Exploring Young Saudi Women's Engagement with Social Media: Feminine Identities, Culture and National Image

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Abstract

With the rising popularity of social media in the last decade and a half, young women in Saudi Arabia have been utilising these platforms to negotiate values and norms in relation to issues such as veiling, work, their place within the private sphere, and their relationships with the opposite-sex. The aim of this thesis is to understand how the rise of social media engagement is impacting long-held traditions and values about Saudi women, and how their social media use is impacting on their public national image. The research addresses the interplay between Saudi conservative nationalists, who wish to preserve a traditional image of femininity that is highly tied to notions of piety and deference, and the Saudi women who, through social media, are actively challenging these longstanding views on how women should behave in society. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's notion of counterpublics (Fraser 1991), this research argues that the democratic potential of social media platforms, independent of cultural and state laws that serve to direct, control and determine the attitudes and behaviour of young Saudi women, has facilitated the emergence of a counterpublic in which alternate contemporary identities are expressed and represented. By employing a triangulation approach for collecting data within a constructivist research paradigm, this research draws on four sets of data. Firstly, it uses netnography to observe the public accounts of seven female social media influencers. Secondly, it observes the personal accounts of nine Saudi women. A third set of data consists of six one-to-one interviews. Finally, a fourth set of data entails seven focus groups involving an overall sample of 36 participants. Using thematic analysis, this research argues that Saudi women, particularly younger women, using social media are adopting a more critical view of traditional customs surrounding femininity and women's place in a society constructed through a collectivist ideology towards more individualistic values, norms and social ties that emphasise agency and autonomy (Giddens, 1991). I also argue that Saudi women active on social media are modernising the national public image of Saudi women. By engaging with Dobson's (2015) study of post-feminist digital culture, I explore the contemporary ideals of Saudi femininity that are portrayed on social media by the young Saudi women I observe in this research and I document the complex and many ways these women can now be in the world. I find that women's engagement with social media is challenging traditional values and norms and performing a vanguard role in reimagining the public national image of Saudi women today.

Key words

Saudi women / Social media / Postfeminist identities / Veiling / Romance / Counterpublics / Social media Influencers / Nation / Individualisation / Gender

To the soul of my dear father, Abdulaziz, the first person to ever call me a doctor at age seven.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1. 1 Introduction

As I was going through the timeline on one of my many social media applications, I came across a meme shared by Sarah, a high school friend: "They used to cover their laptop cameras with stickers, and now they publicly dance on Snapchat." The words were pasted on a photograph of actor Leonardo DiCaprio raising a glass to toast. She commented on her own post: "I'm one of them, I confess", with the emoji of a laughing face. Internet memes are virtually transmitted cultural symbols or social ideas, often in a humorous tone, with the aim of ridiculing human behaviour. This particular meme is referring to a notable shift in the attitudes of young Saudi women towards notions of reputation, piety, honour and its relation to their visibility in public areas, veiling and place within the private sphere. During the early days of Internet engagement between 2000 and 2010, it was common practice for many young Saudi women to cover laptop cameras with a sticker for fear of someone hacking the camera and being able to see them on the other side of the screen, or, worse still, record their image.

In the early 2000s, Saudi Arabian culture and society were still influenced by the values of the Sahwa movement, a religious Wahabi doctrine that rose to prominence in the 1980s in the aftermath of the Grand Mosque seizure in Mecca in 1979 (ICG, 2004; Lacroix, 2004; Le Renard, 2008). In the early internet years (early 2000's), veiling and strict gender segregation were central signifiers of the pious woman and a breach of these cultural codes was considered *eyb* (shameful) and a disgrace not only to the woman involved but to the honour of her entire family. Therefore, women were very protective of their personal photographs, opting not to share them online as they were hyperaware of the risks of them falling into the wrong hands. Today, however, nearly two decades later, as the meme noted above suggests, this thesis will argue that a shift in women's attitudes, values and norms is detectable in their social media activity not only in relation to veiling and visibility, but also in relation to work, romance and other socio-cultural practices.

Today the Sahwa movement's influence is decreasing, with the movement being criticised by government officials and blamed for the ultra-conservatism of state and society over the last three decades. The new crown prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, publicly stated in October 2017 that he intends to "obliterate the remnants of Sahwa extremism" immediately and shift the country to a more 'moderate' Islam (Meredith, 2017). This statement was accompanied by

several new laws that facilitated wider access for women to public spaces in the country, such as lifting the ban on women driving, establishing a sexual harassment law, as well as granting women access to football stadiums for the first time.

The changing values and norms of Saudi women is the subject that has inspired this research interest in exploring the contemporary identities of young Saudi women on social media networks and the cultural implications of these changes, changes which are embedded within a broader project of examining the reconstruction of the national public image of Saudi women.

1.2 Research Context

With 147 million users of social media in the Arabian region and the growth of Internet use continuing to accelerate around the world (We Are Social, 2017), digital media is a growing study field within the disciplines of media & communication and social sciences alike. I started this project with the aim of researching the contemporary understandings and interpretations of femininity amongst young Saudi women on social media networks and trying to assess whether their increased social media engagement has impacted their values and norms in relation to issues of public visibility, veiling and mixed-gender relationships. It is important here to define what is meant by femininity throughout this research. It comprises a set of attributes, behaviours, and roles generally associated with girls and women. Femininity is partially socially constructed, being made up of both socially-defined and biologically-created factors (McRobbie, 2009). However, not to confuse femininity with being female, my focus is on the socially-defined factors that construct and shape the ideal feminine identity which varies depending on location and context, and is influenced by a variety of social and cultural factors. As indicated by the title of this thesis the focus here will be on the ideals of femininity expressed within the Saudi cultural context and the many, and rather complex, ways of being a Saudi woman today.

What I have seen on the various social media platforms these past two years is very different from what I used to know about young Saudi women before I moved abroad in 2012. Young Saudi female social media celebrities with millions of followers started to appear on my feed, unveiled and often in rather revealing outfits. I suddenly started seeing my Saudi female friends nonchalantly share their photographs unveiled publicly on Instagram and Snapchat, yet I distinctly recalled that this was a public disgrace that would smear a young woman's reputation and besmirch her family's name less than a decade ago. At a barbeque during one of my visits home, a young woman was complaining about a boy that would not text her back, and I found

myself wondering is it no longer dishonouring for a young Saudi girl to have a boyfriend? Conversations like this used to be whispered between the most intimate of friends, not casually discussed at a barbeque with 15 other women.

But perhaps the most remarkable incident from my visits home was when my sister gifted me a new *Abaya* (the traditional – and traditionally black – over-garment that Saudi women wear over their clothes when in public) to welcome me back. We were going to attend a public event, which was shocking enough in itself for me as it was a mixed-gender event, a new trend in Saudi that I was not familiar with. Public events in Saudi used to be strictly gender-segregated. In fact, you needed a special permit to host a mixed-gender event, I remember because I was in charge of obtaining the permits when I was an event-manager in my previous job seven years ago. Today, mixed-gender events are popular in Saudi and are a common occurrence, with at least one every week, some even on a national level such as the Saudi National Day celebrations in September 2017 (StepFeed, 2017; DAWN.COM, 2017). For instance, in one week in March, 2018 there were 12 different mixed-gender events taking place in various cities around Saudi Arabia, from plays to fun fairs and comedy shows (Gea.gov.sa, 2018), all funded and organised by the recently created General Entertainment Authority. I opened the packaging expecting to see the traditionally black garment, but to my surprise it was a pastel blue. Isn't an *Abaya* always black? One of the most iconic national symbols of Saudi women – the *Abaya* - was getting a makeover and I wanted to understand how and why. I wanted to research these new emerging identities of Saudi women.

Hence, this project has expanded its initial research focus from mainly looking at how social media usage is impacting the norms and values of Saudi women, to include an exploration of national identity and the role gender plays in national projects. This research sees Saudi feminine identity and the ideals of femininity within the Saudi culture not as a fixed, bounded, stable notion but as constantly changing through interaction, practises and processes. Thus, this research is situated within the inquires of cultural studies which investigate contemporary culture and how cultural practices relate to wider systems of power associated with or operating through social phenomena such as the micro-celebrity explored in this study. This is why constructivism was found to be the most suitable ontological approach to this research. A constructivist paradigm asserts that there is no single reality. It considers reality (social phenomena and their meaning) to be continually revised through social interaction, in which individuals in groups create and recreate culture rather than culture being a pre-given and fixed phenomenon (Bryman, 2012). In terms of this research, the Saudi female, her identity and role within the nation, is

something that is imagined, constructed and renegotiated over time, and the activity of women on social media networks, which this research documents, is generating the necessary processes and dialogue for this renegotiation. In order to assess how interaction on social media platforms is impacting Saudi women's understanding and negotiation of their reality, an epistemological stance that recognises the changing nature of culture is adopted. Thus, given the research questions, this research is positioned within the constructivist paradigm. This is an important moment in the history of women in Saudi Arabia and is worthy of observation and close examination, which is what makes this research significant.

1.3 Research Questions

The aims of this study are twofold, it aims to explore the impact of social media engagement on the values and norms of Saudi women in relation to veiling, gender-segregation, work, romance, and other socio-cultural relations, as well as assess how these changes are subsequently reconstructing contemporary Saudi femininity, its public image and its relation to the nation.

Thus, the key overriding research questions are:

1. How is the rise in social media use in Saudi Arabia influencing the values and norms of young Saudi women and their attitudes towards romance and mixed-gender friendships?

2. In what ways is social media use in Saudi Arabia contributing to changes in the public image of young Saudi women?

3. What are the social and cultural implications of these changes in 1) and 2)?

The theoretical contribution of this research is an advancement of contemporary understandings of Saudi femininity. It is the first study of its kind to use netnography (Kozinets, 2015) as a method to investigate and analyse Saudi women's social media activities and therefore it provides unique and outstanding empirical data that is interesting to examine and interpret. Other qualitative studies on Saudi women have resorted only to focus groups or interviews to collect their data (Al-Saggaf, 2011; Hayat, 2014; Guta and Karolak, 2015) but I believe that the originality of this research methodologically is that it actually observes Saudi women in their natural setting without interfering and disrupting their activity. It is also a pioneering study on the

trending issue of Saudi female micro-celebrities and the way in which this trend in public self-presentation on social media networks is impacting contemporary Saudi femininity. Moreover, the research is amongst the first to document the tensions found online between conservative nationalists who wish to preserve a classical image of the nation and its members, and those who are seeking to modernise it. While other studies (for example, Al-Rasheed, 2013) might have acknowledged these tensions, they have not examined the manifestation of them on the feeds of social media networks, which is where the counterpublic largely exists and is the sphere where substantive change could actually be generated from. Instead, Al-Rasheed's study focused on literature by Saudi women and did not examine their digital activities on social media networks. Other studies on social media and Saudis, such as Guta and Karolak (2015) and Al-Saggaf (2004), which are reviewed in this research, does not consider the association between what they observe and the reimagining of the public image of the Saudi women.

1.4 Situating the Research

The research builds on a fundamental idea popularised by Goffman (1959) which views identity as an act of self-presentation. In particular, Judith Butler's (1990) recognition of gender identity as a performance is relevant to this research. Saudi women's femininity has been constructed through discourse and social processes for decades in which women 'performed' and imitated a femininity that was defined by conservative practises such as veiling or virtual confinement/seclusion to the private sphere of their own homes. In a similar manner to how Giddens (1991) views identity as a reflexive project, this research will explore Saudi feminine identity as a performance and as a project that is being negotiated and reconstructed on networked publics (Boyd, 2010; Ito, 2008). Networked publics are understood in this research as modern communities as they hold many of the characteristics of modernity that were identified by scholars such as Giddens (1991), Bauman (2000) and Beck (2002) in their studies of modern societies, particularly the fact that such communities are defined by individualism rather than collectivism. It is, however, important to highlight that the term 'modern' and 'modernity' as used throughout this thesis in reference to Saudi society is distinct from the use of these terms in the Anglo-Western context. While 'modernity' and 'modern'/'late modern' in an Anglo-Western sense refers to the post-war period (scholars for example such as Bauman and Giddens refer to the UK as 'late modern'), modernity in relation to Saudi Arabia in this thesis is concerned with a particular set of developments that are observed in relation to traditions and customs. Similarly, scholars such as Giddens (1991), Bauman (2000) and Beck (2002) have noted that a trend of

individualisation as a process within modern communities is responsible for their detraditionalisation. The influence of a promoted sense of individualism within networked publics on mixed-gender relationships, collective values and norms of Saudi women as well as on the public image of the Saudi female in relation to the nation is yet to be considered in an academic study. By examining the activity of Saudi women on social media networks, it is anticipated that a process of individualisation will likely be observed, one which might connote the emergence of non-traditional identities amongst Saudi women. The study will thus build on the existing literature pertaining to individualisation, feminism as well as literature on the links between gender and the imagined nation.

This thesis extends existing research in that it does not only evaluate social media's impact on changing norms and values, but it also considers how this engagement is impacting the public image of Saudi women and their relation to the nation and their role within it. Women's social media activity is not only seen as a visible manifestation of changing values towards veiling, gender segregation and work, and to a certain extent as a modern catalyst of further change, but also facilitates an in-depth investigation of the research questions with a historical dimension.

1.5 Organisation of the Thesis

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 constitute the literature review and the theoretical foundation for the research design. Chapter 5 aims to explain the research design itself and the methodology used to collect the data, while chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 form the analysis in this research. Specifically, and based on the evolution of the research emphasis, Chapter 2 is concerned with the idea of the nation and its relation to gender. This chapter will map the necessary theoretical framework for understanding the role that Saudi women play in representing the nation and how it might interrupt their efforts to perform a feminine identity that is true to who they are. This is an important chapter for the reader to fully understand Saudi culture in relation to women, and to familiarise herself with the norms and values that are being challenged through social media engagement, i.e., veiling, gender segregation, and work. This will be achieved through reviewing Mona Almunajjed's (1997) study which explores the values of Saudi women in relation to veiling, gender segregation, and work during the late 1990s, just before the arrival of the Internet in Saudi Arabia. Exploring the relation between the nation and gender in Saudi Arabia specifically through a review of Madawai Al-Rasheed's work on Saudi religious nationalism sets up the theoretical framework needed to understand the backlash Saudi women receive on social media

networks when they go against traditions. Finally, a review of individualism and its role in detraditionalizing societies (Giddens, Beck and Bauman) informs the analysis of how Saudi women's efforts on social media are successfully modernising the public image of the Saudi woman as a national symbol and what it means to be a 'true' Saudi, which I argue in Chapter 8.

Chapter 3 starts by reviewing the literature on digital networks themselves and what constitutes a network public, before moving on to review key literature on identity. These two subject matters are central within the process of exploring young Saudi women's modern identities on social media networks, which is a key objective of this research. It starts by drawing on the work of dana boyd (2010) to explain and frame what network publics are. More relevantly, it reviews Nancy Fraser's (1990) work on counterpublics, the spaces where subordinated social groups cluster and formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. This concept is central for understanding how social media networks can serve as places of unconventional/non-traditional identity expression for young Saudi women. The second part of this chapter focuses on identity itself as a process of self-representation. It starts by presenting an overview of key work on identity (Goffman, 1959; boyd, 2014; Butler, 1990; Giddens, 1991). Then it specifically considers Dobson's work on postfeminist identities on digital networks (2015), which will provide the necessary theoretical framework to explore and analyse Saudi women's identities on social media networks and to analyse modern illustrations of Saudi femininity on social media. Alongside this, a review of the paramount role of images within identity construction on social media networks will be conducted and the key literature on the emerging trend of micro-celebrities on these networks will be reviewed. Therefore, it justifies the methodological approach of netnography, detailed in Chapter 5, to study images of Saudi women on Instagram given that they comprise a central part of their gender identity expression online.

Since the exploration of how the rise of social media engagement is impacting Saudi women's attitudes towards romance and wider intimacy practices is a main objective of this research, Chapter 4 is concerned with reviewing the important literature on romantic and personal relationships on social media networks. In the polymedia context in which our digital communication and relationships exist (Madianou & Miller, 2012), the issue of privacy is central to avoid a context collapse (boyd, 2014). This is of high importance to Saudi women considering the sensitivity of pre-marital romance in the conservative, shame-honour culture of Saudi Arabia. Thus, this chapter will explore these notions as well as review the concept of 'scalable sociality' (Miller et al, 2016) which, as Chapter 9 will argue, organises the dynamics of romantic relationships on social media platforms. In addition, the chapter reviews the networked

individualism approach by Wellman and Rainie (2012) and its influence on collectivities and kinship systems in conservative communities. The approach is necessary to understand how Saudi women on social media networks are bypassing family and societal control of their movement and sociality, which I examine in Chapter 9.

Chapter 5 identifies the philosophical position and methodological approaches used to explore how young Saudi women's engagement with social media is impacting their norms and values as well as their national public image. As a socially constructed reality, the national public image of the young Saudi woman, as well as her values and norms in relation to the above-mentioned points, are examined through a constructivist paradigm that recognises the changing nature of culture. The chapter details the methods chosen in the triangulation process of data collection. Specifically, a netnogpraphy approach is used to collect the data from four different social media platforms, because of its high compatibility with the study of social media networks and its capacity to observe images of Saudi women, which is central to the analysis of the updated image of the national Saudi woman. Focus groups and semi-structured one-to-one interviews via Skype were used to accurately interpret the behaviour and actions observed netnographically online by discussing them directly with the respondents and to cross-validate the data. The method of analysis, as well as practical issues regarding data collection data, including sampling, validity and reliability, and ethical considerations are also discussed in detail in this chapter.

Chapter 6 considers the changing values and norms of Saudi women, particularly in relation to veiling and work, and considers how social media networks can produce ideal spaces for challenging traditions. It examines the use of 'identity separation' by some Saudi women to overcome limitations set on them by their families and to protect their privacy when presenting themselves online in an unconventional manner. The chapter also recodes the emergence of micro-celebrity as a new trend in self-presentation online amongst young Saudi women.

Chapter 7 follows to further analyse the emergence of contemporary feminine identities amongst Saudi women through the observation of the activities of female micro-celebrities on digital networks. The chapter analyses the ways in which this type of public self-presentation is challenging the traditional values of veiling and confinement to the private sphere. By understanding this type of self-presentation as what Dobson (2015) labels postfeminist identities, the argument is made at the end of the chapter on how these female micro-celebrities can be considered vanguards of change amongst women in Saudi and examples of an emerging trend of an aspirational femininity that is marked with new ideals, individualism and neo-liberal qualities.

Chapter 8 acknowledges the backlash of associating non-traditional individualistic identities with the Saudi label in these women's expressions of identity on social media. It aims to conceptualise the ways in which Saudi women are regarded by conservatives as symbolic border guards of culture and as the markers of a unique and pious nation that is distinct from other 'ungodly' nations, as argued by Madawi Al-Rasheed (2013). Following Benedicit Anderson's notion of the nation as an imagined community and outlining a constructivist ontological stance, this chapter will argue the possibility of reimagining the nation and women's identities and roles within it. This will highlight the importance of social media networks as tools for reconstructing and reimagining the Saudi nation and gender identity in relation to it, moving it away from collective ideologies to embrace a more individualistic identity. This argument concurs with Giddens' (1991) notion of individualism's close links with the detraditionalisation of communities.

While chapters 6 and 7 consider the changing values and norms in relation to veiling, work and seclusion in the private sphere, Chapter 9 focuses on exploring the changing values, norms and attitudes of Saudi women, specifically in relation to romance and friendships with the opposite sex. The chapter makes the argument that Saudi women's engagement with social media networks has impacted romantic communication in four ways: democratisation, re-spatialisation, changing temporality, and shifts in gender etiquette. Notions of scalable sociality (Miller et al, 2016) and polymedia (Madianou & Miller, 2012) are used to make this argument. The chapter then explores the dynamics of romance amongst young Saudis on social media networks and the significance of distinguishing public spaces from private spaces on social media platforms to negotiate romance with low risks. The chapter also aims to recognise and conceptualise a condition of 'accountability suspension': a strategy employed by young Saudis to engage in somewhat public displays of affection while still avoiding reprimand or shame in a constant effort to reclaim agency and achieve privacy on social media platforms. Finally, the chapter suggests that intimacy is becoming disconnected from its traditional romantic/sexual meanings. Instead, social media is opening up the possibility of other forms of intimacy to emerge amongst young Saudis based on mixed gendered friendships.

Chapter 10 concludes this thesis by providing a synthesis of the research findings and answering the research's original questions, as well as highlighting a number of recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2. Nation and Women in Saudi Arabia

2.1 Introduction

An issue that emerged from the data collected through netnography in my research was the issue of nation and its relation to gender. A key objective of this chapter is to assess the traditional classical role and image/identity of the Saudi woman (traditional ideal Saudi femininity) in order to be able to understand how Saudi women's participation on social media and their online practices might be negotiating it and redefining the public image of the Saudi woman. This chapter will begin with an inquiry into the ways women have been linked to nationhood and representing the nation by addressing the work of Yuval-Davis (1997). This will then be linked to the emergence of 'religious nationalism' in Saudi Arabia (Al-Rasheed, 2013), an ideology which regards women as symbols of national identity and authenticity that are controlled by society and state to be markers of a pious religious community/nation, engendering a particular monitoring of their social role that I refer to as the 'regulatory gaze'. Following that, I will move on to discuss the cultural values and norms that constitute the traditional ideal femininity within the framework of this 'religious nationalism'. I shall draw on and engage with the classical study by Mona Almunajjed (1997) on Saudi women, which will serve as a historical reference for Saudi women's values and norms as well as their public national image during the height of religious nationalism before Internet usage and social media engagement took off in the early 2000's. I then move on to review recent studies on Saudi women's online engagement to construct an informative review of Saudi women's gender identity and their role as carriers of family name and honour, particularly the work of Guta and Karolak (2015) on social media as sites of identity negotiation among Saudi women. Next, I shall draw on the concepts of individualism and detraditionalisation of communities developed by Giddens, Beck and Bauman as characteristics of modernity to explain the key social changes occurring in contemporary Saudi society concerning gender, intimacy and family life in late modern digital society. The discussion of individualisation and detraditionalisation will inform the analysis of contemporary images of Saudi women on social media and their changing attitudes, values and norms. I shall explain how Saudi women on social media are moving away from the traditional ideals of femininity determined by religious nationalism, and instead are negotiating modern/contemporary feminine identities. This chapter will enable me to answer the second question of this research regarding the ways in which social media usage in Saudi Arabia is contributing to changes in the public

image of young Saudi women, as well as addressing the social and cultural implications of these changes.

2.2 Women as symbolic border guards of culture and embodiments of the nation

In her book, *Gender and Nation* (1997), Nira Yuval-Davis' examination of the relation between women's gendered identity and the nation that they are part of considers the arrangement of processes, practices, images, ideologies, and distribution of power in national society differentiated between women and men, usually to the disadvantage of the former. Yuval-Davis highlights three dimensions to the intersection between gender and nation: the genealogical dimension, the cultural dimension, and the civic dimension. The genealogical dimension focuses on the notion of 'genetic pools' to imagine the nation. In this dimension, gender plays a significant role in which women, as bearers of children, are the biological reproducers of the nation. This necessitates the regulation of their sexual practices and their matrimony choices to ensure that the nation's breed remains genetically pure and homogenous, and to avert any foreign interference with the national genetic pool. The civic dimension focuses on the civic rules and regulations to determine who can 'actively' be part of the nation. Yuval-Davis argues that in religiously orthodox nations, civic rights are marked by patriarchy. Women in such nations are expected to occupy the private domain while men reside in the public domain. Rules, regulations and laws are implemented by the state to regulate and control women in such societies on behalf of male relatives. Finally, the cultural dimension (which is of direct relevance to this research) revolves around the traditions and heritage that are often partially composed of a specific religion and/or a specific language. Yuval-Davis argues the mythical unity of a nation is preserved and ideologically reproduced by an entire system of what John Armstrong dubbed 'symbolic border guards' in his 1982 book *Nations Before Nationalism*. The book was very influential and inspired scholars of ethnosymbolism (a school of thought in the study of nationalism that emphasises the centrality of symbols, myths, values and traditions in the structuring and endurance of the modern nation state) such as Anthony D. Smith and John Hutchinson. According to Armstrong (1982), the role of symbolic border guards is to identify individuals as members or non-members of a certain collectivity depending of their adherence to specific cultural codes in terms of behaviour, style of dress as well as a wider set of customs and practices.

Yuval-Davis' argument goes on to identify the positioning of women themselves as symbolic border guards. Kobena Mercer (1994) argues that women are often adjured to carry the "burden of representation" as they have historically been established as 'the symbolic bearers' of

the collectivity's identity and honour, whether this collectivity is the family or, by extension, the nation as a whole (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p.45). Women, in their 'proper' conduct and their 'proper' attire, embody the border that signifies the collectivity's boundaries and differentiates 'us' from 'others'. Similarly, shame-honour cultures in Middle Eastern societies tie the honour of the family with the reputation of the family's women, and this notion has persisted in the imagining of the Saudi nation, as I shall detail next. Ruth Benedict (1947) first conceptualised the term shame-honour culture in her anthropological study of Japan. However, this type of society/culture exists in several other regions of the world, especially within Bedouin tribal societies of the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia (Abu-Lughod 1986; Abu-Lughod 1993; Meeker, 1979). In shame- honour culture/society, shame is a reaction to other people's criticism, and is highly based on meeting the expectations others have of us (Hiebert, 1986, p.212). Particularly in Middle Eastern societies (including Saudi Arabia), any act that deviates from what is considered honourable is regarded as *eyb*, a very specific Arabic word that could be translated as 'shameful' or 'disgraceful'. In this type of society, each person has a role within the culture and their actions do not only reflect on them but on the whole group (what I refer to throughout as the 'collectivity'), whether it is the family, the tribe, or even the nation in whole. The implication of this is that people in such a society do not operate and make decisions based on what is right or wrong, but rather on what is accepted or not: it is not a guilt society but a shame society (Peristiany, 1966; Bedford, 2004). The notion of *eyb* in Middle Eastern communities is especially prevalent when it comes to issues concerning women and their reputation (see Afshar, 1993, p. 118-119).

Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) pointed out the importance of differentiating between cultural discourse, identity narratives and ethnic processes. Conflating these notions would lead to questions of 'authenticity' when performing identity, what Amrita Chhanchhi (1991) refers to as 'forced identities'. The implication of women representing the nation, its culture, and its honour is that women's individualism is compromised in this process as they are primarily thought of as representatives of the collectivity. Anderson (1983) views the nation as an 'imagined community' in the sense that you can never meet all members of the nation face-to-face and thus, to a degree, this community has to be imagined by those who perceive themselves to be members of it. Therefore, the symbolic guards themselves and the customs and traditions that relate to them are also a construct of the members' imagining. This means that citizenship is not only a matter of legal rights and responsibilities but also of participation, identity, and a sense of belonging. Hence, a growing group of scholars studies citizenship as a subjective experience

of being included or excluded and as a process where people continuously affirm or contest their belonging to the imagined community through various practices (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Roseneil, Halsaa, and Sümer, 2012; Nyhagen and Halsaa, 2016). Here we should note the role that the media plays in producing images and illustrations of what this imagined nation is, and what members in it should look/act/talk/be like to form this imagined collectivity (Anderson, 1983). This suggests that today social media platforms could be useful in reimagining the idealised femininity and developing contemporary national representations of Saudi women.

The next section will examine the imagined nation of Saudi Arabia - a nation defined by religion and piety - and how this affects Saudi women. This frames the literature to explain why issues of nationalism arise in relation to Saudi women's portrayals of identities that challenge traditional values and norms of femininity on social media networks.

2.3 Saudi Arabia's religious nationalism

In her book *A Most Masculine State* (2013), Madawi Al-Rasheed addresses how the absence of secular and anti-colonial nationalism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was compensated by the emergence of a specific type of nationalism instead, which she terms 'religious nationalism'. Stemming from the strict Wahabbiyah interpretations of Islamic texts, Al-Rasheed details how a religious nationalism was developed by the state to unify the different fragmented tribes of the Arabian Peninsula and create a homogenous identity across much of the landmass, one which saw itself as a 'godly community' (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.16). Wahabbi religious nationalism was central for the Saudi state to assert its legitimacy across the burgeoning kingdom and to differentiate itself from other post-colonial Arab countries by the way it upholds the piety of the nation. Politically, this piety became increasingly characterised by excluding women from political and economic authority, minimising their public appearances, and restricting their citizenship rights and participation.

The state has thus turned personal piety into a public project, and Saudi women became boundary markers that visibly and structurally distinguish the pious Saudi nation from other ungodly nations in the way that Yuval-Davis argued in her book Gender and Nation (1997). AlRasheed maintains that them being turned into boundary markers is the reason behind the obsession with "women's bodies, appearance, segregation, purity, and sexuality" in Saudi Arabia, which tends to reflect "the process whereby women have become signals marking the boundaries of the nation" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.17). This obsession was at its peak in the 1980s and 1990s as the *Sahwa* (Awakening) movement swept the kingdom and much of the wider region. The *Sahwa*

movement claimed that Saudi Arabia was not Islamic enough and that people had started to deviate from the true teachings of Islam (Lacroix and Holoch, 2011). The movement was concerned with reversing what it deemed as western influences in the region. This was done through emphasising ideologies and practises that reflected the distinct Islamic identity and tying them to Saudi Arabia as a nation and a state, thereby branding Saudi Arabia an Islamic nation (Chaudhry, 2014). There were gendered expressions of this revival that manifested in practises such as veiling and adopting a certain style of dress, as well as prioritising a woman's role as a wife and a mother over the role of a professional, for example mainly secluding her within the domestic sphere and limiting her public presence (Hilde Granås Kjøstvedt, 2016). As Le Renard (2008) observed, women in Saudi Arabia were turned into a symbol and were ascribed a uniform identity.

Beginning in Mecca, the geographic and spiritual heart of Islam, this movement had a ripple effect in the region. In 1980 Juliette Minces found that in some areas of the Arab world the act of veiling was perceived as a means of defiance against Western values, specifically against what is perceived by Arabs as the loose morals of Western women (Minces, 1980, p.70). Saudi women were supposed to be a – perhaps the central – symbol of the country's virtuous implementation of Islam through being veiled in public spaces and deferring from interacting with men who were not immediate relatives (Le Renard, 2008, p. 612). A close review of the Sahwa movement or Wahhabism and Islamists in Saudi Arabia is beyond the scope of this research (more can be read in ICG, 2004; Lacroix, 2004; Le Renard, 2008). But what matters here is that practices such as veiling and the seclusion of women became Islamic national signifiers of the Saudi Muslim woman because of this movement, and that the female Saudi identity was ultra-religious.

As a result of international pressure on the Kingdom in the period after 9/11, the state sought to advance the image and position of Saudi women by granting them more rights and further mobility within the public sphere. However, despite these sudden actions in the state's national agenda and its slight move away from heavy restrictions on women, my data shows that some Saudi women have been left behind. The implication of this is that Saudi women often conjure up contradictory images, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 9. In Al-Rasheeds words, they are either "excluded, heavily veiled victims of their own religion and society, or wealthy glamorous cosmopolitan entrepreneurs" (2013, P. I).

Like other forms of religious nationalism, Wahabbi religious nationalism is focused on the family, as opposed to the autonomous individual, as the central unit of which the social is

composed. In essence, Al-Rasheed argues, “The foundation of the Saudi state depended on the perpetuation of a social order in which the pious woman was celebrated while the defiant one was subjected to punishment, control and purgation” (2013, p.75). People who hold such views are referred to in this research as ‘conservative nationalists’. Conservative nationalists in this research refers to Saudi individuals (both men and women) who maintain and assert traditional religious Wahhabi gender roles, identities and stereotypes and uphold them as signifiers to distinguish members from non-members of the nation (a detailed review of what this traditional religious identity entails follows later in this chapter). Women’s observance of traditions and customs and their ‘performance’ of a traditional conservative Saudi feminine identity is viewed by conservative nationalists as a way to differentiate ‘our’ culture and our nation from ‘other’ nations and cultures. In a sense, a woman’s failure to adhere to these cultural codes is viewed by conservative nationalists as a betrayal to the nation, and it is causing the nation to lose its distinctive identity, which necessities a specific form of monitoring Saudi women’s socio-cultural online practices that I call the ‘regulatory gaze’.

2.4 The ‘regulatory gaze’

On social media platforms, the policing of Saudi women’s behaviour results in viewing their practises online with a ‘regulatory gaze’ by conservative nationalist members of the collectivity. This entails the supervision of women’s behaviour, regulating it, assessing it, and making sure that it is always aligned with what the traditionalists deem to be the behaviour of a ‘proper’ Saudi female. The gaze is a doctrine that is used in media studies to analyse the visual culture and how the audience views the people that are being featured. Many scholars have addressed the concept of the gaze (Sartre, 1956; Derrida, 2008; Kaplan,1997; Said,1978), classifying it mainly by who is doing the observing.

Foucault detailed his discussion on the term ‘gaze’ to highlight a distinct dynamic in power relations and disciplinary mechanisms. He discussed surveillance and its relation to self-regulation and its use as a ‘contrivance of power’ to refer to how people adjust their behaviour when believing that they are being watched, even if they are unable to directly see who is watching them. The potential surveillance, whether real or unreal, has self-regulating effects. Sturken and Cartwright (2009) maintain that the gaze is not an object that one has or uses, but is rather a relationship between the one doing the looking and the one being observed. They state that: "The gaze is integral to systems of power and ideas about knowledge.” (2009, p.94). Laura Mulvey introduced the ‘male gaze’ in 1975 to explain the objectifying of women in films. Even

though it was originally produced as a theory in film specifically, the term is often applied in media studies in general. In this study, 'the regulatory gaze' is used to refer to a distinct type of community gaze that Saudi women are experiencing on social media platforms. Conservative nationalists' placement of women as representative of the nation and symbolic border guards of culture ensures their subjection to scrutiny, through the regulatory gaze, on social media, where their performance of self and practises are being recorded and circulated amongst members of the collectivity. This modifies women's behaviour online by pressuring them to follow a specific set of cultural codes to attain what the nationalist members of the Saudi collectivity regard as the proper image of the Saudi woman.

At this point it is appropriate to detail this classical/traditional Saudi feminine identity and what is entailed in notions of the 'proper' behaviours and the 'proper' appearance that Saudi women are asked to abide by in order to preserve the honour of the collectivity and 'truly' represent it.

2.5 The Traditional Identity of Saudi Women (Ideal Femininity)

What is considered to be ideal femininity differs from culture to culture, and it is based on what that specific culture considers valuable. A key objective of this chapter is to assess the traditional classical role and image of the Saudi woman, or the ideal femininity, in order to be able to understand how Saudi women's participation in social media today might be renegotiating it and developing new trends in the ideals of contemporary Saudi femininity. To do so, I will review Mona Almunajjed's 1997 informative and detailed study on Saudi women and their traditional role as wives, mothers and homemakers. Appearing just before the arrival of the Internet in Saudi Arabia in the year 2001, Almunajjed's study is an important documenting of a period prior to social media engagement, enabling a fascinating comparison between what it meant to be a Saudi Arabian woman in the 1990s and what it is being reshaped to mean today. Almunajjed conducted intensive interviews with 100 Saudi women from various social, economic and educational backgrounds to assess their quality of life in the conservative traditional society of the 1990s as well as the meaning-making of their social reality. Social issues such as segregation, the veil, education and work were examined closely and Saudi women's attitudes and practices in relation to these issues were documented. Even though the study does not include any interviews with male Saudis, the women's answers and discussions were telling in relation to the views and stances of the men in their lives. However, the strength of this study stems from the fact that it combines empirical data with women's own voices, their feelings, ideas and conceptions about

what their role is and how they should act. The next sections review the traditional ideal Saudi feminine identity in relation to three themes: the veil, gender segregation and work.

2.5.1 The veil

In many Muslim countries, women are required to wear the *Hijab*, which is considered a symbol of feminine modesty and morality (Esposito, 2003). Veiling is intimately connected with notions of the self, the body and community, as well as with the cultural construction of identity, privacy and space. The main academic debate around the veil is whether it is a form of patriarchal oppression or a symbol of identity and in fact a manifestation of Islamic feminism. Abu-Lughod, in her book *Do Muslim women need saving?* (2013), warns against simplistic westernised analysis that confuses the veil as a lack of agency. She asserts that people wear the appropriate clothes for their social communities and their social classes, and that people are guided in this process by socially shared standards, signals of social status, and by religious beliefs and moral ideals. The choice of whether to veil or not, and to which degree to veil, are not simple ones and are indeed guided and complicated by all the above-mentioned factors. Similarly, Leila Ahmed (2011) finds that Muslim women in America wear the veil to protest discrimination against Muslims or to express their solidarity with the Palestinian cause, and not for reasons of piety at all. Myra Macdonald (2006) discusses how expressions of surprise that veiled women can be athletes, feminists, politicians, models, actresses or musicians "underline the tenacity of beliefs that Islamic veiling in intrinsically incompatible with women's agency in the construction of their identities" (2006, p.19). The veil is one of the key items within expressions of the traditional Saudi female image, and it is a main issue in conservative nationalists' regulatory gaze at Saudi women on social media. Conservative nationalists are attacking and publicly denouncing Saudi women on social media who are renouncing the veil in the images they share of themselves online. First, I begin by identifying the many degrees of veiling among Saudi women today. Then I move on to examining the veil as a national symbol of Saudi women.

Types of Veiling

There are different types and degrees of veiling that can be seen on Saudi women today, whether outside on the streets of Saudi Arabia or online. Women's veiling practices range from the most moderate to being fully covered. A moderate form of veiling is when women cover their hair with the *Hijab*, and wear an over-garment on top of their clothes known as the *Abayah* while showing their faces. In some cases, especially amongst younger women under 30, the *Hijab* on top of the

head is missing when in public and only the *Abayah* is worn. While *Abayah*s were customarily black, in the past 2-3 years coloured - white, blue, pink and multi-coloured - *Abayah*s have made their way to the streets of the bigger Saudi cities and in the online images of young Saudi women. The extreme style of veiling amongst Saudi women consists of covering the face as well by the use of the *Niqab* while keeping the eyes uncovered. Generational differences in veiling are seen in the fact that the majority of young women in Saudi are more likely to fall on the lenient end on the spectrum. For many women in Saudi Arabia, the veil in all of its forms has moral, religious and cultural connotations. Regardless of women's convictions on why they should be veiled, the veil has become a customary element in the image of the Saudi woman and a staunch 'symbolic border guard' that identifies their membership to the collectivity. It is important to note that Almunajjed has only questioned the practise of wearing the *Niqab* (covering the face) in her study, since wearing a *Hijab* (covering one's hair) at the time of her study was taken for granted to be mandatory and no women would have stepped out of their houses without at least a *Hijab*. Comparatively, today and in this research, many young Saudi women (whether interviewed or observed online) do not wear a *Hijab* at all, and they only wear the *Abayah* without covering their hair when they are out in public spaces in Saudi. For this reason, Almunajjed never examined or questioned the practices of veiling as a whole (wearing an *Abayah*, *Hijab* and *Niqab*) but only the practice of covering the face, and whenever she mentioned the word veil, she was referring specifically to the *Niqab*. Whenever veiling is mentioned in this study in relation to her findings, it too refers only to the *Niqab*.

Before moving on with the discussion, it is worth noting that women in Saudi Arabia are mandated by law to wear an *Abayah*, the long garment which covers their body over their clothes, although it is not specified what colour it should be or whether or not they have to cover their face or hair. Nonetheless, under the law, all women are expected to dress 'modestly' when in public spaces. When Malak Alshehri went out in the streets of Riyadh without an *Abayah* in December, 2016, she got into legal trouble for 'breaking the law' (Embury-Dennis, 2016). I will later refer to this incident in my analysis to discuss the backlash of her posting a photo of herself on Twitter that day in the street not wearing an *Abayah*. The degree to which a woman chooses to cover herself is influenced by many factors, such as age, the family she comes from and her education. Almunajjed (1997) found that the choice of whether or not to veil in Saudi depended greatly on the decision of her male guardian. The male guardian could be a woman's husband, father, or brother, depending on who heads the household she lives in at the time. In an interview from Almunajjed's study when asked about the *Niqab* (covering the face), a 34-year-old,

uneducated Saudi woman stated that she only wears the *Niqab* out of habit as a result of being born in it and growing up with it. A 40-year-old married woman with an elementary level of education and two children outspokenly expressed her hatred of the *Niqab* and wished for her daughters to never have to wear it, yet she herself did not stop wearing it. And even though some of the women in Almunajjed's study expressed feelings of resentment towards the extreme act of covering the face with the *Niqab*, no real objections were voiced towards veiling in general (wearing a *Hijab* or an *Abayah*), and definitely no acts of challenging this practice were carried out. Even though wearing a *Niqab* today is not as common as it was in the 1980s and 1990s, some women still uphold this tradition today when outside the home. However, the vast majority of these women who wear a *Niqab* discard it when traveling abroad in favour of the more moderate *Hijab*. Many women who wear a *Hijab* in Saudi discard it completely when abroad (Bowen, 2007, p.12). Similarly, some of the participants in my study reported that they wear a *Hijab* on the streets of Saudi Arabia yet share photos of themselves online completely unveiled for both men and women to see. This provokes one of my study's key questions: How is the rise in social media use in Saudi Arabia influencing the values and norms of young Saudi women?

The Veil as a National Symbol

Alongside the veil symbolising 'the virtues of conduct' and having religious connotations (Almunajjed, 1997. p.47), one of the interesting findings of Almunnajed's study was that for some women wearing the veil was a "symbol of an Islamic nationalist trend" in Saudi Arabia. She argues that this finding "reflects an ideological choice" and a "quest for a more meaningful Saudi identity" (1997, P.56). She highlights that during this period (1990s) the veil signified the defiant traditional, cultural and Islamic values, and a call for the revival of an Islamic Saudi identity against cultural incursions from 'the West', even though exposure to Western culture at that time was minor in comparison to today's globalised and digitally interconnected reality. The Sahwa movement mainly influenced the nationalistic significance that was assigned to the veil. Powell (1982) argues that the veil is used by Saudi women as a form of identifying as Muslim. He observes that the veil is functional in forming a cohesive unit amongst the members of an Islamic collectivity as it is an apparent and immediately recognisable attire that distinguishes the collectivity's women from others. Wagner et al (2012) noted that when Muslims are submerged in a community where they are the minority (such as European countries) the veil becomes even more central to the Muslim women as it turns to an affirmation of their cultural identity. Similarly, ElGunidi (2003) asserts the veil is embraced by many Arab women as both an

affirmation of cultural identity and as a strident feminist statement as it represents an expression of liberation from colonial legacies. Thus, it is understandable how such relations between veiling and the Saudi female image came to exist in Saudi Arabia due to the political/religious Sahwa movement, which successfully equated expressions of piety such as veiling for women or gender segregation with the 'imagined' Saudi nation (Anderson, 1983, 2006).

One interviewee in Almunajjed's study was asked about why she wears the veil, and the 35-year-old married woman with two children said: "Wearing a veil is part of one's identity of being a Saudi woman. It is definite proof of one's identification with the norms and the values of the Saudi culture ... and I will teach my daughter to wear it" (Almunajjed, 1997, p.56). It can be observed from her statement how the veil at that time had turned into a signifier of the Saudi female's identity. Scholars of social theories of late modern identity (discussed in Chapter 3) such as Giddens (1991) argue that people construct their identities through what they choose to read or watch on TV and theatres, the clothes they buy, and the way they dress (Giddens, 1991, p.81). Individuals regard these items (in this case the veil) as symbolic markers that communicate something about who they are, (in this case a Saudi woman). Another young, single woman who grew up outside Saudi Arabia stated in her interview that she started to wear the *Niqab* once she moved back to Saudi: "I felt I had to wear a veil. It becomes part of your identity" (Almunajjed, 1997, p.56). The implication of equating the act of veiling with national identity is that when a Saudi woman does not practice it, her national affiliation would be questioned and contested. Indeed, many of the observed Saudi women on social media in this study were criticised over their choice of attire when appearing unveiled, were called 'non-Saudis', and, even when able to prove that they were in fact Saudi citizens, they were dubbed as 'not true' Saudis. One of the comments under a social media user's post of herself wearing a swimsuit reads: "*She is not a real original Saudi, her dad just got a citizenship, and now they count them on us as Saudis, they will never be real Saudis*".

Tying the liberation of women from such social practices to a broader inclination towards social change and modernity and the equation that often occurs between modernity and westernisation (Kandiyoti, 1991; Chatterjee, 1990) has led to a strong backlash by conservative nationalists against the gradual renouncement of such cultural codes. This is due to the conservative nationalist and fundamentalist belief that women are being used as tools of westernising their community. Alternatively, a fundamentalist conservative construction of 'the true' cultural essence of the collectivity comes to be imposed, even though many aspects of this conservative construction are in fact outdated and no longer compatible with the needs and demands of society

today. Once again, women are assigned a critical function in the collectivity: instead of being perceived as symbols of modernity and change, women around the world are cast in the role of 'carriers of tradition'. In Iran for instance, Iranian women's unveiling as a symbolic act of emancipation was surpassed by campaigns of forced veiling in the post-revolutionary Iranian nation (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p.61).

It is not only the case in Islamic communities, but can be seen in western ones as well, that the veil has become the centre of a debate involving nationalism and citizenship, albeit in a reverse manner (McCrone & Kiely, 2000, p.31; Park, 2013; Meer et al, 2010). While in Islamic communities it is 'not wearing' the veil that might result in questioning the women's membership to the nation or citizenship, in western societies it is 'wearing' the veil that causes women's commitment to membership to be suspected. Margaretha A. van Es (2017) finds that women with a Muslim background in the Netherlands and Norway are depicted in the public media discourse of the two countries as oppressed, and stereotypically portrayed as housewives, uneducated and unintegrated in society. She goes on to discuss how these women with Muslim backgrounds are actively trying to affirm their belonging to these societies by breaking stereotypes around Muslim women and by linking their Islamic identity to the Dutch or Norwegian identity through activities such as skiing, for example.

2.5.2 Gender Segregation

Veiling plays an important part in relations between men and women and it is intricately bound up with the norm of gender segregation until today (Doumato 2009; Hamdan 2005; Le Renard 2008, 2014). For example, women in Saudi today have their own waiting rooms in hospitals mainly so that they can feel comfortable without having to think about men watching them. Because of veiling (which is mainly obscuring oneself from the gaze of men), gender-segregated waiting rooms made sense so that women could feel at ease while they wait. Just like veiling, severe gender segregation was a result of the Sahwah movement that was concerned with re-awakening Islam in Saudi Arabia, and it remains implemented until today. While there was a sense of segregation between men and women prior to the Sahwah movement, it was much milder and society was progressing towards a natural merge between the two sexes that was suddenly halted by the rise of the movement that sensationalised the issue of segregation along with many other issues that relate to women. In crown prince's Mohammad Bin Salman own words about Saudi Arabia during a global conference in Riyadh in October 2017: "Saudi Arabia was not like this before 1979. We want to go back to what we were, the moderate Islam that's

open to all religions. We want to live a normal life" (The National, 2017). The conservatism that was popularised at that time often targeted women as culture bearers, and consequently women were directed to dress more conservatively, their access to public spaces was reduced and women-only spaces started to develop in the public domain (DeLong-Bas, 2009, p.19). Even the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia (which was lifted in September 2017) was a manifestation of the cultural drive to limit the mobility of women in public and assume their confinement primarily within the private domain. In the 1990s, Almunajjed found that wearing a *Niqab* (covering the face) was synonymous with being a decent, demurring, respectable 'Saudi' woman, mainly because it indicated that the woman wearing it did not mingle with men.

As a general law in Saudi Arabia, gender segregation touches on nearly every aspect of Saudi social and public life, from the 1980s until today. Deeply rooted in strongly held traditional values that do not allow the merging of unrelated men and women, segregation in every sphere of life - education, working, healthcare, and socialising - was until very recently unquestioned. Even though social norms around gender segregation are slowly loosening (for example more 'public spaces' have been opened to women for the first time, such as at football stadiums (Lovett, 2018), there is still a strong sense in Saudi Arabia of what is public and what is private. Although written 60 years ago, Lipsky's words hold very true today: "Women belonged in the private world" (Lipsky, 1959, p.298). This stems, as Almunajjed (1997) argues, from the high value that the Saudi society assigns to family honour within a wider shame-honour culture. In Middle Eastern shame-honour cultures, the honour of a man is tied to the sexual conduct of the women in his family, whether he is a father, a brother or a husband (Abu-Lughod 1986; Abu-Lughod 1993; Meeker, 1979). Consequently, gender segregation laws were developed as an institutional mechanism designed to regulate women in order to protect the honour of the family. Of course, these social norms and practices are derived from certain interpretations of religious Islamic texts, but it is beyond the scope of this research to review them and debate their inaccuracy.

2.5.3 Work

During the time of Almunajjed's study, some professions were considered inappropriate for women, especially if they required mixing the two genders. A Saudi woman's naturalised/expected role at that time was the domesticity of mother and homemaker. Even though education was granted to women at the time of Almunajjed's study, it was hard for women to pursue a career after graduation for two main reasons. Firstly, only a limited number of

professions were considered suitable/appropriate for women. These were usually jobs that did not require the woman to communicate with men, such as education since the educational system was (and still is) highly segregated. Secondly, it was hard for women to pursue a career because demanding careers would mean deviation from caring for her house, husband and children. The prioritisation of her role as a career woman rather than the naturalised/expected role of a mother/housewife was heavily frowned upon. However, mainly, integration with men was the main obstacle to women's employment opportunities at that time. Women who were not employed but were seeking employment reported that the reason for their inability to pursue a career was the male guardian's disapproval of her working, or that her desired profession was presumed to be *eyb* (shameful) for a woman to do. Almunajjed reported that most families had 'traditional opinions' around professions, such as nursing or being a doctor, and regarded them as a "servile occupation not suitable for a girl of good reputation" (Almunajjed, 1997, p.90) because it forces her to mix with men and work late hours/night shifts. The majority of women who participated in Almunajjed's study expressed strong objections to mixing with men or being exposed to an environment that includes males. Some 60% of women who were interviewed refused to work in a non-segregated environment. They referred to customs and traditions when asked why, and asserted that mixing with men is regarded a violation of the customs established by society, displays a contempt for proper ethical conduct, and might open the door for illicit sexual behaviour. Gradual changes in women's employment were observed in the 1990s compared to the era of the 1970s, yet change is slow and haphazard, and the classical gender role for women in Saudi remained primarily the role of a wife and a mother.

Today, the above-mentioned notions around veiling, gender segregation and the accepted proper conduct from a Saudi woman form the identity that conservative nationalists deem proper, ideal or representative of the 'true' Saudi woman. This term – the 'true' Saudi woman - is an interesting term that emerges from the netnographic data collected in this research. Conservative nationalists reference it upon monitoring and regulatory gazing at Saudi women on social media to demote some women to a subcategory of 'Saudiness'. In an effort to denounce the unconventional images and behaviours of some Saudi women online, conservative nationalists insinuate that these women should not be considered 'truly' Saudi. Yet, Saudi women's activities on social media are continuously renegotiating and reimagining what it means to be a Saudi woman today and this is producing contemporary images that challenge the stereotypical/customary notions around femininity that were explained above. The next section will review recent literature on Saudi women's engagement online and the persistence of the

notion that a Saudi woman carries her family's name and represents its honour, and that, by extension, she represents the nation's honour, a subject which drives conservative nationalists to police young Saudi women's behaviour on social media.

2.6 Recent literature on Saudi women's engagement online and the representation of the family name

This chapter has already referred to Kobena Mercer's (1994) argument around women being often adjured to carry the 'burden of representation' as historical 'symbolic bearers' of the collective's identity and honour. Recent literature indicates that this 'burden of representation' is still imposed on Saudi women today upon engaging with social media, and that they are still thought of by some traditional/conservative Saudis as representatives of their families' honour who carry their families' name. In 2011 a study on Saudi women using Facebook, Yeslam Al-Saggaf linked women's behaviour to their family's reputation, further perpetuating them as the carriers of the collectivity's name and honour. Discussing Saudi women's awareness of privacy settings on Facebook and their reluctance to share personal photos of themselves on the platform, Al-Saggaf notes that the consequences of these photos falling into the wrong hands would be "damaging" to the families' reputations" (Al-Saggaf, 2011, p.11). The implication of this statement is that social structures, particularly the thought of women as representations of the collectivity, is restricting Saudi women's agency, which in return is influencing their actions, values and behaviour and adapting it to what the collectivity deems acceptable/appropriate.

Even studies as recent as one conducted in 2014 by Afnan Hayat have found that women's online behaviour is linked to their family's image within the community. Women who were interviewed in this study reported that their "presentation was not limited to themselves only; they affected their families as well" (Hayat, p.17), and were very concerned about their unveiled photos going viral due to the potential harm to their family's reputation. The participants were also mindful of other people's judgment, which they were quick to pass on. The study concludes that culture dictates the way Saudi women present themselves online, and that it allows judgment to be passed on women according to their online presentation and behaviour.

In 2015, Hala Guta and Magdalena Karolak published a study on the use of social media as sites of identity negotiation and expression amongst Saudi women. Through in-depth interviews with seven Saudi bloggers, the study found that Internet usage among Saudi women is influenced by established social rules, particularly by the belief that a woman represents not only herself, but her whole family as well as her extended family. Guta and Karolak explain that a

Saudi woman carries the family's reputation on her shoulders, and that her individual actions reflect upon the whole family. If these actions are deemed inappropriate by the larger society, they bring shame and dishonour to all family members and especially to the men of the family. As a way to overcome this, Guta and Karolak found that the Saudi women they interviewed resorted to concealing their names and, in doing so, were able to disassociate themselves from the collectivity of the family and thus reclaim their agency. Guta and Karolak also found that Saudi women negotiated cultural norms online in terms of relations with the opposite sex. Even though the study does not particularly investigate online romantic relationships between Saudi men and women, it does recognise a newly discovered possibility for women to network with unknown men and women alike. The ability for women to communicate freely with unknown men regardless of the context of their relationship is in itself a negotiation of cultural norms in the heavily gender-segregated community of Saudi Arabia.

In addition, Guta and Karolak found that the idea of women representing the whole family and not just themselves has led them to practice self-censorship. Sharing and distributing personal photos of women or engaging socially/romantically with men is particularly regulated in Saudi society and thus the study found that women self-censor the photos that they share as well as their practices online to make sure that they abide by cultural norms in terms of veiling and not mingling with unknown men. However, the study overlooks the heavy use of uncensored photographs by female Saudi micro-celebrities, particularly fashionistas, as well as regular Saudi women on platforms such Instagram and Snapchat. The acknowledgment of Saudi women's recently increasing practice of sharing personal photographs of themselves online would have undermined the study's central thesis of the Internet as a space of disembodied identities or anonymous engagement. The limitations in the study's findings could be due to the low number of participants, which makes it hard to generalise its findings.

While I agree with Guta and Karolak's finding that Saudi women use social media to renegotiate their identity, their study does not address the 'regulatory gaze' that women are subjected to online from the wider Saudi society. They fail to address the conservative nationalistic judgment that exists online and pushes back in the face of Saudi women's efforts to negotiate their gender identity, and instead focus only on family restrictions. This study will advance the research undertaken by Guta and Karolak to deliver an understanding of Saudi women's engagement with social media, and to uncover the complexities of negotiating gender identity and the challenges faced by Saudi women upon exhibiting contemporary and non-traditional types of femininity while still identifying as Saudi women. Guta and Karolak, in

addition to the two studies noted previously (Al-Saggaf, 2011; Hayat, 2014), only focus on women representing the family. However, my study observes that Saudi women are also burdened with representing a much larger collectivity - the nation. Just as Saudi women are expected to carry the family's name, conservative nationalists expect them to carry the nationality itself and represent it in a way they deem appropriate (see analysis in Chapter 8). This brings us to the detraditionalisation of the Saudi community on networked publics. The next section reviews the process of individualisation that is prominent on social media networks as it is central to explain the detraditionalisation of modern communities such as the communities formed online on networked publics.

2.7 Individualisation

The collectivism of Saudi society means that women's individualism is undermined by their ascribed role to represent the collectivity through the way they dress and behave, irrespective of whether this collectivity is the family or the wider nation. Corresponding with the work of Yuval-Davis (1992), this has meant that Saudi women are exploited as 'symbolic border guards' of the culture and representatives of the family and nation. The perseverance of culture and the religious Saudi identity was dependant on preserving traditions and the social norms of veiling and segregation and traditional gender roles. In order to understand how tradition is being challenged on social media, this thesis identifies social network sites as networked publics that form part of modern communities which promote processes of individualisation. A number of prominent scholars (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2002) have made a link between modernity (with its endorsement of individualism) and the detraditionalisation of communities. Therefore, reviewing the concept of individualism is important for assessing how social media networks could facilitate a negotiation of the traditional ideals of Saudi femininity that are defined by conservativeness, and promote modern ideals that constitutes an aspirational femininity which searches for agency within the site of popular culture and heterosexual romance. (detailed in Chapter 3).

Prominent social theorists (such as Mauss, Marx, Simmel, Tonnies, Weber, and, more recently, Giddens, Beck, and Baumann) may disagree about when to demarcate modernity from pre-modernity and the exact nature and magnitude of the changes associated with this epochal transformation, but there is a general agreement that the modern era is massively distinct from traditional societies in how societies in which people traditionally lived in systems of acute, close social relations within collectivities based on some form of kinship have been transformed by the

forces of industrialisation, urbanisation, capitalism, and the integration of modern technological innovations into our daily lives. Over the last two centuries an array of forces integral to these developments have led to a weakening in the fabric of these social communities, providing a context for personal autonomy and individualism to rise and become centre-stage in our perceptions of the world around us. This process of individualisation posed a challenge to custom and tradition as people start to venture outside the collectivity and adopt more individualistic sets of values and ideas. People began to attempt to learn and discover what their own interests and values were on a personal basis, without a presumed following of the general interests and values of the collectivity (Giddens, 1991). Indeed, what individualism means is to think independently from the collectivity and develop your own ideas upon critical self-examination and exploration, instead of following the ideas, prescriptions and conventions handed to you by your community. It is important to note though that while the terms 'modernity' and 'late modernity' in Anglo-Western literature refer to the post-WWII period (for example, the UK now is referred to as a 'late modern' society), the term modernity is used here in the context of Saudi Arabia in a slightly different manner. In this research, and within the context of Saudi Arabia, the terms modern/modernity refer to the period following the introduction of the Internet and the waning influence of the Sahwa that began from the early 2000s and continues apace today. Still, I observe that processes of individualisation, and correspondingly detradtionalisation, exist in Saudi modernity as they do in late modern communities within the context of Anglo-Western literature.

The implication of processes of individualisation in shame-honour communities such as Saudi is two-fold. Firstly, the association between women's conduct and the family/nation name weakens as the focus is on the individual rather than on the collective. The rise of individualism entails that every person is representing herself, which means that Saudi women would stop thinking (and being thought of) as representatives of the collectivity's honour, whether that be the family or the nation. The notion that women's actions reflect on the family's/nation's honour and reputation results in the policing of women's actions because once this notion is contested, Saudi women enjoy more liberty to choose how to appear, behave and who to connect with. This leads to the second implication of the individualisation process, namely, that the processes of individualisation are expressed through a rise in people's desire for autonomy and through growing confidence and agency. Therefore, if women are no longer satisfied with conforming to the customary model of femininity that has been established through tradition, they are inclined to discover and adopt new and alternate gender roles/identities.

The term 'reflexive modernisation' is used by Giddens (1991) to describe a set of processes associated with late modernity. Giddens focuses on the contrast between traditional (pre-modern) culture and post-traditional (modern) culture. In traditional communities, individual actions do not need to be thoroughly contemplated and calculated since the offered choices are formally made, determined and resolved in the form of traditions and customs. However, in post-traditional communities and in contrast to traditional ones, individuals are much less concerned with the paradigms developed by and handed down from earlier generations. Individuals in post-traditional communities are offered more choices thanks to an abundance of (often cross-border) information available about the plethora of lifestyle and workplace opportunities on offer in the modern world, and thus they become disembedded from the fixity of a narrowly local life. Nonetheless, this encouragement to conceive of the world in a different way entails that more analysis and examination is required prior to taking an individual action, which means that society is more reflexive and aware. According to Giddens, in late modern societies self-identities are constructed as part of a constantly revised reflexive project that offers a wide multitude of options and choices through an abstract system which is detached from both time and space (Giddens 1991, p.5). The more tradition loses its grip, the more individuals tend to negotiate their lifestyle choices from a variety of options that are being offered to them not only due to the 'pluralism' (Berger, 2014) that characterises modern societies, but also through the globalised media that packages these lifestyle choices in appealing and glamorous ways. The way this relates to this study is that in a modern environment such as what can be observed on social media platforms, the image of the Saudi woman could be 'adopted' instead of 'handed down'. This might explain why the classical/traditional ideal of Saudi femininity reviewed above is being contested and challenged in social media networks. Saudi women are reflexively approaching self-identity through their lifestyle choices that are being portrayed on these networks, adopting new choices and a modern femininity that redefines what the Saudi woman looks like and how she behaves today (see Chapter 3).

Giddens notes that "A lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embrace, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity" (Giddens, 1991, p.81). For example, the rhetoric of self-branding employed by fashionistas and micro-celibrities (discussed in detail in Chapter 3) depicts the post-feminist ideal of 'having it all' (Duffy and Hund, 2015) through sharing images that show a glamorous lifestyle of autonomy and entrepreneurship that is part of a carefully constructed self-brand/identity. Giddens notes how the term 'life style' does

not have much applicability in traditional communities, as it implies choice, and ‘adoption’ rather than a ‘hand-down’. The lifestyle choices made by an individual comprise the very core of her self-identity in this post-traditional setting. In traditional settings, identity is externally shaped by the authority of customs, family and religion; by contrast, in late modern societies, individuals self-reflexively embark on a project of self-development and construction. Giddens argue that modern identity is thus a reflexively organised endeavour.

Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) builds on Giddens argument of individualisation and focus specifically on women as they argue that women in late modern societies are gaining independence and a sense of autonomy, interpreted by these social theorists as no longer living for others as wives, mothers and caregivers. The authors argue that the changes in women’s lives are not necessarily revolutionary, grand or systematic, but rather exemplified in small steps in the fields of education, work and family. It is a process that is not linear, but rather complex and in some cases irregular and even contradictory. The small choice of a Saudi woman to be unveiled in her profile picture is a form of individualism in which she moves away from thinking of herself as the daughter, the wife or the sister of the male figure in her life. Sets of experiences of this nature and modes of identity are manifestations of the agency and autonomy that comes with processes of individualisation in which a woman is moving away from the notion that unveiling might bring men in her life shame, towards thinking of herself as a detached entity from the family and a responsible individual.

Saudi women are aware, however, that this show of autonomy entails a degree of social and personal level risk that goes hand in hand with choice. The ‘own life culture’ or the ‘self-culture’, as the authors refer to it, is a characteristic of individualisation that positions us in a ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992). In this risk society, women are offered new possibilities, but simultaneously they are faced with new incertitude, conflict and pressures. Indeed, Saudi women in my research are being targeted regulated and their national affiliation is being questioned as a result of their increased agency on social media networks. They are, as the authors describe, in an ‘intermediate stage’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.56), and their individualisation is still being negotiated. Even with acts of emancipation that are seen on social media platforms in terms of lifestyle choices, issues such as male guardianship, segregation, the complexity of pre-marital romantic relationships and veiling are still potentially explosive questions. This 'no-longer-and-not-yet' situation is causing much ambivalence and many contradictions and inconsistencies in the life of the modern Saudi woman (this will be explored in detail in the analysis chapters).

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter detailed the traditional customary ideals of Saudi femininity in relation to veiling, working and gender segregation. It examined the positioning of Saudi women as symbolic border guards of the nation and its culture. It also reviewed the shame-honour culture of Saudi Arabia and the role of women in it as representatives of the family's honour and reputation. The review of these notions highlights the singular way of being a Saudi woman at that time, which will frame the analysis of the challenges facing Saudi women on social media networks upon depicting a modern image of the Saudi femininity that is unconventional or non-traditional. The review of the traditional way of being a Saudi woman will also highlight the complexity of Saudi women's contemporary identities and the different ways in which Saudi women claim their identities in online and (offline) spaces. It will also underpin my development of the notion of the 'regulatory gaze' upon examination of the backlash women are subjected to upon depicting such images and identities. Women's positioning as symbolic border guards of the collectivity (the nation) compels their adherence to traditional gender roles and identities that are perceived to be functional in distinguishing 'us' from 'others'. Therefore, a 'regulatory gaze' emerges from conservative nationalists on social media networks.

The chapter also sketched Saudi woman's traditional gendered identity/femininity through a review of AlMunajjed 1997 study. It found a conservative gendered identity/femininity defined by veiling and virtual confinement to occupancy of the private sphere away from the male gaze which is a necessary outcome of strict enforcement of gender segregation. Finally, the work of key authors on the process of individualisation and its role in de-traditionalizing communities was reviewed. What we take away from this is that the images and realities of Saudi women which was at a time dictated by traditions and submerged in notions of piety and modesty while being closely tied to the imagined nation, is probably impacted by the increased trend of individualisation on digital networks that is part of a greater shift towards individualisation in modern cultures and society. This shall be fully explored in the analysis chapters.

Chapter Three. Networked Publics and Online Identity

3.1 Introduction

Social media networks are arenas in which it is possible for people to communicate and engage with one another. For social media connections to take place, individuals need to construct an online identity of themselves and therefore self-represent. The objective of this chapter is to review literature on online identity and self-representation online as well as frame the context in which these representations take place, the networked public (boyd, 2010). The networked public is a term that is used to "describe the way in which social media audience can be thought of as members of a public, bound together by their use of a common platform" such as Instagram or Twitter (Dobson, 2015, p.10). The review of online identities will pin down my discussion in the analysis of how a new type of femininity/gender identity is developing online amongst young Saudi women that is contesting some of the norms and values of the Saudi community that were reviewed in the previous chapter. An understanding of networked publics will ground my argument around social media platforms being counterpublics to the Saudi public sphere that marginalises women. This will answer my research question about how the rise in social network use is contesting the values and norms of the Saudi community and how it is changing women's attitudes towards these customs/norms. The chapter will start with a discussion on what constitutes a public, before drawing on the work of danah boyd to frame networked publics and their features and affordances. Next, key identity theories will be presented before moving on to discuss specifically online identity and the role images and photographs that users share online play in online identity construction and self-representation. Finally, the notion of micro-celebrities on social media platforms will be explored and how self-representation and identity construction online could turn into a business and a commodity, giving rise to paradigms such as the Fashionista and social media influencers.

3.2 The Networked Public

Social network sites have gained an immense amount of popularity and attracted an enormous amount of people who use them as online 'hangout spaces', turning them into a modern-day agora (Turkle 1995, p.249) in which people gather, converse, exchange ideas and form relationships. However, this trend has particular resonance in a country where gender segregation

between men and women is the norm, and women in particular are mainly positioned within the private sphere away from the male gaze. Acknowledging social media networks as publics is central to understanding the impact social networks have on the modern identity of Saudi women (see chapters 6 and 7), their public national image (see Chapter 8), and their sociality (see Chapter 9). The aim of this section is to assess social network sites as networked publics, as well as to review their features and their affordances. This is because the design and the affordances of social networks is influencing users' sociality, as will be demonstrated later.

3.2.1 What is a Public

In order to understand how social networks have detached Saudi women from the private sphere and given them access to public areas of the community, we need firstly to examine the conceptual separation between the terms 'public' and 'private'. The distinction between these two terms is multi-layered and complex but can be summed up in three different ways: society/collective vs. individual/personal, visibility vs. concealment, and openness/acceptability vs. closure (Rabotnikof 1998: p. 3; Rabotnikof 1997). Fixing women in the private sphere would necessitate restricting their accessibility to open areas in the community and therefore their exclusion from collective debate, as well as limiting their visibility and keeping them concealed within the private sphere.

Scholars who are more interested in the civic action and participation within collectivities often focus more on the accessibility of publics and the circulation of information to the society, as evident in Habermas's definition of the public sphere (1991) as well as Frasier's framing of 'counterpublics' (1992) in response. Habermas public sphere theory describes the public sphere as a figurative body or practice in which public opinion on matters of public interest is shaped, mediated with private interests, and expressed by responsible members of the citizenry. It is an area of social life where elite individuals freely converse and identify their community's problems and reach a common judgment which is later distributed in conclusion to the masses, and it is these discussions within the public sphere that influence governments to take political action. Importantly, he argues that the mass media has control over the public sphere, thereby challenging the legitimacy of any other cultural, non-political publics that are engrossed "with consumption of culture" (Habermas, 1991, p. 177).

Habermas's theory of the bourgeoisie public sphere has been thoroughly discussed in academic literature, and even revised by Habermas himself (Callhoun, 1992; Crossley & Roberts, 2004; Forester, 1985; Goode, 2005; Kelly, 2005; Kogler, 2005). Rather that seeing it as a

weakness, the numerous ways in which this theory has been criticised is an indication of how useful it is for understanding the structural transformation of the public sphere. However, the shortcomings of this theory do need to be addressed and the theory needs to be revised in order to understand the increasing complexity of the public sphere in modern societies, specifically in societies that are undergoing immense structural transformation from traditional to modern, as is the case in Saudi Arabia. Firstly, Habermas's analysis of the public sphere is criticised by scholars such as, among others, Garnham (1992), Calhoun (1992), and Fraser (1992) for its somewhat exclusive centring on the bourgeois public life. This reduction of the complex nature of the modern public sphere to a single bourgeois public sphere means that we overlook the significance of an alternate 'plebeian' public sphere that is developing alongside and in opposition to the bourgeois one (Garnham, 1992: 359). These collective spaces that are formed and occupied by social classes and groups outside the dominant class of the bourgeoisies are playing a pivotal role in constructing modern public life and therefore cannot be neglected or excluded from analysis.

Another area of criticism of Habermas's theory is his idealistic picture of the bourgeois public sphere even though it is imbued with power relations, something which Habermas himself later acknowledged (Habermas, 1992). The discourses generated in the bourgeois public sphere are that of educated, wealthy, mostly white and predominantly male elites, and are therefore a reflection of the specific interests of this privileged social group (Thompson, 1995). This particular critique can be linked to the objections raised by feminist critics on the patriarchal character of the public sphere. Even though Habermas's original account of the public sphere is gender-blind, feminist critics pointed out how gender inequality is a central element of modern public spheres, and how the public sphere cannot elude the pervasiveness of materially and discursively constructed forms of patriarchy (Brettchneider, 2007; Cameron, 1998, Moor, 2003; Rendall, 1999). The institutional criteria mentioned in Habermas's original view of the bourgeois public sphere were subjected to criticism by Fraser (1990), who states that while claiming 'inclusivity', the bourgeois public sphere has failed to include women and the lower classes of society. Fraser references scholars Landes, Ryan and Eley, pointing out that the clubs and associations in which people gather to form the ideas later produced in the public sphere are not accessible to everyone. She asserts that these clubs are limited to bourgeois men who view themselves as a universal class and emphasise their eligibility to govern. This, in her opinion, has resulted in a male bourgeois public sphere dominating at the expense of other publics, thereby excluding lower classes, other ethnicities and, most importantly, women. In the same vein, Fraser

draws on these criticisms of Habermas's problematic assumption of a single public sphere – a bourgeois public sphere - and argues for the existence of what she terms 'counterpublics'. Fraser defines counterpublics as "Parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (1997, p.81). The empowering potential of counterpublics resides in their ability to challenge the legitimacy of dominant discourses and the practices they engender by creating counter-hegemonic realms based on alternative discourses. While these feminist critics are concerned mainly with the political public sphere, this study is concerned with what Habermas terms the 'literary public sphere', expanded and redefined by McGuigan (2005) as the 'cultural public sphere'. The cultural public sphere is not entirely disconnected from the political public sphere. In fact, the existence of a cultural public sphere is a prerequisite for the emergence of a political public sphere. In the cultural public sphere, the media plays a significant role. Firstly, the media represents the platform for debate. Secondly, it is the main source of information. Thirdly, it constitutes a space that aggregates public opinion. Finally, media is where the output of the debates is promoted. That said, this study focuses on new media's (i.e. social media) potential role within the cultural public sphere of Saudi Arabia and how it can form a 'counterpublic' where Saudi women can produce, negotiate and reconstruct cultural discourse around gender roles and national public image.

3.2.2 Publics in the Age of Social media

Many scholars argue that there is not just one single public but rather several publics existing simultaneously to which some individuals are included while others are excluded (boyd, 2014; Ito,2008; Warner, 2002). Today, with the heavy dissemination of communicative technologies, publics have started to emerge in the various social media networks people engage with. Livingstone (2005, p. 9) understands publics with a focus on who they consist of, defining them as groups of people who share "a common understanding of the world, a shared identity, a claim to inclusiveness, a consensus regarding the collective interest". According to this definition, the immediate social circle of friends, family and peers could be understood as a public, as well as broader collectivities such as the members of the nation or the country. In her approach, Livingstone addresses how the media helps shape the collective by providing a common context, thereby synonymising the notion of the 'public' with that of the 'audience'. The audience formed by media is by its very nature a public, but it is not necessarily passive. For instance, Jenkins

(2006) maintains that producing and consuming media are two processes that are highly interconnected with and affected by each other. Ito (2008) pushes this idea further to contend that “publics can be reactors, (re)makers and (re)distributors, engaging in shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange as well as through acts of media reception” (Ito, 2008, p. 3).

This understanding of public stands in direct contrast to the political theorists’ position, such as that of Habermas, which disputes the validity of any depoliticised public “preoccupied with consumption of culture” (Habermas, 1991, p. 177). However, some political theorists, such as Fraser (1992), assert the cultural significance of publics when she argues that they are not only spaces of discourse and opinion, but also “arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities” (Fraser, 1992). Likewise, Calhoun (1992) points out a weakness in Habermas’s simplistic assumption that “identities and interests [are] settled within the private world and then brought fully formed into the public sphere” (Calhoun, 1992, p. 35).

Against this backdrop, networked publics came to exist on social media networks. Ito defines a networked public as “a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media” (Ito, 2008, p.2). boyd’s definition of networked publics as publics that are restructured by networked technologies extends Ito’s definition to include “the resultant spaces and collectives that emerge because of these developments” (boyd, 2010, p.16). They are both the space formed by networked technology and the imagined collective that develops as a consequence of the intersection of people, technology and practice. Networked publics function in a similar way to most other publics in allowing users to gather and connect for social, cultural and even civic objectives as well as helping the users to reach out beyond their immediate circle of friends and relatives. For these reasons, Senft acknowledges social networks as cultural counterpublics in relation to women in the same way that Fraser argues that counterpublics emerge in response to the exclusivity of the public sphere, whether cultural or political. Senft’s argument is documented in her 2008 book Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks (2008), which I shall return to in this chapter. This argument is particularly useful in the context of this research as it helps to understand how social media platforms (as networked publics) can function as cultural counterpublics where Saudi women debate and negotiate their national public image and gender role by producing cultural content that features an aspirational femininity which challenge traditional and classical images and discourses of the Saudi woman - how she looks, what she does, and where she resides.

However, the technology that structures these networked publics introduces a particular set of affordances that shape the way people engage socially within these settings. These affordances do not dictate social behaviour but the practices that unfold on these networks are informed by the affordances, producing new dynamics that shape participation and social engagement. In sum, the architecture of networked publics, as boyd argues, distinguishes them from the classical notion of publics. Therefore, these affordances are important to review in order to fully grasp and structure a valuable framework for understanding social practices on social media networks. Please refer to the appendix for a detailed account of four main affordances that are common between most social media sites and which play a significant role in configuring networked publics and in the development of an online self-identity: persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability. As well as the main building blocks of these networked publics; profiles, friends or contact lists, public communicating tools, and update feed (boyd and Ellison, 2007) in order to understand how features of networked publics are being used to construct an online identity that represent people on social networks. It is also important to consider these features as I will later draw on them to explain issues that arise from socialising on social media networks such as privacy, the imagined audience and context collapse.

3.3 Online identities

In relation to online identity, the majority of studies centre on self-presentation (Wynn and Katz 1997; Papacharissi 2002; Baym 2010; boyd 2010). In order to take part in a networked public, one must contemplate and create a networked self. This is done through creating social media profiles on different platforms. Given the relatively few identity questions online when compared to offline social interaction, Marwick (2015) suggests that every piece of digital information a person provides, from her choice of nickname or handle to her shared photos, can be and is used by audiences to form a conclusion about her and who she is. In addition, Lincoln & Robards (2016) argue that young people are actively and continuously marking out their identities on social media platform as personal spaces in which they exercise control (probably for the first time in their lives), in the same way that bedrooms are central spaces for identity expression for teenagers. In this section, I will address the main theories of identity and explain how they relate to online identity and self-representation on social media networks, before specifically reviewing Dobson's (2016) distinct post-feminist identity that is emerging on these networks.

3.3.1 Identity Theories

Even though we might think of identity as a singular, fixed and static notion that does not change throughout our lives, it is hardly the case. Most people experience identity as flexible and mutable. Goffman (1959) studied the act of self-presentation closely, describing it as impression management: controlling or guiding the impression that other people make of us through adjusting our setting, appearance or manner. His work has underpinned key debates about the construction of online self-presentation and the acknowledgment of social media practices as 'identity performance' (boyd and Ellison, 2007; Buckingham, 2008; Cover, 2012; Liu, 2007; Westlake, 2008). Goffman takes into account the (audience) as well as the (context) on which this presentation takes place, arguing that, just like an actor on stage, a social actor adjusts his/her performance according to where they are and who is watching them. He concludes that we present ourselves in ways that differ according to these two factors. Our behaviour at a party, for example, would differ from our behaviour at work in a professional setting. Indeed, research on 'symbolic interaction' indicates that we present ourselves in different ways to different individuals according to their status and the social context (Mead and Morris, 1934; Blumer, 1986).

Similarly, boyd (2014) notes how choices of self-representation by the same user might not be uniform across all online activities and social media profiles. As participants in social media platforms usually use a plethora of services and not just one platform (Miller and Madianou, 2012), their identity work might vary from one platform to another (Turkle, 1995, p.180; boyd, 2012. p.38). A user might wish to present herself using her first and last name on a certain profile while choosing to present herself with a nickname on another, and while she might choose to share her personal photo as a profile picture on Instagram, she might choose a photo of her favourite actress to be her Facebook profile picture (boyd, 2012. p.38). Sometimes these profiles are linked to each other in order to create an overall, somewhat homogeneous, networked identity that spreads across all platforms. In other cases, these profiles are separate, each communicating a different aspect of a person's identity or connecting with a different imaginary audience in mind. The latter, multiple identities, creates the basis of what I identify in Chapter 6 as the practice of 'identity separation' that some Saudi women resort to in order to handle surveillance, privacy issues, and to avoid shaming while negotiating an unconventional feminine identity. Identity is pliable and adapted according to social context, and people are highly skilled in shifting their self-presentation to suit their needs, a fact which renders identity a social construct. The variation in identity performance according to the context is perhaps explained by

the notion of ‘pluralism’ by scholars such as Hall (1987) and McRobbie (1994). This multiplicity of identity performance should not be interpreted as dishonesty, but rather as an inherent property of identity (Baym, 2010). However, it raises issues about false identities and levels of ‘authenticity’ in self-representation.

The ability to recognise and to outline social context, or the ‘frame’, as Goffman calls it (1956), is important when analysing self-presentation and social behaviour, as the context is a central issue in identity construction online. Framing or context helps to establish rules and expectations to guide behaviour. boyd (2012) observes that users make choices to represent themselves in different ways on each platform according to the audience that the users have in mind for that specific platform and in accordance to the context as well as the norms of that platform. The context of a particular platform is not determined mainly by its technical features, but is rather socially constructed through the interplay between users and the platform itself. boyd notes that people go on a certain platform to “connect to people they know, observe how observe how those people are using the site, and then reinforce or challenge those norms through their own practices” (boyd, 2014, p.39). This results in the creation of the norms of that particular platform, which define the context and therefore provoke a certain image or representation choice and certain patterns of behaviour by its users. This is not to say that collapsing contexts does not occur sometimes; it most certainly does, and it be closely reviewed in Chapter 4.

The focus on categories such as gender, ethnicity or nationality is very common is expressions of identity. A key theory concerning identity as a social construct was presented by Butler’s (1990) focuses on gender and sexuality, in which she asserts that these concepts are constructed completely through discourse and social processes. Rather than thinking of gender as an inherent feature that comes naturally to a person, Butler argues that gender is ‘performative’ on account of the fact that it is composed through millions of individual actions. We see other people do it and thus we end up performing it by imitating them. What can be drawn from this is that race and gender is something that operates in societies ideologically in order to maintain certain balances of power or to further them, in this instance they are structural sexism or racism (Omi and Winant, 1993). Chapter 8, which addresses the issue of gender roles and representation in relation to nationalist affiliation, draws on Butler’s ‘performative’ theory to explain women’s attempts to renegotiate Saudi female gender identity and reimagine it through social media engagement.

3.3.2 Postfeminist identities on social networks

As this is mainly a study of Saudi women and their performance of a contemporary feminine identity on social media, it is central to review the relevant literature on feminism, or rather 'post-feminism', and the performance of it in digital contexts. Especially considering that postfeminism is regarded as a critical way of understanding the changed relations between feminism, pop culture, and femininity, which is analogous to what this research is trying to achieve in relation to Saudi women. Reviewing postfeminism will help to analyse the way in which Saudi women are negotiating and reconstructing the image/identity of the Saudi woman through their social media practices, which is a key question in this research.

Even though the structure of the term postfeminism invokes a sense of progression emphasising a time 'after' feminism, the context and meaning of the prefix 'post' in the term are disputable amongst scholars. When young western feminist scholars speak about post-feminism, 'post' is meant to describe a complete rupture, a period 'after' or anti second wave feminism (Hawkesworth, 2004; Gillis & Munford, 2003). They refer to what has also been termed a 'third wave' of feminism that neglects the second wave's emphasis on equality in favour of a focus on women's sexuality, sexual expression and extreme femininity. In opposition to this viewpoint on the meaning of the prefix 'post' as anti or after, another group of feminists consider that the prefix 'post' denotes a lineage that entails revision, resemblance and continuation. While the third perspective is locating the 'post' in a middle area that is neither marking a simple break from what precedes it nor a continuity of it (Gamble, 2001). What makes the interpretation of what postfeminsim means even more of a challenge, is the fact that feminism itself has never had a universally accepted agenda or a single ideology that's is clearly defined and upon which we can measure the advantages and/or shortcomings of its spin-off postfeminism (Harris, 1999). In the words of Stéphanie Genz:

"At best, feminism can be said to have a number of working definitions that are always relative to particular contexts, specific issues and personal practices. It exists on both local and abstract levels, dealing with specific issues and consisting of diverse individuals while promoting a universal politics of equality for women" (Genz, 2009).

Instead of being fixed within a specific contextual and epistemological framework, postfeminism develops from the interchange and hybridization of feminism, postmodern theory, consumerism, neo-liberal politics, and mainstream media. It can be argued that postfeminism's

biggest challenge is that it takes the gains of the second wave (specifically gender equality) for granted (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010) and embraces raunchy culture and pornography as a form of empowerment and autonomy. This is in stark contrast to 'second wave' feminists, who considered pornography as acts of violence against women. Postfeminisim is in fact quite critical of classical feminism's gender binary and essentialism, and can be regarded as a critical way of recognising the altered relations between feminism, pop-culture and femininity. In addition to this, postfeminism commercial appeal and its consumerist implication is another reason for the confliction between postfeminists and second-wave feminists who view popular strands of postfeminisim such as Girl Power and Chick-lit as retrogressive due to the implication of creating what Imelda Whelehan calls a "free market feminism" that functions through "capitalism and is based on competitive choices in spite of social conditions being stacked against women as a whole" (Whelehan, 2005, p.159). Commonly, postfeminist expressions that are documented academically arise in a Western context are marked by the propagation and increase in "media images and communication technologies and a neo-liberal consumerist ideology that replaces collective action and activism with more individualistic assertions of consumer choice and self-rule" (Genz, 2009, P.9). In addition, postfeminisim is often criticised for its exclusion in relation to class, race and age in which the ideal postfeminist is portrayed as white, middleclass girl. I do not agree with second-wave feminists' dismissal of postfeminism as regression from the principles and foundations of the feminist movement, Instead I align my self with the likes of Anne Brooks, Julie Ewington and Charlotte Brunsdon who view postfeminisim as a healthy rewriting of feminism and a rejuvenation of the movement recognising it as a continues process that is constantly transforming and changing itself. However, I refrain from using the term to describe my findings on Saudi women for reasons that I detail in the below paragraphs.

In her book Postfeminist Digital Cultures (2015), Ashley Dobson assesses the performance and negotiation of femininity by young women on social networks. In agreement with feminist poststructuralist epistemology (Butler, 1990; Barad, 2003; Cover, 2012) and much like Butler's (1990) recognition of gender identity as a performance and a social construct, Dobson sees girls and young women on social media today as cultural producers who are 'producing' a postfeminist femininity while trying to navigate its sometimes contradictory demands. Dobson (2015), concurring with other feminist scholars (Gill, 2007; Hopkins, 2002; Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, 2005; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Ringrose, 2013) observes a shift in representations of femininity in today's postfeminist digital culture to one in which attributes such as energy, vitality, confidence, independence, an

entrepreneurial spirit, along with public visibility and self-exposure, are central aspects in the expression of modern femininity. In western cultures, and within the digital media context, Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) points out that young women are increasingly urged to make themselves publicly visible through digital media production and 'brand' their presentation in a manner that is aligned with these new postfeminist attributes, thereby creating a postfeminist brand of femininity.

Scholars have documented the gender-typical attractiveness of most of these modern postfeminist depictions and narratives (Gill, 2007) as well as the intense focus on consumption (McRobbie, 2009). In addition, Dobson notes that in performing postfemininity online, key aspects of traditional femininity that are tied to fashion, style and consumption are retained and confirmed as pleasurable (Zaslow, 2009). This is aligned with postfeminist ('girl-powered') versions of femininity that Zaslow (2009) describes when stating that "Some elements of traditional femininity (beauty, sexiness, and care) are retained while others (passivity, weakness, and dependence) are met with a feminist reimagining so that girls are repositioned as active choice-making agents" (Zaslow, 2009, p.158). Zaslow then critiques 'girl-power' concluding that at its core is merely a commodification and commercialisation of opposition to traditional femininity, and that what it does, is that it makes feminist ideas and discourse more accessible yet sometimes less potent (Zaslow, 2009. p.159). The notion of entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas within the broad term of 'post-feminist culture' has caused scholars such as Mcrobbie (2009) and Gill & Scharff (2011) to critique the term and how it is being used to analyse a very restricted number of media texts, centralised on the experiences of largely white, middle-to-upper class Western women.

When young women express/display a post-feminist self within digital cultures, Dobson notes that many of them are met with harsh and hostile reactions on social media sites of 'incited judgment' as Nukra dubs them (Nukra, 2014). Dobson (2015) notices several textual performances of self-confidence and acceptance that she suggests are being used by young women as a self-protective measure against the heavy judgment they face on digital cultures (p.129). Harris notes that it is a way of coping with the demand for excessive self-exposure ('discourse and display') on social media and the counter judgment of a gaze that is scrutinising and often sexualising (2004, p. 8). Dobson agrees with Nurka (2014) that the constructions of postfeminine selves on social media networks/networked publics must be understood as "performances created in relation and response to the assumption of a judging and judgmental gaze from peers and others" (Dobson, 2015, P.129). She notes (2014b) how a high sense of self-

revelation is normalised in digital social media culture amongst the youth. Whether it is in terms of information revealed about one's self, the number of photographs and personal videos shared, or even the capacity of communication, commenting and 'liking' is required to maintain social connections and friendships. Similarly, Bollmer asserts that 'networked citizens' today must accept "the demand to connect and expose oneself, maintaining flows of information to others" (2012, p.8).

This is however, an argument that is very particular to western societies. In fact, 'postfeminism' in its entirety as a term and as it is used by Dobson is limited by this exact detail; its fixation on particularly western women. In relation to Saudi women in my research, one needs to consider the complexity of the situation in a rather conservative society where women are expected to remain veiled and away from the eyes of strangers, and self-revelation and excessive visibility for women is yet to be fully normalised. Conservative traditions -veiling and remaining obscure- on one hand, are challenged by the contemporary push towards visibility and self revelation in digital context which is expected to create tension and therefore produce a type of femininity that is very particular to the Saudi society and is not accurately conceptualised by Dobsons term (postfeminism). There is the added weight of judgment and pressure considering the shame-honour culture of Saudi Arabia and the demand that women uphold the burden of representing the honour of the family, and by extension the honour of the nation. Preserving the honour of the family is closely tied to notions of visibility, veiling and seclusion to the private sphere. Therefore, upon engaging with social media and posting photographs of themselves, Saudi women are not only judged aesthetically in terms of attractiveness or sexiness, but they are also policed in terms of how much they reveal and how they behave. Therefore, I suggest that young Saudi women on networked publics are not only subjected to a judging gaze, as Dobson argues, but also to a 'regulatory gaze' that it is quite distinct and particular to conservative Islamic societies/Saudi society, as detailed in the previous chapter.

The above highlights the term's (postfeminism) limitation to encompass avant-garde activities of non-western women who are not feminists in the traditional sense since they are not particularly political. What is meant by "feminist" in this thesis is believing and actively engaging in feminism as an ideology and a political movement that calls for equality between men and women (see Hannam, 2007, Schott, 2003 Stanley, 1990). While postfeminism or post-feminist identities in Dobson's work are intended to capture a moment in western feminism, the terms do not accurately describe what is taking place amongst Saudi women online for two main reasons. Firstly, the Saudi society did not move through the waves of feminism in the same

manner that western societies have. Instead, what is taking place in Saudi society is more complex, young women are showing signs of empowerment and autonomy, while still negotiating legislative and societal restrictions. In addition, the online activity that I have documented in this research is far from the conscious organised social and political effort which defines feminist movements. While such organised effort does exist online and offline amongst some groups of Saudi women, it is not the focal point of this research. Instead, what I document here is individualistic digital depictions of a modern/contemporary femininity that is imprinting on wider culture, but it is not intentionally designed or organised to do so in the way that women in feminist movements collectively campaign for societal change. This adds to my reluctance in using the label of "feminism" to describe these cultural changes/their online practices. The second reason why the term 'feminist' is not fitting here is that these online activities are retaining key aspects of traditional expressions/modes of femininity that conflicts with feminist ideologies. These expressions/modes of femininity are articulated through a vivid immersion in consumption, the preoccupation with male-guardian approval and the fixation on beauty, which is shown in the analysis. These practices pose serious questions about whether the contemporary portrayals of Saudi femininity should be considered and labelled as 'feminist'. And while I sought in the beginning to develop a term that can encompass these varied and somewhat contradicting aspects of contemporary identity amongst young Saudi women, it has been pointed out to me by my supervisors and examiners that such a "catch all" term would be inaccurate. What I view here is not a singular way of being a Saudi woman that can be conceptualised in a term, instead, I examine the complex way in which Saudi women today are grappling with the conflicting demands of contemporary post-feminism and the expectations of a conservative society that is still 'traditional' in many ways. This complexity arises from two factors that set the contemporary context in which Saudi women grapple with expressions of identity and self-image in the digital age. The first is the overt contradiction between contemporary aspirational femininity and the the traditional, overly religious, Sahwa-inspired femininity that has been articulated and promoted since the 1980s and 1990s which 'froze' social relations for Saudi women in time. The second is the quite sudden appearance of digital technologies just 20 years ago and their now routine use, increasingly by young women who were brought up using them. Taken together, these two factors mean that Saudi women have been thrust from an era of strict marginalisation directly into an age – the digital context – which has rapidly and radically altered how humans relate to one another and how they re-imagine their identities. Thereby resulting in the emergence of contemporary ideals of femininity that are sometimes distinctively different

from Saudi's traditional ideals of femininity, and in other times they are very much the same, and this is what will be documented here in this research.

These significant patterns of expression and changing values among the women I observed online, resemble 'postfeminist' identities in their incorporation of neo-liberal characteristics of modern society and the promotion of agency amongst women. However, while both my research and scholarly work on postfeminism discuss and assess visibility and body sexualisation/exposing, the level of visibility referred to in Dobson's work on digital post-feminism and in the critique of McRobbie and Gill & Scharff is far more prevalent and intense than what I observe from Saudi women online. What is meant by visibility in this research is significantly less sexualised images of women when compared to the visibility that post-feminism work identifies and studies. The emphasis here is on social/cultural representation through visibility rather than sexual display. Moreover, Saudi women are developing a sense of agency and self-confidence through the recently provided opportunities to be visible culturally and socially *online*. Therefore, while Dobson, along with other feminist scholars (Phelan, 1993, Wolf, 1991; Mulvey, 1975/1989), argue that women's visibility in western cultures might not necessarily lead to self-actualisation and empowerment, I argue differently for the case with Saudi women. The level of visibility associated with contemporary expressions of femininity online within the conservative, shame-honour culture of Saudi Arabia might actually translate into self-actualisation and empowerment amongst Saudi women.

In today's networked society, where textual communication is receding and giving way to photography and video sharing, the images that we share online have become a central component in our self-presentation. The next section considers this.

3.4 The power of the image

As noted, photographs and images have become a central component of our expression of identity online and thus worthy of closer attention. For Saudi women, and as I shall argue in the analysis, personal photographs are turning into an influential tool for negotiating and re-imagining what the national image of the Saudi woman looks like. Several anthropological studies have explored the relationship between photographs and images as a form of representation and the people who generate them (Ginsburg, 1995; MacDougall, 2005; Sprague, 1978; Edwards, 1992; Pinney, 2011). Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) use methods based in visual anthropology as well as semiotics to examine the use of imagery specifically within the act of self-presentation on Facebook. They argue that the photographs that users share on a certain platform present a series of performances strategically chosen by an individual to communicate

identity and belonging. They cite Holland's (1991) argument that personal photographs can be influenced by and entangled with larger cultural notions of community, family and gender. Chalfen looked at how photographs that users share online might reaffirm culturally structured values through what they portray (1987, p.98). Moreover, Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) note how relationships are also the main aspects of imagery on social media, demonstrating significant bonds between family and friends which communicate information about a user's 'image' so that they are key blocks in the presentation of the self online. This section reviews the emergence of a selfie culture on social networks and explores the use of imagery by women in the city of Marden to present ideals of femininity and to display family ties (Costa, 2016).

3.4.1 Selfie Culture

Marwick documents the rise in the 'selfie culture' as the newest form of participation on social media platforms. In taking selfies, users actively craft the impression they want to give to others, which makes selfies a significant mode of self-expression, as well as a substantial genre to consider issues of identity, aspiration and social expectations. Used for self-presentation and self-branding by micro-celebrities, the selfie has been studied and examined by several scholars (Madden et al, 2013; Schwarz, 2010; Winston 2013; Twange and Campbell 2009; Lee, 2005). Although they are often criticised (and subsequently dismissed) as narcissistic acts (Cosslett and Baxter, 2013, Chamorro-Premuzic, 2014), Miller et al (2016) concluded that such generalisations are often inaccurate. The work of Miller et al (2016) explores the use of photographs and imagery in presenting the self online and its relation to gender performances and cultural conformity. The aim of the research was to study and report on the use and consequences of social media for people around the world. It was conducted over for 15 months in eight different field sites (Brazil, Chile, China, England, India, Italy, Trinidad and Turkey), with each field site producing its own monograph. In addition to the eight books designated to each field site, a ninth book was written to serve as an overall comparative book titled How the World Changed Social Media (2016). It finds that in many of these field sites, participation on social media platforms is highly visual, affording photography an unprecedented pervasiveness as part of daily life, especially with the popularity of smartphones, which feature often good quality cameras and connect us to social media platforms 24/7. The issue with the term narcissism is that it implies a self-indulgent orientation towards the self, whereas Miller et al (2016) document several occasions when the selfie is used to cultivate social relations. They maintain that there are many types of selfie which can be employed to convey group sentiment and affiliation rather than individual narcissism. This

has been seen in the case of the field site of the English village in which the participants shared five times as many ‘group selfies’ as ones which featured only themselves. Moreover, Miller et al (2016) point out that as an aspect of social media, selfies are de facto meant for sharing and circulation, which makes them representational of a more socially focused activity rather than an individually oriented one as the accusations of narcissism might imply. Nonetheless, the study does not dismiss the fact that images on social media and selfies in particular mainly represent idealised selves, which underlines their use by micro-celebrities for self-branding. In the Italian field site, Nicolescu (2016) observes the tendency of young women to spend hours ‘staging’ the perfect selfie. They end up taking multiple shots, which they scrutinise before selecting the one(s) they wish to upload online.

What is meant by idealised images differs from one country to another and is a matter of context and historicity. Ideals are reassessed and changed regularly, and what might have been ideal a number of decades ago might not be so today, and certainly what is considered ideal in the U.S. might not be viewed in the same way in Saudi Arabia, for example. This is why the observance of selfies is so relevant to this study, as they are turning into tools for promoting a new idealised self amongst young Saudi women. The contradictory findings in a comparison between Miller et al’s industrial Chinese location and the rural Chinese location were very revealing in relation to how context might influence the ‘idealised’ self. While the poor financial situation in the first one conjured up an inclination towards posts which portrayed an aspiration around consumption and wealth, in the second economic aspirations intersected with conservative traditions, with photographs that featured parental relationships and family life. In some instances, the normative rules of self-presentation are not about ‘looking your best’, but rather simply about presenting the self in accordance with social expectations. In a small English village, for example, selfies were often taken with no makeup and in casual attire, portraying an unpretentious modesty (Miller, 2016). Adults in the same village only posted selfies when they were related to charitable causes such as the ‘#nomakeup selfie’ challenge, which helped them to fend off accusations of narcissism that are often associated with selfies. Similarly, in the northern Chile field site, a standard selfie taken in a user's home or at a friend’s house or even on a regular outing was devoid of glamour and the aesthetics were erased (Haynes, 2016). Young users would post several photos a day of often mundane things all conveying a sense of monotony in everyday life, pairing them with hashtags such as #bored. A common form of the selfie in Chile was found to be the ‘footie’, in which only the feet of the photographer are shown, often while in a lounging position in front of the TV or playing a videogame, all in an effort to appear unassuming and

casual, and to trivialise the act of posing. The way users utilise this genre, ‘footie’, to communicate the mundane and to appear inconspicuous and unassuming is very peculiar to that region/community. When ‘footies’ appeared in other communities such as Italy, for example, they were again utilised to portray an idealised self with a spectacular natural setting such as a beautiful beach. In relation to my study, selfies will be looked at using netnography to assess young Saudi women’s modern/contemporary idealised public self, and to determine whether any changes have occurred in the traditional values and norms. In addition, the observance of the comments and reactions from other Saudi users on these selfies will help assess the cultural implications of the newly emerging identities.

3.4.2 Women’s ideals of femininity in the Turkish community of Mardin through imagery

More relevantly to my study on Saudi women’s engagement with social media, Costa (2016) researched a conservative Islamic community in southeast Turkey as part of Miller’s comparative study. The results that emerged from that site will be highly informative throughout this literature review due to the similarities between this community and the traditional Islamic community of Saudi Arabia in terms of social conservatism and Islamic belief systems, as well as Arab ethnicity since a high percentage of Mardin inhabitants are Arabs. On public facing social media, Costa (2016) found that young adults from both genders in Mardin construct and present idealised selves, taking advantage of the high level of visibility offered by social media in order to achieve a degree of local fame and popularity. Driven by the desire to attain this status and popularity, Costa observed that traditional boundaries between private and public were disrupted in this conservative community even though these boundaries had hitherto been strictly controlled and monitored. Naturally, public facing media is a place where users share what they know is going to be viewed publicly by others, and thus it is where they perform a self that is suspected to be scrutinised by other members in the community. Therefore, users in Mardin are caught between two contradictory driving forces: preserving reputation and pursuing popularity. Regarding the use of photography and visual images to present the self amongst female users in Mardin, Costa found that the models of femininity are variable and contradictory, changing dramatically according to age and social background. Identifying two ideals of femininity/gender image, Costa observed that women on social media in Mardin portray either a pious modest self or a more liberal image concerned with fashion, makeup and aesthetics.

In the first case, where women define their public selves through a declaration of piety and modesty, photos portraying the female's face or body are entirely or partially absent from public facing profiles. Instead, women use images of children or pictures of natural landscapes as profile pictures. Anonymous profile pictures were found to be more common amongst young women from rural backgrounds and with a lower level of education who are not necessarily ‘choosing’ anonymity but rather forced to adopt it in order to avoid conflict with their male relatives. In some cases, religious motives were behind the choice to withhold sharing personal photographs. Costa found that religious Arab females in urban areas deliberately choose to express their piety and modesty through withholding personal photos of themselves that depict their face or body. Instead, they share abstract photos or photos of babies or religious images as profile pictures and on public facing areas of social media. Often, in such profiles photos of prepared tables of food and feasts in restaurants or at house gatherings would be very common as they are perfect images to communicate a rich sociality without having to feature people in the photograph. The aim of such postings is again to impress others and obtain their admiration and envy. However, they reaffirm classical notions about veiling and limiting women to the private sphere away from the male gaze.

The second type of the ideal woman in Mardin is presented in the photos of young women from urban areas and less conservative backgrounds who share recognised photos of themselves which emphasises style, beauty and aesthetics through attention to clothes, accessories and makeup. Costa notices that not only secular, liberal women opt for recognition as opposed to anonymity when presenting themselves online, but some slightly more religious women might also choose to post photos of themselves (although their hair is covered in them). Social media has become the place where female users who are interested in fashion, makeup and beauty, can display these interests and compete for distinction within their community. Nonetheless, Costa asserts that in the generally conservative community of Mardin, even these photographs, which slightly push the boundaries in terms of women’s visibility and image projection, “still always follow norms of respectability and decorum, and they never attempt to pose with original, strange or weird expressions or display alternative aesthetics” (2016, p.59).

Costa further documents a rather interesting practice involving women’s presentation of themselves through photographs. She observes that women in Mardin often present images of themselves with important family members, including their parents and brothers if unmarried and

with their spouse and children if they are. I also observed this practice in my study of Saudi women (see Chapter 7). And while the intention documented by Costa in the case of Turkish women was the fear of misappropriation and the possibility of photoshopping of images by internet trolls, in the case of Saudi women this was not really a concern, as will be shown in the analysis. However, both groups of women view this type of photographs featuring them with family members as expressions of the ideal woman devoted to her family members.

Finally, the study of Miller et al, and Costa's volume in particular, shows a shift towards ubiquitous photographs that were previously kept away from the public gaze in private photo albums at home. With the rise of social media, photographs of ourselves, ordinary family lunches, and mundane gatherings have become a daily feed in our social media platforms resulting in a higher level of visibility of the once private lives of women, in particular within conservative communities. The advantage of this is that it allows ethnographers to assess whether classical conceptions around gender and gender roles persist or are being challenged. Through an analysis of this vast flow of images and photographs on Saudi women's social media accounts, we can assess whether men are still predominantly occupying the public spaces in the society while the women are enclosed in the private areas away from the public gaze or whether this is changing, and whether the portrayals of men as workers and the guardians and the women as caregivers are increasing or declining.

In relation to my research enquires, the aforementioned literature raises a number of important issues about the use of imagery to affirm or reimagine the public gender image and cultural values and norms in a community. This corresponds with the hypothesis in this research that young Saudi women are using their photographs on social media to negotiate their public image as well as to reassess the centrality of some cultural values such as veiling or male guardianship. The literature also mirrors some of the tensions between those who support contemporary/unconventional ideals of femininity and those who maintain traditional representations of gender (this will be addressed below and in the analysis in Chapter 7).

3.5 Micro-celebrities, influencers and fashionistas

In relation to self-representation and identity online, specifically to the 'public' performance of self, it is necessary to review the 'micro-celebrity' trend on social media platforms before ending this chapter as it relates to the findings of my study. Even though the trends of 'fashionista' and 'social influencer' entails a somewhat non-conventional form of self-representation to what Saudi women are accustomed to (high visibility as oppose to veiling and restriction to the private

sphere), it is gaining popularity amongst Saudi female users on social media (see Chapter 6). In this section, I will review the act of self-branding to achieve online fame online, female micro-celebrities' efforts to create a counterpublic on social media, and finally the implications of being a fashionista.

3.5.1 Self Branding

Much recent attention has been given by scholars to the practice of pursuing fame and popularity through social media (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Replogle, 2014), with many asserting that is has become a prominent objective amongst users in general when engaging with social media (Van de Rijt et al, 2013; Greenwood and Kaufman, 2013; Uhls and Greenfield, 2012; Gamson, 2011). Indeed, recent research shows that being famous on social media and branding oneself has become a 'job' (Carah and Shaul, 2016; Booth and Matic. 2011; Ferberg et al, 2011; Marwick, 2010; Duffy and Hund, 2015). According to Mavroudis and Milne, it is a type of labour that "involves producing a manufactured version of self that can be publicly consumed" (2016, p: N/K). Duffy and Hund (2015) explore how female fashion bloggers depict the ideal of 'having it all' and the 'glam life' by turning their branded-self into a commercially successful and publicly visible form of what Marwick (2013) dubs 'aspirational production' (an attention-seeking practice whereby an individual present herself in a high[er]-status social position (Marwick, 2013, p. 122-123) that young female social media users are eager to consume. Similarly, Page (2012) documents how social media users and micro-celebrities actively employ the 'hashtag' tool to self-brand in an effort to achieve high levels of visibility. In 2013, Senft explored how branding the self was exploding into the public sphere on networked publics, in which the majority of users are aware of their public presence online and engage in micro-celebrity practices. Given the architecture of social media such as Facebook features that publicise users' updates, posts and likes by default, as well as encourage users to "monitor the activity of others in the name of social connection" (Senft, 2013, p.347), social media users are invited to view social media as a public stage and engage with it as a performance. These processes turn the Internet into a marketplace where users are urged to take on the role of both buyer and the seller, as well as act as the 'goods' through branding themselves for other users to consume what they post and buy into the lifestyle that they portray through their posts.

Terms such as 'instafamous', 'micro-celebrity', 'Internet celebrity', 'Youtuber' and 'social media influencer' have become widely circulated in news outlets and become part of the popular culture (Brodesser-Akner, 2014; Satenstein, 2017; Saul, 2016). These terms entail a

social media account with a large following which resonates deeply with them, and a degree of fame amongst other social media users. Achieving this degree of online fame and popularity calls for constant visibility and exposure to grab people's attention, which might contradict or violate the social norms in Saudi society with regards to women. Women in Islamic conservative communities are expected to keep a low-profile and mainly confine themselves to the private sphere (see chapter 2). However, more recently in the Arabian Gulf, the rising trend of the 'fashionista' and social media influencers, particularly amongst women, indicates a significant social change may be occurring. The politics of visibility for women in Saudi is being challenged and renegotiated through the emergence of female Saudis such as, to name a few, @model_roz (5.7 million followers), @thehala (653k followers), @afnan_albatel (6.2 million followers), @malak_alhusaini (3.4 million followers), @adhwaaldakheel (605k followers), who each gather millions of followers on platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat. This suggests the emergence of these social networks as 'counterpublics' in relation to Saudi women.

3.5.2 Women as micro-celebrities, seeking 'counterpublics'

An early study on celebrityhood in the age of social media was undertaken by Senft in 2008. This study examined the practice of 'webcamming' adopted by 'camgirls' and how it can relate to feminism and political expression. It is important to note that this was prior to the practice's recent association with pornography. Senft defines micro-celebrity as a mind-set and an accumulation of self-presentation practices located in social media, through which users strategically and deliberately formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and share personal information to heighten attention and thus enhance their online status (Senft, 2013). Senft considers the concept of fame and publicity for camgirls, but her study applies to social media celebrities in general, translating into three aspects: theatrical authenticity, self-branding, and celebrity. One of the most interesting commentaries made by Senft in her study is the notion that throughout history women have reacted to their omission from the public sphere by founding counterpublics where their presence is admitted. She goes on to posit that social networks are modern counterpublics that women use for this very purpose. Her findings relate back to Frasier's above-noted conceptualisation of 'counterpublics' and the use of these publics by marginalised members of the community to push back and secure a place for themselves within the public sphere. Senft also notes how today's networked society encourages women to 'represent'

themselves through confession, celebrity, and sexual display, yet are castigated for too much visibility through conservative censorship and backlash.

3.5.3 Instafamous, the rise of the glamourous fashionista

Further research on this theme has been conducted by Alice Marwick (2015), who examines the phenomenon of 'Instafame' and celebrityhood on social media sites that promote the sharing of images and photographs in preference to texts. Marwick argues that this favouring of the image promotes a new type of micro-celebrity that is quite different from earlier documentations of this practice. Today, the practice of micro-celebrity has extended to include a specific set of visual self-presentation strategies that highlight the glamour and the luxury of the user, turning her/him into a 'regular person' who attracts mass audiences previously limited to broadcast media. Marwick explains how these instafamous 'regular people' tend to be good-looking and work in 'trendy' industries such as advertising, design, fashion or media, all of which share a focus on physical appearance. While Marwick does not directly refer to trends in the Arabian Gulf, her observations on social media celebrities and 'Instafame' correspond with the sudden rise in the 'fashionista' amongst Saudi women which is documented in this research. A fashionista is a young woman who is interested in fashion, closely follows the latest trends, adopts them and promotes them by taking photos of her daily style or creating video tutorials of her make up routine and shopping 'hauls'. The title of 'fashionista' is usually reserved for women who have achieved a certain degree of popularity on social media platforms as social media influencers and micro-celebrities by gathering thousands, if not millions, of followers. This thesis considers the cultural parallels and contradictions between the characteristics of the fashionista and that of the traditional young Saudi female.

Fashionistas, which I view in this research as a digital expression of an aspirational femininity amongst Saudi women, are reaffirming pre-existent gendered scripts by their portrayal of women mainly as consumers. A fashionista's feed is commonly flooded with photographs of luxury items and designer goods, expensive trips to exotic places while promoting merchandise and sponsorships from cosmetics companies and fashion houses for marketing purposes. All this positions these fashionistas mainly as consumers who are also encouraging their audience to consume. Fashionistas in particular, and the majority of female social media influencers observed in this study, rely on portrayals of the 'glam life' to build audience in what is dubbed an 'attention economy' (Davenport & Beck, 2005). These depictions are balanced with occasional images of 'candidness' that are 'natural' and less aesthetically constructed, with the aim of

conveying a sense of ‘authenticity’ and ‘realness’ to ensure that the audience still view them as relatable, a crucial feature in the new age entrepreneurial digital business (Duffy, 2013; McQuarrie et al., 2013; Marwick, 2013b).

The work of Ashley Dobson (2015) on self representation and self-production on social media is of relevance here. The issue of ‘instafame’, branding the self and marketing it, is that it raises questions about the ‘authenticity’ of the self that is perceived and communicated through the profile. Dobson (2015) notes that when the intentions and motives for creating a profile are reduced to commercial (such as the case with fashionistas and social media influencers who are cashing in on their online performances of self), then they “disrupt the conventions and expectations of the community” (p.11). She asserts that the tacit understanding of social media self-representation between the producers and viewers is that what is being viewed (the personal profiles) are indicators of someone's self-chosen and ‘authentic’ identity, produced for personal use rather than for commercial or political gain. Once this belief is questioned by the producers’ benefiting financially from their self-performance, then accusations of ‘fakeness’ are expected to arise. The implication here is that Saudi women who benefit financially from their performance of a ‘contemporary’ feminine identity on social media that challenges the traditional ideals of Saudi femininity mentioned in chapter 2, such as fashionistas, might find that the genuineness of their performance is questioned to be an attempt to stir up controversy and gain more followers, which is seen in the data in this study. Or worse, their entire claim of a Saudi nationality would be doubted as a publicity stunt to achieve exposure in the Saudi market which is undoubtedly the biggest market in the Arabian Gulf.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed three main notions: networked publics on social media, digital post-feminist identities, and the central use of images to construct online identities on networked publics today. The review of these three notions serves to frame the analysis of my research to help answer the research questions about how social media engagement is challenging norms, values and attitudes in relation to veiling and, more broadly, gender roles in general. This review is also necessary to understand how social media engagement can facilitate the modernisation of the national image of Saudi women and the development of contemporary feminine identities (see analysis chapters).

Identity theories were also reviewed in this chapter with a focus on the distinct post-feminist identity that is promoted on networked publics. In agreement with feminist

poststructuralist epistemology (Butler, 1990; Barad, 2003; Cover, 2012) and much like Butler's (1990) recognition of gender identity as a performance and a social construct, Dobson sees girls and young women on social media today as cultural producers who are 'producing' a postfeminist identity while trying to navigate its sometimes contradictory demands. The implication of this is that Saudi women could reproduce and redefine what an ideal Saudi femininity looks like through their use of social media platforms, even though this contemporary femininity might not necessarily be feminist.

The chapter also reviewed the use of images/photographs as a key element of engagement and self-representation on social networks. Costa's study of the Turkish city of Mardin was closely reviewed due to its resemblance to the cultural features of modern Saudi Arabia. Costa's study sees two distinct ideals of femininity communicated through the use of imagery: a pious, modest self and a modern, liberal image concerned with fashion, makeup and aesthetics. This chapter also noted how the rise in selfie culture could undermine visibility limitations on Saudi women and thus encourage them to be more visible when representing themselves online. Finally, ultra-public performances of self on social media, or 'micro-celebrity', were reviewed. Achieving this degree of online fame and popularity calls for constant visibility and exposure to grab people's attention, which might contradict or violate social norms in Saudi society with regard to women. Nonetheless, the trend is on the rise amongst Saudi Arabian women.

Chapter Four. Digital Relationships and Communication

4.1 Introduction

Saudi society is structured in a way that keeps men and women predominantly separate. Educational institutions, places of employment, public areas, and even social customs have all been constructed with the aim of keeping men and women segregated and within their own respective spaces, physically and culturally. Naturally, such severe and strictly enforced gender segregation has affected intimacy and personal relationships between the two genders. The lack of interaction makes pre-marital romantic relationships as well as the establishment of wider intimacies not only dangerous for those involved but also close to impossible in practice. This chapter reviews the central approaches and debates on online relationships and the development of romance on social media networks. This will underpin my analysis of how social media platforms have successfully created a gender-integrated networked public that is convenient for Saudi women to negotiate romance and wider intimacy practices. This will answer my research question on how social media engagement is impacting Saudi women values, norms, and attitudes towards romance and wider intimacy practices.

The chapter will start by reviewing networked individualism as a term to describe the nature of digital communication on social media networks. I then review the polymedia context in which our digital relationships exist today. Following that, I address the issue of privacy online, central when managing relationships on social media platforms, with a specific focus on social privacy and the strategies employed by social media users to achieve it. The notion of scalable sociality is also reviewed in this chapter with a focus on the work of Elisabetta Costa in southeast Turkey as an informative research on mediated relationships in a conservative community that shares many similarities with Saudi society. Finally, a review of digital romantic relationships is provided to frame the analysis in Chapter 9.

4.2 Networked individualism

When Wellman and Rainie (2012) discussed networked individualism, their focus was on the way we socialise on networked publics. The focal point of their definition of the term is relationships and how they are lived on social media platforms. This is in a way different from the notion of individualisation discussed earlier, which focused more on identity and choices, yet it is the same in the sense that it asserts the autonomy of the individual and her agency, except

this time carried out through relationships. Exploring the concept of networked individualism would be informative at this point in the review because it sheds light on the greater degree of agency that is granted to women once they are freed from the ties of the family, especially in terms of romantic personal relationships with the opposite sex. Networked individualism's centralisation on the person (individual) rather than the group (the nation, the family) plays a role in challenging customs and traditions, as will be explained in the following paragraphs.

The previous chapter reviewed and discussed the notion of networked publics (boyd, 2010; Ito, 2008), and I explained how social media networks are understood as networked publics. What Wellman and Rainie observed in their book Networked (2012) was that the infusion of mobile technologies into people's daily routines and their submersion in networked publics have changed the way they interact with one another. Rather than entrenched in groups, people have to a much greater extent become networked as individuals, and so the world is arranged around networked individualism rather than group solidarity or local consensus. Similar to the notion of individualism, networked individualism perceives an increased personal autonomy in the modern age, except with a focus on sociality as mediated through digital networks. It represents a shift from the classical configuration of social arrangements and relations built around large hierarchical bureaucracies or social groups that are tightly knit, such as the family, to social organisation mediated through the use of modern communication technologies. While Manuel Castells laid the foundation of this approach, it was Rainie and Wellman (2012) who popularised it and emphasised its importance by marking the rise of networked individualism as something which diverges from deep-rooted social arrangements that are constructed around "large hierarchical bureaucracies and small, densely knit groups such as households, communities, and workgroups." (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p.6).

A distinguishing characteristic of networked individualism is that people within this system operate more as "connected individuals and less as embedded group members" (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p.12). For example, family members no longer use one shared landline for the entire household, but rather each member of the family uses his/her own mobile phone to connect with their own network individually rather than connecting collectively as a group. This raises a concern amongst conservatives that the personal autonomy which comes with individualism is contributing to the continued decline in traditional social values, fragmenting society and leaving people atomised and isolated. This theme, which is very common in journalistic and media narratives today, and can be traced back to the work of early sociologists such as Ferdinand Tonnies, Georg Simmel and Max Weber as well as more recent work that highlights the

unfavourable outcomes of individualism (Bauman, 2001; Bauman 2000) such as the erosion of community (Heelas, Lash, and Morris 1996; Putnam, 2000, Leigh, 2010).

However, Wellman and Rainie contest this rather simplistic view, and instead of viewing networked individualism as a withdrawal from social life, they view it as an enhancement of it, usually associated with a flourishing offline sociality. More importantly, they argue that this does not necessarily signify a drift towards social isolation, but instead marks a move to flexible autonomy. Miller et al (2016) notes that in traditional kinship systems, an individual's social obligations and practices arise from her position within the family and the tribe, from the fact that she is a wife, a mother, a sister. The implication here is that it would be hard to disregard the woman's obligation to carry the family's name, and the idea of her protecting the family's reputation in a shame-honour culture becomes more powerful, thereby affecting her sociality. In contrast, within networked publics, users can choose to rearrange their social circle and disassociate themselves from their offline kin relationships (and consequently their roles and social obligations) and gain more agency in their sociality. This could have a profound impact on the way young Saudi women socialise on social media networks, where they can enjoy the flexible autonomy of networked individualism. Indeed, the findings of Miller et al (2016) in relation to networked individualism and women in conservative communities are to that effect.

However, it is important to remember that even though engagement on social media is promoting a sense of networked individualism and granting women enhanced agency, the reality is that these social media networks are not completely detached from the people we know and are related to offline. When young Saudi women are experimenting with non-traditional social connections with the opposite-sex, most likely their family members and acquaintances are simultaneously active on these same social media networks. Indeed, Costa (2016) notices how just as social media networks could be places of individualised networking, they can equally be places of group allegiance and conformity. This is why issues of privacy, the imagined audience and context collapse, which I examine next, are important.

4.3 Polymedia

It is important first to review a notable contribution to the field of digital communication as it will highlight the complexity of relationships and their management in the age of digital media. The notion of 'Polymedia' acknowledges the multiplicity of media platforms that connect us. First introduced in 2012 by Madianou and Miller, the approach was part of research on transnational mothering amongst Filipino women abroad and the way they mediate their relationships with

children at home back in the Philippines through the use technology and new media. Looking beyond the platform, medium or device, Polymedia views communication 'horizontally', noticing how communication media complement one another. The approach acknowledges how challenging it is to define social media and to assess its uses given the fact that they mean many different things to different people. While Instagram might be a way of expressing one's self artistically to one user, it might be a private concealed space to flirt with another. The study was informed by the idea of 'affordances', defined by Hutchby 2001 as the "functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object" (p.444). In an interesting example presented by Mirca Madianou in a research article in 2015, Aria, a Filipina teenager, chose to communicate with her mother who is working overseas through Facebook or Whatsapp rather than Skype. To her, use of social media platforms was a way of finding the right distance in her relationship with her mother. The lack of visibility on Whatsapp and Facebook chat, an affordance that was achieved on Skye via video calls, means that Aria was able to talk to her mother while avoiding being reprimanded over her untidy room because her mom was not able to see it. The asynchronous temporality of social networking sites afforded Aria more command over how she presented herself and managed her relationship with her mother. The mothers in the study (2012) chose the medium of communication (whether Facebook status or a Skype call) not only due to convenience or availability, but because the chosen medium of communication conveys a message on its own. Texting, for example, was used for phatic communication, while phone calls might communicate a sense of urgency. Therefore, within a polymedia context, each medium can only be understood in relation to the other mediums since it has been chosen over the others to communicate that message. The study also observed that communication does not take place over a single technology but by selecting between and combining a mixture of constantly changing media, thus highlighting "the need for each relationship to create a configuration of usage" (Madianou and Miller, 2012, p. 124).

The polymedia approach draws our attention to the ways in which users regard media as integrated environments of affordances, highlighting how they exploit the differences among media to handle their relationships. Navigating this environment becomes especially meaningful in mediated personal communication as users capitalise on differences between different types of media to convey emotions and manage mediated relationships. And as social media propagate, each platform develops its own niche in users' communicative practices. What surfaces because of this is a complex environment of multiple, evolving social media. What the term 'polymedia' does is shift our attention from social media as individual platforms to a recognition of this

complex media environment which users navigate to fit their communicative requirements. Returning to the example of Aria, each social media platform obtains its own niche according to its affordances, while the collection of all the different media platforms together constitutes the environment within which this particular personal relationship between her and her mother was being negotiated. What cannot be achieved through the affordances of Whatsapp could be done through the use of a different platform which incorporates different features and affordances.

Thus, users seldom employ just one platform in their online communication, but rather a compilation of media while boosted convergence intensifies the shifting between platforms, as observed in Madianou's 2014 research 'Smartphones as Polymedia'. In this research, Madianou assessed whether smartphones function as an environment of polymedia, discovering that "smartphones consolidate the emergence of the ubiquitous internet and the 'taken for [grantedness]' of the mobile phone" (Madianou, 2014, p.678). For users who own a smartphone, being 'online' is the default situation to a point that it no longer registers as a distinct state. 'Always on' users, as Madianou calls them, employ smartphones as an "integrated environment of communicative opportunities" (Madianou, 2014, p.670). The mobility of smartphones, along with their capability to hold innumerable applications, facilitates jumping between these platforms easily and fluidly, rendering them representative of a media environment in their own right. As a result, smartphones as polymedia heighten the awareness of significant others, and in cases of physical separation shorten the distance.

Finally, Madianou and Miller's (2012) findings show that this increased and often indirect communication is not necessarily positive, as friction and discontent are as common as the more fulfilling aspects of digitally mediated communication. Consequently, a polymediated context of social connection raises issues of privacy (as will be seen below), which is a matter of utmost importance for Saudi women, who, in a shame-honour culture, need to protect their reputation while negotiating norms and values on social media.

4.4 The issue of privacy: avoiding surveillance

First, it is important to make it clear that what is meant by privacy here, and throughout this research, is 'social privacy', or, as danah boyd puts it, not personally identifiable information (PII), but rather personally embarrassing information (PEI) (boyd, 2010b). The difference between the two, as boyd explains, has to do with the audience at play. Issues with privacy and PII, are mostly issues with strangers such as governments and corporations or third parties manipulating and misusing people's data for marketing purposes or government surveillance.

However, according to boyd, what people are mainly concerned about when engaging on social media is PEI and the social personal damage that can be done by individuals they actually know or get to know and might be embarrassed in front of. It is for this reason that, as boyd asserts, "People often do not worry about whether or not something is publicly accessible online, but how far it can spread and searchable it might be by those who might be trying to embarrass them" (2010b, p. N/A). Issues of privacy are even more urgent in shame-honour cultures such as Saudi Arabia, where people (especially young women) care for their reputations and fear tarnishing them because they extend to the rest of the family and beyond to the nation. Thus, it is necessary to review the way in which privacy is achieved on social media networks in order to fully understand the way in which it is impacting Saudis' online sociality and connections and how these sites are used to negotiate romance and wider intimacies. As much as data privacy, which involves the right of protection against third parties (PII) is an important issue, it is beyond the scope of this research to address it since the focus here is on personal and intimate social relationships online, for which PEI is more relevant.

4.4.1 Privacy defaults and user agency

While the situation in most interpersonal communication offline is that interaction is private by default/public through effort, dana boyd (2014) draws our attention to the reversed situation in mediated online interaction. For example, offline, and even in a public setting, two people who are having a conversation in a coffee shop can assume a degree of privacy. Even if people close by do hear parts of the conversation, social norms and etiquette would prevent them from taking part in the conversation. However, in mediated environments, assumptions around social norms and privacy are being questioned as many social media platforms are designed to encourage users to 'share' and spread information. Default settings on websites such as Facebook, for example, make it a lot easier to share with everyone in the friend list than to manipulate the settings to limit the post to a selected audience. Therefore, interaction on social media is public by default, private by effort.

Fundamentally, social privacy online relates closely to user agency as it is about having control over how personal information flows online (boyd, 2010a). Surveillance online, whether by parents, peers or society in general, is a concern many users of social media platforms have across all social groups, and a significant one when considering digitally mediated intimacies and personal relationships. Whether it is women in shame-honour cultures who worry about their reputation and the repercussions of public social engagement online with the opposite sex, or the

common user all over the world, we care about who is watching us doing what. It is true, however, that we might not all choose to be as 'private' as one another, and what constitutes private differs from user to user depending on the context. Users of social media in southeast Turkey, for example, were found to be protective of their photographs for fear that someone might share them on social media without their knowledge or consent (Millet et al, 2016). On the other hand, the same study found that users in industrial China were less protective of photographs since they consider it a gesture of affection and appreciation for someone to share their photographs online unexpectedly. However, we all want a degree of control over what we put out there, even if we choose different scales of exposure for ourselves.

Even though mediated interpersonal communication on social media platforms is public by default, the fact that a person is engaging in public on social media (on public-facing platforms) does not mean that he/she does not care about privacy (boyd, 2010a). As boyd asserts, "There is a big difference between being in public and being public" (2014. p.60). Pew found that 85% of adult users want to have control over who has access to their personal information. Even a puzzling piece of data such as Miller et al's (2016) finding that four in five people in rural China share their password with others should not be misinterpreted as a lack of concern about privacy. Instead we need to look at who they are willing to share their passwords with, and we will find that it is normally only with people they trust. This brings us back to the understanding of social privacy online as a desire for control over who sees what, and thus as an expression of user agency. Social privacy online is not something that a participant has or does not have, but something that users work for and negotiate to achieve using several techniques and strategies.

4.4.2 Strategies to achieve privacy

Individuals online use many techniques to achieve privacy. The most obvious way would be to tamper with privacy settings in order to restrict the visibility of a certain post to a certain audience. However, boyd found that users of social media might resort to other strategies in order to achieve privacy.

Social steganography

Instead of restricting audience, users might restrict access to *meaning* by using inside-jokes, otherwise known as 'social steganography'. Social steganography is basically the act of hiding the meaning of a message "in plain sight by leveraging shared knowledge and cues embedded in particular social contexts" (boyd, 2014, p.65). This could be achieved through the utilisation of

innumerable linguistic and cultural tools, such as song references and lyrics, insider-jokes or other anecdotes from popular culture which would limit the meaning of the message to a selected few and exclude others from understanding it even though the message itself is functionally accessible by everyone. In her book It's Complicated (2014), boyd explains how teens in the U.S. might use pronouns and nicknames or refer to certain events and user-predetermined code words to gossip with one another without adults understanding it.

boyd gives the example of surfing Facebook with 17-year old Serena when stumbling upon a status by a classmate of Serena's which read: "I'm sick and tired of this". While boyd herself, or surely any other person who is not in Serena's school might not understand what the pronoun 'this' refers to, Serena and her school mates could fully interpret that it refers to the dispute that this classmate had been having with another girl from school. Through this technique, Serena's classmate succeeded in limiting access to the *meaning* of her message even though the message is technically accessible to everyone on Facebook and linguistically coherent and meaningful, thereby achieving a greater level of privacy for herself. Encoding content using social steganography could be a very useful strategy for young Saudi women to reclaim agency in their effort to achieve privacy in contexts in which they assume others are watching.

Switching Audiences

Another way of protecting one's privacy online is by switching platforms - or rather audiences - for sharing certain messages or for a specific activity, such as choosing to share a selfie on Snapchat (which fosters only your close friends) rather than sharing it on Facebook (which hosts all your family). This entails a premeditated decision to keep audiences separate from one another and to manage social media profiles respectively. This act of switching platforms and being mindful of the audience on each platform, which boyd discusses (2014), is closely related to the notion of 'scalable sociality' which Miller et al developed in their book How the World Changed Social Media (2016), which will be reviewed below. Contacts and platforms could possibly overlap, but generally platforms become associated with certain types of communication that the user deems suitable for the audience on that specific platform. However, this strategy does present its own challenges when trying to avoid what boyds labels 'context collapse'.

Context collapse happens when "people are forced to grapple simultaneously with otherwise unrelated social context that are rooted in different norms and seemingly demand different social responses" (boyd, 2014, p. 31). In a world where the notion of 'polymedia' (Madianou and Miller, 2012) dominates our communication, users might wish to separate certain

aspects of their personality and limit them to a particular medium with a particular audience in mind. However, the proliferation of social media platforms and their popularity has increased the probability that users will unexpectedly encounter people on the wrong platform, such as your aunt joining Instagram and *requesting* your *friendship*, or your mother checking your Facebook wall. Having imagined audiences in mind helps users to construct their online profiles and activity accordingly, and thus "The imagined audience defines the social context" (boyd, 2014, p. 32). Yet, because of the intricate nature of privacy settings online and the publicness of many social media programs, it is hard for users to know exactly who might be also watching. Manoeuvring collapsed context while bearing in mind multiple potential audiences involves substantial social monitoring and negotiation and is certainly influencing the way we use social media platforms. The risk of context collapse is of a much higher consequence in the situation of young Saudi women from conservative families. The possibility of encountering a family member on a platform where these young women might choose to negotiate romance and intimacies with the opposite sex by adding, connecting and flirting with young men (a situation that the family and wider society deem inappropriate) would have a significant impact on these women's reputations.

Pseudonyms

In an effort to overcome the issue of context collapse, the user might resort to the use of pseudonyms. The use of pseudonyms is a practice that was more common in the early days of the Internet in the 1990s (Turkle,1995; Stone,1996) when online communication was primarily textual and characterised by anonymity. However, today the 'real-name web' (Hogan, 2013) is very different from the sparse, strange and simplified 'old web'. Qualities that made it that way have receded today, leaving us with a web that is densely connected. Moreover, even though the Internet supplies the affordance of anonymity, it is not anonymous by default any more, as used to be the case. Built-in cameras and microphones in laptops and smartphones have resulted in a decrease in textual communication online and a rise in photo-sharing and video-chatting, increasing the gap between pseudonym and online communication practices. This is not to stay that anonymity or pseudonyms have disappeared entirely from our online social practices, or that it should/will disappear, as it certainly encourages the full participation of all groups of society, including the vulnerable, the marginalised and the oppressed, all of whom worry about surveillance (Bodle, 2013). The growing usage of real names does not weaken the motivations for anonymity or pseudonyms. Functional reasons for pseudonyms still endure, such as wanting

to use a unique nickname, or as Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) argue for personal motivations of identity play. But more generally pseudonyms are used in an effort to avoid the critical issue of context collapse upon negotiating privacy.

4.4.3 From being a threat to being an opportunity

It is because of scenarios like this that users of social media around the world might view social engagement on these platforms as a potential threat to their privacy. However, in several countries, such as India (especially in the south) and China, engaging on social media platforms might be the first chance for individuals to experience a genuinely private space (Miller et al, p. xvii). In industrial China, Miller et al (2016) observed how factory workers live together in factory accommodation with between six and eight occupying the same room. Daily life is collective where people cook in public spaces and visit without knocking. It is widely accepted that one would only hide a rather grim secret from the public eye. In such an environment, the use of social media platforms presented Chinese people in these contexts with their first chance for true privacy, especially given their frequent use of anonymity affordance online. Miller et al found that on social media factory workers in China were able to document their thoughts and secrets without fear of judgment from the people who they live with and share their offline space so closely with (Miller et al, p. 188-189). More relevant to a case study on Saudi women, social media might be the only space where some Saudi women could connect and engage in a sexually integrated social environment, privately, and away from the gaze and control of her family.

boyd concludes that achieving privacy is a continuous process "by which people seek to have control over a social situation by managing impressions, information flows, and context" (2014, p.76), which makes it a variable, changeable construct highly related to user agency. The once rigid line which lay between public and private is now obscure, and privacy is no longer understood as something you have or do not have online; it is something that you constantly work for. In the context of Saudi Arabia, the novel ability to engage socially and freely between the sexes online entails achieving a certain degree of privacy, at least in the early stages of this practice, before it can be accepted as a social norm for the opposite sexes to interact freely in the community. This will be examined more closely upon reviewing Elisabetta Costa's 2016 contribution on the conservative Islamic society of Mardin below.

4.5 Scalable sociality

Significant analysis and discussion on the subject of social media and its impact on personal

relationships is presented in the study by Daniel Miller et al (2016) (see Chapter 3). In their attempt to define social media, Miller et al (2016) pay close attention to the 'scales' on which users fluctuate upon communicating and socialising at a given moment online. They conceived two main scales: the first one is the scale from 'the most private to the most public', and the second is the scale from 'the smallest group to the largest groups' (p.3). At the opposite ends of these scales, we find private, one-to-one communication/socialisation at one end, and public broadcasting or mass communication/socialisation at the other end. The study asserts that our engagement with social media has created this notion of online 'scalable sociality', or the ability of adjusting the scale of socialising in terms of reach according to the preference of the user at that time considering the polymedia context of today's digital communication as well as our desire to achieve privacy. The Polymedia approach (Madianou and Miller, 2012) acknowledges how most people today use a wide assortment of social media platforms and that no one platform can be understood in isolation from the others. Therefore, within the context of Polymedia, users can "map different kinds of sociality onto the diversity of their social media platforms" (Miller et al, 2016, p.4). The use of a certain platform and the connotations of using it as a medium relates to the way another one is used and perceived, and is therefore a perfect illustration of the concept of 'scalable sociality'. So a user might share some information on the public facing areas of social media such as a Facebook wall, for example, while choosing to limit romantic communication to private messaging, thereby adjusting the scale of sociality to a lower degree when convenient. For example, while a Skype video call might be preserved for the most intimate of relations, such as lovers at a distance, WhatsApp can be used for small group texting to close friends or to household family members. On a larger scale of sociality, Facebook is more of public facing platform that involves everyone a person knows from family members and distant cousins to work acquaintances and close friends, while Twitter could be open to even complete strangers. Miller et al conclude that "The best way to define what is popularly called social media but also includes prior media is thus to describe the new situation as increasingly 'scalable sociality'" (p.3).

There is no uniform ranking of the scale of sociality on these platforms; instead, users select them according to their preferences and according to the platforms' audience. Some might choose to have a private Facebook account, while others might use Skype group calls with several friends at once instead of only dyadic video calls. Scalable sociality is not only illustrated through Polymedia, but might be also observed within a single platform. For example, the functionality of 'groups' within WhatsApp enables the user to have a group designated solely for

family members, while another one includes only close friends. Topics discussed easily in the friends group might be disregarded in the family one due to the presence of parents. Just as well, the user might choose to restrict a post to a certain group of contacts on a platform through the privacy preferences, or even to directly send a private message through the private messaging system of that platform instead of using its public space. This is the advantage of scalable sociality: it gives users choice and control over the degree of privacy or the size of the group with whom they wish to communicate.

Scalable sociality is useful for dividing spaces of interaction on social media platforms into a public-facing platform/space such as the Facebook wall, which everyone can view, and a private platform/space such as the direct messaging system on Facebook or the dyadic messaging on WhatsApp. This divide is critical for conservative communities with shame-honour cultures in which people need to be aware of social surveillance and privacy to protect their reputations, as is the case in Saudi Arabia. The inherent tension between privacy and publicity is a matter of interest in many western studies, and it is a central theme in Elisabetta Costa's research (2016), which links her findings together and constitutes the perspective through which she examines social change. As a conservative, mostly segregated community, the issue of privacy and publicity is of special interest for the users of Mardin when engaging online. She states that social media are comprised simultaneously of both very public and very private settings, as well as the many areas between the two extremes. She asserts that this is one of the main reasons why social change, when prompted by social media, "is not a linear and uniform process, [but is] rather… the combination of conflictual and opposite transformations" (Costa, 2016, p. 4). This is the case mainly because people in shame-honour cultures behave differently on public areas of social media platforms than the way they do on private areas.

Through observing the public spaces of social media such as the Facebook wall or the Twitter feed and the way they are being used in Mardin, Costa finds that Mardinian users of social media have devised a new mode of public space that is hyper-conservative and more traditional than the offline Mardin society. This digital public space "reinforces traditional groups such as the family and lineages as well as the individual" (Costa, 2016, p.4). One important issue that Baym (2013) refers to in her book on personal connections online is that social forces such as gender and culture persist in our online communication and in some cases are even strengthened when mediated. And while mediated communication introduces many new qualities, it continues to exhibit and reinforce the wider cultural forces that shape meanings in all contexts. On the public online space, Costa (2016) found that female users would portray themselves as good,

modest Muslim women who adhere to traditional values, omitting any aspect of their lives that does not showcase their conformity to gendered norms and Muslim morality. This seems to stem directly from the degree of surveillance that their images and posts are subjected to on social media by immediate family and friends, a surveillance that might not necessarily occur offline. For example, photos that show men and women in public settings together, such as in cafes or restaurants, are rarely displayed publicly on profiles as it may lead to gossip or misunderstanding even though these practices have obviously occurred in 'real life'. Equally concealed on public-facing social media platforms are premarital romantic relationships and flirtations, even if they are known to close friends offline; these relationships are never carried out on the public areas of social media. Public facing platforms are also used as a public form of interconnectivity with the extended family and kin, in which narratives of happy relationships are shared publicly in the form of family photos or to send religious holiday greetings to extended family members.

In the traditional conservative middle-eastern communities, the line between public and private has always been attentively policed. Domestic intimate areas of the home, such as the kitchen or the family living room, for example, have always been restricted and protected from outsiders' gazes. Therefore, women, considered belonging to that private domain, were expected to also remain concealed. However, in Mardin, Costa notes that images of these private areas started to pop-up on public-facing platforms, with, for example, everyday photos of the family sharing meals together displayed on the Facebook wall for everyone to see. Similarly, the study notices the "increasing visibility of women whose public presence has always been limited and controlled" (p.6). Yet Costa explicitly details that alongside these *intrusive* pop-ups of the domestic and intimate in public areas of social media, the people of Mardin still perform selves, relationships and values that adhere strictly to the traditional customs of their society. Highly conscious of protecting reputation within the community, Mardin men and women exhibit only what conforms to conservative and traditional social norms on public-facing social media.

In contrast, upon reviewing private areas of social media, Costa finds that it had led to new individual-based forms of socialisation as well as facilitating prohibited mixed-gender friendships and love relations. On the private areas of their social media, the men and women of Mardin were found to be creating and maintaining their own relationships as individuals away from the binds of family and society that contain their offline lives. While offline, these same individuals tend to be defined as members of kin groups, where their role, identity and demeanour are determined by gender or age. Online, however, Costa notes that social media, specifically its private areas, could be viewed as a liberating tool where users in conservative

communities are able to express repressed desires and create more individual-based social relations. And while this argument is true for both men and women, it is especially true for female users, who tend to have much less autonomy and whose choices are eminently determined by older male family members.

It was interesting to note how women in Mardin were offered a new opportunity through social media to meet new people and make new friends despite the restrictions on their offline movements. Costa chronicled how young female users often added strangers to their social media accounts and had private conversations with them. They had become skilled in navigating privacy settings to conceal these interactions from other friends and family contacts, or they would simply create a fake profile designated solely for this purpose, connecting with strangers away from the gaze of the family and friends. Even though this is not courtship or flirtation, but merely friendship, they still felt the need to hide it from others as it is considered morally reprehensible to communicate with total strangers.

Costa's finding that social media has increased the autonomy and the number and types of friends users could have, especially women, is in line with Wellman and Rainie's (2012) notion of our movement in modern societies towards 'networked individualism' (explored above), defined as the move from group-based networks to individualised networks. This development, however, is not necessarily at the expense of group allegiances, but perhaps alongside them. As Costa notes, social media was being used in Mardin largely to maintain contacts with relatives scattered around Turkey and abroad, inducing strong family relations and tribal ties that otherwise would have been compromised by this geographic dispersal. Nonetheless, amongst the new kinds of social relations that Costa saw emerging online, romantic relationships are central. This is something which I address in the next section.

4.6 Digital Romantic relationships

It is useful to first review some of the key western literature on romantic relationships online in order to build an interpretive framework for the research, before moving on to review in some detail Costa's account of romantic relationships in the conservative community of Mardin. The use of social media networks for initiating and cultivating romantic relationships is very common in western communities despite the frequent opportunities for a person to initiate a romantic relationship offline/organically (Gershon 2010; Pascoe 2010; Lenhart and Madden 2007; boyd, 2010). Digital interaction plays an important role, specifically amongst young adults and adolescents, in initiating casual relationships and in progressing to a more serious/exclusive

attachment. Christo Sims (2007) found that especially amongst young adults flirting through social media with a possible love interest was less intimidating than face-to-face flirtation. Through what he calls 'controlled casualness', teenagers and young adults are able to manage the flirting process more effectively while avoiding the usual vulnerabilities that come with it.

The role of social media does not stop at commencing a romantic relationship. The multiple sites of social networks are then used to cultivate and manage the relationship, moving it between platforms in accordance with the stage it is at (Pascoe, 2010) and adding more media channels to the communication in a calculable configuration of 'media multiplexity' (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Baym (2013) points out that as the ties we make online strengthen, more forms of communications are added, such as video call or instant messaging in order to expose us to more social cues. In her book Social Media and Personal Relationships (2013), Deborah Chambers documents the way in which digital media is being used by young adults to initiate and manage romantic relationships in a very intricate and calculated manner. She notes how instant messages and written textual communication in general is found to be very appropriate in the early stages of the relationship as it entails the right amount of informality (Gershon, 2010) as well as offering more control over the communication. Similarly, comments and likes on a love interest's pictures or posts are also a way of treading carefully in the early stages of flirting in order to save face in the event that the feelings are not reciprocated. Once feelings prove to be mutual, then more platforms are incorporated into the digital interaction and the budding partners move on to video calls, phone calls and personal meetings. In addition, social media is used to announce and display the relationship to friends by sharing the couple's photographs publicly and changing the relationship status on one's profile, otherwise known as being 'Facebook official' (Papp et al, 2012). Moreover, social media is impacting users' behaviour within intimate relationships due to the notion of continuous availability. Partners are communicating flexibly and frequently through the various platforms offered (Baron 2008; Gershon 2010, Pascoe 2010), thereby intensifying the relationship and raising expectations about their partner's availability despite geographical distance or, in the case of adolescents, parental control. Regular check ins and several instant media messages and texts per day become expected from each partner and their lack could trigger jealousy, anxiety and even digital surveillance (Marshall et al, 2012; Muise et all, 2009).

Social media networks are also used to mediate and manage breakups, sometimes in quite a public manner (boyd 2010a, 2010b). Gershon (2010) found that many consider breaking up over a social media platform to be very inappropriate, yet the practice still occurs. Depending on

each person's media ideology (their own media values), some find it acceptable to end a relationship or announce a breakup on social media networks while some find it cruel and distasteful (Gershon, 2010). Gershon also found that there was no shared consensus about the role social media plays in announcing the breakup to friends and family, or on how it is used to cope with the breakup itself as ex-partners still occupy the same virtual spaces and still appear on each other's feed. Following a breakup, monitoring and stalking an ex-love interest or an ex-partner is an issue that is being raised by the heavy use of social media networks and their intersected nature (Muise et al, 2009; Pascoe, 2010). On many occasions, it is hard to overlook the updates on newsfeeds and the tags in a friend's photographs and check-ins that involve an ex-partner. Thus, stalking and surveillance is made easier and less risky. Snippets of information that are gathered via photograph tags and check-ins and status updates can paint a picture of how that person has spent his/her weekend and with whom. This has created a pattern of communicating passively with partners or ex-partners which the person knows are watching, either by manipulating the relationship status on Facebook to single, or through using social steganography by posting certain songs or specific quotes that are meant to communicate a certain message passively without having to actually talk to the (ex-)partner.

The incorporeal nature of online romance does not diminish the role of the physical body in online intimacies (Chambers, 2013). Photographic and video-sharing tools are now key features in social media platforms, with some, such as Snapchat and Instagram, being solely devoted to video- and photo-sharing. Through the utilisation of these features, the body plays a dynamic and central role in online romantic relationships as both an object of desire and a potential reward once the relationship evolves. Physical expressions of intimacy can be communicated on social media and dating sites through various intricate textual and visual cues (Weisskirch, & Delevi, 2011; Livingstone and Gorzig, 2015; Lee et al, 2015). The occurrence of romance and intimacy online is quite fitting with Giddens (1992) concept of 'plastic sexuality', which challenges traditional/conventional romantic/sexual relationships. Giddens argues that plastic sexuality is an aspect of his notion of a 'pure relationship' in which personal autonomy and choice are equally emphasised for women and men. This is respectively shifting gender power in western societies towards female sexual equality. The huge range of choices on offer to both men and women on dating sites and through social media platforms is arguably granting women sexual freedom and associating it with self-realisation in the same way that Giddens argues through the notion of a 'pure relationship'. In addition, the autonomy that is emphasised through plastic sexuality is argued by Giddens to be facilitating and generating a wide range of

sexual activity that is not necessarily conventional and which could help us to understand the virtual and digital intimacy/sexuality that is viewed on these sites.

Now that some of the key debates about online/digital romance and intimacy in the western world have been reviewed, the next section will turn back to Costa's review of online romance in a culture that is more comparable to Saudi culture.

4.7 Digital romantic relationships in conservative communities: Mardin

In her focus on romantic relationships, Costa emphasises the transformative role that social media platforms play and the degree to which it has enhanced opportunities to fulfil a desire that some feel for premarital romantic love within the conservative community of Mardin. She highlights how social media platforms are a new, gender-integrated space where women and men can connect and interact more frequently than in the past. Prior to the popularity of social media in Mardin, the chance to engage in premarital love affairs was traditionally limited to the infrequent occasional encounters in a small number of offline spaces. Her evidence shows that in older times, premarital couples could meet clandestinely, but their options for locations were scarce, such as a cave or the courtyard of a mosque, for example. Not long ago, shopping malls and modern cafes were built on the outskirts of the expanding city and were also added as potential dating spots, yet they still required discretion and caution. Social media platforms, by contrast, are a highly accessible alternative and they now presented opportunities for an unprecedented number of illicit relationships. Social media has formed a unique and flexible architecture shaped by its users to experience, and not just fantasise, about love, and yet keep it rigorously hidden (Costa, 2016 a, p.26-27).

Costa acknowledges that the notion of online or digitally mediated romantic relationships in Middle Eastern societies in general, and in Mardin specifically, is not a new one. In fact, romance existed in 'cyberspace' prior to the emergence of social media. From the very early days of the Internet in the region, digital communication has been used to initiate romantic relations through forums, mIRC chats, and MSN to name a few sources (Kaya, 2009; Wheeler, D. 2006). This was also the case in Mardin. However, Costa argues that the diffusion of social media and smartphones has made online premarital romantic relations and friendships more common, less anonymous and accordingly more integrated into the everyday life of the young users in the Middle East. This has been facilitated through the scalable sociality of these platforms, as users continually navigate between a public area where they can meet new people, while

simultaneously presenting a self that is in accordance with moral expectations, and private areas where they can retain a hidden intimate communication with both lovers and friends.

Costa observes how social media in Mardin was 'naturalised' as a digital liaison between lovers, and courtship was perceived to be its distinct and vital purpose. This of course has raised overt issues of morality, which are not new to the literature on Islamic morals, and the issue of romance. In fact, several studies have investigated how traditional Muslim morality and values can coexist with practices of love and romance within the same settings and carried on by the same people (Abu-Lughod, 2000; Gilsenan, 1982; Lambek, 1993; Marsden, 2005; Marsden, 2007; Schielke, 2009). However, subsequent to the emergence of a key study conducted by Lila Abu-Lughod in 2000, academics' understanding of intimate romantic premarital relationships as simply 'challenging' traditional Islamic values in the region have ceased. In addition, Costa's examination of romance in Mardin is contributing to the discourse by documenting how social media have shaped "new private and secrete public spaces" which cultivate premarital romance that used to be limited yet not completely absent (Costa, 2016 a, p.104). In a paper published in 2016 (b), Costa specifically examines the morality of premarital romance against the Islamic background of Mardin's population, drawing upon the same data used in her study. She found that there was no shared understanding between the residents of Mardin of what constitutes an appropriate use of social media for courtship and flirting which is a normative cultural genre that was common amongst young female users. A total diversification of individual ideas on the topic was also not the case either. Rather, a communal set of religious and moral values was interpreted differently, resulting in social media being viewed as morally appropriate in different ways by different women. That is to say, social media enabled a variety of moral Muslim selves which mirror distinct understandings of morality, religion, and modernity.

The inclusion of social media into intimate everyday life and practices has not formed 'structuring patterns of behaviour' (Bourdieu 1977) unconsciously embraced by all users, but as Costa's ethnographic data reveals, "Young unmarried women consciously attempt to live their moral dispositions" (Costa, 2016 b, p.212). Through their use of technology, young women are immersed in an active process of moulding the self, and simultaneously they are moulded by the technology. The outcome of this is a plethora of patterns and practices and the absence of a clear normative ideal standard for conducting romance online. This is the result of a divergent interpretation of morality on the one hand, and the secrecy that surrounds romantic practice in conservative communities on the other. There is no shared social context to develop social norms in regards of romance. For that reason, it is only with difficulty that a consensus on 'proper

accepted ways' for Muslim females to engage in premarital love is reached (Costa, 2016 b, pp. 212-213). Costa's findings help to explain the importance of viewing Muslim morality as interwoven in mediated practice, instead of viewing it as a set of values that are detached from the material and media world we live in. Her study demonstrates that routines of using digital media, and the accommodation of love aspirations within them, have been forming new (debated and changeable) moral normative orders around premarital romance. Her participants did not regard premarital romance and piety as two opposing ideals, but as "compatible expectations simultaneously fulfilled by the new mediated practices" (Costa, 2016 b, p.213). Instead of opposing each other, premarital love and morals are mutually shaping each other.

Through a series of examples gathered during her 15-month ethnographic research, Costa reveals how these stories narrate an account of social change in the Mardin community, a shift "from tradition to modernity, from arranged marriages to marriages for love, from extended to nuclear family, from a family-bond society to individualism" (Costa, 2016a, p.106). However, she duly notes how some traditions are still upheld - publicly at least - as the standard code, even if they are not actually practiced. For example, she records how arranged marriages are still portrayed as the ideal, and how many cases of 'love marriages' are presented to the public as arranged ones. In addition, she notes the preservation of cornerstone ideologies such as virginity before marriage or discretion when flirting, all remaining firm amongst the residents of Mardin. She concludes by saying:

> Modernisation has produced new social relations, but also new conservative ideologies and new strategies to protect women's respectability and reputation. On social media, indeed, new friendships and romances came along with a new, conservative presentation of the self (Costa, 2016 a, p.115).

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed key approaches relating to relationships online and managing them. The networked individualism approach argues there has been a transformation from kinship systems and group-embedded patterns of sociality towards a more autonomous and individualistic type. This transformation has significant implications for Saudi women considering the shame-honour cultural frame of Saudi culture that ties the honour of the family to female chastity and as a result justifies control of her sociality. The flexible autonomy of networked individualism enables Saudi women to at least partially escape the limitations of being

embedded as a daughter, sister and a wife within the family, to a freedom of being socially independent from these ties, which in return would facilitate social practices that the family/group deem unacceptable, even reprehensible. This explains the flourishing of romantic relationships and the development of new, wider intimacies between the two genders in Saudi Arabia on social media networks. The gender integration on these networks, combined with agency over achieving social privacy and finally the flexible autonomy of networked individualism are coming together to create an environment that nurtures and promotes the growth of these mixed-gendered relationships and intimacies.

However, the Polymedia context in which sociality is being lived online is presenting its own challenges in achieving privacy. Upon analysing online romantic engagement and wider intimacy practises amongst Saudi users, and given the sensitivity of opposite-sex relations in Saudi Arabia's shame-honour culture, achieving social privacy on social media networks becomes a central issue. Therefore, the chapter has identified a number of popular strategies that are being employed online to manage privacy and gain more agency over our online communication. The notion of scalable sociality relates to managing privacy online in the sense that it is dividing social media platforms into public facing areas and private areas. Costa's work is of importance here as it examines a community that shares the same shame-honour culture and traditional collectivity with Saudi society. She notes that the transformation towards an individual-based sociality in conservative communities is concealed within private areas of social networks. People in these conservative traditional communities, especially the older generation, do not recognise the new types of mixed-gender relationships as legitimate, and thus the ones that engage in them refrain from displaying relationships in public. Consequently, a social change towards a more individualised sociality and self in private spaces online is occurring at the same time as a performance of ultra-conservative and traditional social norms in online public spaces, which are gradually progressing to incorporate aspects of the intimate, domestic domains. Thus, social media can provide part of the solution to the problem of negotiating romance and intimacy in conservative traditional communities, and this is why these platforms become naturalised for this purpose. The analysis chapters in this research will show if the same can be said about the Saudi community in relation to women and their relationships with the opposite sex given the sensitivity of opposite-sex relation in Saudi's shame-honour culture.

Chapter Five. Methodology

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explains how an appropriate research design to answer the research questions was identified (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p.30). It addresses the rationale behind the three methods of data collection chosen: netnography, focus groups and one-to-one interviews. The chapter starts by discussing the philosophical position of the research and explains its ontology, epistemology and methodology. The discussion then details the methods and research tools employed to collect data, before considering the methods of analysis used: thematic analysis. Next, the chapter discusses the practical issues regarding data collection - sampling, validity and reliability, and ethical considerations. Finally, an account of reflexivity is included, in which the researcher reflects on her role in the process of collecting the data and interpreting it.

5.2 Philosophical Standpoint

Khun (1970) argues that it is important to consider the paradigm that underpins the design of any qualitative research and why it is chosen. A paradigm, or a philosophical position, creates a holistic view of knowledge, how it is acquired and how we see ourselves in relation to it. Awareness of it increases the quality of the research by informing the design of methodology, as well as the approaches and techniques used in the data collection. This section defines the key concepts of ontology and epistemology. It then considers different paradigms of inquiry: positivism, constructivism and subjectivism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a; Guba, 1990), before assessing the ontological and epistemological questions of the research and matching them to an appropriate interpretative framework.

Ontology is the logical starting point of any research as it entails the researcher considering the foundation of knowledge and *what* reality is, followed by understanding the epistemological issue of *how* that reality can be known (Blaikie, 2000, p.8; Grix, 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p.201; Hay, 2002, p.63). Epistemology refers to the theories and models that guide the knowledge production process, and is directly related to ontology in the sense that choosing a particular ontological stance implies the adoption of a particular epistemological stance, and vice versa (Crotty, 1998). For example, early social research, which was heavily influenced by the European intellectual movements associated with the enlightenment, approached social phenomena in a rigid quantitative manner. Researchers of the time tended to view humans as a static and

unchanging 'object'. Thus, they used a positivist paradigm with a realist ontology and a dualist epistemology, which employs quantitative research strategies, and with scientific techniques similar to those found in the natural sciences (Bryman, 2001, pp.12-13; Grix, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p.179; Packer, 2011, p.5; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Positivists endeavour to deliver results that are rigorously objective and devoid of biases, which they assume will make the results reliable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a; Guba, 1990, p.22; Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p.168). However, the inflexibility of the positivist paradigm and the complexity of human behaviour and emotion renders positivism less adaptable to many situations (Flick, 1998, pp.2-3). Subsequently, philosophers of social science challenged the positivist paradigm by developing a number of post-positivist approaches which acknowledge the possibility of human error, bias, and subjectivity and recognise that theories need to be constantly revised (Guba, 1990, p.22; Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p.168). The differences revolve around the constitution of reality and our understanding of it (i.e. is there a reality (a truth) and can we actually know, describe, and measure it objectively which is what positivists believe, or, on the other hand, do we constitute reality in the processes of observing which is how post-positivist understand reality. The goal of research for the positivist is to know the truth; the goal for post-positivists is to be intellectually honest and self-reflexive in researching while acknowledging that we cannot know the truth.

A different approach saw the rise of anti-foundational ontologies that were less concerned with objectively measuring an objective reality (as opposed to the process of meaning-making itself), interpretative epistemologies and qualitative research methods as tools of inquiry. Amongst the leading paradigms of this nature is social constructivism. The ontological position within a social constructivist paradigm asserts that, in contrast to positvism's depiction of a single observable reality, there are actually multiple representations of reality. It considers reality (social phenomena and their meanings) to be continually revised through social interaction, in which individuals in groups create and recreate culture rather than culture being a pre-given and dictating behaviour (Bryman, 2012). In order to assess how extensive interaction on social media platforms is influencing the values and norms of young Saudi women, to examine how engagement on social media is contributing to changes in the public image of young Saudi women, and to understand the impact of social media on values and attitudes towards intimate and mixed-gender relations (i.e. the key foci of this research), an ontological stance that

recognises the changing nature of culture must be adopted. Thus, given the research questions, this research is positioned within a constructivist paradigm.

Constructivists aim to understand and reconstruct what individuals (including the investigator) initially believe reality to be (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p.113). In their exploration of human awareness, constructivists insist that we should always be open to new interpretations of reality. From a constructivist ontological standpoint, there is no single objective reality as to what a Saudi woman is, looks like, or what her values are; on the contrary, there are multiple subjective meanings of 'Saudi woman' that are constantly reconstructed through (re)negotiation in human interaction. Accordingly, a constructivist epistemological stance asserts that reality needs to be interpreted in order to discover and frame the underlying meanings of events, activities and social phenomena (Charmaz, 2000, p.523; Fay, 1996; Potter, 1996; Schwandt, 2000, pp.197-198). Furthermore, the researcher plays an instrumental role in creating knowledge through interaction with the participants. Thus, in order to understand how social media is impacting on the values and norms of Saudi women when it comes to opposite-sex relations or identity expressions, we need to interpret the meanings of Saudi social media behaviour and activity, and interpret what it means to be a Saudi woman according to the respondents and the observed individuals. Guba and Lincoln (1998, p.111) state that constructivist epistemology is transactional and subjective. 'Transactional' in this sense means that the reality of what a Saudi woman is and looks like arises from interactions between individuals and between individuals and situations (Berlin, 1987). These interactions produce a 'truth' that is never static but rather constantly evolving. What is meant by 'subjective' is that the truth is unknown, and it is the job of the researcher to uncover it by constructing an impression of it as he/she sees it (Ratner, 2008). Thus, in this context, there is no distinction between ontology and epistemology, as the "investigator and the object of investigation are interactively linked so that the findings are literally created as the investigation proceeds" (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p.111).

Finally, the methodological framework is chosen in accordance with the ontological and epistemological stances. In a constructivist research that is concerned with interpreting behaviour and social phenomena, several methods can be used to collect accurate, valid data which helps to interpret the reality that the researcher is investigating. Given the ontological and epistemological frameworks through which constructivism sees the world, constructivist research uses the

qualitative methods of observation (through ethnography or netnography), qualitative interviews, case studies, focus groups, narratives, among others, for collecting data.

5.3 Data Collection Strategy

The keynote methods used in this research is netnography. Netnography was chosen because of its high compatibility with the study of social media networks. Its observational nature enabled me to examine Saudi women's use of social networks, and therefore to answer the research questions on how the rise in social media use in Saudi Arabia is influencing the values and norms of young Saudi women, their attitudes towards romance, and in what ways is it contributing to changes in their public image. In addition to netnography, two further methods of data collection were adopted in order to increase the validity of the findings: one-to-one interviews and focus groups.

Validity and reliability are a common concern associated with findings generated through observation and a constructivist paradigm. One way to overcome these limitations is to use multiple methods of collection to validate the findings by corroborating one source of data with another, known as triangulation (Mason, 2002). The data that was collected from the initial netnographic observations was used to formulate the questions that guided the focus groups and interviews. Findings gathered through netnographic observation were thus cross-checked ('triangulated') with several respondents during personal interviews, as well as through the discussions in focus groups, and interpretations were developed accordingly. The inclusion of these two methods enabled me to accurately interpret the behaviour and actions observed netnographically online by discussing them directly with the respondents. Moreover, having a different sample in each method (micro-celebrities in netnography, and regular users in the focus groups and one-to-one interviews) enabled me not only to cross-validate the data but also to capture different dimensions of the same social process: performing femininity/identity construction.

In this context, the role of the qualitative researcher is a self-reflexive bricoleur who groups and gathers the pieced representations of reality together and builds an account of a community narrative at a certain moment in time (Charmaz, 2000, p.522; Nelson et al., 1992, p.2; Weinstein & Weinstein, 1991, p.161), narratives which may change at different historical moments (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p.167). Thus, what it means to be a Saudi woman, what she looks like and how

she behaves and her values and ideals about love, intimacy and opposite gender relations in general might be different today from a point in the past due in part to extensive social media engagement, which themselves may change over time.

The following sections discuss the three methods used, their sampling frame and how each relates to the research questions.

5.3.1 Netnography

As stated, observation is a compatible method with a constructivist research paradigm. In netnography, which originated in ethnography, interactions are observed on digital networks and later interpreted to answer the research questions. It is a dance of possibilities to understanding social interaction in contemporary digital communications context (Kozinets, 2015). In this section, I discuss my sample for this method, what websites and accounts were included. I also explain when the data was collected and how it fits into the overall research design. In addition, I highlight what I did and why.

Sampling of netnography

The sampling for this method is twofold: website (platform) samples, and account (user) samples. Choosing the website sample was in accordance with Kozinets' (2015) guidelines for selecting online communities that are worthy of netnographic observation. Kozinets (2015, p.168) recommends choosing sites that are: relevant, active/interactive, substantial, heterogonic/homogenic, rich in data and experiential. Relevant is used in the sense that the sites relate to your research questions. Thus, Instagram is relevant because the heavy use of photography and images meant that it is a possible site to assess contesting norms and values around veiling as a fundamental feature of the customary image of the Saudi woman. What is meant by active and interactive is that the site has recent and regular flows of communication between the participants. For this reason, Facebook was excluded from the observation as it is no longer actively used by many Saudis; instead, Snapchat was used because of its current popularity and high activity. Being substantial and rich in data means that the sites chosen must have a critical mass of communicators and offer detailed or descriptively rich data with significant numbers of postings and comments. This quality was found on Instagram, where the accounts of social media influencers included a plethora of comments and interactions from other Saudi users. All the sites observed were homogenous in the sense that I observed a Saudi

collectivity on the site. For example, on Twitter, I chose to observe the trending hashtags in Saudi Arabia. This was done through a 'filter' option in which you can view what hashtags are trending in a certain country. However, the sites were also heterogeneous in the sense that they included both genders (men and women), as well as Saudis from various social classes and cultural backgrounds. Data collected through netnography was naturalistic as respondents were observed in their setting with no interference from the researcher. See Table 4.1 for a summary of the websites considered and used, along with the reasons for choosing or rejecting them.

Platform	**Included or not**	**Reason(s)**
Instagram	Included	• For its heavy use of Images and videos. • For its activeness and interactive comment section.
Snapchat	Included	• For its heavy use of video and images. • Activeness and relevance.
Twitter	Included	• Substantial and rich in data. • Highly interactive hashtags.
YouTube	Included	• Interactive comment section.
Facebook	Not included	• No longer active

Table 5.1: Platform Sample

The second consideration in the sample was to consider whom to observe on these platforms. My criteria for choosing the sample was: Saudis (whether male or female) between the ages of 18-35 who are users of social media. On Instagram, I observed the accounts of six female Saudi social media influencers (micro-celebrities), as well as the private Instagram accounts of nine ordinary Saudi women (one of whom is running a business through her account), who later participated in the one-to-one interviews (see Table 4.2). Micro-celebrities sample was chosen based on popularity and reach. I drew on my prior knowledge of Saudi digital culture as a young Saudi female myself, in identifying the sample and choosing 6 of the biggest most popular women accounts. A higher number would have been hard to manage because of the high volume of posts and comments on these micro-celebrity accounts. As for the 'ordinary' accounts, I sampled them using a snow-ball technique starting with a general 'call for participants' that I have posted on my own Twitter and Instagram accounts, to which a several friends and acquaintances responded

positively and agreed to take part in the research. They then recommended other friends and acquaintances of their own. Only 9 women responded positively to being part of the research and all those who have accepted were part of the sample. If I had more time to collect my sample I might have been able to observe a bigger number of participants. Nonetheless, the sample provided interesting rich data despite its small size. The observance of micro-celebrity accounts related directly to my question on how social media engagement was changing the image of young Saudi women and contesting the values and norms around veiling and producing a post-feminine image of Saudi woman. The accounts were also very rich in data due to their popularity and their publicness. In addition, the private accounts were informative in relation to the questions around attitudes towards romance and wider intimacy practices which I later discussed with the observant in one-to-one interviews.

Percentages used in the analysis to interpret the data (such as in the analysis of figure.27 or the analysis of Khawater Al-khuwaiter posts) were reached by selecting a random sample of 100 posts/comments and coding them to asses the percentage that I use in my analysis.

Person Observed	Type of Account	Number of Followers
Roz (@model_roz)	Public	6.7 M
Hala Abdulla (@thehala)	Public	830K
Sausan Alqadhi (@stylemesausan)	Public	44.6K
Afnan Albatel (@afnan_albatel)	Public	6.7M
Khawater (@om_Shahoooody)	Public	1.1M
Thana and Sakhaa (@theabduls)	Public	69.9K
Aseel (@Guzel.sa)	Public (Business)	21.5K
Mai	Private	169
Shikhah	Private	132
Sarah	Private	99
Muneerah	Private	32
Wafa	Private	138
Hessah	Private	4K
Kholood	Private	6K
Ghadah	Private	750

Table 5.2: Instagram Sample

The Twitter Sample was approached differently. Instead of targeting certain accounts, I observed the activities on trending Saudi hashtags that were related to my research questions. This was done through a 'filter' option on the platform which allows you to view what hashtags are trending in a specific country. In particular, a hashtag regarding Malak Alshehri was very useful as it related directly to my question around the image of young Saudi women, as well as to the theme of nationalism (this is explained in more detail in the analysis sections). A similar approach was used in the YouTube sampling, in which I examined the comment sections under specific videos from Saudi YouTubers that discussed topics relating to the themes of the research, such as the videos of Hatoon Qadi, a female Saudi YouTuber. Other videos were either pointed out by the respondents in my focus groups, or I became aware of them due to their popularity (viral videos). In the latter case, the videos were embedded either on Twitter Hashtags or on Instagram accounts I observed. The Snapchat sample amounted to 61 individuals and was a combination of the following: 12 of the highest viewed Saudi micro-celebrities (influencers) these are mostly the same influencers that were followed on Instagram as each influencer has an account on each platform plus 6 more micro-celebrities, again here the criteria for choosing them was their reach and popularity amongst young Saudis. Forty-three personal Saudi friends and acquaintances of mine, these were my original friend list as a user of Snapchat myself. In addition, 15 individuals from my focus groups whom I asked to add on Snapchat in order to observe them and then later interview them in the one-to-one interviews [see table 5.4]. These 15 were chosen based on consent (those who agreed to be observed were included in the sample). Not all 15 made it to the one-to-one interviews phase. I ended up interviewing only 6 people, these were the ones that were perceived to have something interesting that needed further discussion, as the interviews facilitated any further questions or explanation to their activity on the platform. With regards to gender, I observed and analysed both the responses of male and female users on all these platforms equally. It is important to highlight that although the observed accounts on Instagram are of women, the comments on their posts were open to both genders and it is from here that a large portion of my data came. The reader will notice that the majority of the examples I use in this research are from Instagram, this is due to the vividness of the images on the site. However, it is important to note that the examination of other platforms such as Twitter for example was instrumental for this research. It was a useful tool not only for recruiting participants but also for gaining knowledge of the latest trends and debates concerning Saudi

women which in return helped me form the questions for the personal interviews and focus group.

Time frame of netonography

The netnographic observance of the different social media platforms and accounts was not limited to one stage of the project, but occurred throughout the whole study. The ability to access previously produced interactions retroactively enabled me to go back and forth in my netnographic observation of these accounts and platforms. An initial scan was undertaken at the beginning of the data collection process and prior to the holding of focus groups and interviews in order to inform the questions and themes to be discussed. This scan took place between July and September 2015, and brought new themes to my attention, such as the theme of nationalism and the image of the 'true' Saudi woman.

After the focus groups were held, between November 2015 and February 2016, an in-depth observation of certain accounts was conducted, as well as observation of several hashtags on Twitter. These produced rich sets of data. I developed an archive system to save the data that I found potentially useful for analysing at a later date. I created three different folders: Nationality, Relationships, Identity, with each correlating with a possible general theme. Data that was found interesting, whether it was a comment from a user, a photo shared by a celebrity on Instagram, a post on Snapchat, or a tweet in a hashtag, was captured through using the print screen or snip it tool, then archived in the corresponding folder. While most of the data using this method was collected in that period, I continued to monitor these accounts and websites throughout the rest of 2016 2017 in case any relevant data was added. Indeed, in September 2017 the ban on women driving was lifted in Saudi Arabia along with allowing women into sports stadiums for the first time (a public area from which there were excluded before), which generated a lot of reaction and debate on social media platforms. Therefore, more examples were added to the analysis from September 2017.

Limitations and advantages of netnographic research

Given the topic of this research and the research questions, this method was found to be very useful and instrumental in observing and assessing how social media is impacting on Saudi women's values, norms and attitudes towards love and wider intimacy practices, in addition to observing contemporary Saudi femininity and how the image of the Saudi woman is being lived

on social media networks. Just as an ethnographer observes the interactions of subjects within a community, a netnographer observes the conversations, activities and interactions between users on a networked society, such as social media platforms, and considers these to be data. This data is recorded in contemporary communication networks and can be accessed by anyone, which is an advantage of this method. The retroactivity factor meant that I could go back and observe interactions that had happened several years before, while in ethnography the researcher is limited to observing the current situation.

The main limitation of netnography is that it relies heavily on the researcher's interpretative skills. In order to successfully conduct netnographic research, the researcher must have an in-depth understanding of the culture that surrounds the data by immersing himself/herself in the community he/she is studying (Kozinets, 2010, p.75). It is not sufficient to be able to run a software or an application. So it was necessary to fully understand how Saudi women think and behave and to be very knowledgeable of the complex Saudi culture and Arabic language (including the Saudi dialect and modern slang) to be able to detect and explore the nuance, sarcasm, and symbolism found in the data and to be able to interpret it correctly. It is obvious that being a young Saudi woman gave me a significant advantage in this research and turned me into an additional tool that enriched the research and enabled me to unearth the interactions that were worthy of analysis from the large volume of data found. I had prior understanding of the Saudi culture by being part of it, as well as full knowledge of the latest trends, viral videos and influential online Saudis. Another advantage of this method is that it is less intrusive than ethnography as the researcher does not need to be physically immersed in the daily lives of the observants; instead, all the observants' interactions can be viewed, downloaded and saved digitally from a network public. This is efficient as it saves the researcher money, travel and time that otherwise would have been needed to conduct ethnographic research (Kozinets, 2002).

5.3.2 Focus Groups

Focus groups were held to cross check data gathered from the netnographic research and to help interpret it. One of the main reasons for holding focus groups was to generate data on the opinions and attitudes of women and men towards romance and their wider intimacy practices. The focus groups and one-to-one interviews were more useful compared to netnography for collecting data on this specific topic. This is because the practise of intimacy on social media is often conducted in the private areas of networked publics away from the gaze of the netnographic

researcher. Focus groups were also useful in observing discussions around the changing values and societal norms around practices such as veiling and gender segregation. The discussions provided rich data on the intentions and motives behind the observed online actions of the Saudi youth and the way they think of the Saudi collectivity.

Sampling of Focus Groups

Seven focus group discussions were conducted with five groups comprising all women participants, and two groups containing mixed genders (see Table 4.3). Although this research focuses mainly on Saudi women, their image and their attitudes towards love and intimacy practises, these areas are, quite obviously, highly influenced by men. In a patriarchal society such as Saudi Arabia, the attitudes of men impact significantly the actions of women, as is revealed in the analysis. Therefore, it was important to include men in the focus groups to generate a well-rounded set of data. As mentioned earlier, participants were chosen through a purposive snowball sampling technique (Tonkiss, 2004, p.199), where participants referred me to others who were willing to take part in the research. I first reached out to my own friends and contacts using an announcement across all my social media platforms (this included Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter) and the ones who responded to my call for participants referred me to more people who they know and are willing to take part in the study.

Focus Group No.	Number of participants	Gender
Session 1	5	All female
Session 2	5	All female
Session 3	4	All female
Session 4	4	All female
Session 5	4	All female
Session 6	7	3 Males, 4 females
Session 7	7	2 males, 5 females

Table 5.3: Focus Groups Sample

The participants were between 18 and 35 years old. This age range was chosen for several reasons. First, the Internet became accessible to the general public in Saudi Arabia in the early

2000s. Thus, it was important for the research that the sample included those who were born in the 1980s and 1990s. Half of the participants were digital natives, while the rest were digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001). Digital natives are users who were born during or after digital media and technology became popular. This includes those who were born in the 1990s as they grew up with digital media, even if it was in its early stages. Thus, I identify all participants who are 26 and younger as digital natives. Those who are older are digital immigrants. It is important to distinguish between the two groups as it helps in assessing the impact of social media in changing the attitudes of users towards societal norms and values. Digital immigrants are more likely to be able to recall a time when their values were stronger and more influenced by the collectivity, whether this is the family or society as a whole. Moreover, the distinction between the two age groups allows us to consider the fractured modern identities that are expressed by digital immigrants online, and compare them with the more cohesive expression of identity amongst digital natives (see Chapter 6 for more detail). All the participants were from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's capital and largest city, and two of them currently live abroad. With 6.5 million residing in Riyadh (High Commission for the Development of Riyadh, 2016), the city is a melting pot for all Saudi tribes and cultural backgrounds, both conservative and liberal.

Time frame of focus groups

It was critical that the focus groups took place after the initial netnographic scan of popular social media networks in Saudi Arabia in order to help form the guiding questions and to flag any online behaviours in need of discussion. The primary netnographic observation was undertaken between July and September 2015. Accordingly, the focus groups were conducted and recorded in September and October 2015. However, due to technical problems with my personal computer, a small number of sessions were lost. It was not possible to retrieve them despite considerable effort. Thus, a few more sessions were conducted to compensate for the shortage in data due to this setback. The extra sessions took place in December 2015 and January 2016. The sessions were held at a time that suited all the participants (Converse & Schuman, 1974, p.53; Tonkiss, 2004).

Method, advantages and limitations

The sessions were conducted via Skype, which was not only economically advantageous but also allowed geographic distance to be overcome (Reid & Reid, 2005). Skype calls enabled all participants to see and hear one another, including the moderator. The sessions were captured

using Quicktime, which recorded the screen of the moderator as the sessions took place. In terms of reflexivity, the use of Skype, which is in itself a social media platform, highlighted several issues around gender segregation which were raised. Participants were aware of these issues and spontaneously referred to them during the focus groups, which was an example of how social media is facilitating mixed-gender relations.

As some of the topics debated in this research (such as veiling, pre-marital love and intimacy) are traditionally sensitive in Saudi Arabia, I positioned myself as a data co-producer in the focus groups by citing my own experiences with social media as a young female Saudi user in order to establish a familiar and trusting relationship with the participants and therefore lead a free-flowing discussion (Burgess, 1982; Byrne, 2004; Mason, 1996, pp.36-38; Spradley, 1979). This is in accordance with the constructivist research paradigm adopted in this study, in which the researcher is a co-producer of the data, and reality is transactional and subjective (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). From a constructive ontological stance, reality is a result of the interaction between the individuals with one another (including the researcher) and individuals and their settings (Berlin, 1987; Charmaz, 2000, p.523; Fay, 1996; Potter, 1996; Schwandt, 2000, pp.197-198).

Finally, despite my effort to include a number of male participants in the focus groups with the intention of generating a balanced dataset, the number of men was not sufficient to do so. I accumulated far fewer responses from men than I have anticipated. Nevertheless, as this remains a study about women and their contemporary ideals of femininity, it is therefore the voices and views of young? women that are the focal point of this research.

5.3.3 Semi-Structured, One-to-One Interviews

Interviews are a popular way of collecting data in modern qualitative and quantitative studies (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Fontana & Frey 2000, pp.646-647; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p.1; Mishler, 1986, p.23; Silverman, 1993, 1997). Bryman (2012) posits that there are three different types of interview: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews. While the first type is more commonly used in quantitative research (Converse & Schuman, 1974; Seale, 2004), the latter two are commonly adopted in qualitative research (Bryman, 2012). Semi-structured and unstructured interviews allow the participants to share their personal perspectives and are generally more efficient when exploring topics where there is limited knowledge (Bryman, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Moreover, qualitative interviews are concerned with

developing an understanding of subjects' identities as a cultural and historical construct that is in a continuous process of subjective transformation (Foucault, 1979, 1982). Therefore, qualitative interviews often seek to encourage participants to articulate their personal experiences and viewpoints in their own words (Byrne, 2004, p.182; Fontana & Frey, 2000, p.653; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p.7). Because one of my key research questions is about the developing and changing values of Saudi women, semi-structured interviews were considered to be important to ascertain the romantic practices of women online and how their online engagement on social media might impact their values and norms around romance and wider intimate practices. In addition, it was deemed to be a suitable method to examine the development of a contemporary feminine identity that is emerging amongst young Saudi female users of social media.

Sampling of one-to-one interviews

The interview sample was drawn from the focus group sessions, as well as the participants who had their accounts observed netnographically. As mentioned earlier, those who depicted interesting views on the focus group discussion or posted things that needed to be unpacked were asked to be interviewed, this was the criteria on which the participants in the interviews were chosen. The aim was to discuss their actions, behaviours or comments that were relevant to my research questions. In total, six one-to-one interviews (one male and five females) were conducted (see Table 4.4). Two more participants were asked to be interviewed but they have refused to take part in the interview section of the research.

Interviewee	Age	Point of Recruitment
Aseel	30	Observed account
Wafa	35	Observed account
Mai	26	Focus group participant + Observed account
Sarah	32	Observed account
Munaeerah	23	Focus group participant
Ali	33	Focus group participant

Table 5.4: One-to-One Interview Sample

Time frame of one-to-one interviews

One-to-one interviews were scheduled to take place after the completion of the focus groups. The decision to collect the data in this order was deliberate as interviews were included to enable a deeper understanding of the issues raised in the netnographic observation and focus groups and personal motives behind some of the observed actions. Thus, it was important that interviews were undertaken after this knowledge was acquired and the themes formulated. Accordingly, the interviews were conducted in February and March 2016.

Method, advantages and limitations

As with the focus groups, the interviews were undertaken via Skype. Participants were in their homes and connected online and the interviews were recorded using Quicktime. Kazmer & Xie (2008) note that online interviews are commonly very effective when the research topic is related to the online context, such as the case with my study dealing with social media usage. As stated previously, in preparation for the interviews I observed the Instagram and Snapchat accounts of four of the participants over a period of four weeks (the other two were recruited to follow up some of their comments during the focus groups). Consent was obtained prior to the observation as three of these accounts were private. Some of the practices observed were noted in order to be discussed during the interviews, particularly those related to romantic expressions. This enriched the data that had been collected netnographically and compensated for the limitations of netnography when it comes to examining behaviour taking place in private areas of the Internet/social networks. Wengraf's (2001) argument that semi-structured interviews are a research tool with "high-preparation, high-risk, high-gain, and high-analysis" (2001, p.5) proved to be true in my research. The main characteristic of semi-structured interviews is that they provide flexibility (Bryman, 2012). I followed a pre-scripted 'interview guide' that was customised to each respondent in accordance with the data collected netnographically or in accordance with their participation in the focus group. The guide was followed to a certain degree. However, the flexibility of the semi-structured interview allowed for new questions to be formulated according to the responses of the participant during the interview (Bryman, 2012).

The questions were open-ended and the atmosphere of the interviews was informal in order to put the participants at ease and allow for a free-flowing conversation. In addition, my gender and proximity in age to the participants was an advantage as it allowed me to create an atmosphere of trust and friendliness with my female respondents. This development of a rapport, as well as the

privacy of the interviews, meant that the respondents felt free to express their feelings and opinions around some of the sensitive topics discussed with no fear of judgment. In contrast to focus groups, where participants tend to express 'culturally expected views', interviews allow for true and genuine opinions to be expressed independently from the group (Bryman, 2012, p.518). In addition, the results of the Asch experiment (1951) show that in a focus group an emergent group opinion can suppress a different perspective that is held by just one member of the group.

5.4 Analytical Approach - Thematic Analysis

Data was analysed using thematic analysis, which is one of the most common modes of analysis in qualitative research (Guest, 2012). In addition, it supports a constructivist research paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006) because it examines how events, realities, meanings and experiences are the outcome of interactions between individuals with one another and with social settings. This approach focuses on an entire data corpus, such as focus groups, interviews, and netnographic data, as opposed to narrative analysis, for example, which points out themes within one data item such an interview with a single participant (Murray, 2003; Riessman, 1993). Thematic analysis was considered appropriate as it enabled an understanding of the large data corpus. Furthermore, it is a flexible and functional research tool that can potentially yield a "rich and detailed yet complex account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.5). Braun and Clarke define thematic analysis as "A method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data" (2006, p.79). It organises and describes data sets in rich detail into themes, as well as interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). The way these themes are identified is not necessarily dependent on measuring them quantifiably by counting how many times they appear in the data corpus; rather, some themes are determined according to their ability to capture something important in relation to the research questions.

The coding was done manually by transcribing the focus groups and interviews. If the data were larger, software packages such as Nvivo would have been useful for the coding. However, I found it possible to code the data manually using word files and folders to group contents of each identified theme together, as explained above. An inductive approach to thematic analysis was employed for coding the themes in which the coding frames were not pre-determined and the researcher attempted to be free from any preconceptions. This approach produced a theme that was not originally considered in the research questions: nationalism and the 'true Saudi identity'. Accordingly, the research questions were refined as the project progressed in order to reflect the

intention to assess this emerging theme. However, as Braun and Clarke (2006) argue, a researcher cannot be entirely free from a theoretical and epistemological commitment, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum. Thus, some themes were coded in a deductive 'top down' manner in which the coding was explicitly analyst-driven by the researcher's interest in the values and norms of young Saudi women. Therefore, it was anticipated that certain themes identified in the data would arise, such as veiling and gender segregation. Ryan and Bernard (2000) list a number of techniques to identify themes within the data collected, several of which were used to identify themes within the research, such as: simple word count, repetition, and indigenous categories such as the use of the word '*eyb*' (shameful).

Three main themes emerged from the data collected, each comprising a chapter of the analysis: online identity, nationalism and the true Saudi woman, and finally, personal and intimate relationships online. Sub-themes that emerged within these three main themes were: gender segregation; veiling; premarital relationships; and online fame/micro-celebrity.

Importantly, the analysis of the themes went beyond the semantic content of the data and examined the underlying ideas, ideologies and conceptualisations that were informing and building the semantic content. At this level of identification, thematic analysis overlaps with certain types of discourse analysis, specifically thematic discourse analysis, where broader meanings are theorised as underpinning what is actually articulated in the data. This was undertaken in this research specifically in the example of nationalism, where theories about women and nation and women as guardians of culture were used to underpin and analyse the data collected netnographically from the perspectives of Saudi women.

The analysis was conducted in several phases. This was not a linear process, but rather a recursive one in which the researcher moved back and forth between the phases as and when necessary. In the first phase, in September and October 2015, I familiarised myself with the data as I translated and transcribed the data from Arabic to English. This resulted in an overview being formed, and general notes were taken to highlight ideas for possible patterns to be used in theme coding at a later stage. Several scholars highlight the importance of transcribing data for the researcher to successfully familiarise himself/herself with it (Bird, 2005; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Riessman, 1993). The second phase of generating initial codes and searching for themes within them took place in January 2016. In this phase, an inductive approach to the data was

employed and the initial codes were produced manually at a basic descriptive level (Tuckett, 2005). At this point the research questions were reformulated. It is worth noting that the coding of themes was a combination of data-driven and theory-driven coding processes. By the end of February 2016, the search for broader themes began and the codes were sorted into different themes that were revised and refined before finally narrowing down to three main themes with a number of sub-themes. The process of revising the themes continued throughout the spring of 2016, as more data was added through the on-going netnographic observations.

Finally, the last stage in the analysis was defining and naming the themes, analysing them in detail, linking them to the research questions and linking this with the theoretical framework. This happened in February and March 2017. In this phase, the initial descriptive data that was formalised in the first and second phases was further analysed and contextualised in order to form arguments in relation to the research questions. This phase focused mainly on the third research question as I attempted to ascertain the cultural implications of changes in the values and norms of young Saudi women, their attitudes towards romance and their wider intimacy practices, and changes in the public images of young Saudi women. Thus, the overall analysis of how social media engagement is impacting the lives of Saudi women was pinned down during this phase.

5.5 Validity and Reliability

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research, including netnographic research, has no clear and measurable standards of evaluation. Thus, it is often critiqued as being vague or ambiguous, and there is debate about whether or not the results should be generalised. However, Baym (2006) highlights the many strengths that qualitative studies enjoy. On top of being grounded in theory and data, qualitative research usually demonstrates rigor in data collection and analysis, as well as the ability to draw on several data collection strategies (Baym, 2006, p.82). As noted above (see section 5.3), the use of different methods of data collection is known as triangulation, which is a robust technique that enables the data to be validated through cross verification, thereby increasing its credibility (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Rothbauer, 2008). As noted (see section 5.3), this research did not rely solely on netnographic data, but also used focus groups and semi-structured interviews, thereby increasing the validity of the results.

Furthermore, while the reliability of quantitative research was conventionally associated with objectivism (Schwandt, 2000, p.196; Shapiro, 1981; Taylor, 1985, 1995), the nature of qualitative research is being reconstructed to adopt an open-ended, interpretive, and naturalistic approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Geertz, 1973, 1983). Several scholars note the move in qualitative research towards the endorsement of authenticity and trustworthiness as new standards are used to evaluate the validity of the research (Guba & Lincoln 1989, p. 245-251; Lincoln & Guba 2000, p. 178-179; Schwandt 1989). Based on its assumption that there is not a single objective truth, constructivism employs negotiated criteria to understand and explain the multi-constructed social realities within diverse contexts (Hiley et al., 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979). Accordingly, this study constructs a dialogic space in order to explore the ways in which social media engagement is impacting Saudi women's values, norms and attitudes towards personal relationships with the opposite sex and towards love and intimacy, as well as its impact on the image of the Saudi woman and the implications that arise from all of this.

Given that the focal point of this research is women, and that I myself am a Saudi woman, intellectual honesty and bias cannot be avoided entirely, as is the case with other interpretivist research that aims to give voice to the marginalised (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.14; West, 1989, ch. 6) or attempt to grasp the meaning of social experiences (Charmaz, 2000, p.523; Fay, 1996; Potter, 1996; Schwandt, 2000, pp.197-198). Nonetheless, bias was controlled within this research through various approaches: records were kept regarding the research progress, data analysis and problems that arose, all of which was very helpful in the reflexivity in the last stages of the study. In addition, the research was conducted systematically in order to collect valid empirical data by using multiple methods—netnographic observation, focus groups and semi-structured interviews—within an open-ended paradigmatic structure. Finally, comparative methods, which require rigorous criteria, were used to analyse, categorise, and refine the data into distinct themes that not only included deductive themes which were determined within the initial theoretical framework, but also inductive themes.

5.6 Ethical Issues

All participants in the focus groups and personal interviews received and approved a consent form, which highlighted the potential risks of the study. They were also given an information sheet which clearly explained the objective of the research, stated their right to withdraw from the study whenever they wanted, and listed all the researcher's contact information. They all took

part in the research voluntarily with no compensation or any other form of payment. At the beginning of each focus group and interview the respondents were briefed orally about the study and its aims and were given my contact information. They were asked to reach out to me whenever they had further questions or enquiries about the progress of the research.

The participants were informed that the focus groups and interviews were being recorded; however, they were guaranteed that the recordings would only be used by the researcher in this specific study. Similarly, during the netnographic data collection, respondents with semi-private social media accounts were only observed after their consent to participate had been secured. They were also informed of the possibility of recording (capturing) their actions/posts/likes on the social media platform as part of the netnographic research. However, micro-celebrity accounts that were observed netnographically were not informed of the research. Scholars have widely debated the ethical issue of permission and consent within netnographic research (Boellstroff et al., 2012; Buchanan, 2004; Ess, 2009; Johms et al., 2003; Krotoski, 20010; Mckee & Porter, 2009; Thorseth, 2003). A number, such as Boellstroff et al. (2012), stress the importance of informed consent and considerate anonymity within their guidelines on conducting ethical netnographic research. However, it is important to note that the Internet is very complex, and that there are various types of communication that take place within it. The authors of the *AoIR Ethics Working Committee Report* confirm that “No official guidance or ‘answers’ regarding internet research ethics have been adopted at any national or international level” (2012, p.2).

Kozinets (2010, 2015) argues that the Code of Federal Regulations asserts that the use of spontaneous conversation, if gathered in a publicly accessible venue, is not considered human subject research (2010, p.141). Therefore, he suggests that the recording of synchronous conversation and interaction should be treated differently from the way asynchronous communication, which is clearly intended for public consumption, is treated (2010, p.145). Accordingly, conversations, posts and comments that are gathered from a publicly accessible social network platform such as Twitter hashtags, or even micro-celebrities’ public accounts on Instagram are exempt from the need for ethical consent before being used in research. Furthermore, Walther, a leading researcher in computer mediated communication, posits that: “While some participants have an expectation of privacy, it is extremely misplaced” (2002, p.207). In this context, micro-celebrities’ accounts, such as used in this research, fall within a

public setting of social media and thus observing them does not ethically require signing a consent form.

In summary, although I used the usernames/handles/userIDs of micro-celebrities, their posts, and their profile images, the anonymity of all other participants was guaranteed. Names and details were changed to protect the identity of the participants and achieve anonymity. Conversations and comments made by regular users on the public accounts of micro-celebrities were also used as they are posted on a publicly accessible venue. However, the names were pixelated to avoid any risks and to protect the identity of the users who commented. Finally, the researcher strived to translate comments that were made in Arabic without compromising their meaning.

5.7 Reflexivity

Effective use of reflexivity is not only a way to control the validity and reliability of the data in qualitative research, but enables the reader to gain insights into the aims, values and decisions that prompted the study (Turnbull, 1973). Malterud (2001) argues that the researcher's background will influence what subjects were chosen for investigation, the stance and angle of the investigation, the methods of collecting the data, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and delivery of the conclusions (Malterud, 2001, pp.483-484). Furthermore, in a study in which the researcher is constructed as a 'human research instrument' a true account of reflexivity is central to achieving reliability and avoiding accusations of bias. To achieve this purpose, I kept a detailed reflexive journal throughout the research, in which I have attempted to be systematic and honest about the knowledge construction within this study (c.f. Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

My position as a young Saudi woman who has experienced the important years of the 2000s when the Internet, and subsequently social media, were introduced into Saudi society, and through engaging with social media as a female member of the Saudi collectivity, sparked my interest in the topic of this research. Years of observing fellow Saudi women negotiate the many legal and cultural limitations imposed on them through their use of this instrumental tool (social media), and having done the same thing myself, have encouraged me to reflect on the dynamic and ever-changing Saudi society, a collective that is often - mistakenly - depicted as static and a religious 'fly in amber', especially when it comes to women.

From the initial stages of data collection, my knowledge of the way in which Saudi women use social media and their reasons for doing so directed me towards certain platforms to observe certain practices. I had previous knowledge of female social media influencers and micro-celebrities from Saudi Arabia, having actually followed their accounts closely for years. The proximity of my age to that of the respondents made it easier for them to relate to me and trust me and to feel comfortable talking to me about sensitive issues, such as premarital romance and love. In several cases, I used my own experiences with social media engagement as ice-breakers in the personal semi-structured interviews and as a way to guide debates in focus groups. Indeed, several scholars note the researcher's role as a data co-creator is to facilitate conversation in focus groups and interviews (Burgess, 1982; Byrne, 2004, p.182; Fontana & Frey, 2000, p.653; Mason, 1996, pp.36-38; Spradley, 1979; Taylor, & Bogdan, 1984, p.7). My approach resulted in the respondents viewing me not as a distant researcher, but as a friend with whom they were having a discussion. Knowledge of the latest debates, incidents, and even knowledge of the intricate Saudi dialect and local slang and cultural references made the analysis of netnographic data easier, faster and more accurate.

Finally, keeping an honest record of reflexivity involves reflecting on factors that may have negatively influenced the findings. Being a Saudi woman and the researcher simultaneously might have encouraged male participants in the focus group to express progressive liberal views in relation to women's rights to have an individual identity on social media and experience premarital love without questioning her national affiliation or jeopardising her reputation. These values and attitudes, which are widely accepted as progressive in the public domain, are ones that male respondents might have thought I wanted to hear. However, the objective observance of data through netnography compensated for this possible shortcoming. Triangulation was employed for this specific reason; the multiplicity of methods was intended to increase the validity and reliability of the data collected. Even if men's views during focus groups were influenced by the presence of me as a woman (and by the other respondents being female), male social media users observed through netnography were not aware of a female researcher observing them, and thus their views are entirely impartial.

5.8 Conclusion

This study was conducted through a constructivist research framework. Triangulation was used in my data collection strategy in order to validate the data and ensure its reliability as fully as

possible (Mason, 2002). The three methods used to collect the data were observational netnography, focus groups and semi-structured one-to-one interviews. The Kozinets (2015) guidelines for selecting online communities that are worthy of netnographic observation were used to determine which social media platforms should be observed. Accordingly, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and YouTube were included, but Facebook was excluded as it is no longer an active site for many Saudi users. The sample from Instagram included the accounts of six Saudi female social media influencers (micro-celebrities), as well as the private Instagram accounts of five females. On Snapchat, 61 accounts were observed that were a mix of micro-celebrity accounts and regular users, including individuals from my focus groups. On Twitter, the sample was drawn through observing the activities on trending Saudi hashtags that were related to my research questions. Finally, on YouTube, the sample was drawn from the comments section under videos which discussed a topic related to the themes of this research. Seven focus group sessions and six one-to-one interviews of both male and female Saudis were conducted in order to increase the validity and reliability of the data. Although the study could not completely avoid subjectivity, this is not a threat to the validity of the results as several scholars contest the setting of rigid criteria of objectivity when conducting qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Geertz, 1973, 1983; Guba & Lincoln, 1989, pp.245-251; Lincoln & Guba, 2000, pp.178-179; Schwandt, 1989). The analytical approach I used was thematic analysis due to its compatibility with a constructivist research paradigm, as well as its flexibility and functionality, which make it ideal for analysing large data corpus. Coding the themes was undertaken inductively, free from analytical preconceptions. In addition, several deductive themes were expected to arise in relation to my research questions, such as veiling and gender segregation. Ethical issues were examined and addressed in this chapter, as well as a reflexive account of the knowledge construction in my research and my role as a researcher in it.

Chapter Six. Social Media: A Space to Challenge Tradition

6.1 Introduction

I start my analysis by looking at the use of 'identity separation' by Saudi women to overcome limitations set on them by the collectivity and to protect their privacy when presenting themselves online. I identify a gap in some women's presentation between the online self and the offline self. Drawing on the notion of counterublics to describe these spaces on which alternate contemporary feminine identities are being expressed and represented (Fraser, 1992; Senft, 2008), the analysis will highlight how social media networks can be used as a space where shame-honour culture can be challenged. I then move on to address that the 'gap between selves' is closing up when considering younger women (digital natives), mainly due to their higher sense of individual agency, which in return makes them less mindful of the collectivity's long-held notions of family honour and its dependence on women's modesty/chastity. This move, from a close knit social system towards an emphasis on personal autonomy and the individual instead of the group, is understood as part of a series of factors leading to the individualisation and detradtionalisation associated with modern communities that scholars such as Giddens (1991) and Beck (2002) have explored. These writings are drawn on here to examine Saudi women's engagement with social media networks. The analysis in this chapter begins to answer a key question in this research on how social media engagement is impacting and changing the values and norms of young Saudi women by recognising social media platforms as a functional tool to create shame-free spaces where culture can be challenged. I continue to answer this question through the analysis in Chapter 7.

6.2 Multiplicity in Saudi women's identity expression 'identity separation'

When examining the online and offline performances of feminine identity among Saudi women, it is important to consider two things that Goffman (1959) argues have a considerable impact on our choice of self-presentation at a given situation: the audience and the social context (see more in Chapter 3). Goffman asserts that a social actor (Saudi women in the case of my research) would adjust her performance according to who is watching and where she is. My research findings show that Saudi women are highly conscious of these two factors when they present themselves online, and that these factors affect their choice of self-representation/identity

performance. This results sometimes in divergent performances from one social media platform to another depending on the friend list of that platform and the assumed social context for it. The analysis in this chapter is informed by Butler's (1990) understanding of gender identity as 'performative', in which gender identity is socially constructed through the repetition of acts and the imitation of the dominant conventions of gender. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the norms and ideals of gender identity/performance for women in Saudi Arabia have been long tied with conservative notions of veiling, piety, severe restrictions on mingling with the opposite sex, and generally a confinement to the domestic/private sphere. These acts became the norms and values of the ideal feminine performance through habit and repetition, and they are framed within a shame-honour culture (Ruth Benedict, 1947) which guarantees the perpetuation of this ideal femininity (Abu-Lughod 1986; Abu-Lughod 1993; Meeker, 1979). As explained in the literature review (Chapter 2), in Middle Eastern societies, particularly in Saudi Arabia, any act that deviates from what is considered honourable is regarded as '*eyb*' a very particular Arabic word that could be translated as shameful or disgraceful. The notion of '*eyb*' in Middle Eastern communities is especially hyper when it comes to issues concerning women and their reputation (read more in Afshar, 1993, p .118-119) and I shall talk more about the issue of reputation later in this chapter. However, this chapter argues that since the mid 2000's Saudi women's engagement with social media networks has ignited what I call a 'hyper context awareness' and enabled them to create semi-public spaces (through defining the context and controlling the audience) in which they can experiment with new identity performance and negotiate the classical norms and values of femininity in Saudi.

Discussions arising from my focus groups and one-to-one interviews as well as my observations of men and women's online activity using the method of netnography show that choices of self-presentation online by the same user might not be uniform across all social media accounts. Some women users tend to present themselves using their first and last name on a certain profile while choosing to present themselves with a nickname on another. Alternatively, some women share their personal photos on one platform but not on another, such as one of the participants in this study (Sarah, 32-years-old). Sarah uses her own personal photo as a profile picture on Instagram, but refrains from doing so on Twitter. The data in this research show that the reason behind the inconsistent identity performance across social media platforms is either to avoid conflicts with family members who also use the platform, achieve privacy, or to adapt to the user's preconceived assumption of what the social context of that given platform is, as the following

examples will show. For example, upon observing 32-year-old Sarah's various social media accounts, I noticed a distinct difference in her performance from one platform to the other. In her comments on this, she said:

"*I am much goofier on Snapchat than on Twitter for example or even Instagram. I feel like Twitter is more for discussing politics and current affairs. It's also very public, and that's why I don't use my own photograph as a profile picture on it. But Snapchat is just to send your friends random stuff. That's why I only add really close friends on Snapchat. I want to be very spontaneous and comfortable*". (Sarah, February, 2016, one-to-one Interview).

Sarah's attempt to explain the difference between Snapchat and Twitter in this comment is reminiscent of Madianou and Miller's (2012) argument about the polymedia context we live in, where one platform can only be understood in relation to another platform. Sarah's definition of the context on each social media platform is what is influencing her online self-presentation/identity performance. In a personal interview with her I asked her why she defines the context of each platform in this way, and she answered that it is a combination of what "*the site could do*" and "*how people use it*". She elaborated that the affordances of Snapchat, for example, make it very easy for her to send instant videos and photographs to her contacts, and that they are not persistent as they disappear in 24 hours. The non-persistent nature of the platform makes it synonymous with silly videos that were funny/relevant at the particular moment they were shared, but were not meant to last. The norms of the platform, or 'how people use it', are also a contributing factor to defining its context. The way Sarah's friends on Twitter and the people she connects with on the site use it has created norms of behaviour and usage on the platform (at least for Sarah's circle), which provoke a certain performance of identity from Sarah herself. boyd (2014) observed how the context is defined not only by technical features or affordances of the site, but also by users' observations of how people are using the platform. They later either "reinforce or challenge those norms through their own practices" (boyd, 2014, p.39) (see also Chapter 3). boyd (2014) observes how users today might dabble with several social contexts spread across several social media platforms, each provoking a different way to present the self on. A platform in which the contacts are family members would have a different context from a platform where the contacts are one's close friends. These varying contexts might even be hosted by the same platform simultaneously. Mai, a 25-year-old Saudi woman I interviewed, reported having a designated group chat on WhatsApp with her family members and a separate one for her co-workers and a third for her close friends. The way she presents herself

and interacts in each group is different due to the different contexts on each one of them. A story about a flirtatious text she had received would not be shared in the family group or with the co-workers, and similarly she would not speak in the same manner that she does in the family group with her friends.

"*In my family group, I don't think about my dialect, I just speak the way I do at home. I wouldn't do that with my friends though. Maybe with some friends when we are alone, but not in the group on WhatsApp with all of them*". (Mai, February 2016, one-to-one interview).

Mai speaks to her family in a distinct Qassimi accent, the region of Saudi Arabia where her family hail from originally. However, when speaking with friends Mai switches to a Riyadh accent, which is commonly presumed to be more sophisticated. She explains that it is not because she is ashamed of where she is from, but that it is simply more "*chic"* and stylish to speak in a Riyadh accent, and it is how all her friends speak. The netnographic data in my research shows that young, single Saudi women are highly aware and very concerned with social context when it comes to identity performance on social media. I call this concern 'hyper-context awareness'. Mai's behaviour can be understood as a form of impression management that is motivated and controlled by her hyper-context awareness; who is watching her, and the social context that she is in.

Defining the context and imagining the audience to determine the identity performance on a certain platform is not uniquely Saudi. boyd (2014) has noticed it with American users as well, and it is the basis to what I identify as 'identity separation' in young Saudi women's performance of online identity. This finding relates closely to Madianou and Miller's (2012) Polymedia, where users regularly separate aspects of their personality and limit them to a particular platform with a particular audience in mind. This practice of identity separation is very strategic in Saudi women's negotiation of classical female identity because it enables them to create spaces that are free of one of the main sources of control in shame-honour cultures: people that matter. Young Saudi women in these examples are exercising individual agency on social media platforms to achieve privacy and reveal a growing sense of autonomy. They can manipulate privacy settings and employ scalable sociality (Miller et al, 2016) to create semi-public spaces that exclude family members and conservative acquaintances, or even to disguise their names completely, thereby

escaping criticism and shaming by the individuals who fix them as representatives of the family collectivity's honour.

This can be seen in the example of Wafa. Wafa (34 years old), a participant in this research from a conservative background, reported that she had deliberately chosen not to use her real last name in her Instagram profile not only to protect her privacy by preventing family members from finding and adding her, but also by not carrying the family name she is relieving herself from the task of representing the family's honour (Mercer, 1994). The reason she was keen on doing so was that she had identified the context of Instagram as a place where she can be more liberated and flirtatious, which is considered shameful in conservative traditional families of Saudi Arabia. In a shame-honour culture, Wafa is pushed and pressured by her family members to protect her reputation and refrain from flirting, adding and talking to men, or even posting photos of herself publicly. Through social media, Wafa is exercising user agency to manipulate privacy settings to disassociate herself from her family and assert her networked individualism by presenting herself simply as Wafa81 in a space that is free from anyone (at least anyone that matters) who might criticise/shame her. However, she does not escape national public criticism since she identifies as a Saudi in her profile (I will expand on the issue of Saudi women and the burden of representing the nation in the next chapter when discussing nation and gender). Wafa might still receive comments on Instagram from conservative nationalists she does not personally know who are criticising her behaviour given the fact that she is a Saudi woman and that she should according to them portray a sense of decorum that matches her nationality. A typical comment would be "*How can you call yourself a Saudi, dressed like that? Where is your family from this?*" She quickly deletes them, and she reports that they do not really bother her as they are, in her words "*Just random people. I do not care what they think*". By 'random' Wafa means that they are not of any influence on her or have a real connection to her life (such as family members or personal acquaintances) and thus their criticism does not really shame her since they do not even know her. By stepping away from the collectivity of the family and close personal ties, an emphasis on the project of the self within the trend towards individualism enables Wafa to perform aspects of femininity that are unconventional in her social circle and which normally she would be shamed into renouncing. For instance, on Instagram social media platform, where she is less conservative, she posts photographs of herself unveiled, and she is not hesitant to flirt with men:

"*I am not shy to talk to men because I know they don't know my family name, so I am not disgracing my family. I am just being myself and it doesn't affect my family in any way*". (Wafa, March 2016, one-to-one interview)

As Giddens (1991) argues, in traditional communities a person simply accepts what has been handed to her by the collectivity as convention and custom. Combined with the burden of representing the collectivity's honour by abiding by these customs, this makes it very difficult for women in Saudi to challenge these traditions and reformulate a female gendered identity. However, in modern communities such as the networked publics of social media sites, individualism is highly visible and promoted as a positive value. With it, users of social media develop their own values and experiment with new lifestyles that "give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity" (Giddens, 1991, p.81). Moreover, in the case of Saudi women, individualism on networked publics offers women the chance to free themselves from adhering to the norms and expectations of a 'proper' Saudi woman and representing the collectivity in publics where shaming is either completely absent or where it is less impactful as it comes from none prominent individuals. By first defining the context on her Instagram account as a liberated and romantic/flirtatious context, Wafa controls the audience according to that online social context by choosing whom to add on her contact list, adding 'open-minded' close friends and avoiding those family members and judgmental friends who hold conservative values, thereby creating a shame-free space. In addition, she creates and presents an online self-identity that disassociates her from the collectivity of the family by omitting her family name in her username. Therefore, Wafa is able to 'perform' a feminine identity on Instagram that would not be accepted in a family context. In fact, due to her hyper-context awareness, she does not share photos of herself at all on Facebook, where her brothers and relatives are on her friends list and where she discloses her family name on her profile. Yet on Instagram she performs a distinctive identity that differs considerably from an offline social context among family members:

"*I share lots of photos of myself on Instagram and I also add men freely, which I don't do on Facebook. If I added a random guy on Facebook one of my brothers would surely ask me about it, or my relatives would judge me. However, on Instagram I make sure I don't have any relatives or judgmental friends*". (Wafa, March 2016, one-to-one interview)

Similarly, in focus group 4 the distinction between some Saudi women users' performances of feminine identity online and offline came up when discussing why some Saudi women might be veiled offline and yet share photos of themselves unveiled online. Fadwa (36-year-old female) had this to say:

"*I know many girls in the company where I work who don't cover up inside the company but just as they step out of the door they do, because they know that their families wouldn't want her to uncover their faces outside in the street so they have to live a contradictory lifestyle. It's not duality; she just doesn't want to upset anyone. And the same thing with women who don't veil on SMN yet veil offline". (*Fadwa, January 2016, focus group*)*

The women in Fadwa's workplace had to disregard their personal views around veiling and prioritise their community's values instead, as they knew that their actions reflected on their family's name and that it would bring shame not only to them but on the family as well. However, when they were in a context that was completely detached from their families and their families' supervision, they performed a type of femininity that is marked by an individualistic set of values that is distinct from the values that their families hold. The feminine identity they performed in a social context that includes their family was conservative and traditional (wearing a veil that covers her face), yet the feminine identity they performed at work was modern and liberal (unveiled). Similarly, on social media platforms, unconventional performances of femininity amongst Saudi women are promoted, as I will explain in detail later in this chapter, especially when the social context of the platform excludes family members who might object to or obstruct the expression of these contemporary and, somewhat non-traditional, femininities/identities.

During the focus group discussion, Lubna (26-year-old) stressed that this contradictory duality in self-presentation is not deceptive but rather an adaptation to the context that these women find themselves in at a given moment:
"*This doesn't mean that she [*the woman who expresses contradicting dual identities*] has double standards, but she simply can't walk the streets of Saudi without it". (*Lubna, January 2016, Focus group*)*

Lubna herself wears a veil offline and yet shares photographs of herself unveiled on her social media accounts:

"*It is imposed on me* [wearing a veil in public]. *If it wasn't, I wouldn't wear a hijab at all when in public and I wouldn't exhibit this duality in my character"*. (Lubna, Jan 2016, Focus group)

Lubna here is referring to the law in Saudi Arabia that states women must wear an Abaya and a Hijab when in public. And even though Lubna is referring particularly to legal imperatives, in some cases the pressure to wear the veil comes from the woman's family. Lubna and the women in Fadwa's workplace do not change their self-presentation to deceive or because they have double standards; they are simply adapting to the context that they are in and to the audience that is watching them. However, in the process they ended up with an online identity that is not similar to their offline one.

The collectivity's power (whether it is the family or the society/nation) to control and restrict women's activities and gendered identities through strong traditions, strict laws and shaming (Mercer, 1990) has one major overriding ramification: it fixates subjugated identities and creates what Chachhi (1991) dubs 'forced identities'. An example of this is found in a photograph shared by Hala on Instagram (Figure.1). Binary expressions of identity are observed in the photo, where she is seen driving her car while in the U.S.A. The caption reads: "*Back to my normal life, and car selfies #LA #morning #nofilter*". Even though Hala cannot appear unveiled in public on the streets of Riyadh where she comes from, and is banned from driving a car, she dubs this lifestyle a '*normal life*' (the end of the ban lift on women driving in Saudi Arabia did not happen until September 2017, while this photo was posted in early 2016). The act of driving a car is quite significant as it relates directly to limitations on women's movements in Saudi Arabia and confinement to the private domain. This intriguing choice of words implies that life in Saudi Arabia, where she is veiled and her mobility is controlled, is not her 'normal' self but a self that is forced upon her. Her adaptation to a certain set of rules in Saudi meant that her identity was dictated to be conservative in the streets of Riyadh, where she is veiled and not driving. It is merely obedience to law and custom, not an actual choice of representation. The key issue here concerns the central role of social media in managing the contradictory values of tradition and modernity that mark the lives of Saudi women (particularly when they experience or come into

contact with individualistic values and ideals in western cultures such as the USA, either offline or online).

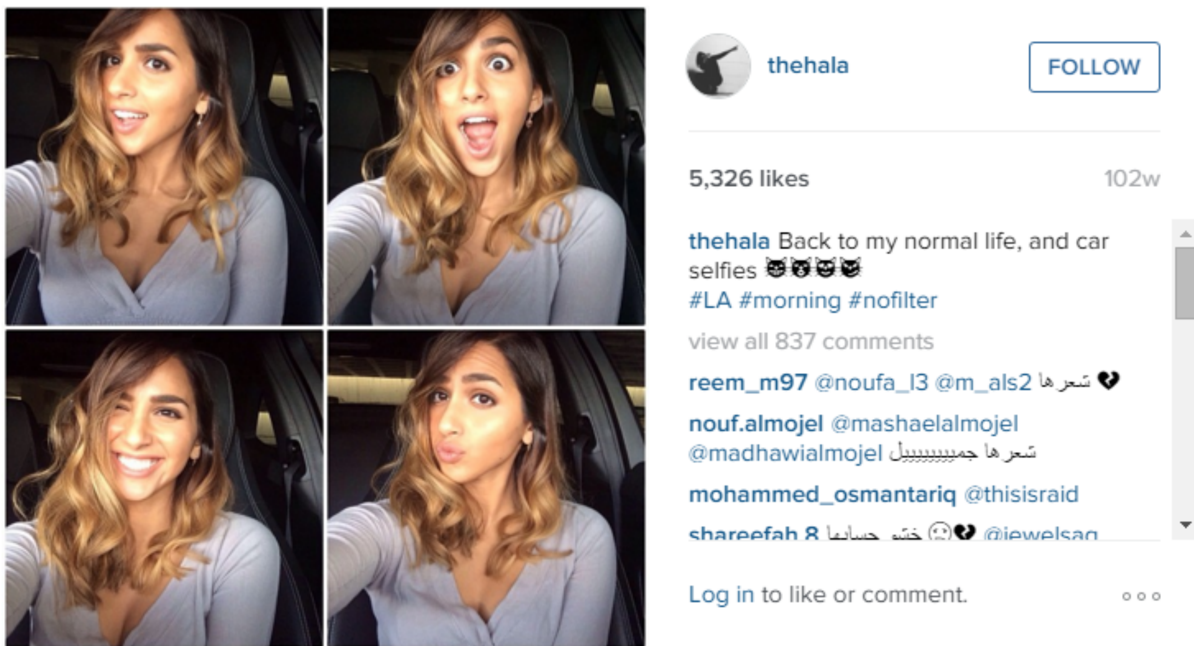


Figure 1*: *post from Hala's Instagram

Women in Saudi society are pressured into leading binary lives, whether it is between their offline and online identities, as in the case of Hala, or between multiple online identities according to a predefined context and a controlled audience, as in the case of Wafa. This is mainly due to the restrictions and limitations imposed on them by their families, by tradition, or by the law. Importantly, while the integration of online technologies into our daily routine has made it hard for western scholars to distinguish between the online and offline worlds (see, for example, Livingstone, 2008; van Dijck, 2013), my research findings confirm that this is not the case for the Saudi women I interviewed and observed. The possibility of scaling sociality and the individual agency that is afforded on social media networks has increased Saudi women's autonomy and enabled them to create spaces where they can experiment and negotiate long held values without compromising their privacy and reputation, thereby creating a counterpublic where shame-honour culture is being revised and adapted to suit the current needs of young Saudis, proving that culture is not static but actually in a constant state of flux. Participants in the focus groups are conscious of a mismatch or disparity between the reality the Saudi women live offline and what is taking place online in their social accounts. They are compelled to live parallel, contradictory lives. However, this online/offline performative disparity is considerably narrower for younger Saudi women aged between 25 and younger, who grew up as digital

natives. As explained in Chapter 5, digital natives are social media users born during or after digital media and technology had become popular. I shall explain next how Saudi digital natives are expressing more individualistic values through the performance of new modes of online – feminine identity that deviate from the classical norms and values of Saudi Arabia.

6.3 Closing the gap

The identities and attitudes of Saudi women adopted online and offline are not always so polarised. I observed that older Saudi female participants, aged between 26 and 32, emphasise the existence of a gap between online and offline performances of self in relation to Saudi women. By contrast the online and offline performances of identity among younger single Saudi women (younger than 25 years old) suggests that the gap is closing. Young Saudi women are becoming more confident in portraying an individualistic set of values and norms not necessarily consistent with those of the collectivity, and they seem to be less susceptive to shaming and criticism. In the example below, we see two young women operating a food-truck during a music festival in Riyadh, selling sweets and drinks to the concert's attendees (Figure.2). The situation is challenging classical ideals of Saudi femininity in more ways than one; the women are placed in a public setting in which they are dealing directly and freely with male customers. Moreover, their appearance is not entirely conservative, their hair is barely covered and their make-up is heavy. An older male passer-by saw the food-truck and the young women who were dealing with young male customers as part of their job, and stopped to film it on his phone while complaining about "*the state the the Saudi society has reached in which women are trotting in the streets uncovered talking and dealing with strange men*".

Figure 2: A screenshot from a video of two young women operating a food-truck on the street.

He then posted the video on twitter (figure.3) to which many were quick to confront and oppose his stance and his criticism of the young women. Waheed Al-Ghamdi replied to his tweet saying: "*we have two models in front of us here; a young man from the new generation who is dealing naturally and somewhat nonchalantly with the situation, and an older man from the old generation who is filming the incident and whining*".

Figure 3: Waheed AlGhamdi commenting on Twitter.

Al-Ghamdi then continues to say: "*my comment on this is; leave the new generation to live their own times, they are far more capable than you to cope with the changes*". (@wa7eed2011, December, 2018, Twitter).

As this viral twitter exchange shows, the gap between the younger generations online and offline behaviour is closing up with more and more young men and women adopting new values and contemporary identities on the street that are very similar to what they exhibit, and what this research documents, on their social media accounts. The young people in the video are comfortable socialising with the opposite-sex, and specifically the young women are confidently

projecting a non-traditional identity of an independent and uncovered woman who is taking an active part in the public sphere.

Participants in focus groups and personal interviews suggest that this is because of their inclusion (as young Saudis/digital natives) in networked publics from an early age. Being digital natives diversified sources of information on mores and values, thereby helping them to develop their own values and ideas as well as giving them the chance to exercise individual agency away from the traditions of the collectivity. During a focus group, Areeb (23 years old) stated that the life she portrays online is the same as the one she lives offline: "*They are very close to each other. There are a lot of similarities between the two and much more autonomy and ease in society today*" (Areeb, January 2016, Focus group). She further stated that even if there is still room for improvement in terms of laws that control Saudi women, she believes that today women are more willing to challenge customs and traditions concerning identity expression, gender roles, and what is considered by conservative nationalists to be the ideal femininity within Saudi culture. Areeb claimed that unlike her older female cousins, she is not concerned with what people might think or say, and thus does not feel the need to hide her family name on her online social media accounts in order to talk to and add complete strangers from the opposite sex (what is commonly referred to as '*strange men*'). A 'strange man' is basically any man who does not have an immediate relation to a woman (such as her father, brother, husband or cousin). Accordingly, Saudi women need to be veiled around such men and refrain from communicating with them out of the fear that this might lead to illicit behaviour. Often, a woman's relation with a 'strange man' is a source of gossip that might harm her reputation. Areeb continues:

"*Even in terms of integration with men, people are now more tolerant of the idea of friendships between men and women. It has become an accepted reality between younger girls. It doesn't need to be hidden."* (Areeb, January 2016, focus group)

This suggests that women are gradually freeing themselves from the task of representing the family as a collectivity and emphasising their networked individualism, which represents a shift of the classical configuration of social arrangements and relations built around large hierarchical bureaucracies or social groups that are tightly knit, such as the family, through the use of modern communication technologies (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). Correspondingly, the increasing autonomy, individual agency and the wider trend of individualism that is found on social media

networks is reconstructing the traditions and values of family and community and reconstructing the ideal femininity within Saudi culture. This is consistent with Giddens' (1991) concept of individualism and detraditionalisation of communities, which will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Durr, who at 27 is among the older single women in my sample and so experienced the boom of social network platforms in Saudi around 2007 during her late teens, confirms Areeb's statement. Durr explained that prior to the rise of social media in Saudi society, young Saudi women had to accept gender identities and roles prescribed by family and the wider collectivity. Today, young single women can access a limitless array of options in terms of identities and ways of expressing femininity. She proceeded to explain how, as a young woman, she and her friends used to be intimidated/shamed by their families into performing an ideal of femininity that is very specific and conservative: "*If you uncover your face, no one would ever want to marry you*". The implication is that any deviation from this ideal conservative femininity, whether by choosing to uncover or experimenting with romantic relationships before marriage, would render a young woman unfit for marriage, condemning her to a life of singlehood. Durr acknowledges the limited choices of identity and gender roles offered to women at that time by portraying marriage as "*the highest achievement for you as a woman"*. As a result, young women cared greatly about achieving that social status. She also adds that even women who dabbled with romantic relationships or portrayed an image that challenged societal norms by unveiling have managed to get married, proving the older generation's assumptions (around losing your reputation equating to a woman not getting married) wrong.

"*I mean that they use to tell you these things and you can never know if they were wrong or right. You don't want to risk it and then find out that they were right and regret your actions. But when you see for yourself on social media that what they are saying is wrong, and that girls are not only getting married but even marrying non-Saudis and living a far better life than what you are living while you kept yourself from doing things you wanted to do only for the sake of marriage, you realize that all this was an illusion that they embed in your mind for you to be afraid. I remember being afraid! There were things that I wanted to do but wouldn't because I would worry about what people might say about me?"* (Durr, January 2016, focus group)

Durr compares herself to young women in Areeb's age who are digital natives, stating that it is no longer effective today for families to intimidate young women into conforming to a limiting

set of gender roles and traditional conservative ideals of femininity by alleging a bleak future for those who challenge traditions. This is because they are simultaneously viewing on social media platforms examples of Saudi women who successfully challenged and defied these customs and roles and yet did not suffer the dire consequences that Durr and her friends have been warned about by their families. In fact, in many cases they reaped rewards, such as the case with social media influencers (see below).

"No matter how many lies you tell them [younger generations of Saudi women], they won't believe these lies because they can see for themselves [the examples of Saudi women online who challenged customs successfully with no consequences]" (Durr, January 2016, focus group).

Women who contest classical gender roles on social media platforms have turned into vanguards of change and modernity. I reiterate here that the terms 'modernity/modern' in this thesis with reference to Saudi society is concerned with a particular set of developments that I observe in relation to traditions and customs in the period after the spread of social media usage in the community from around the mid 2000 onwards. As a result, young digital natives like Areeb are now becoming less reluctant to accept traditional identity expressions for women and are less responsive to the collectivity's pressure to keep women within a frame of a conservative ideal femininity. Najd (25-years-old) and Mai (25-years-old) shared the following sentiments about female microcelebrities and social media influencers from Saudi who are publicly challenging the traditional conservative ideals of femininity and showcasing an autonomous identity:

Najd: *"I hope more and more of them do it so that they can open up the society to these ideas."*

Mai*: "I'm the same. I wouldn't like to be famous but I love having famous Saudi women doing the work for me. The problem is that I don't like it for myself but I love the change that comes out of it and so I would love to see even more of these types of girls. They are doing us - Saudi women - a great favour".* (Mai and Najd, December, 2015, focus group)

The recent development in laws concerning women in Saudi has helped to bridge the gap even further between the contemporary femininity that young Saudi women aspire to achieve, and the

reality that they live in Saudi. Take for example the recent photograph that Hessah shared on her Instagram when she was first granted the licence to drive in Riyadh (July, 2018).

Figure 4: post from Hessah's Instagram

Hessah captions the photo: "*It has been more than a month now, and it still feels like a dream*". The captions highlights how the aspirational femininity that Hessah and other young Saudi women could only 'dream' of a few months ago has now turned into a reality that they live everyday in the streets of Riyadh. The juxtaposition of this photograph with the photograph that Hala shared (Figure.1) back when driving was banned in Saudi, highlights the role that legislative changes play in enabling the realisation of contemporary aspects of feminine identities amongst young Saudi women and their normalization. Only a few months earlier, Hala's "*normal*" self could only be performed in the streets of Los Angeles or on social media platforms, but with lifting the ban on women's driving, the contemporary and unconventional images of Saudi women online and their reality offline is a lot more analogous.

Figure 5: a post from Ghadah's Instagram of her and her friend

Similarly, Ghadah Badwai a young woman from Riyadh shared this photograph of her and her friend attending a David Guetta concert in Riyadh that was held as part of the Formula E Championship in December 2018. The 3 concerts which were held by renowned musicians such as Enrique Iglesias, The Black Eyed Peas and One Republic, were unprecedented in Saudi Arabia. Men and women celebrated freely in the unsegregated concerts as well as attend the race itself and all the accompanying activities. Women were not only attendees, but they were also organisers, hosts, and managers in the event as well as competitors in the race (Ad Diriyah E-prix, 2018). The race and the music festival that accompanied it was brought to Riyadh as part of the Vision 2030 led by the Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman who opened the championship himself and attended the closing ceremony on the third day. Such a radical challenge to conservative traditions of Saudi culture would have been very difficult to bring about in such short time if it wasn't for the governmental support. Such support gives this kind of event a legitimacy that silences any possible criticism or backlash.

The photograph that Ghadah posted of herself on social media, unveiled attending a musical concert, was for the first time an accurate representation of her reality offline in her own country.

She acknowledges this in her caption and reaffirms it in another post in which she thanked Mohammed Bin Salman personally for bringing about such change to Saudi Arabia. The caption reads: "*when I attend a concert [for] my favourite singer and in my own country that's a privilege".* The example of Ghadah showcases how legislative changes and governmental support can facilitate the emergence of non-traditional contemporary ideals of femininity and bridge the gap between what Saudi women showcase online with the reality that they live offline.

6.4 Conclusion

I conclude this section by stating that corresponding with Giddens' (1991) argument about late modern communities, the changes I highlight in this chapter can be described as part of a process of individualisation and detraditionalisation of modern day Saudi Arabia. Young Saudi women's engagement with social media (networked publics) is creating a counterpublic with a shame-free culture that promotes individualistic values and withdrawals from traditional family-oriented values (1990). More specifically, the findings in this chapter highlight the shift in cornerstone values within the shame-honour culture of Saudi Arabia: the association of the family's honour with women's behaviour. As noted in the literature review, in the early days of the Internet and even in studies as recent as Guta and Karolak (2015), Al-Saggaf (2011) and Hayat (2014), scholars have identified a strong link between the tendency of Saudi women to self-monitor their behaviour and appearance online out of fear of their reputation and that of their families being tarnished. And while the same can be said here about older women users (ages between 26-35), I observe from the focus group discussions, such as the above mentioned example of Areeb, and from the data I gathered netnographically, a distinct shift in the attitudes of younger women in this research (25 and under) in relation to this value.

Women digital natives tend to share photographs of themselves online often, as well as connect nonchalantly with people from the opposite sex, even when their social media accounts show their family name. Less weight is being given by younger female users to the task of preserving the family honour/reputation, something which would necessitate strict self-controlling and controlling and self-monitoring their own actions and behaviours online. This showcases a wider trend of individualism that is diffusing amongst young women on these social media platforms with an emphasis on individual agency and autonomy. Young single Saudi women are performing and experimenting with new online identities that form part of new, detraditionalised values and norms that underpin new performances of femininity different from the conservative

ideals of femininity of the 1980s and 199's (see Chapter 2). These findings are in agreement with the constructivist ontological and epistemological stance of this research, which considers reality to be continually revised through social interaction through which individuals in groups create and recreate culture, rather than culture being static and to be forever under the dictates of conservative nationalist mind-set (Bryman, 2012).

Nonetheless, this chapter also acknowledges there is a distinction between the online and offline practices of some Saudi women, especially amongst older participants and participants from a highly conservative social background. It is apparent that some of the women who participated in this research resort to living binary lives that bar

e some differences in terms of levels of exposure, choices of self-expression and ways of communication with one another or with the opposite sex. These differences between the portrayal of their lives online and the reality they live offline is due mainly to one of two reasons: either their inability in law to practice these forms of self-expression, such as appearing unveiled and driving, or social pressure and the limitations set on them by their families and immediate social circle. In any case, both reasons lead them to resort to online spaces to claim their identities and express aspects of it that they may not be able to express offline. What this finding highlights is the functionality of social media platforms as tools for creating a private space (a counterpublic) disconnected from disruptive individuals, where women can experiment and negotiate unconventional feminine identities. Moreover, this chapter shows how changes in laws are gradually allowing offline and online performances of young women to correspond with one another, and for contemporary aspects of feminine identity, once commonly limited to counterpublics on social media, to appear offline in the Saudi public sphere. These observations constitute the formation of an answer to one of the main questions of this research: How is social media engagement impacting and changing the values and norms of young Saudi women? And highlights how legislative reforms and governmental support are foundational for this change to come about, and to transcend merely social media platforms and phone screens to the actual streets.

In the following chapter, I explore further the answer to this question by examining Saudi female micro-celebrities as a prominent example of modern feminine identities on social media. I provide an account of how they are influencing the values and norms of young Saudi women through their effort to claim identity online. I assess their role as vanguards of change in the

community, and address how they are diffusing contemporary ideals of femininity amongst young Saudi women.

Chapter Seven. Micro-celebrities and the Contemporary Ideals of Femininity

7.1 Introduction

As noted in Chapter 3, one of the prominent trends of 'public' performances of self in Saudi networked publics today is the micro-celebrity (Van de Rijt et al, 2013; Greenwood and Kaufman, 2013; Uhls and Greenfield, 2012; Gamson, 2011). From the netnographic data that I collected, together with the focus group and interview findings, I found that the trend is being diffused amongst Saudi women as well. The number of female Saudi fashionistas (women micro-celebrities who are interested in make-up, fashion and the latest trends, see more in Chapter 3) and social media influencers is multiplying, with each one of them building an audience base rapidly thanks to the scalability and replicability affordances of networked publics that helps them to go viral. Young Saudi women such as @model_roz (5.7 million followers), @thehala (653k followers) @afnan_albatel (6.2 million followers) @malak_alhusaini (3.4 million followers) @adhwaaldakheel (605k followers) @afnansn (1.m followers) @hala_alharithy (81.5k followers) and @stylemesausan (31.k followers) to name but a few, are examples of the popularity of this form of public performance of self amongst Saudis.

This popularity can be measured in the number of social media influencers and aspiring micro-celebrities as well as by the millions of young Saudi women (and men for that matter) that follow these celebrities' accounts. This is influencing more and more young Saudi women to aspire to do the same. For example, Raghad, a 20 year-old young Saudi woman whom I met as part of the focus groups, enthusiastically told me that she intends to become a sensation in the world of social media by making her private Instagram account public and becoming a fashionista. She reported that she is only waiting for her father to adjust to the idea, she says to me, rather defiantly: *"Just wait and see…"* As noted, public self-performances of this nature among Saudi women contradict traditional notions of ideal femininity (discussed in Chapter 2). Firstly, achieving celebrity status/fame entails a positioning in the public sphere under the spotlight, despite the fact that Saudi have historically been encouraged by tradition and custom to remain secluded in the domestic domain (Doumato 2009; Hamdan 2005; Le Renard 2008, Le Renard, 2014; DeLong-Bas, 2009, p.19). Secondly, in many cases of micro-celebrity, particularly fashionistas, women emphasise attributes such as their body and their face/beauty, which

contradicts classical perceptions around veiling and modesty (Almunajjed, 1997; Esposito, 2003). Thirdly, the role of being a micro-celebrity itself has turned into an industry and a job opportunity that is highly rewarding financially to those who achieve it. This has expanded the array of professions available to Saudi women to include entrepreneurial opportunities in creating media content, e-commerce, advertising, as well as spinoff professions in designing and cosmetics, all of which are a departure from the conventional role of home-maker (Carah and Shaul, 2016; Booth and Matic. 2011; Ferberg et al, 2011; Marwick, 2010; Duffy and Hund, 2015). Moreover, ventures of this nature are advancing women's financial independence, which in return amplifies their autonomy from the collectivity of the family.

Examining this social trend in this chapter would help understand and answer the two central questions of the research on how social media engagement is impacting and changing the values and norms of young Saudi women, thereby altering the ideal Saudi feminine identity/image, and how it can be used to claim these identities. The next sections will address these points.

7.2 Micro-celebrity: A move from the private to the public

The role of microcelebrity necessitates a strong presence within the public sphere through self-promotion. This in itself is a challenge to social norms of Saudi that fixes women in the private sphere, to protect the reputation of the family by remaining unobtrusive (Almunajjed, 1997; Le Renard, 2008; Hilde Granås Kjøstvedt, 2016). In the early days of social media use in Saudi Arabia, women did not only refrain from sharing their photographs but they even refrained from sharing their names. Fame was not something women sought, in fact it was something avoided as it jeopardised their wider family's reputation. Instead, anonymity/obscurity was the norm (Al-saggaf, 2004). The interviews and focus group in my study confirm that, older interviewees (aged between 30- 35) assert that early social media engagement among women in Saudi was characterised by anonymity:

"It was unheard of even to be famous [as a Saudi woman]! Can you imagine your father's or brother's reaction? No one would want people to talk about their daughter/sister". (Basmah, 32 years old, December 2015, Focus group)

Customary ideals of femininity in Saudi maintain that in order to express a demure form of femininity, women must remain invisible/obscure, both in the literal sense and the metaphorical

one; they must not only be veiled in public places or inhabit almost exclusively the domestic setting, but also remain '*untalked*' about. Naturally, one could not be famous while being obscure, as being famous necessities being being talked about.

Today, Saudi female micro-celebrities are contesting the norm of exclusion from the public sphere/public eye by being the most debated topic both in social circles and in conventional media outlets. They are hosted on TV shows and featured in magazines and newspaper editorials and have millions of followers that listen to them and talk about them (Abdullah, 2017; Dairani, 2017; Aldkheel, 2017; YouTube, 2015a; YouTube, 2015b). Drawing on Fraser's (1990) conceptualisation of 'counterpublics' (see Chapter 3), Senft (2013) argues that networked publics can perform as counterpublics that women use as a reaction to their omission from the public sphere. Fraser refers to the employment of counterpublics by marginalised members of a community to push back and secure a place for themselves within the public sphere. In Saudi, young women are making a bid to position themselves in online spaces, through which they are engaging and likely to be influencing large audiences. Therefore, it can be argued that social media networks as networked publics are serving as counterpublics for Saudi women, where they negotiate and develop a presence in the public and culturally produce contemporary representations/images of Saudi women and identities. Female Saudi micro-celebrities embody modern ideals of femininity, and, deliberately or not, are disseminating them through the affordances and features of networked publics amongst Saudi women, thereby becoming vanguards of change within the community.
An example of this trend is Hatoon Kadi, a Saudi micro-celebrity who is reaching millions of viewers through her YouTube channel (Noon Alniswa), which has 26,070,983 views at the time of writing. Kadi, a comedienne who started her channel in 2012, discusses and comments on various social and cultural issues concerning the contemporary Saudi woman. Topics range from discussing the veil, social media usage, women's rights, and current affairs in Saudi Arabia. In an interview on BBC Radio 4, she stated that when she started her YouTube channel, social media communication in Saudi Arabia was booming with online comedy shows, but they were all fronted by men. So she decided to fill a gap in the market (BBC Radio 4, The Conversation, 28/ November/2014). The presence and activities of Saudi social media influencers such as Kadi on networked publics leads me to conceptualise these modes of communication as social media-led counterpublics organised by and providing admission to previously marginalised members of the Saudi collectivity [women]. Kadi's efforts to produce a YouTube show written and presented by

a woman and which discusses current affairs in Saudi Arabia from a woman's point view represents a huge advancement by providing a public space in which women can participate in political and cultural debates. Similarly, the chance for other female users of social media to comment, 'like' and 'share' on Kadi's online videos is a further channel through which women can participate in these Saudi 'counterpublics' to compensate for their confinement to the domestic/private sphere and lack of representation in the public sphere. However, it should be acknowledged that, in contrast to being taken seriously as commentators on current affairs, women are often pressured to draw upon discourses of beauty and consumerism to express this freedom and achieve this status within the counterpublics. This will be discussed below.

7.3 Fashionista's and the politics of Visibility

The second way in which the rise of the female micro-celebrity is impacting societal norms is by challenging and negotiating the politics of visibility for Saudi women. Being a social media micro-celebrity, particularly a fashionista, requires more than just sharing one's photograph. It commonly calls for an emphasis on physical beauty through highlighting body attributes, glamour, heavy makeup, and what conservative nationalists would consider 'revealing' clothes (see figures 7 and 8). None of these factors are consistent with the norms of veiling and modesty when it comes to women's attire in Saudi (Almunajjed, 1997; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Powell, 1982), as discussed in Chapter 2. To understand the magnitude of what are interpreted as audacious acts of self-representation in relation to Saudi norms it is necessary to assess them against the backdrop of traditional social norms. Take into account what participants in this study recounted: until very recently in Saudi Arabia, women posting photos of themselves, even wearing a hijab, was controversial. In focus group (5) Shikhah (28 years old) notes the change in the attitudes of young women regarding the ease with which they are now prepared to share their photos publicly compared to the early days of the internet:

"In the early days, who used to share their photo on social media accounts or have it as a profile picture?" she asks rhetorically, implying that the answer is (no one). She goes on saying: *"Now every girl does it and it's completely normal because of how exposed we are to girls doing it, it became normalised"*. (Shikhah, 28 years old, January 2016, focus group).

As discussed in the literature review (Chapter 3), a 2011 study of Saudi women's engagement with social media platforms by AL-Saggaf reported apprehension about even sharing/sending their photographs online with their female friends due to a constant fear of these photographs

falling into the wrongs hands. At that time, displaying a photograph as a profile picture was not even considered. However, participation on social media today is becoming increasingly visual (Miller et al, 2016) and sharing personal photographs of oneself has become a central part in presenting the self online to wider society (Marwick, 2015). As concluded from Shikhah's earlier response, women's attitudes towards visibility online are changing. They are less reluctant to represent themselves visually through the use of personal images. Among the women I interviewed, more than half share their photographs online and display them as profile pictures on social media platforms as they do not see it as an indecent or defamatory act as, in the words of one of my participants, "*There is nothing wrong with it*".

This attitude towards visibility and being seen unveiled is gradually being adopted offline as well. Ghadah Badawi, one of the young women I observe in this research, shared the below photograph on her Instagram of herself hiking in Saudi Arabia unveiled (Figure. 6).

Figure 6 : post from Ghadah's Instagram, September 2018.

Ghadah is not only sharing a photograph of herself unveiled, but she is actually hiking unveiled in Abha City in Saudi Arabia. Her ease towards visibility and being unveiled is practised both online (on her social media accounts) as well as offline, but this was not always the case. Ghadah

started using Instagram early 2015, and her 237 posts on the platform went through 3 different phases. The first phase was from starting the account in August 2015 up until March 2016. In this phase, Ghadah never shared a photograph of her self, and her posted photographs were limited to food, landscape and inspirational quotes. The second phase started in March 2016, when Ghadah shared the first photograph of her self albeit wearing a head scarf (veiled) attending a convention in Riyadh. She continued to share photographs of her self and her daily routine in Riyadh sporadically for the next couple of years, while always appearing veiled. However, from July 2018, Ghadah started sharing photographs of herself unveiled, thereby commencing the third phase, where she stopped wearing a head scarf completely both online and offline. Ghadah's use of Instagram throughout the years, documented the shift in her attitude towards veiling and visibility, both in her online and offline activity. Incidentally, this gradual shift in attitude and behaviour is noted in the accounts of all eight young women that I observed in this research. What is drawn from this is that attitudes are changing, and that this change in behaviour is not limited to online activity in and by itself, rather it is a change in the Saudi society as a whole not just on its virtual public sphere.

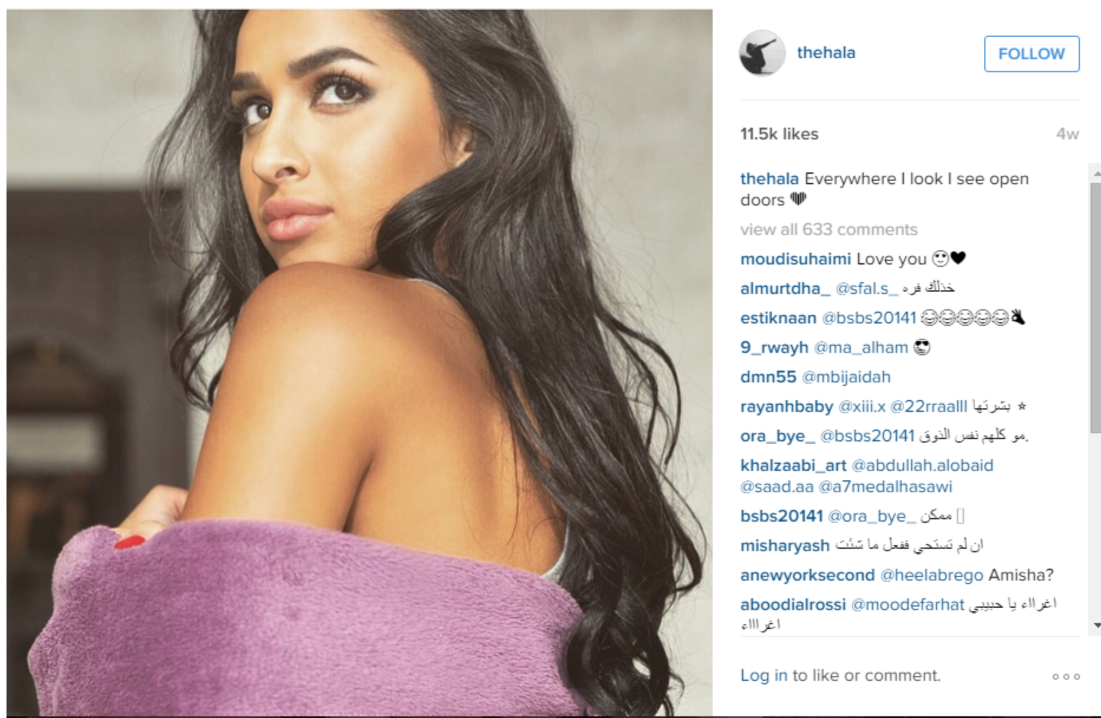


Figure 7: post from Hala's Instagram

Figure 8: post from Roz's Instagram

A critical reading of the types of images that are commonly shared by female Saudi social media influencers (see figures 7 and 8) reveals how the images are disputing the norm of veiling. Moreover, there is a strong emphasis on the beauty and body, with the young women being the centre of both photographs with large parts of their bodies exposed. In addition, the pressure that these women are under to draw on discourses of consumerist lifestyles can also be noted, (see below).

However, it is important not to overgeneralise this shift in attitudes of Saudi women on social media platforms. Costa (2016), who studied a conservative Islamic community, found that women in the Muslim collectivity of Mardin in Turkey were influenced by two contradictory ideals of femininity/identities: a liberal/westernised image much like the ones depicted above in figures 7 and 8, and a pious, modest conservative femininity. Women who defined their public selves through displays of piety refrained from sharing photos of themselves at all. Instead, their profile pictures were of their family's children, and photographs they shared on Instagram or Snapchat were either of beautiful natural landscapes or of food platters and feasts from social gatherings they had attended. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, I observed online in my netnographic research that some women avoided sharing photographs of themselves, even photographs in which they were wearing a Hijab. Some micro-celebrities - such as @afnan_albatel (6.2 million followers), @om_shahoooody (1 million followers), and @afnansn (1 million followers) - have

not once shared a photo of themselves on their accounts. In this way, these micro-celebrities are perpetuating traditional social norms around Saudi women's veiling and visibility, even though they are challenging societal norms in other ways (i.e. by projecting an image of a confident, outspoken, and financially independent female entrepreneur, as will be discussed later in this chapter).

While some women social media users refrain from sharing their photographs out of the religious belief that strange men (i.e. all men who are not immediate relatives: husband, father, uncle, brother, son) should never see them unveiled, others stop themselves from doing so due to fears of "*What would people say?*" (Noura, 33 years old, January 2016, focus group). The concept of 'reputation' is central within a shame-honour culture such as Saudi Arabia and is a way of policing women. The reputation of a woman in traditional shame-honour culture is tied to her practices and way of dressing, and accordingly so is the reputation/honour of her family, which is why many families tend to object to their daughters displaying their photographs unveiled for everyone to see. It does not matter whether the person views the act as wrong or right, what matters is if others think it is '*eyb*' (shameful) or not. Yet, many young Saudi social media influencers are rejecting this notion. Particularly in Roz's post (Figure.8), the caption *"Don't Worry about those who talk behind your back; they're behind you for a reason"* acknowledges the controversial nature of such images where young Saudi women appear unveiled, and that they would most likely stir a wave of gossip which might harm a young woman's reputation. Nevertheless, Roz conveys defiantly that she is not concerned by it, and she urges her followers to do the same: *"Don't worry"*. Her nonchalant stance in the photo further asserts her indifference to maintain a good reputation by retaining and showcasing the conservative ideals of femininity, in particular veiling.

The focus groups and one-to-one interviews indicate that young Saudi women who follow these social media influencers and fashionistas are quite susceptible to such contemporary radical messages. Raghad, a 20 year-old participant in the focus groups (whom I have mentioned earlier in this chapter), expressed her strong desire to be a fashionista. Even though Raghad comes from a conservative family, she states that she no longer has reservations about the idea of sharing her photographs publicly. However, her father's objection is still keeping her from doing so.

"I no longer think it's a big deal. Everyone is doing it now. It has become normal and accepted. I'm totally fine with having an open account with my photos that anyone can view. I'm only keeping it private for now because of my father". (Raghad, December 2015, focus group)

Raghad did not always hold this view. When she was younger, she thought that the idea of publicly sharing her photographs online was extreme. Yet, after being subjected online to many other young Saudi women who do it, the idea has become normalised and she no longer thinks it a 'big deal'.

When I asked her whether her father's reasons for forbidding her from exhibiting photos were religious, Raghad told me that he was not that religious: "*But you know our society. I mean it's difficult for him to face his friends and colleagues who see his daughter's photographs everywhere*". Raghad used the male pronoun to refer to the friends and colleagues of her father. This reveals that women are used as symbols of honour amongst the men in the collectivity, which necessitates controlling them and their sexuality (Chhacchi, 1991; Rozario, 1991). Raghad's father's objection to his daughter revealing herself (through her photograph) is not based on a religious or ideological belief that the behaviour is intrinsically immoral but rather on conformity to a social convention around the collectivity deems '*eyb'* (shameful). The social invisibility of women is central for male relatives to maintain their sense of pride/honour in the collectivity as it signifies their chastity, in contrast to women who are unveiled and visible to the gaze of men. Although it appears that many Saudi families have moved forward from this outlook (as evident by the young Saudi women on social media and in interviews who see nothing shameful to themselves and to their families in displaying unveiled photographs online), it appears that this outlook still persists and is still a reality for many young women. Even though Raghad herself is less inclined to conform to the traditional conservative ideals of femininity and honouring the collectivity on the expense of her own individual agency, needs and desires, she must still abide by her father's rules as the head of the household. This could possibly be attributed to her young age or financial dependency on him, but it is understood from her comment that she does not intend to confirm for much longer: "*I'm only keeping it private <u>for now</u>"*.

Assigning the task of policing and controlling a woman to a male guardian is what provokes comments such as the ones in figures 9 and 10 on one of Roz's '*risqué'* photographs, where

@remo5234 wonders "*I just have one question: where is your husband in all this?*" and @nx.6m comments "*The problem is that she says that her father approves what she does!*" The collectivity expects the men to control '*their women*' to protect their name/reputation. This is because the men in a shame-honour culture take it upon themselves to be the 'protector' of their honour, which might be jeopardised by the actions of their women, thereby tarnishing their reputation (Herr, 1969). Each member in the collectivity within a shame-honour culture has a role and their honour is dependent on carrying out the duties of this role, which in return would grant them acceptance in the wider community. While in western societies individualism is valued, in traditional shame-honour communities, obligation to the collectivity and conformity and policing the honour/shame dichotomy is of greater value, and is in many cases the reason behind one's actions. It is the men's duty to control their women and it is the women's duty to honour their name and maintain a good reputation by conforming what society expects and demands of them.

Figure 9: comment from @remo5234 on Roz Instagram post

Figure 10: comment from @nx.6m on Roz Instagram post

This highlights another societal norm for Saudi women: that of male guardian approval. The consent of the woman's male guardian, whether it is her father, brother, or husband, is essential for her to dare to break the norms of the community in Saudi Arabia. Another participant (Meshaal, 27 years old) reported that she could not post photos of herself "*Because my family wouldn't want me to"* (Meshaal, December 2015, focus group). While Tuqa (22 years old), in a different focus group, when asked about sharing photographs online stated: *"I have my own picture as a profile picture on all my social media accounts, and it's completely fine by me and my family"* (Tuqa, December 2015, focus group). Both responses highlight the constancy of this social norm in Saudi Arabia. Even Tuqa, who identifies herself as a 'liberated' woman, could not behave in a liberated way without her father's consent (i.e. she would not share her photograph publicly without her father's support). Women who wish to share their photographs unveiled publicly, but do not have their male guardian's approval of such behaviour online, resort to 'identity separation', as in the earlier example of 35 year-old Wafa, whereby they hide their family name and control their audience (see Chapter 6). Recently married Najd (25 years old), another young woman I talked to in one of the focus group, told me that one of the main factors that encouraged her to marry was that she wanted more freedom to do the things which her father did not consent to, such as going away on 'girl trips' and enjoy freedom of mobility without having to explain where she is, call home or ask for permission. Changing her male guardian from her father to her husband (as her husband is legitimately her legal male guardian once she is

married) was a way to escape the strict rules of one guardian to the more lenient rules of the other.

Even though it is debated heavily by feminist activists on Twitter, the Saudi norm of male guardianship is rarely openly contested or debated by apolitical users, including micro-celebrities. In fact, in many cases it is reinforced, albeit unintentionally. For example, fashionistas Hala and Darin try to confront the aggression and criticism they face from conservative nationalists who constantly criticise their attire and appearance in some of their photographs on Instagram by posting photographs with their male guardians to insinuate their approval of these actions on social media (see figures 11 and 12).

Figure 11: post from Hala's Instagram (Hala and her father)

Figure 12: post from Darin Instagram (Darin's parents)

In figures 11 and 12, Hala and Darin respectively are displaying photographs of their fathers with the main objective of showcasing that they enjoy good relationships with them. This is meant to counter accusations and assumptions by conservative nationalists that either the parents are unaware of their daughters' activity on social media, or that these women's relationships with their parents is strained because of their daughters' behaviour, or that these young women are estranged from their families and thus no one is there to control and discipline them. I encountered hundreds of comments referring to families, fathers or brothers by conservative nationalists on these young women's posts while observing the accounts, such as "*Her father must have disowned her*" and "*She has no family, she is disobedient and they have forsaken her*". Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) note how relationships are a main aspect of imagery on social media, demonstrating significant bonds between family and friends, which in turn communicate something about a user's 'image'. In this way, relationships are key building blocks in the presentation of the self online. Similarly, this thesis recognises the use of photographs by Saudi women to display family relations and national belonging in an effort to push back against attacks from conservative nationalist users over women's unconventional portrayals of femininity. The responses of the young women in this research, whether through focus groups or one-to-one interviews, suggests that parental/male guardian approval is enough for some people to stop criticising a woman's untraditional behaviour or appearance. However, perpetuating this specific value of male approval means that no deep shifts in the patterns of gender power relations within their community is occurring.

In the photograph shared by Roz (Figure.13), one comment attempts to defend Roz from other users' criticisms of her '*shameless behaviour*' (referring to her wearing a bikini on the beach), not by asserting her free will and individual agency to dress how she pleases, but by assuming that she has asked her family and got their approval of her choice of attire, and is therefore allowed to wear a bikini. The comment reads: *"Why are you interfering in Roz's business? She had asked her parents and they have approved. Why do you hate her? You are jealous."* Even if the commentator (@rx.lo) intends to support Roz's unconventional choice of dress, this response reinforces the norm of male guardian approval within Saudi culture. Thus, even if women's participation on social network sites is negotiating and altering some norms and values around

the politics of visibility, it can also perpetuate norms that naturalise gendered power relations. For a significant shift in gendered power relations, women need to have the freedom to behave as they please regardless of their male guardian's approval and a higher emphasis on their right to individual agency and autonomy needs to be made. The value of the legal guardian for women is indeed so strong that it is yet to be challenged by the arrival of the new Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman. While he made significant legislative changes in regards to women (from lifting the ban on driving to allowing them more access to public areas in the community) he is yet to accredit women full rights to travel and marry without a male guardian's approval. This highlights how these 'radical' behaviours online are merely scratching the surface of the reality of Saudi society, and that there is much more still to be done. Nonetheless, what is being observed from Saudi women on social media is no way negligible as it still impacts culture and norms in all the other ways we discuss in this analysis.

Figure 13: comment from @rx.lo on Roz's Instagram post

7.4 The Unconventional Modern Role of the Female Entrepreneur

Another way that female microcelebrities are disrupting traditional gender norms in the Saudi community is through their creation/development and popularisation of a new role for Saudi women: as business owners, or entrepreneurs. Considering the large audience that micro-celebrities have, they are thought of by many companies as social media influencers and thus as great marketing tools for products and consumer goods. Recent research shows that being famous

on social media and turning oneself into a brand has become a job in and by itself in western societies, and the Arab world and Saudi Arabia are quickly following suit (Carah and Shaul, 2016; Booth and Matic. 2011; Ferberg et al, 2011; Marwick, 2010; Duffy and Hund, 2015). More and more Saudi young women are attempting to be 'instafamous' through what Marwick (2013) dubs 'aspirational production'. Saudi Fashionistas and social media influencers are building their audience base through creating and branding a self that users aspire to by projecting a glamorous life of travel and luxury (see figures 14 and 15). This further supports the findings of Duffy and Hund (2015), who explored how fashionistas can successfully build an audience through depicting a 'glam life'.

As social media influencers, all the Saudi micro-celebrities observed in this study benefitted from advertising and brand collaborations, and many of them even went on to start their own business that corresponded with their branded selves, thereby turning fame on social media platforms into an entrepreneurial springboard for them to jumpstart their professional ventures. For example, Afnan Albatel (6.2 million followers) started her own makeup line, while @aqwa83 (550k) opened an interior design business. Similarly, influencers such Om.shahoooody and Sausan Alkadi benefit financially from product placement in their accounts and from being paid to attend fairs/festivals and events and covering their visits through their social media to promote these events. I address here how their role as social media influencers and their entrepreneurial endeavours have encouraged other women to pursue the modern identity of the independent businesswoman.

For Saudi women, the consumable image becomes more aspirational when it is tied to financial independence and business accomplishments, as this insinuates a further weakening of the norm of the male guardian and provider. In Figure 15, social media influencer Afnan Albatel posts a photograph of her wrist wearing six Cartier Love diamond bracelets, each costing over £7000. The caption reads: *"I want to wear your love, not the shackles of your love. I want to enter your vast universe, not your golden cage"*. A Cartier Love bracelet is customarily a gift from one partner to the other to express feelings of love and affection. The connotation of Afnan's post and caption is that she refuses to be caged or controlled by a man for financial security; instead, as a successful business woman, she will buy herself six bracelets with her own money. This display of self-accomplished wealth and success, and the connotations of independence that comes with it, is a form of aspirational commodity and branding which young Saudi women are very

susceptible to. A young woman I interviewed (Anoud, 29 years old) spoke enthusiastically about how much she admired Afnan for her utilisation of social media networks to accomplish a business women status, and enviously longed to do the same herself.

Figure 14: Hala in a Louis Viton scarf and a Dior handbag on Instagram

Figure 15: Afnan in Cartier bracelets and a Channel shopping bag

When examining the images of female Saudi social media influencers, the pressure that these women are under to draw on discourses of beauty and consumerist lifestyle in order to achieve popularity and fame should be noted. This has a significant implication when the

fashionista/micro-celebrity herself is veiled (wearing a Hijab). Examining the Instagram accounts of female Saudi micro-celebrities who share their photographs veiled, such as Sarah Alwadaani @sarah_wad3ani (1 million followers) and Darin Al Bayed @darin00013 (4 million followers), for instance, raises the issue of commodification of the veil and the commercialising of feminine Islamic identity. One such example is the photo of Sarah Alwadaani (see Figure 16), which she shared on Instagram:

Figure 16: Sarah in a veil and Abayah on Instagram

In Figure 16, Alwadaani is advertising the designer of her garment (who is incidentally also a young Saudi woman) and promoting her *Abayah* line. By doing so, she is expressing a feminine Muslim identity through commodities (Abaza 2001; Sandikci and Ger 2001; Salamandra and Katz 2008; Gökariksel 2007) yet it is not exactly a traditional conservative femininity as the veil in this instance is situated within a rhetoric of beauty and fashion. The implication of the popularity of veiled Saudi social media influencers like Sarah Alwadaani is that the veil becomes a brand or a label of a consolidated Saudi Muslim femininity. Scholar Minoo Moallem (2005) considers whether the veil in this case is an actual site of agency or merely an empty signifier and a way to insert the image of the Muslim woman into the world of fashion and consumer culture, especially if we take into account the endless products that are being marketed to veiled Saudi women by other Saudi women, from *Abayas*, modest clothing, scarves and veils such as the *Abayah* fashion line that Alwadaani is advertising in this post. Gökariksel and Secor (2009) note

how commercialising the veil and marketing it as a fashion item blurs its meaning as a religious disciplinary practice pivotal to the cultivation of piety (Mahmood 2011; Gökariksel 2009). Pushing this analysis even further, it can be argued here that the whole urban/modern ‘unconventional’ female Saudi identity is being commercialised and used by major global companies to market consumer products to the Saudi/Arabian Gulf market.

Figure 17: Roz promoting hair vitamins on Instagram

In Figure17, Roz is advertising the famous Sugerbearhair Vitamins to her 6.8 million Saudi followers in Arabic (using distinctly Saudi slang). Considering the strong buying power of the Arabian Gulf/Saudi market, it is not surprising for big companies to approach this market through the reach of female Saudi social media influencers. It does, however, raise a concern very similar to that about the veil on whether the identity of the modern, urban ‘unconventional’ young Saudi woman is being commercialised.

The benefits of social media platforms in creating job opportunities for Saudi women is not limited to influencers, micro-celibrities and fashionistas. Many regular Saudi women have started small businesses that are run entirely on social media platforms. As noted Chapter 2, traditionally, a Saudi woman’s primary role was that of homemaker and caregiver, and the

professional opportunities available for Saudi women were very limited and commonly determined by gender segregation (Almunajjed, 1997). As a result, women were confined to the gender-segregated schools and colleges to teach other women, or a few positions in the medical sector, mainly as gynaecologists (and even that was frowned upon as it required mixing with men and working late hours/night shifts). However, Saudi women's engagement with social media platforms has created new and unconventional opportunities for them to work while still avoiding integration with men. Internet-based businesses founded and run by women are flourishing, and entrepreneurship is becoming an aspiration for many (AlEsa, 2016). Consequently, a new identity of the financially independent business owner, or the 'entrepreneur', has emerged amongst Saudi women. My netnographic research uncovered hundreds of Instagram-shops and home-businesses owned by Saudi women operated via social media. In the comments section of a randomly chosen photograph in @Afnan Albatel's account on Instagram, over 130 business Instagram accounts owned by Saudi women were being promoted. Moreover, several posts on Afnan's account itself were promoting the accounts of female Saudi makeup artists, hairdressers, designers, bakers, chefs as well as other professionals, all running their business from home through a social media account on Instagram or Snapchat (known as a '*Matjar electrony*', or e-shops).

Aseel (a 30 year-old mother of triplets), who had just launched her e-business on Instagram a few months prior to our interview, told me that she started her catering/wedding planning business when she saw how many Saudi women were successfully promoting their home-based business on Instagram. She noted:

"*It was very encouraging to see women and mothers like myself suddenly running popular e-shops on social media! It made me think: well I can do that too! I made a couple of initial designs for chocolate trays and I advertised my business on @aqwa83's account and it rapidly boomed*". (Aseel, March, 2016, one-to-one interview)

She now has 18.6k followers on her business account on Instagram (@Guzel.sa). There is no physical store and the business is run entirely from her home and through the account to avoid face-to-face contact. In addition to opening up opportunities for women to work, the home business trend has also normalised several 'hands-on' professions such as makeup artist, hairdresser or cook (which all used to be considered '*eyb*' and beneath a woman from a middle-

class status) and glamorised them to the point that they have become desirable. On this particular point, Aseel says: "*Before, it was 'eyb' for a woman to sell home-cooked food or go from house to house as a make-up artist. People would say 'Does she not have anyone to support her financially? Does she need the money?*'". By saying 'before', Aseel is referring to a very recent history just before the trend of social media took off in Saudi Arabia, particularly the platform of Instagram in 2012. This significant change in the attitudes of Saudis towards women undertaking manual jobs is evidence of how social media can be used to negotiate values and norms in Saudi society.

Moreover, Aseel's experience sheds light on the central role that social media influencers/fashionistas are playing in supporting and promoting other Saudi women's start-up businesses. Indeed, the observed accounts of social media influencers in this research were full of paid ads and 'collabs' with local e-businesses by fellow Saudi women. Therefore, the rise of female social media influencers in Saudi is changing norms and values relating to paid employment/financial independence and labour in two ways: firstly, by inspiring women to take on the role of a working-woman and turning the female entrepreneur into an aspirational identity, and, secondly, by supporting and promoting e-businesses operated by Saudi women through featuring them on the account. These women are becoming both the embodiment of the modern Saudi entrepreneur as well as becoming the channel that successfully accelerates the popularity of this identity by promoting and building the career of more female Saudi entrepreneurs.

The next section analyses in detail the new ideals of femininity that are emerging online through the activities of women micro-celibrities, influencing many young Saudi women and encouraging them to adopt them.

7.5 The new ideals of femininity amongst Saudi Woman on Social Media Networks

From the findings and discussions above, we can observe how young women's practices on social media/networked publics is impacting the classical image/identity of the Saudi woman and updating it. They are hyper in terms of the accelerated speed of which they are moving away from classical and traditional Saudi femininity. We must acknowledge that Saudi women did not move through waves of organised feminism as women in the west did. Saudi women were somewhat 'frozen in time' due to the social relations of their society and the Sahwa-inspired marginalisation in the 80s and 90s, before being suddenly thrust into the hyper world of the

digital age. And this is the first reason why I refrain from using the term 'post-feminism' to refer to what is observed from Saudi women as the term post-feminism is used to refer to a particular moment within the western culture and the history of feminism.

Following from this (in fact, largely as a result of this), the second aspect of Saudi women's engagement on social media is that they are using the digital context as a progressive force to 'improve' their circumstances (empowerment, agency, etc.) rather than merely use the internet as a forum for body sexualisation/exposing (as western post-feminists tend to do and which is criticised by second-wave feminists). Instead, the emphasis in the posts of Saudi women which have been analysed above is on social/cultural representation through visibility rather than overt sexual display. Therefore, while Dobson, along with other feminist scholars (Phelan, 1993, Wolf, 1991; Mulvey, 1975/1989), argue that women's visibility in western cultures might not necessarily lead to self-actualisation and empowerment, I argue differently for the case with Saudi women. The level of visibility associated with expressions of unconventional modern identities online within the conservative, shame-honour culture of Saudi Arabia might actually translate into self-actualisation and empowerment amongst Saudi women. Yet I refrain from using the label of feminism to term define it. The reason is that these new emerging identities, modes of self-representation and public /popular representations of Saudi women are not feminist in the classical sense as they do not act politically in an explicit manner. In addition, women participants in my research retain several features of traditional femininity that contradicts with feminist ideologies. These values that underpin and express traditional feminine identities are exemplified by the following pastimes and practices: a constant projection of consumer goods and a fixation on beauty, fashion and make-up products. This raises a pertinent question: how liberating are these new feminine identities for Saudi women? At the heart of these feminine expressions and images of Saudi women is a project to market and sell consumer goods. These values and practices are replacing one set of cultural chains - overt legal tyranny of patriarchy – with another set of cultural chains - commercial imperatives. Nonetheless, because of their aspiration and search for agency within the site of popular culture it is suggested here that in their effort to claim their identities both online and offline, these young women are developing contemporary ideals of femininity.

These newly emerging ideals are conceptually similar to Dobson's 'post-feminism' in terms of their relationship to neo-liberalism but at the same time acutely specific to Saudi circumstances in terms of the values and customs that they are challenging. The below three

examples show how young Saudi women's activity and representation in the digital context can be understood as displays of empowerment, in its assertion of power and aspiration for agency.

As reviewed above (see Chapter 3), a number of scholars have observed a shift in representations of femininity today on networked publics in which qualities such as energy, vitality, confidence, independence, entrepreneurial spirit, along with public visibility and self-exposure are emphasised in the performances of femininity by women online (for example, Gill, 2007; Hopkins, 2002; Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, 2005; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Ringrose, 2013; Dobson, 2014, Dobson, 2015). Similarly, we see these attributes being emphasised in Saudi women's performances of self as well, with less regard being given to other people's opinions, criticism, or attempts at shaming. A central attribute that is observed in Saudi women's performance of identity on social media is confidence and a sense of defiance that contrasts with the traditional conformity of shame-honour cultures. In the photograph shared by Hala on Instagram (Figure 18) she writes: "*Birds born in a cage think flying is an illness*". The caption is most likely directed at the many women conservative nationalists who criticise her unconventional behaviour, excessive visibility and 'immodest' choices of clothing which they browse on her her Instagram and Snapchat activity. Hala appears unapologetic in her expression of self on social media and very self-assured showing confidence in what she is doing even though critics might mistake her 'freedom to fly' or to be who she wants as an 'illness' as they themselves (women who criticize her) are 'caged' in a shame-honour society/culture that is controlling them with rules, traditions, and dictating how they should look and act. The illustration of qualities such as defiance, confidence and reassurance that sharply contrast to the conformity of the classical Saudi femininity (whether it is conformity to customs and traditions, or conformity to the rules of the legal guardian, the family and the wider society) substantiates the recognition of the sentiments that are communicated in theses posts as new ideals that are emerging amongst Saudi women.

Figure 18: post from Hala's Instagram

This quality of confidence and self-assurance can also be linked to broader discourses of individualisation (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 2002) in which this young woman would discover and practice her own values and preferences which might not necessarily conform to the values of the collectivity/society. Similarly, Dobson (2015) observes in the practices of young women on social media that idealised postfeminist femininity elides with the broad neoliberal political discourses of individualisation and self-actualisation. Hala's analogy describes the strong sense of collectivism in Saudi society that she is part of (cage), and how some might perceive expressions of individualism by Saudi women as wrong or immoral (an illness) for their failure to align with the collectivity's values/customs. The accentuation of individualism in networked publics is recognised here, which in return is promoting the development of new ideals that are aligned with with the notion of individualism on social media networks amongst Saudi women as they move away from the collectivity and its shared values.

We can see the same thing in the example of Sausan in Figure. 19, in which the caption reads: "*My advice to you people, you never need anyone's approval and make sure to always put your happiness above anything else*".

Figure 19: post from Sausan's Instagram

Again, connotations of individual agency and confidence are provoked through Sausan's choice of words. Her advice to other people, which can also be understood as her own personal 'motto' in life, encourages the adoption of individualistic values, preferences, lifestyles, advocating active choice-making in relation to the self instead of conformity, just as she did with her bold choice of blue hair in the photograph.

However, as noted above, the assertion of individual agency and *"not needing anyone's approval*" is in tension with the perpetuation of male guardian approval in some of these micro-celebrities' posts. This tension can be explained by understanding the amount of pressure these young women are under from conservative nationalists to conform. In today's digital cultures, young Saudi women are expected to be on display, not only to make their bodies visible but also to speak, to be heard, to express their inner selves confidently, authentically, and transparently, and thus to make themselves known. Anita Harris (2004) has documented the cultural push for girls and young women to display, confess, speak up and generally participate in public discourse. But the kind of intense visibility and self-exposure of women is not only about self-actualisation, power and producing the self as valued and valuable. Rather, women make

themselves open to public judgment, shaming, critique and surveillance, especially in shame-honour societies, while the cultural promises that circulate around their visibility may or may not be realised. Thus, to fend off conservative nationalists' scrutiny of their behaviour is to actually conform to the strong value of male guardian approval in order to challenge other traditional restrictions on visibility and choice.

Despite these young women's push for freedom and nonconformity on social media in terms of traditions of veiling and visibility, it frames this femininity within a context of consumerism and an avid interest in fashion, style and makeup. Such as the case in the below example:

Figure 20: post from Sausan's Instagram

Sausan's caption reads: *"Do what they think you can't do"*. The tone is very energetic and defying. It encourages and positions women as active subjects, illustrating a specific 'can-do' feminine subjectivity that is commonly idealised in the postfeminist, late-modern neoliberal context (Harris, 2004), As young women are viewed as most adept at consumption and image-management, Harris (2004) argues that the image of a self-reliant, earnest, ambitious, materialistic and highly visible 'can do girl' has become the symbol of achievement and success in today's individualised and meritocratic neoliberal society. Nonetheless, even though the

performance of Sausan in this Instagram post exemplifies attributes that are new to Saudi feminine performances, such as vitality and independence, as well as the overt visibility in relation to the Saudi custom of veiling, it still retains some facets of traditional femininity. For example, Sausan herself is an attractive young woman posing in the photograph heavily made up and beautified. Gill (2007) documents the gender-typical attractiveness that is maintained in illustrations of postfeminist narratives. Additionally, the majority of Sausan's posts are focused on consumption, a traditional feminine attribute (McRobbie, 2009), such as the case in this specific photograph (Figure. 20) where Sausan links the details of where to buy her outfit from. As noted in the literature review (see Chapter 3), Dobson (2015) argues that post-feminism on digital cultures maintains some key aspects of traditional femininity that are tied to fashion and style and consumption (Zaslow, 2009). Similarly, in this research I note how Saudi women's effort to claim their identities online can sometimes do the same. This is also noted the posts of Hala and Afnan in figures 14 and 15, where there is a fixation on material items that relate to fashion and style (the Cartier bracelets, the Luis Vuitton scarf) in order to express wealth and financial independence. Thus, even though the aim of the posts is to communicate unconventional ideals of femininity that relates to qualities of meritocracy, entrepreneurship, financial success and independence, it is still depicting and encouraging traditional feminine attributes of consumption and interest in fashion and style.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter highlights young women's effort to claim identity online and offline in Saudi Arabia. This effort is brining about some depictions of femininity that are unconventional and new to Saudi culture, which contrasts with the traditional Saudi femininity that is promoted within a shame-honour culture. Unlike traditional ideals of femininity, these new and contemporary ideals endorse neoliberal qualities such as confidence, self-assurance, independence, defiance and a strong sense of individual agency. It gives less value to conformity and the shaming that might ensue from insubordination. However, some traditional values of femininity are still evident, such as portrayal and consumption of classical ideals of feminine beauty, and, more importantly, very often these unconventional portrayals of femininity are achieved by inadvertently endorsing the male guardian approval which is still prevalent in Saudi society.

Many of the young women's posts analysed in this study portray notions of confident self-belief and meritocracy; that success is achieved through ambition, determination and hard work. The identities observed on social networks amongst Saudi women and micro-celebrities are commonly affiliated with the rhetoric of individualisation and meritocratic self-making. This is in a way very similar to Dobson's (2015) observations on post-feminism in western and anglophone digital cultures. Dobson details how young women she observed on MySpace were keen to align themselves with post-feminist traits of being a 'can do girl' (Harris, 2004) "that is self-reliant, ambitious, materialistic and highly visible" in order to "construct a publicly valued post-feminist feminine self" (Dobson, 2015, p.111). However, this has many repercussions when it happens in a conservative Islamic community that is more aligned with patriarchal discourse and collectivism, as is the case in this study. It invites a backlash and a wave of judgment by other users, as we will see in the next chapter because it challenges classical ideals of femininity in Saudi culture.

The efforts of social media micro-celebrities in particular are challenging and impacting the values and norms of Saudi women significantly in more ways than one. This phenomenon is, first, negotiating women's move towards a prominent space within the public sphere. Secondly, it is normalising the debut/appearance and presence of women publicly (whether veiled or unveiled) and neutralising the shame that surrounded it before. Finally, it is giving way to new and modern gender roles for women, such as the female entrepreneur. Although long-established norms such as male guardian approval persist on these social networks, the impact that social media engagement is having on traditions and norms cannot be overlooked. Not all norms are being contested on networked publics; the actions of some micro-celebrities and some users alike are perpetuating some norms around male guardianship and gender power relations, for example. Accordingly, women who do not have the support of male figures in their lives were found in this research to either express forced identities or resort to 'identity separation' to protect their privacy when expressing a self that deviates from the collectivity's norms and values.

Yet, in general women micro-celebrities are acting as vanguards of change that young Saudi women are looking up to and emulating. The presence of vanguards of change and the diffusion of such paradigms of Saudi women through social media has led to young digital natives now becoming less reluctant to challenge traditions when claiming their identity. The activity observed in this chapter by Saudi women and micro-celebrities online is compensating for

women's seclusion within the domestic sphere and successfully bringing about a Saudi counterpublic on social media networks, in which women play a crucial and instrumental role. Additionally, these women are negotiating gender roles by challenging norms around the placement of women within the domestic and private sphere and around limiting their role to that of home-maker. They are also challenging norms of veiling. The high demand for visibility on social media is urging women to reassess their values around veiling and visibility. Finally, the neo-liberal emphasis of individual agency and autonomy on networked publics is gradually emancipating women from their conventional placement as representatives of the collectivity's honour and carriers of the family name.

The findings in this chapter answer the question regarding the values and norms that are being challenged on social media platforms in relation to women by mapping out and framing the emerging unconventional and contemporary ideals of femininity amongst Saudi women on digital networks. The next chapter will examine the cultural impact of this non-traditional femininity once it is linked to the Saudi nationality and detail the pushback from conservative nationalists against it.

Chapter Eight. Social Media and the National Public Image of Saudi Women

8.1 Introduction

This chapter will analyse the findings relating to the second question in this research, namely how social media usage in Saudi Arabia is contributing to changes in the public images of young Saudi women, emerging from the data collected through netnography and focus groups. The previous chapter analysed the ways in which the engagement of Saudi women with social media networks is impacting norms of veiling, working and their seclusion to the private sphere. These norms, as Chapter two described, are established as the defining codes of traditional gender identity in Saudi. Therefore, the alteration of these norms would indeed impact the public images of young Saudi women, moving them away from a collective ideology to an individualist identity that does not necessarily subscribe to these collective traditions and norms.

Upon the initial examination and analysis of the netnographic data that I have collected, themes of nationhood, religion, national identity and westernisation emerged in relation to Saudi women's expressions of unconventional ideals of femininity on social media networks. In this chapter, I will demonstrate the way in which conservative nationalists uphold women as symbolic border guards and markers of a unique and pious Saudi nation distinct from other nations. This will emphasise the centrality of the need to secure and police women's subscriptions to the collective ideology for the conservative nationalistic project and therefore explain the severe backlash from conservative nationalists in cases of resistance. I shall do this through analysing the attacks and aggression against young Saudi women from these conservative nationalists on social media upon depicting an identity that is divergent from the classical norms that have long been held as defining codes of the Saudi woman.

I will start by comparing conservative nationalists' reactions to two extreme images that are often conjured up on thinking of the Saudi woman today: the pious woman and the glamorous, cosmopolitan woman, as well as addressing the regulatory gaze that these conservative nationalists use to police women. I will then move on to detailing and categorising the types of digital aggressions that are manifesting as a result of this gaze. Throughout this analysis, I will be asserting how young Saudi women's engagement on social networks is allowing the exhibition

and the cultural production of new modern and fresh images of Saudi women, therefore successfully renegotiating gender identity within the Saudi nation and moving it away from collective ideologies to embrace individual agency and autonomy. Throughout this chapter of the analysis, I will be mainly drawing on the work of Al-Rasheed (2013) and Yuval-Davis (1997), as well as Anthony Smith (1986) on nationhood, Dobson (2015) and Harris (2004) on digital post-feminism, and Giddens (1991) on individualism.

8.2 Contradictory Images

Chapter 2 discussed the emergence of a specific type of nationalism in Saudi Arabia heavily marked by religion, specifically an orthodox, 'Wahhabi' interpretation of Islamic text. I detailed how this 'religious nationalism' (Al-Rasheed, 2013) became increasingly focused on women, the way they dress, their exclusion from the public sphere, segregation from men, and restrictions of certain civic rights such as driving, and the enforcement of male guardianship on travel, marriage, and obtaining a passport, amongst other things. The international pressure on the Saudi Arabian government after 9/11, combined with the cultural and economic influences of globalising capitalism, pushed the state towards a more lenient modern nationalistic narrative, even if it was not yet significantly freed from a religious conservative motif with the aim of painting the state as a champion of women (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Nonetheless, not all Saudis were willing to update the religious national identity that was popularised in the 1980s as part of the Sahwah movement and adopt this modern identity instead, especially with regard to women and their image and role within the nation. Conservative views on the vitality of the veil as an identity signifier (which is often misinterpreted by western feminists as an oppressive patriarchal practice) is well documented in Islamic feminist research (Badran, 2009; Shaikh, 2003; Syed, 2010; Shirazi, 2003). The tension between these conflicting views has resulted in the manifestation of two contradictory images of the Saudi woman and a disagreement amongst Saudi social media users over which one is to be considered a 'true' representation of Saudi women. As noted Chapter 3, the term 'true Saudi' that emerges from the netnographic data collected in this research is referenced by conservative nationalists in an effort to dismiss women who challenge or deviate from the conventional traditional Saudi femininity. Thus, the word 'true' is always placed in this analysis within quotation marks.

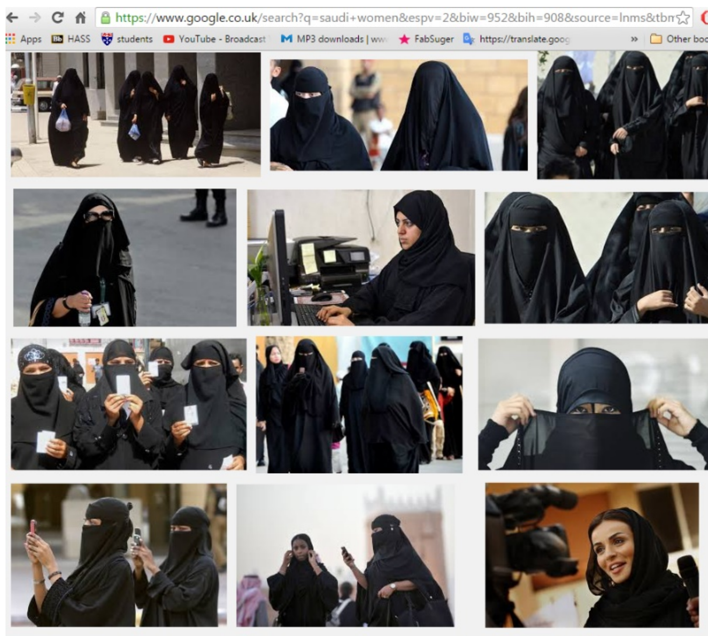


Figure 21: Google search results for 'Saudi Women'

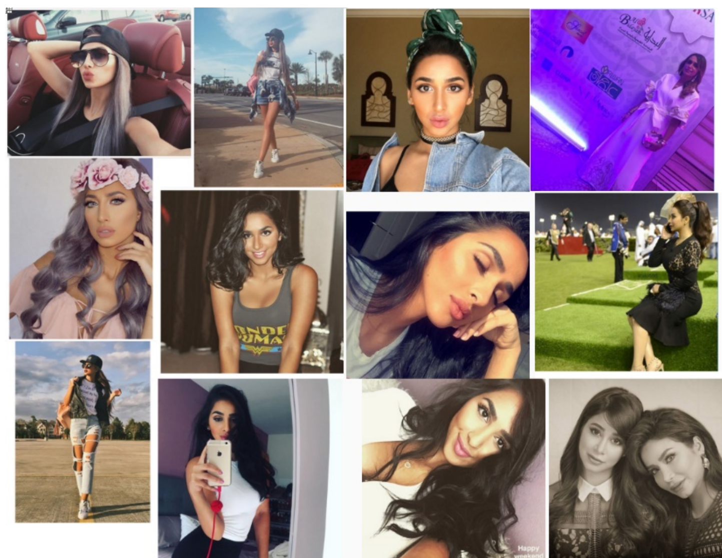


Figure 22: A collection of images from Saudi fashionistas' accounts on Instagram.

The juxtaposing of the two collections of photographs in figures 21 and 22 captures the contrasting images that are conjured up when referencing Saudi women. She is either the pious, conservative, heavily veiled housewife, segregated from men and dependent on the male guardian in her life (father, brother or husband), or she is the glamorous cosmopolitan entrepreneur who jet-sets around the globe, drives her own luxury car and manages her own

business with a social circle that includes both men and women. In this section, I shall examine the contradictory images of Saudi women, with a main focus on women's appearance and attire, as it is easy to assess and observe on social media networks in which personal photographs and images are a central component of identity expression. Of course, not all Saudi women fall within either one of these two polar images; rather, they are two polar ends on a scale. However, juxtaposing them in this way highlights the progress that Saudi women are making in renegotiating their gender identity within the Saudi nation, and traces the development of modern new ideals of femininity that are gradually being tied to their Saudi nationality.

8.2.1 The Pious Woman

Conservative nationalists deem this particular type of woman to be the 'true' Saudi female. Religious conservative Saudi women are not only accepted but are celebrated within the traditional Wahhabi nationalistic narrative. Veiling, as I have explained in Chapter 2, is a central signifier within this traditional classical female Saudi image. As a result, women who subscribe to this viewpoint refrain from sharing any personal photographs of themselves online. Amongst the Saudi female micro-celebrities that I observed, Khawater Al-khuwaiter @om_shahooooody (1 million followers on Instagram) embodies this traditional classical identity. By never sharing any

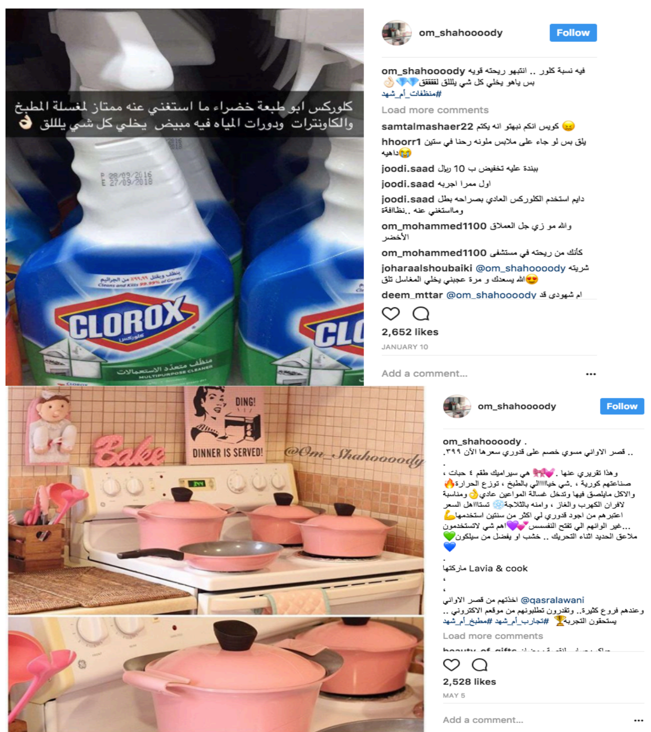


Figure 23: two posts from Khawater's Instagram

photos of herself and primarily focusing on her duties as a mother and a home-maker, Al-khuwaiter is an ideal representation of the Saudi women in the eyes of conservative nationalists.

In these randomly selected posts from Al-khwaiter's Instagram account (see figures 23 and 24), a fixation on cooking, cleaning, tiding up the household is evident. Over 70% of Al-khwaiter's posts concern her role as a mother and a housewife, where she shares recipes to cook with her followers and ideas to organise the fridge and the cabinets, and properly clean the house. Her posts always place her in the private domain of the house, and she often invokes religious notions in the captions. Take, for example this photograph of Al-khwaiter's living room, which she shared on Instagram at the end of the summer holidays and before the return back to schools (see Figure 24).

Figure 24: post from Khawater's Instagram

The caption reads: "The end of the longest vacation in the history of the Kingdom. We have witnessed two pillars of Islam falling within the same holiday (Ramadhan and Hajj) and two *eids* (Al-adh'ha and Al-fter). *Alhamdullelah* (Thank you Allah) for this blessing". She then ends with a prayer thanking God for blessing "*us*" (meaning her and her followers) with a holiday full of

joy and happiness and with no loss or agony. This religious motif is commonly invoked and highlighted in Al-khwaiter's posts and similarly in the posts of women who subscribe to a traditional classical feminine Saudi identity. A critical reading of this specific photograph shows that it embodies every aspect of the traditional conventional Saudi woman which conservative nationalists idealise and celebrate. It places Al-khwaiter in the private domain within her home, in a house that she cleans, cares for and maintains, in front of a feast that she has prepared for her husband and children, displaying a religious spiritual sentiment (despite the fact that such sentiment is not associated with going back to school), ands most importantly, concealing (veiling) a very important element: Al-khwaiter herself.

The conformity of Al-khwaiter to a religious conservative traditional Saudi female identity does not provoke any aggression from conservative nationalists despite her activity on the platform Instagram. I have examined nearly 300 different photographs posted by her on Instagram in search of a single attack in regard to her national affiliation, with no success. In comparison, it was easy to find critical, even aggressive comments by conservative nationalists on the accounts of Saudi fashionistas. Posts that highlight national affiliation are commonly an active space where such attacks on women reside, yet in the nationalistic posts of Al-khwaiter, there are none. This asserts Armstrong's (1982) argument on the role of cultural codes such as styles of dressing or behaviours in identifying individuals as members or non-members of the mythical nation, particularly when it comes to women, who are fixed as 'symbolic border guards' of the nation in nationalistic projects (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Mercer, 1994).

Figure 25: post about the national day on Khawater's Instagram

Figure 25 shows a photograph that Al-khwaiter shared on the national day of Saudi Arabia. She writes in the caption a little prayer to keep the Kingdom, the King and 'our soldiers' safe. All the comments under the post were positive. Not one comment criticised Al-khuwaiter with the usual "*You do not represent Saudi women*", or questioned her national affiliation, or accused her of being a disgrace to the Saudi nation. This is contrary to comments examined under similar national posts by women who are promoting non-traditional aspects of femininity in their effort to claim their identities online, which will be detailed later in this chapter. The domesticated and pious woman is fully accepted by religious nationalists as a reputable representation of Saudi women. She fits in neatly with the narrative of religious nationalism, which highlights piety and conservatism, and thus does not provoke any attacks from conservative nationalists because it does not threaten the unified identity of the imagined nation and she preserves the boundaries that differentiate 'us' from the 'others' (Yuval-Davis, 1997). In many cases, she is an active conservative nationalist herself, believing that female identities in Saudi should remain defined by a Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic texts that places them within the private domain, regulates their attire and movement, and restricts their civic rights. Examples of such vocal 'true' Saudi women will be presented within this chapter upon analysing the 'regulatory gaze'.

Dobson (2015) follows poststructuralist theorists in suggesting that we understand women's efforts in media production on digital networks not as reflective of a pre-existing 'reality' but as producing and constituting our sense of the real through repeated discourse and representation. She suggests that young women are "centrally caught up in power struggles as they interact with, via, and in postfeminist techno-social mediascapes to produce self-representations in the course of everyday life". Furthermore, Dobson (2015) (in line with feminist poststructuralist epistemology) argues that gendered identities and femininity are not inherent properties, but are rather constituted and produced together with performative and complex acts of self-presentation (Butler, 1990; Barad, 2003; Cover, 2012). Thus, in relation to Saudi women, unconventional social media self-representations should not be understood as inauthentic or unreal representations of a pre-existing conservative/traditional Saudi femininity, but rather as a production and constitution of a contemporary Saudi femininity that is produced performatively and discursively through symbolic, repetitive, and normative expression (Butler, 1990). Which brings us to the second type of Saudi femininity found on social media, the glamorous fashionista.

8.2.2 The Glamorous Cosmopolitan Woman

The image of the glamorous, cosmopolitan Saudi woman contrasts sharply with the aforementioned image of the traditional and conservative woman. Amongst the female micro-celebrities I observed, fashionistas in particular embody this acute image of an autonomous, independent Saudi woman (see Chapter 3). Thus, I shall draw my examples in this section from the Instagram accounts of two Saudi fashionistas: Roz (@model_roz) and Hala Abdullah (@therhala). In contrast to the conservative women, the women within this category do not subscribe to the Wahhabi conservative nationalists' traditional imagining of how women should appear and behave. They are often unveiled, liberal, have no reservations about mingling with men, and are interested in occupying the public rather than the private domain. Their presentations of such an image on social media and the association of it with being Saudi nationals prompts a backlash from conservative nationalists in the form of verbal attacks, as the following examples will illustrate.

Figure 26: comment from @hayon_141 on Roz post

In Figure 26, Roz appears unveiled in a short, revealing dress in the streets of Los Angeles posing on top of her car, which she drives herself. She is actively engaging in the process of taking a 'selfie', presumably to share on social media. She captions the image saying: *'Keep calm and take a selfie'*. The rise of a selfie culture has been well documented by scholars (Madden et al, 2013; Schwarz, 2010; Winston 2013; Twange and Campbell 2009; Lee, 2005), particularly their utilisation for representing an idealised self. Similar to Nicolescu (2016) observation on Italian women, I note here how Roz is 'staging' the perfect selfie to construct a branded-self that would be aspirational and appeal to her followers (Marwick, 2015). The identity that is being idealised here is that of a carefree young woman who is dressing and behaving in an unconventional, westernised manner, apparently not necessarily perturbed by the criticism she might inspire in a shame-honour culture that considers her choice of dress and mannerisms '*eyb'* (shameful).

More importantly here, in the mini-biography on Roz's Instagram account on which she shared this photo, she states that she is a 'Saudi Arabian model'. By labelling herself as Saudi Arabian, Roz is tying this image of a modern dynamic and somewhat liberal woman, who is untroubled by what people might say about her, to the Saudi nationality, thereby culturally producing and

idealising, whether deliberately or not, an alternate image/identity of the young Saudi woman. This result further supports the idea of women utilising social media for cultural production (Dobson, 2015), which feeds Senft's (2013) recognition of social media networks as counterpublics of cultural production for women in which they compensate for their exclusion from the process of cultural production in the public sphere. In this image, a Saudi woman is placed in a public setting (in the street), as opposed to being confined to the private domain. She is a dynamic active woman who drives her own car and enjoys autonomy of movement. And, more importantly, she does not abide by conservative dictates of modest dressing and does not hesitate to share her photograph publicly. This image is in stark contrast to that of Al-khwaiter's which was analysed above.

Once attached to the label of Saudi national, such images invariably provoke a sever reaction from conservative nationalists in the form of verbal attacks in the comment section. Under this same photograph by Roz, a female user (@hayon_141) comments: "*Sadly you have destroyed the Saudi reputation. Erase the words 'From Saudi Arabia' from your bio and look for a nationality that befits you and what you're wearing".* She adds in her next comment, while talking to other users in the comment section who are defending Roz's right to choose what she wears: *"Don't tell me that this is none of my concern. Since she wrote 'Saudi Arabia' in the bio then she is our concern*". The user @hayon_141 is a typical example of a conservative nationalist. Critical reading analysis of @hayon_141's comment indicates that women in secular and religious nationalistic ideologies, their actions and their choice of dress, are considered a representation of the entire nation's honour (Mercer, 1994). Roz's individual actions here are blamed for "*destroying*" the entire nation's "*reputation*". Such sentiments reveal the predominance of the *collective* over the *individual* for religious nationalists, which is being contested by the emphasised sense of independence, agency and autonomy in the lifestyle that Roz narrates through her posts (Giddens, 1991, p.81). Thus, Roz's engagement with social media platforms can be understood as part of a wider process of individualisation which some scholars argue is detradtionalising communities (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2002). The aggression of @hayon_141 towards Roz's unconventional lifestyle is further accentuated in her desire to strip Roz of her Saudi nationality when she demands that Roz "*remove the words 'from Saudi Arabia*" from her bio and "*look for another nationality that fits [her]*". The user @hayon_141 here is bluntly refusing to acknowledge Roz as a Saudi woman.

This type of attack is visible under almost every photograph of the 1500 photographs on Roz's Instagram account. And such aggression is especially vivid when the photograph portrays a slightly more provoking attire or behaviour. For example, in Figure 27, where a man at Coachella festival embraces Roz, the comments surge from an average of 3000 (the average number underneath a photo posted by Roz) to 11,500 comments. 20% of these comments are general words of admiration, while a staggering 80% are a wave of criticisms and an intense debate between two types of followers: conservative nationalists who are castigating Roz's behaviour and other Saudis who are defending her. User @Ftoom_abdulkareem excoriated Roz under this photograph saying:

"*I just want to know where are [her men] from her? They are [semi-men] those who let their daughters and sisters strip off their clothes under the name of freedom. This is not freedom; this is a disgrace to our whole Muslim society, to the whole nation of the Prophet Mohammed. Where is your fear of God? Where is your jealousy over your women?*" (@Ftoom_abdulkareem, comment in Instagram, April 2017)

Figure 27: Roz in Coachella embraced by a man (Instagram)

The rhetoric in @Ftoom_abdulkareem's comment is reflective of the main ideas in conservative nationalists imagining of the ideal Saudi woman; she should be monitored and controlled by the male figures in her life to ensure her conformity to a religiously pious identity that 'fears God'. Any deviation from this conservative identity is considered a shame on her whole family and especially a shame on the men who have failed to control her. More importantly here is that the user considers Roz (and by extension all Saudi women) to be direct markers and signifiers of an imagined religious Saudi nation - 'the nation of the Prophet Mohammed'. This is consistent with Madawi Al-Rasheed's (2013) arguments around the centrality of women in the conservative nationalistic project in Saudi Arabia and the use of them as 'symbolic border guards' of the nation and its culture (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Here, not only the norm of veiling is being contested but also the norm of gender segregation. Gender segregation, as explained in Chapter 2, is the reason veiling is such a central component in the religious national imagining of the ideal Saudi woman to begin with (Doumato 2009; Hamdan 2005; Le Renard 2008, 2014). Veiling is meant to 'shield' the pious woman from the eyes of men and minimise the potential of infatuation and illicit sexual relations that might result from it. This perhaps explains the significant rise in the number of aggressive comments under this specific photograph. Even though Roz challenges the norms of veiling in every photograph on her Instagram account, the image of a Saudi woman being touched by a man proved to be even more infuriating to Saudi conservative nationalists judging from the significant upsurge in the number of negative comments.

The implication of losing control over women is the loss of the nation's defining cultural signifier and consequently represents a transformation of the unique (and uniquely moral) national Saudi identity. Thus, I argue that the aggression that is observed on the accounts of unconventional Saudi women is an outcome of a 'regulatory gaze' performed by conservative nationalists to monitor, evaluate and seek to discipline Saudi women into a specific performance of identity that is consistent with a religious national narrative and an imagining of a pious nation (Benedict Anderson, 2006). The next section analyses examples of the regulatory gaze being applied on Saudi women while categorising the aggression that ensues from this gaze into three distinct categories, each representing a typical accusation or criticism of these unconventional women.

8.3 The Regulatory Gaze

As mentioned in Chapter 2, I develop this term against the backdrop of a doctrine that is used in media studies to analyse visual culture and how the audience views the people that are being featured (Said, 1978; Sartre, 1956; Derrida, 2008; Kaplan, 1997). However, I use this term to contribute to and advance the debate around the gaze through a feminist focus on gender within conservative communities and shame-honour cultures, specifically Saudi Arabia. The regulatory gaze of conservative nationalists on Saudi women's social media activity and digital expressions of identity is driving a backlash against unconventional depictions of femininity. Conservative nationalists' efforts to denounce these expressions of non-traditional identities and reject them as representations of Saudi women commonly fall within one of three archetypal attacks/accusations: undermining a woman's Saudi citizenship, using ethnic slurs to marginalise her status within the nation, and branding her as a victim of westernisation, all of which are meant to communicate that these women are not to be considered 'true' Saudi women. As noted in Chapter 2, the data collected netnographically shows an emergence of the word 'true' proceeding 'Saudi' when referring to women's nationality. Similar words such as 'real', 'authentic' or 'original' might be used instead; however, they are all used to communicate the same thing: a two-level categorisation of Saudi women that conservative nationalists on digital networks refer to in order to marginalise and dismiss modern identities that do not conform to the ideals of conventional, religiously pious femininity. In this section, I will analyse examples of each of the three archetypal accusations/attacks on women in order to confirm conservative nationalists positioning of women as symbolic border guards of culture. This will then frame my argument about how idealising non-traditional attributes of femininity online can be understood as a renegotiation of women's national image and what being a Saudi woman means today. This national image is no longer a singular unanimous form but rather several diverse, and sometimes contrasting, identities and images.

8.3.1 The Undermining of Women's Saudi Citizenship

The first common reaction from religious Saudi nationalists upon coming across a Saudi woman on social media who is expressing an identity that challenges the classical traditional feminine national identity is to doubt her nationality to begin with. Even if the woman claims to be Saudi, conservative nationalists hesitate to accept it; she is assumed to be non-Saudi until proven otherwise. This is especially the case if the woman in question is withholding the announcement of her last name or her tribe. This particular type of aggression is something that I have

documented on all the accounts of Saudi women I have observed in which the offline identity of the woman was ambiguous, either because of omitting the family name (as in the case of Hala) or because of using a pseudonym (as in the case of Roz). Conservative nationalists' acknowledgment of a woman as a member of the nation seems to be conditional on her compliance to the customs and norms of classic traditional Saudi femininity, as detailed in Chapter 2. Conservative nationalists' views are consistent with ethnosymbolism scholars' emphasis on the adherence to tradition and custom for the nation to endure (Armstrong, 1982), except that Saudi conservative nationalists expect the woman's compliance to this image to persist even beyond the physical boarders of the state itself. For example, in the comment section on this photograph (Figure 28) shared by Roz of tanning herself on a beach in Los Angeles, user (18_sm_18) comments: "*No way is she actually a Saudi. Even the filthiest family in Saudi wouldn't let their daughter appear this way*". Similarly, user (roOory5677) comments on the same photo with: "*I reckon she is Moroccan. All the so-called 'Saudi celebrities' turn out to be Moroccans in the end*".

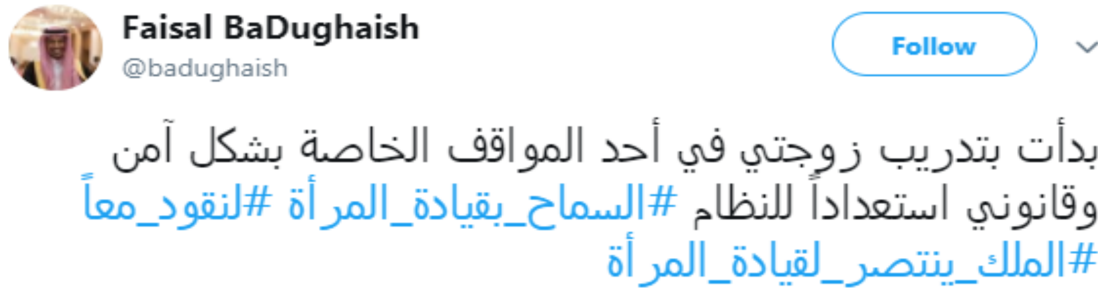
Figure 28: post by Roz on Instagram

The ambiguity of Roz's offline identity (since she is using a pseudonym) encourages this specific type of aggression. Until Roz proves her citizenship somehow, the primary reaction of conservative nationalists is to dismiss her claim to be a Saudi citizen and instead accuse her of being an imposter from a neighbouring Arab country who is just using the Saudi label as publicity stunt. This type of accusation has been repeatedly posted on both the accounts of Roz

and Hala. From my observations of Roz and Hala's Instagram accounts netnographically, I have found that conservative nationalists have alleged that these women are in fact Egyptian, Moroccan, Yemini, or Syrian on several different occasions. Dismissing these women as non-Saudi would certainly relieve conservative nationalists of the problem of associating this non-conservative image with Saudi feminine identity. Moreover, and within the same aforementioned comment by (@18_sm_18), we can detect conservative nationalists' imagining of the Saudi nation as a collectivity of pious conservative citizens in which '*no family would ever let their daughter appear this way'*. User @18_sm_18 certainly did not meet every family in Saudi Arabia, yet this does not stop him/her from assuming how all Saudi citizens would behave and how they would look. This proves that the nation itself is somewhat imagined by the national conservatives. It is therefore an idea that can be re-moulded, re-shaped and re-imagined through the use of imagery. Benedict Anderson (2006) argues that media images play a central role in the imagining of the nation and that they can perpetuate certain stereotypes. Similarly, and from a constructivist ontological and epistemological stance, I argue in this research that these non-conventional social media images of Saudi women can negotiate the imagined nation of Saudi and re-imagine the way women look and act within it. The repetition of these new modern images of women and associating them with the Saudi nationality can succeed in perpetuating new stereotypes, thereby successfully turning social media platforms into counterpublics where, as Fraser (1997) states, counter discourses are invented and circulated by subordinated social groups which in turn permit them to formulate and culturally produce oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (Fraser, 1997; Dobson, 2015; Senft, 2010).

One last thing to be drawn from this example is the predominance of customs and traditions within the shame-honour culture of Saudi Arabia over the law. Even though Roz in this photograph is beyond the borders of the Saudi state where women are controlled by law to dress modestly (since Roz here is in the USA), @18_sm_18 still asserts that a 'true' Saudi family *'would never let their daughters appear this way'*, thereby emphasising the role of women as 'cultural carriers' within religious national projects (Yuval-Davis, 1997) and underlining the family's duty to control women and their movement if the state is not in the position to do so. The notion of tradition trumping law for conservative nationalists is also evident in their reaction to a selfie by Faisal BaDughaish, which he shared on Twitter (see Figure 29). Just a few days after the ban on women's driving was lifted, BaDughaish posted this selfie of himself next to his

wife in the driving seat of their car, saying: *"I started training my wife to drive in a private car park in a safe and legal way, preparing for the implementation of the new law"*.



9:09 AM - 30 Sep 2017

8,318 Retweets **12,415** Likes

3.1K 8.3K 12K

Figure 29: post by Fasial Badughaish on Twitter

The tweet went viral, getting retweeted over 8,000 times, and generating over 3,000 comments and even being reported on several national and international news outlets (BBC News, 2018). The comment section under the tweet was filled with many encouraging and supporting

responses that celebrated BaDughaish and his wife. However, despite the fact that women's driving was fully legal at that point, conservative nationalists were quick to voice their resentment of BaDughaish's behaviour, specifically his failure to "*handle*" and "*control*" his wife, who is not only driving the car, but also not covering her face. Despite both acts (not covering the face and driving the car) being legal, conservative nationalists were triggered by the public display of them in the photograph alongside the Saudi national flag hanging from the windshield mirror. What is interesting is that all the verbal attacks were directed towards Mr. BaDughaish himself, not his wife, even though technically she is the one disturbing tradition. This further indicates conservative nationalists' belief that men should be in control of 'their' women. It can be argued though that Mr. BaDughaish himself is also breaking a norm and a tradition in society; he is endorsing women's autonomy, visibility, freedom of mobility and occupancy of the public sphere. In this case, he is also threatening the distinctive conservative identity of Saudi Arabia.

What is drawn from this is that conservative nationalists expect Saudi women to maintain a national identity that is defined by the cultural codes of veiling, modest dressing, and sexual segregation even beyond the limits of the state and regardless of state legislation. Furthermore, women's adherence to this identity (inside and outside the geographical borders of the nation) is central for them to be regarded 'true' members of the nation. In addition, it undermines Al-Rasheed (2013) argument, in that it is not only the state and its legislation that are to be blamed for Saudi women's confinement to these cultural codes, but rather a complex socio-cultural architecture of political, legal and historical processes. While Al-Rasheed's argument has some truth in it (in that some laws in Saudi Arabia are filling in for the patriarchy of the family, such as male guardianship, veiling laws in public places and the - former - ban on women driving), it is still evident that Saudi women do not escape these confinements even when they escape the laws that facilitate them, either when abroad or online or *even when the law itself changes*. The pressure of a shame-honour culture persists and the 'regulatory gaze' is employed by conservative nationalists to determine who is a 'true' Saudi with no regard to what is 'legal' or not, but to what is *eyb* (shameful) or not.

However, the accusations of conservative nationalists are challenged by the women themselves through their posts on social media. In an effort to prove they are in fact Saudi, these women would display signifiers of their citizenship in their posts in a very similar way to what I have

analysed in Chapter 6 when it comes to displaying family relations. Commonly in these attempts, the signifier of citizenship would be the Saudi passport. Take for example this photograph by Hala Abdullah, who is commonly accused by conservative nationalists of being a Moroccan impersonating a young Saudi woman (see Figure 30. In this photograph, she is casually displaying her Saudi passport in the background of the photograph in a calculated move to silence the accusations. The constant association between non-traditional identities and signifiers of Saudi citizenship is culturally producing a new ideal of Saudi femininity and a new national image of Saudi women. This image is being created and disseminated on social media platforms, reaffirming women's role as cultural producers on social networks (Senft, 2010) and thereby functionally turning these platforms into counterpublics where alternate interpretations of their identities and public national image is being generated and circulated (Fraser, 1997).

Figure 30: Hala's passport on Instagram and a comment by @thebeauty8 on it

This, however, does not silence the attacks by conservative nationalists. Once citizenship is proven through a signifier of this nature, conservative nationalists turn to another type of accusation/attacks: ethnic slurs.

8.3.2 Ethnic Slurs

If citizenship were not a matter of dispute (because the woman in question is displaying her tribal or family name publicly, for example), then the aggression might take the form of ethnic slurs. The use of ethnic slurs is meant to dismiss the woman's validity as a 'true' representation of Saudi women based on her ethnic roots under the assumption that only a direct lineage to specific tribes is to be considered a 'true' national. The idea of pure blood and lineage has often been associated with nationhood. Anthony Smith (1986) focuses on the inherent connection between the nation and its ethnic origins, linking the nation to notions of kinship and extensions of family. This approach to understanding nationhood acknowledges the centrality of ethnic homogeneity to the nation and the role that the 'myth symbol context' plays in the durability of the collectivity's imagined ethnic origin (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Smith, 1995). I observe through my netnographic data that the myth of common origin or shared blood is palpable in the use of slurs by conservative nationalists in Saudi Arabia. Words such as '*asil'* (origin) or '*mojansah'* ('naturalised citizen') often accompany comments that contain racial slurs, further cementing the idea that not everyone who holds a Saudi passport is to be regarded a 'true' Saudi in the eyes of conservative nationalists.

For example, under a YouTube video posted by Htoon Kadi, in which she discussed unconventional views on gender roles within the Saudi community, a male user proceeded to call her 'sea vomit' in the comment section. Kadi was advocating for a lift on the ban on women driving, which evidently did not agree with the views of the conservative nationalist user who attacked her. The slur ('sea vomit'), which is used for Saudis from the western region by the Red Sea, is implying that the person is an immigrant that came overseas from Africa or East Asia and was later naturalised as a Saudi citizen. The abuser is insinuating that this makes Kadi a non-'real' Saudi compared to a woman who was born with original Saudi roots, and therefore Kadi's views on lifting the driving ban are not only irrelevant but also non-representational of what 'true' Saudi women want. Similar ethnic slurs are used in accordance with other women who are being attacked, such as Shia if she is from the Eastern Region, Yemeni or Yazidi if she is from the south, or Levantine if she is from the north. In any case, the slur is meant to demote the woman in question to second-class membership within the collectivity, the intention being to marginalise her, her views, or the way she looks in relation to the imagined pious nation.

Figure 31: Hala driving a car in Daubi (Instagram)

In the selfie image in Figure 31, Hala is driving a car unveiled in Dubai. Here again, the woman in question (Hala) is not breaking any laws; she is beyond the borders of Saudi Arabia practicing perfectly legal acts in the UAE, where neither driving nor unveiling in public are illegal. Nonetheless, Hala's identification of herself as a Saudi woman and the subsequent association of the Saudi label with such acts provokes a strong reaction from conservative nationalists. A user (aabbbbaabbl) commented on Hala's photo by saying: *"God help us, anyone who is anyone nowadays claims to be Saudi. It is impossible that her (roots) are Saudi 100%. But this is the price we pay for having such a consumed [sic] nationality"*. We witness here again the reference to origins and blood and the myth of a certain lineage that is somehow 'more Saudi' than other Saudi nationals. Similarly, on the previously mentioned selfie of BaDughaish (see Figure 29), a user commented: *"You should have stayed in your own country Hadhramaut, why come here and change our traditions!"* Despite the fact the Mr. BaDughaish and his wife are Saudi citizens, the user is ethnically slurring them by referring to their origins from Hadhramaut in Yemen (identifiable from their surname) in an effort to belittle their contribution to the public discourse/debate on the issue of women driving. This particular outlook, in which the opinions and representations of some groups in society are marginalised whether because of their class, ethnic background or gender, is in a way very reminiscent of Habermas's (1991) notion of a public sphere that is exclusive to bourgeoisie men, and which was criticised heavily by largely feminist scholars (see Chapter 2).

As Fraser (1992) argued, marginalised groups such as women, lower classes, or certain ethnicities can compensate their exclusion by forming counterpublics that challenge the exclusion from the public sphere. Here, the user who made this racial comment is imagining an exclusive public sphere where only 'original' Saudis, with noble bloodlines, and preferably only men, are allowed to weigh in on matters of public interest such as the lift on the driving ban. Yet, by considering the reception and the wide reaction to these digital posts, it can be argued that social media platforms can be utilised by people from marginalised groups, such as BaDughaish and Hala, to create a counterpublic on which their contribution to public debate and cultural production is influential.

The next section analyses the third type of digital attack on unconventional Saudi women: victims of westernisation.

8.3.3 Victims of Westernization

The netnographically collected data in this research shows a continuous attempt by conservative nationalists to invoke the threat of westernisation to the Saudi Islamic nation and its unique identity as they denounce expressions of non-traditional identities on social media networks. In this category of accusation, conservative nationalists' placement of Saudi women as symbolic border guards is even more conspicuous than it is in the aforementioned types (see 8.2.1 and 8.3.2). Women are regarded by conservative nationalists as the signifier that distinguishes the nation from other nations and for this reason their appearance, behaviour and attitudes must reflect a collective national identity over an individualistic identity (Al-Rasheed, 2013).

The aftermath of the following Tweet by Malak Al-shehri is a clear example of the above. In December 2016, Malak Al-shehri tweeted that she will go out of her house in the city of Riyadh without wearing an Abaya, and posted a photograph of herself doing so (see Figure 32). The Tweet reads: *"Today I decided to go out in the morning with no Abaya. I will wear my skirt with an elegant coat. I will start by having breakfast at McDonald's, then coffee and cigarettes with a friend [male friend]. Then I will go to buy glasses".* The tweet is infused with several innuendos of an identity that is far from the traditional pious gender identity that fits in with the religious nationalists' narrative. It depicts a young woman as an active subject who is 'deciding' for herself what she wants to do, despite society's disapproval of her unveiling, smocking or mingling with

men. She is confident, highly visible, independent and has male friends. In the photograph itself, Al-shehri appears in the streets of Riyadh without *Abaya* or veil. This image cannot be compared to any of the other images I have analysed in this study as it is the only one where the act of unveiling is actually taking place in the public domain within the Saudi state itself, as opposed to the other images (which were either in private domains within Saudi Arabia or in a public domain abroad). Al-shehri's attire in the photograph is not extremely revealing; in fact, in many ways what she is wearing looks a lot like a traditional *Abaya* in the sense that it is black and relatively modest. Yet it is her defiance to a national symbol - the *Abaya* - that enrages conservative nationalists, especially that her mocking contempt for tradition is taking place inside the geographical borders of the state itself: in the capital city and seat of government, Riyadh.

Figure 32: Malak Alshehri post on Twitter (photo + tweet)

The Saudi collectivity on Twitter immediately picked the news up and a hashtag was created in which conservative nationalists denounced Malak's action, with some even going as far as to demand her arrest, while other Saudis in the hashtag defended her. Malak was indeed arrested but she was quickly released as no actual crime was committed. However, the hashtag was flooded with tweets warning of foreign forces that are orchestrating such 'seditionary' incidents. A Saudi woman tweeted: "*They are jealous of the Saudi woman and they want to strip her just like they stripped the women of the world. Never! We do not want liberation of that kind like this sheep here*". The user is referring to Malak as a 'sheep', since she is presumably being manipulated by western media to express a 'liberated' identity with the aim of westernising Saudi women and

compromising the Islamic Saudi identity. Usually, in this type of allegation by conservative nationalists, the reference to the 'west' is very general and ambiguous with no specification of a particular country or institution that is doing the 'westernising'. Similarly, in this comment, 'they' refers to the west in a general, non-specified manner, while the reference to Saudi women is singular and defined in 'the Saudi woman'. The use of a singular defined noun to refer to all Saudi women as a sole entity highlights the conservative nationalists' favouring of collectivism over individualism in the sense that the many millions of Saudi women are assumed to be the same and presumed to share the same qualities, attitude, beliefs, and most certainly the same appearance. Yet the identity that Al-shehri is displaying is quite distinct and liberal in that it does not conform to the demands of collective identity and therefore it is disrupting the imagining of a homogenous nation with a one-size-fits-all gender identity.

Such a sense of individualism as invoked in this photograph of Al-shehri could be very threatening to the customs and traditions of a society (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2002), and so to preserve a classic traditional/conservative national identity collectivism must be endorsed in the religious national narrative. In addition, the critical comment highlights conservative nationalists' exploitation of women as symbolic border guards that define the nation and distinguish it from the rest of 'the world'. This finding is consistent with that of Al-Rasheed, who found that women in Saudi "have become boundary markers that visibly and structurally distinguishes the pious nation from other ungodly polities" (2013, p.16). Therefore, it is vital that their dress, behaviour, segregation, body and sexuality are controlled to ensure their purity.

The netnographic data that was collected from Al-shehri's hashtag also indicated that the politicisation of women's issues and association of modernity with westernisation is interrupting a much-needed update to the status of women in Saudi society as well as hampering the reconstruction of their image. Another user tweeted in the hashtag, saying: "*If she was a normal girl she wouldn't be released, but these so-called activists have foreign embassies behind them and international organisations to get them out without any consequences to their actions*". Again, the user is implying the interference of foreign (western) countries in the case of Al-shehri. It is important though to note that Malak Al-shehri is not a political activist, as the user claimed. Nonetheless, conservative nationalists on Twitter did not hesitate to politicise her act. She was an obscure young Saudi woman until the day she went out without an *Abaya*.

Such references to a foreign conspiracy or an orchestrated attack on the Islamic Saudi identity through the women of the nation casts a negative shadow over processes of emancipation. For example, under the photograph in Figure 30, which shows Hala's Saudi passport, a user attacked the news channel [Al-Arabia] for hosting Hala on a talk-show in which she was introduced as a young Saudi fashionista, and proclaimed that Al-Arabia channel was only hosting Hala to '*incite Saudi girls to rebel and liberate, and this is what America wants*". Indeed, Saudi women's liberation from the strict cultural codes that currently define their national identity has come to signify a broader inclination towards social change and modernity (Lawrence, 1994; Pfister & Hacısoftaoğlu, 2016) which many feminist Islamic scholars have been critical of, such as Abu-Lughod (1998), Miriam Cooke (2001), Saba Mahmoos (2005) and Haideh Moghissi (1999) for example. Kandiyoti (1991) and Chatterjee (1990) observe the role that women played in many decolonisation projects, in which they were symbols of a move towards modernisation. This, however, raises concern about whether, and if so the extent to which, modernity can be associated with westernisation (Thong, 2016; Beck et al., 2003; Jung & SpringerLink, 2017). The equation, which often occurs between the two notions, has led many conservative nationalists in Saudi to resist the process of modernisation, believing that women are being used as tools of westernising (under the guise of 'modernising') their community to weaken the distinct unique identity of the entire Saudi nation (Al-Rasheed, 2013).

Additionally, the way these incidents concerning women in Saudi Arabia are being reported by western media does not really help with anxieties over about attempt by foreign governments to undermine the national Islamic identity of Saudi Arabia. A title in the British newspaper the Independent, which reported on the incident of Al-shehri, read: "*When a Saudi woman daring not to wear a hijab leads to calls for her beheading, maybe it's time the UK paid attention*" (Ahmed, 2016). The article soon turns political in the second paragraph, discussing Saudi's war on Yemen, instead of maintaining its focus on the incident itself. Al-shehri's name is not mentioned once in the article; it is only referenced under her photograph, and even there, her name is misspelled (Malaka) instead of (Malak), with no surname. All of this made the reader (howmarvelous) in Figure 33 wonder about the real motives behind the article: is it really about Al-shehri, or is Al-shehri's story being used to foreign interference in the kingdom's internal affaires in the name of human rights. The article's tone, and its misleading information around the likelihood of Al-shehri being 'beheaded', offended some readers in the comment section (see Figure 33).

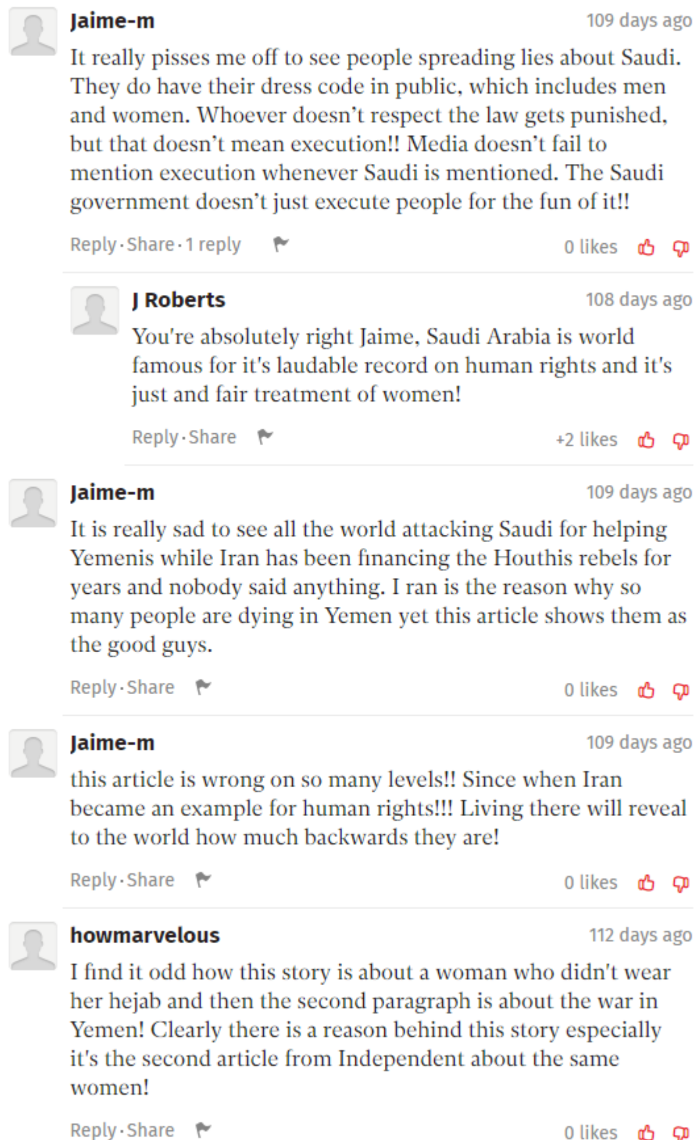


Figure 33: the comment section on a UK article about Alshehri

Four comments out of five were not about Al-shehri at all, but rather about the foreign and internal policies of Saudi Arabia, which accentuates how women in Saudi are being used as political pawns both by conservative nationalists and the western media alike. The news article reproduces what Edward Said termed an 'orientalist gaze' (Said, 2003) driven by relations of power between colonising counties and the colonised, in which the west is presumed to be superior to the barbaric orient. Reporting of this nature is what incites conservative nationalists and further feeds their obsession with maintaining women as symbolic border guards and markers of the nation, as they find the western media's constant interest and coverage of Saudi women's news insidious or suspicious as it might be used as a justification for interfering in Saudi's

internal affairs or tampering with the distinct Saudi culture. When social media influencer Khalid Alwabil @kwabil shared on Twitter that the story of Al-sheheri is being reported in several western publications, a number of his followers were outraged and sceptical of the publications' motives (see figures 34 and 35). In Figure 34, @mansorbinm writes in reply to @kwabil: "*These are the ones that work abroad* [meaning the journalists] *and want to ruin the reputation of Saudi Arabia. They are liberals and seculars, and the majority of them are women who live abroad*". Similarly, @mghazzawi replies to Alwabil's tweet in Figure 35, saying: "*This is the true meaning of fabrication and propaganda. Saudi women now seem to be like the sauce for the western news*".

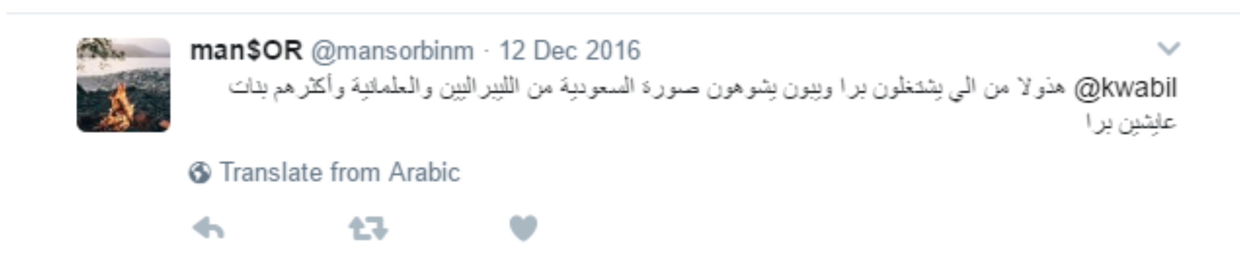


Figure. 34 reply from @mansor on Alwabil's tweet (Twitter)

Figure. 35: reply from @maghazzawi on Alwabil's tweet (Twitter)

The story of Al-shehri itself, how it was reported and how it was received and debated by readers is an example of how women in Saudi Arabia are being turned into political nationalistic pawns. Yuval Davis (1997) shows how women in nationalist projects that resist westernisation or colonisation are constructed in the role of 'carriers of tradition' rather than being seen as symbols of change (p.61). Symbolic acts that might mark women's emancipation, such as driving or unveiling, are seized on and resisted by fundamentalist nationalists as attempts to westernise the community and demolish the uniqueness of the Saudi identity. Conversely, they see in women's honouring of these customs "the safeguard of the national cultural essence" (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p.62). And so when a woman challenges the culture and customs of Saudi Arabia, the critics

proceed to question the ethnicity, excluding her as an ‘other’/‘not a real Saudi’, an agent or a traitor to her country, or at the very least a naive woman who is falling victim to western media’s efforts to ‘corrupt’ her. Yuvan-Davis notes that when fundamentalist nationalists mark national affiliation with the adherence to certain practices and customs, they are functioning as a mirror image to the ‘colonial gaze’ which focuses on these practises to establish ‘otherness’ (Yuvan-Davis, 1997; Chhachhi, 1991; Maini, 1989).

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed two polar images of Saudi women that can be found online today: the pious woman and the glamorous cosmopolitan woman. I have also shown how the depiction of a pious conservative gender identity is central to the conservative nationalist project. Therefore, the findings show that a particular type of gaze, which I term the ‘regulatory gaze’, is used by conservative nationalists in Saudi Arabia to assess and evaluate Saudi women’s performance of gender identity, and a deviation from the pious identity is reprimanded, criticised and attacked in various ways. The analysis of these attacks indicates conservative nationalists continuous positioning of Saudi women as, firstly, symbolic border guards and markers of the nation and representatives of its honour and piety (which accordingly distinguishes the pious nation from other, ‘ungodly’ nations), and, secondly, as political pawns in the conflict between a fundamentalist religious national group and the liberal west. For this reason, conservative nationalists find it necessary to maintain a national gender identity that is heavily marked with religious ideals of veiling, gender segregation, and confinement within the private sphere.

Despite this, young women on social media networks persist in depicting a modern and contemporary identity that is very different from the imagining of religious nationals of an ideal or ‘true’ Saudi woman. The argument that has been made in this chapter is that these young women’s efforts are renegotiating and restructuring what it means to be a Saudi woman today, shifting female identity from being ingrained in a collective ideology to expressions of femininity that are defined by the neo-liberal characteristics of individual agency and autonomy. In this way, social media platforms are successfully turned into counterpublics in which women can culturally produce a fresh public national image and contribute to the public debates that are reshaping the culture of contemporary Saudi Arabia.

While previous studies (reviewed in Chapter 3) on Saudi community and online engagement found that women online are still heavily tied to familial and national reputation (Saggaf, 2004; Hayat, 2014; Guta and Karolak, 2015), I find that Saudi women are actually contesting this notion and a focus on individual agency is emerging as a result of activity on social media networks that are in many ways 'modern communities'. Kazys Varnelis (2008) points out the many similarities between the network digital culture that we find on social media networks and the social structures that are found in the culture of late modernity. Similarly, Chapter 2 reviewed a number of scholars such as Giddens (1991), Bauman (2000), and Beck (2002) who argue for a link between modernity and the detraditionalisation of societies, mainly posited on the belief that individualism is one of modernity's defining characteristics and main driving forces.

Similarly, and despite the noted aggression shown by conservative nationalists, I document that young women's engagement on social media networks can be understood as an expression of individualism through which they are reflexively approaching self-identity, as opposed to accepting a pre-defined national – collectivist – identity they inherit from past generations. This suggests that social media networks are facilitating a re-negotiation of the traditional classical ideal of Saudi femininity and promoting alternate identities. The netnographic data indicates that many Saudis are indeed embracing and acknowledging women's right to think and behave independently from the collectivity and gradually free themselves from the burden of representing the family's (and by extension the nation's) honour and acknowledge instead that the only people they represent is themselves. As a Saudi male user on Instagram said in reply to claims that a certain fashionista did not represent Saudi society: "*No one is representing anyone else but him/herself. Let everyone live the life they want. We don't all have to be copies of each other*".

Indeed, participants in the focus groups and the interviews reported being very optimistic that the participation of women on social media networks is bringing about a progressive change to the notion of the 'true' Saudi woman and her public national image. A recurring theme in the focus groups interviews was a sense amongst participants that laws could control (and have controlled in the past) the collective sentiment towards traditional practices that has long been defining national attributes of the nation, specifically in relation to women. This trend of law leading change in culture is reflected in Annemarie van Geel's study on Saudi women's occupancy of public spaces (2016), in which she reflects on how law is leading the way for the formation of mixed-gender spaces in certain universities (such as King Abdallah University for Science and

Technology) and in public fora (such as *the shura*, the King' Consultative Council). However, this study appeared before the enactment of more transformational laws, such as opening stadiums to women for the first time, or opening cinemas and opera houses and arranging mixed-gender public events through the General Authority of Entertainment which was established in May 2016. Despite resistance on social media from conservative nationalists, participants in this study believe that it is only a matter of time before society adapts to this new culture. They equate what society is going through right now in terms of modernising the image of the Saudi woman with what it went through when women's education was first permitted in the 1960s. Both are seen as examples of how legalisation can control/shape national identity and culture.

Ali, in focus group 2, calls it "*the bottleneck*", referring to the critical debates Saudi society underwent when women's education was first allowed. While girls' education was '*eyb'* ('shameful') in the 1960s, just like driving and unveiling is today, the national attitude towards it changed when the state allowed and began enforcing girls' schools. Al-Rasheed (2013) discusses the 1960s when King Faisal opened the first school for educating girls and kept it open despite public opposition in villages around Saudi Arabia. Al-Rasheed documents the change in the national attitude towards girls' education as time passed and how education eventually became a defining attribute of the Saudi woman. Ali went on to explain that the same thing is taking place on networked publics today, where Saudis dispute and discuss, thereby bringing about a movement in Saudi culture in relation to the image of the Saudi woman. Similarly, the same analogy was brought up by Areeb in focus group 4:

"*I always go back to when the first girls school was opened in Saudi. Everyone objected and many of the people who objected were fundamentalists, religious clerics who feared that the Islamic identity of Saudi Arabia would be lost. But look how it is now. Women's education has become commonplace*". (Areeb, January 2016, focus group)

All of this, of course, begs the important theoretical question: who is driving whom? Are the laws driving our imagining of the nation and its identity, or is it the nationals' imagining of the nation that is driving the laws? The answer lies in the public sphere; those who have access to the public sphere are in a position to debate, negotiate and reformulate national identity and the laws that define it. This is why women's admission to the Saudi public sphere is crucial for the advancement of their position and to update their national feminine identity. Saudi women's

participation in networked publics, in their own right 'counterpublics', and their contentious control of the production of their own images on social media networks is certainly locating them in a position of renegotiating and reimagining the nation despite the interruption of conservative nationalists. This is something that is unique in Saudi society, as women prior to the Internet and social media had limited (if any) control over producing media, which is directly responsible in imagining the nation. As noted in Chapter 2, Anderson (1983) emphasises the role that the media plays in producing images and illustrations of what the nation is, and what members in it should look/act/talk/be like, thereby forming this imagined collectivity. Thus, for a very long time, the imagining of Saudi women was not up to them at all, but was rather dictated by individuals in charge of media production, who were, of course, almost exclusively men (Sakr, 2008).

This chapter, then, answers the question of how social media usage in Saudi Arabia is contributing to changes in the public images of young Saudi women.

Chapter Nine. Analysis of Mixed Gender Interaction and Intimate Relationships on Social Media

9.1 Introduction

While chapters 6 and 7 explored the first research question on how the rise in social media use in Saudi Arabia is influencing the values and norms of young Saudi women (with a particular focus on norms of veiling, male guardian approval and work), this chapter focuses on changing attitudes towards romance and wider intimacy practices. As noted in Chapter 2, Saudi society is heavily marked by gender segregation, a value that was particularly promoted and has been strictly enforced since the rise of the Sahwa movement in the 1980s (ICG, 2004; Lacroix, 2004; Le Renard, 2008). Gender segregation became a cornerstone value in the shame-honour Saudi society (schools, hospitals, companies, public spaces such as restaurants, cafes and parks, even social occasions such as weddings and gatherings are strictly gender segregated), impacting relationships between Saudi men and women as a result and, in particular, limiting the chances of pre-marital romance. This chapter argues that the introduction of social media platforms to this cultural setting offers a novel opportunity for Saudi men and women to mix more freely and frequently, thereby undermining gender segregation in practice and also as a societal value, developing new forms of mixed-gender intimacies and reducing the shame that surrounds pre-marital romantic relationships.

The analysis in this chapter can be broken down into two main themes: romantic relationships, and wider intimacy practises. Romantic relationships here mean the distinct attachment/bond one shares with a significant other. Though this type of relationship involves sexual desire and attraction, it does not necessarily include sexual relations/acts, as most Saudis believe in abstinence from sex until marriage. This is very distinct from what I mean by wider intimacies. This term is a more general sense of affection and care that is found in friendships and family ties and which specifically *excludes* sexual desire or attraction. With regard to romantic relationships, it is necessary to flag that as this study is focused on social media platforms (not dating sites/apps) the aim is to examine the elision of the social with the romantic. Thus, I am restricting my analysis to romantic relationships that originate in, and are cultivated through, social media

platforms and excluding the analysis of using designated dating sites as it is beyond the scope of my research.

I recognise four practices that social media engagement has facilitated within the Saudi romantic scene: democratisation, re-spatialisation, changing temporality, and shifts in gender etiquette. I draw on the notions of scalable sociality (Miller et al, 2016) and Polymedia (Madianou & Miller, 2012) to examine the dynamics of romantic relationships on social media platforms. As for wider intimacy practices, I suggest that intimacy is becoming dis-embedded from its traditional romantic/sexual meaning. Instead, social media is opening up the possibility for other forms of intimacy to emerge based on mixed gendered friendships. Privacy and commodifying relationships are subthemes that are also analysed in this chapter, and I further identify the status of 'accountability suspension' that permits young Saudis to gesture to their romantic relationship somewhat publicly.

9.2 Romantic relationships

Perhaps the most obvious assumed role of social media in Saudis' lives is its central role in initiating and maintaining pre-marital romantic relationships. With no possibility for integration in schools and universities and with limited chances of integration in the workspace, as well as a lack of cafes/bars or public spaces/social settings for the two sexes to mingle, social media has become the most prominent place for a person to meet a romantic interest. The turn to social media to facilitate romance and the significance thereof can only be fully comprehended when we consider that engagement in pre-marital romance is yet to be fully accepted in Saudi Arabia. Saudi society's reluctance to accept pre-marital romance is due to the heavy sexual connotations that such a relationship ensues in a culture that deems such sexual relations not only immoral but also shameful. This complicates the engagement in romantic relationships, particularly for women as representatives of the honour of the family/collectivity and the high emphasis on a woman's chastity to maintain this honour. Thus, engagement in premarital romantic relationships would often subject Saudi women to criticism, harassment, reprimand or worse. A participant in one of the focus groups stated the following:

"You shouldn't have any say or judgment on a girl who is talking to boys or even having a sexual relation with one. This is one of the things that is holding us back as a society from evolving. That women turn on other women, you judge her even for things that are none of your business

and don't affect you or your friendship with her. We are simply a judgmental society" (Durr, Jan 2016, focus group)

Durr's statement demonstrates the severe backlash that some Saudi women might have to deal with if a relationship of this nature were to be exposed in Saudi's shame-honour culture/society. Thus, in a cultural setting that forbids and obstructs/hampers romantic relationships, the Saudi youth I interviewed and observed in my study turn to social media to negotiate romance in a networked public (boyd, 2008) that not only brings the two genders together, but also allows a certain level of privacy, thereby collapsing the social with the romantic. Of course, the use of social media in initiating and maintaining romantic relationships is not a Saudi novelty; several scholars have recognised and investigated the use of digital communication in general and social media in particular for romantic and sexual relationships in several other societies (see Chapter 4) (Costa, 2016; Gershon 2010; Pascoe 2010; Lenhart and Madden 2007; boyd, 2010). However, particularly in relation to Saudi society, I identify four distinct ways in which the values and norms of young Saudi women in relation to romantic relationships are being impacted through social media engagement: democratisation, re-spatialisation, changing temporality, and shifts in gender etiquette. The four processes are all detectable in a quote shared by a participant in one of my focus groups, and so this quote would be a fitting start to analysing them in detail:

"*I feel social media helps you find a boy since we don't see much of each other offline. For example, I once met a boy online whom I liked very much from his Instagram account. I mean I had no idea who he was before. There was absolutely no relation between us, but we started talking when he added me and I liked him and something started off. I won't necessarily marry this guy, but I mean social media is making up for the limited chances to meet a boy in Saudi*". (Raghad, December, 2015, focus group)

9.2.1 Democratisation

The first thing that is suggested in Raghad's comment is a process of democratisation in relation to romance. Giddens (1993) observes the democratisation of personal life and 'plastic sexuality' in modern societies. Giddens develops the theoretical concept of plastic sexuality, which means sex that is unconcerned with reproduction as a consequence of effective contraception and women's financial independence. While Giddens' approach to democratisation focuses on sexual needs and relations both heterosexual and homosexual, democratisation in this research and

particularly in the case of Saudi Arabia does not necessarily refer to sex and sexuality but rather to romance and love (which may or may not include sexual elements), and focuses particularly on heterosexual relations. Yet democratisation here does resemble Giddens' approach in its emphases on autonomy and agency when it comes to administrating and conducting romantic relationships. The democratisation of romantic relationships in Saudi Arabia from what I observe here is a result of women's social independence, or rather their netwo§§§§§§§§rked individualism on social media networks which engenders a degree of enhanced personal autonomy in the modern age (Wellman and Rainie, 2012), as opposed to Giddens' emphasis on financial independence. As noted in Chapter 2, people have become to a greater extent networked as individuals, rather than entrenched in groups, and so the world is arranged around networked individualism through the use of modern communication technologies rather than group solidarity or local consensus.

Not only is there now more scope for women to meet men on social media, but *who* they are able to meet has also changed. As previous states of romance were commonly bound to official marriage proposals, which were closely connected to familial and communal ties, social media, as Raghad puts it "*helps you find"* a significant other independently by putting you in direct contact with a larger pool of people. It is providing a space where lovers/partners can find each other, a modern-day agora (Turkle, 1995, p.249) where weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) are functional in expanding one's social circle, which ultimately raises Raghad's chances to encounter potential partners. So, in Raghad's example, there are multiple ways and chances for the young man, from whom she received a follow request on Instagram, to find her and vice versa, whether by coming across her account through a comment she made on an Instagram post, exploring her Instagram page, or the suggested friendship feature (which Instagram promotes). This highlights the democratic nature of romance on social media platforms, in which both men and women have equal chance to meet and initiate a relationship of this nature independently from their families and the larger community.

In another example, Muneerah (a participant in this study who I observed and interviewed) had met her current boyfriend on Twitter, where they have both been following a common contact (Norah), who is both Muneerah's classmate in university and the young man's cousin. They both kept commenting on Norah's tweets and engaged in public exchanges on Norah's feed until finally he sent her a follow request. The fact that 95% of adult Saudis (both male and female) are

active users of social media (Globalmediainsight.com, 2017), and no physical boundaries to segregate them according to their gender exist on these digital networks, is further stimulating this process of democratisation. As one participant in my focus group notes:

"*There is no 'women's door' and 'men's door' on social media. You can meet whoever you want to meet as long as they are online".* (Ali, 31, December 2015, focus group)

What Ali refers to when saying *'women's door'* and *'men's door'* is the classical traditional way of designing houses, hospitals, schools, and even restaurants in Saudi Arabia, where there is a designated door to a section for women (and families, where lone women should enter) and a door to a separate section for men, thereby limiting the chances of mingling even further. In contrast, on social media, 95% of adult Saudis are free to mix/mingle on gender inclusive social media platforms, impacting their romantic practices by democratising romance and giving the chance to both men and women to meet each other equally without having to rely on arrangements made by the family.

9.2.2 Re-spatialisation

The second process that Raghad's comment illustrates is a re-spatialisation of the context of dating. Raghad's comment highlights the use of social media to overcome the control of movement that many Saudi women are subjected to, thus permitting the relationship to commence and be sustained. There is no need to arrange a place to meet privately away from people's gaze, figure out an excuse to leave the house, drive (which Raghad cannot do) or figure out a way to get to the location where the meeting is to take place. Instead social media makes it much simpler logistically to 'meet up' and communicate virtually, whether through texting on the instant messaging service that all the networks observed in my study provide (Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter), phone-chatting on apps like WhatsApp and Snapchat, or even video-chatting, which is also facilitated on several platforms like WhatsApp, Snapchat or Skype.

However, as detailed above, it is not only *mobility* restrictions that complicate physical dates for Saudi women, but also the fear of jeopardising one's reputation if these secret dates were exposed. Even the young women I interviewed who were from wealthy families and had their own drivers still hesitated to go out on dates out of fear that the driver might inform on them (to their families) if he understood the nature of the trip. Aziz, a participant in the study, highlighted the obstacles that young Saudis might face when trying to logistically arrange a romantic date by

noting that

"[It is] *10 times harder on a woman because she also has to worry about her reputation, let alone the fact that it is harder for her to go out of the house and come back as she pleases, unsupervised*". (Aziz, March 2016, one-on-one interview)

Thus, it is much easier and more convenient to move romantic practises into digital spaces such as social media. Indeed, for most women, it is the only option.

This is consistent with many studies that recognise the use of social media as a dating space to compensate for the lack of physical meetings in situations of limitations on mobility, whether it is due to age (as may be the case with teenagers in western countries, Van Ouytsel et al, 2016) or for logistical reasons such as long distance relationships (Billedo et al, 2015), or due to social and ethical restrictions as in conservative religious communities (Costa, 2016). The traditional spaces that have shaped dating practices are becoming reconfigured. In many ways, the borders that have been used to designate dating have become loosened, meaning that one can date at work, in the university, or even at home, suggesting a process of re-spatialisation to the romantic scene in Saudi where dates are quite literally in the palm of your hand on your mobile phone.

9.2.3 Changing temporality

The third way I suggest that social media engagement is impacting romantic relationships is the shift in the temporal management of dating. All unmarried participants, both male and female, in my study stated that they utilise social media for romantic flirtations and for keeping in touch with their love interest throughout the day. Dating has thus become loosened from the time that it occurs. Unlike traditional settings, where a date might be at a family gathering, a community event, or even a stolen *rendezvous*, here dating becomes characterised by the continuity of time. Several scholars have documented lovers' tendency to communicate flexibly and frequently through social media platforms (Baron 2008; Gershon 2010, Pascoe 2010), thereby intensifying the relationship. Regular check in's and several IM messages and texts daily become expected from each other and a lack of them could trigger jealousy, anxiety and even digital surveillance (Marshall et al, 2012; Muise et all, 2009). This aspect of digital romance has extended the timeframe of a date. Partners enjoy a non-constraining temporality, where a date is no longer one

single event that has a starting time and a finish; instead, they have the capacity to engage romantically throughout the whole day.

Interestingly, the participants in my study never used the word ‘dating’ to describe digital interaction with their partners. Instead, they used the word talking. The word (date) is preserved for the actual physical meeting between them and their loved ones. However, physical meetings are usually sporadic due to the reasons noted above; months could go by without partners succeeding in arranging a physical date. Thus, I consider even digital phone calls videocalls and chats on social media platforms to be a form of dating. For example, Muneerah (a 23 year-old participant in my study) has only gone on two physical dates with the young man she has been ‘dating’ for 6 months. However, they have exchanged thousands of texts on WhatsApp and photographs on Snapchat, and they talk daily using the calling features offered either one of these two platforms. They also follow each other on Twitter and Instagram. Thus, their engagement with social media is changing the temporal management of their dates in the sense that they think of their dates as an extended practice that spreads and takes place throughout the day as opposed to a certain block of time in which they physically meet.

9.2.4 Shifting gender etiquette

Finally, the fourth way in which engagement on social media is impacting romantic relationships, women’s values and attitudes towards love and romance in Saudi is the transformation of gender etiquette. Returning to Raghad’s earlier comment, we can draw from it how social media is equipping women with agency and autonomy to administer their own social relations, specifically romantic ones. Prior to widespread social media use, women had to wait passively for romantic connections to be orchestrated by their families in the form of arranged marriages. However, the fraying of gendered etiquette of dating on social media amongst Saudis can be noticed in the data collected. In the aforementioned example of Raghad, she did not have to rely on her family to arrange her connection to a man they thought was suitable for her, which would happen only for the purpose of matrimony. Instead, she made the choice to be involved with this man independently from her family, even though their romantic involvement might be fruitless in relation to matrimony. This finding again highlights the networked individualism nature of relationships on social media networks (Wellman and Rainie, 2012) and their influence on collectivities and kinship systems in conservative communities. As noted in Chapter 2, Giddens (1991) notes that late modern communities are moving away from collectivism and systems of kinship towards individualism, which is in return directly responsible for detraditionalising these

communities (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2002). This finding in relation to shifting gender etiquette confirms this.

Moreover, other young women I have spoken to in this study are even taking the first step themselves in approaching a person they like or are attracted to on social media platforms. Norah, for example, reported that she has done this several times on Twitter or on Instagram:

"*If a man grabbed my attention on a hashtag or in a friend's feed, I would add him in order to get to know him better. I once liked a guy's witty comment in a hashtag (on Twitter) about a viral commercial and so I followed him, he followed me back. After a while he DMed me* [sent her a direct message on Twitter] *and that's how we started*". (Norah, March 2016, one-to-one interview)

The agency can be sensed in Norah's behaviour and in how she approached this situation. In a traditional cultural setting in the shame-honour culture of Saudi, Norah would be prohibited from talking to men all together, let alone from initiating contact. However, with digital culture she is more inclined to adopt an identity that is independent, autonomous and active. The implication of this is that the gender etiquettes when it comes to romance are changing and being detraditionalised. Women (and men) no longer think that it is inappropriate for women to make the first move. Now that I have detailed the ways in which social media engagement is impacting Saudi women's values and norms in relation to romance, I shall explore the manner in which romance is structured on social media platforms and how is it being negotiated.

9.3 The Structure of romance on social media networks, exploring the dynamics

A notable and central theme that emerged from the findings on Saudis' engagement in romantic relationships on social media is that of private and public areas on these platforms. Marking and defining the perimeter of what constitutes a public or a private area is very functional to the dynamics of romance on social media platforms. I draw here on the notion of scalable sociality (Miller et al, 2016) in order to understand the emergence of both public and private places on social media that complete each other and balance the equation of online romance in Saudi. As noted in Chapter 4, scalable sociality is a term developed by Miller et al (2016) to describe users' ability to adjust the scale of sociality on social media or the audience addressed from the most private to the most public and from dyadic communication to mass communication. The findings in my research show that young Saudis define a public area of a certain social media platform not

necessarily by the number of people viewing it, but rather depending on *who* is viewing it. A group on WhatsApp that holds 5, 6 or even 10 of your closest friends would still be considered a somewhat private area, mainly due to the user's intimacy with the group members. Interviewee Sarah (32 years old) was speaking about her stance on sharing her own personal photographs and videos on Snapchat, saying:

"*I wouldn't share them in public, no*". (Sarah, February 2016, one-to-one interview)

Nonetheless, Sarah does actually share both videos and photographs on her cousins' groups on Snapchat (which has 9 members) more than once a day. When I asked her how it was possible that she does not think that she is sharing her photographs publicly on Snapchat, she explained to me that sharing with her cousins "*does not count* [as public sharing]". The implication of her statement is that she defines public/private areas on social media platforms (in this case Snapchat) depending not on numbers, but on *members*. Accordingly, posting on Snapchat Story, which all contacts can view, is considered public, while posting on a closed Snapchat Group that only hosts her cousins is regarded as private even if it holds 10 or 20 people. Similarly, Twitter Feed, Facebook Wall, and Instagram Feed are all thought of as public as long as the account itself on these platforms is an open account. On the other hand, closed groups where the users control the audience and define the context are private; accordingly, even the public feed of a closed account where the user controls the audience and defines the context is also private.

However, particularly in romantic communication, there is a high emphasis on it being dyadic communication for it to be regarded as private. So what was considered private in relation to wider intimacy practices might not necessarily be regarded as private in relation to romantic practices. The added reservations when it comes to romantic practices is understandable in light of Saudi's shame-honour culture, which I have previously explained and which specifically places a high value on a woman's demeanour in relation to love, romance and sexuality. This renders privacy a central theme in relation to Saudis' romantic practices on social media, which I will return to in this analysis. The data suggests that areas that allow for dyadic closed conversations, such as the direct messages on Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp or Snapchat, are what constitutes a private area where romantic communication can take place. This structure of public and private areas on social media platforms, in addition to the distinct affordances of each platform, is what guides the digital dynamics of courtship amongst Saudis. A participant in this

study (Ali) explained that public areas are used to scan and scout for a romantic prospect. Once a person of interest is found, the communication is moved to a private area of social networks such as personal direct messages and private WhatsApp conversations.

"*You would start talking to a girl you like who you saw on your Twitter timeline, you know like subtweeting her and replying and so on. If you see there is a mutual interest from both of you, then you would send her a direct message and start talking privately more freely with each other, exchange numbers and move to a more intimate platform such as WhatsApp or some other instant messaging service, start sending photos to each other or video chatting. If she is cool with it, then you would arrange a physical meeting*". (Ali, March, 2016, one-to-one interview)

In addition to the significance of the public/private structure of social media platforms in relation to young Saudis' romantic practises, what we can draw from Ali's comment is that there is an interplay between different platforms of social media. As social media propagate, each platform develops its own niche in users' communicative practices as the technological affordances of each platform lend themselves to particular social norms and contexts. What surfaces as a result of this, is a complex environment of multiple evolving social media. Correspondingly, Ali perceives video calls on skype or FaceTime to be more intimate than chatting on an instant messaging service. Yet messaging on WhatsApp is more personal than just sending direct messages on Twitter, presumably because adding someone on WhatsApp would require knowing their personal mobile number and so it would be reserved to personal intimate connections/contacts. Romantic relationships are thus navigated and moved from one platform to another as they progress, moving them from impersonal/public areas of the internet such as a Twitter timeline to a more private location such as Twitter direct messages, before finally moving them to a more intimate platform which would entail constant and continuous communication throughout the day, such as WhatsApp.

Within the context of Polymedia that we are living in today (Madianou & Miller, 2012), it is not surprising that romantic practices are not limited to one single social media platform, but are rather spread across several ones in accordance with what each platform affords. I have detailed in Chapter 4 how several scholars have documented the Polymedic utilisation of social media platforms to manage relationships in general and romantic relationships in particular (Miller et al, 2016, Madianou & Miller, 2012, Chambers, 2013). Raghad's quote earlier in this chapter

exemplifies the emergence of a romantic etiquette/dynamic that makes use of the availability of several platforms. Her relationship with the young man started on Instagram, where he added her and sent her direct messages on the platform, but after the initial 'introductory' stage the relationship was moved to a more suitable platform in terms of affordances. Raghad explains that she proceeded to add him on WhatsApp, where they could text, call and video-chat together. They also added each other on Snapchat, where they would send momentary short-lived images and 10-second videos to each other throughout the day. Raghad explains the interplay between the different media to manage the relationship:

"*WhatsApp is where we would have a continuous flow of conversation throughout the day. Snapchat is just a good way to keep each other posted on the little details of our day. It is like a way to keep him with me moment by moment*". (Raghad, December, 2015, focus group)

The endurance of texts on WhatsApp makes it a more suitable platform for long talks and detailed discussions. However, the temporality of texts on Snapchat makes such a discussion hard to maintain as the sentences keep disappearing, thereby interrupting the flow of the conversation. On the other hand, the very same affordance of non-persistency on Snapchat becomes appreciated when sharing mundane moments with the significant other that are not intended to be followed up for long. In a different example, Norah told me that she would incorporate more social media platforms, specifically the ones that require sharing one's personal mobile number, only once she can trust the man she is talking to. She professes that she would not add a man on WhatsApp (which necessities her giving him her personal mobile number) until a significant amount of time had passed on their relationship and he had gained her trust. Instead, she would use the call feature on either Snapchat or on Line App and exchange text messages on the direct messages of Twitter or Instagram. This highlights the interplay between several social media platforms within a Polymedia context as an attribute of digital romantic practices and it suggests the emergence of a romantic etiquette that shifts between and incorporates several of these different platforms amongst young Saudis. In addition, it suggests how each platform might correlate to a certain stage in the relationship. Platforms that require more details about the user in order to facilitate the communication (such as a telephone number for WhatsApp) are persevered for meaningful romantic attachments, while insignificant/mundane flirtatious communication would take place on a platform with nondurable communication, such as Snapchat. Similarly, the work of Pascoe (2010) and Haythornthwaite (2005) (see Chapter 4),

highlights the move of a digital romance between platforms in accordance with the stage it is at, where more media channels (in this case more social media networks) are added to the social intercourse in a calculable configuration of media multiplexity.

The implications of Norah's remark, is that Saudi women today have the ease/flexibility, capacity and tools needed to be able to engage in casual romantic relationships, and not just significant/serious ones. Prior to social media, romantic relationships required far more disclosure and revelation from both partners for them to take place. This would be either by exchanging personal numbers (at a point in time when it was even a shared household number) or meeting in person, which raises the stakes and as a result pushed women to reserve their romantic adventures to only the most significant relations. However, the inclusion of social media with its convenience in customising one's social circle, and the ease of managing relationships on the platforms in a context of networked individualism with lower stakes, has resulted in Saudi women tolerating and undertaking casual romantic relationships more often than before. Not every romantic relationship they engage in is a significant one; some are merely casual flirtations. This sentiment of casualness is also exemplified in Raghad's earlier comment in this chapter where she states:

"I won't necessarily marry this guy". (Raghad, December, 2016, focus group)

The aforementioned explained the emergence of public spaces and private spaces on social media platforms that are central to the negotiation of romance amongst Saudis. I also examined the way in which the multiplicity of these platforms is being utilised to arrange digital romance and how, thanks to their distinctive affordances, they are catering to both serious and casual romantic relationships. However, the social media multiplicity that young Saudis grapple with when negotiating romantic relationships raises an added issue that impacts significantly on the dynamics of Saudi digital romance: the issue of privacy. What I mean by privacy here is maintaining such relationships unobserved by those you do not want to know about it. With so many media platforms to manage, how one avoids a context collapse when the stakes are so high in the shame-honour culture of Saudi Arabia is a crucial question. This question becomes even more urgent if we consider some of my participants' eagerness to express their feelings of love rather publicly. In the next section, I examine some of the approaches that young Saudis resort to in order to gratify their desire to boast about their relationships and engage in romantic

expressions somewhat publicly, yet avoid context collapse and keep these relationships unobserved by/unknown to/away from an undesirable judgmental audience.

9.4 Privacy, Avoiding a context collapse, and accountability suspension

The most obvious solution for Saudi women to keep a digital romantic relationship concealed (thus achieving privacy) in the age of social media would be either to restrict such romantic communication to the private areas of social media platforms or resort to identity separation (see Chapter 6). Identity separation is having multiple accounts, one for each identity, and is facilitated by the multiplicity of social media platforms in a Polymedia setting which is very closely linked to Goffman's (1959) argument on the importance of audience and social context when 'performing' identity. The user defines a context and controls the audience on a given platform, making it suitable for the expression of a particular identity/practise, shame-free, which in a way turns even the public areas of that specific controlled accounts into private ones.

The use of identity separation to achieve privacy in relation to romantic practices is exemplified by the behaviour of Wafa. Wafa has created a profile on Instagram which she predetermined would be used for initiating and engaging in romantic relationships, or, as she puts it, "*for flirting*". She accordingly withheld from stating her last name in her profile, sent and accepted friend requests from men, and most importantly posted her photographs on that profile unveiled. However, her behaviour on this Instagram profile is very different from her behaviour on her Facebook profile, on which her contact list harbours her family members and distant relatives. On her Facebook profile, Wafa states her family name, does not display any photographs of herself, and behaves rather chastely (in accordance with her family values) by not publicly commenting or engaging with strange men in a suggestive manner. Wafa resorted to separating two parts of her identity and expressed them independently from each other (one in each platform) in order to be able to engage in romantic relationships privately and safely with no shame. However, identity separation is not something that all Saudi woman favour or resort to as a solution. From the 27 women I spoke to in focus groups and interviews, only six openly told me they did it. Furthermore, while the rest of the respondents might have resorted to the former solution and chose not to disclose this to me, five women explicitly said they did not favour identity separation. This leaves them with the option to limit romantic communication to dyadic communication in the private areas of social media platforms. Yet, from the social media

accounts I observed and from the discussions I had with the women in my research, I noticed that ornaments of love and romance were still exhibited on public areas of social media.
Several studies, albeit with a focus on western societies, have examined and explored the use of social media platforms to profess love attachments and display love (Robards & Lincoln, 2016; Utz and Beukeboom, 2011; Bazarova, 2012; Saslow et al., 2013, Orosz et al., 2015). This is done in several ways, whether through couples changing their relationship status on Facebook, sharing romantic photographs of themselves with a partner, or by publicly exchanging romantic messages on each other's wall/timeline. There are many possible reasons why users might want to place such private practices in a public context. It could be caused by feelings of insecurity about the relationship, or more commonly to self-promote and show off, thereby utilising the social media platform for relationship "impression management" which displays the connections between users (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011, p. 512).

Saudis are not excluded from wanting to affirm superiority amongst their peers by displaying success in love/romance. The implication of this, however, is that the consideration of social media platforms as a stage from which we perform to an audience is inviting young Saudis to commodify romantic relationships, treating them as products that we possess and display for attention or peer approval. Tuqa, a young female participant in my focus groups, responded to a question on whether she judges a young woman who initiated a romantic relationship with a young man online that ended in marriage saying: "*Not at all!", she laughed.* "*On the contrary, I'm actually jealous of her. I want the same!*" Another female participant in the group, Meshaal, laughingly declared: "*Me too! I'm jealous of her*". This interaction exemplifies the inclination of young Saudis towards romantic relationships today on social media platforms and how these relationships are turned into desired acts/items, much like commodities, sought after and displayed for status, attention and approval amongst peers, even though these young Saudis might still prefer to conceal them from their relatives and wider social circle.

All this begs the question of how this desire to display romantic attachments publicly (whether to show them off, gush, or because of personal insecurities) is managed in a context that might include family members, distant friends, relatives and acquaintances who consider premarital romantic relationships to be shameful/dishonourable. From analysing the data, I determined that young Saudis manage the predicament of wanting to display the relationship on social media platforms while still averting the blame for engaging in it by what I call 'accountability

suspension'. Accountability suspension is achieved when public expressions of romance are marked with ambiguity and are not directly addressed at someone specific. When digital romantic expressions are cryptic, opaque and camouflaged, the individual's accountability for these actions is suspended as they are no longer solid acts of professing love, but rather circumstantial evidence that could be explained elsewise. This is in a way very similar to boyd's notion of social stenography (see Chapter 4) except that it specifically relates to avoiding blame/shaming in relation to love and romance in shame-honour cultures rather than just generally excluding some people (teenagers' parents in boyd's case) from a certain narrative on social media platforms.

One way to achieve 'accountability suspension' is through the use of social stenography. While observing Mai's Snapchat account as part of the netnographic research in this study, I noticed that Mai had posted a snapshot of a black screen with a blue heart emoji on it and the number 7 next to it. The message is very obscure and might not mean anything to someone who does not know Mai well, but it does however imply a romantic entanglement of some sort. When asked about it in a personal interview, Mai explained that 7 is her nickname for her boyfriend, Hamad (which is written in Arabeezy '7amad').

"*Only my friends who know about Hamad would get this* [and Hamad himself, obviously]. *"People who don't know me that well, or my brother who follows me on Snapchat, would not be able to get anything out of this. It's like a nod to Hamad that only he and my closest friends would get. Our little secret*". (Mai, February 2016, one-to-one interview)

Mai's use of social stenography enables her to publicly display her affection to her boyfriend at that moment without jeopardising her privacy or appearing immodest. She was able to gush over her love/affection to her boyfriend and even to parade the relationship in front of her friends, and yet exclude information from other members of the audience who might be watching, such as her brother. In doing so, Mai is suspending the accountability of posting a romantic ornament (the blue heart) in a public area of social media (her Snapchat story) that everyone can see. She managed to engage in public digital romantic expressions while still averting the possibility of shaming by relative or acquaintances. The same thing can be done through the use of insider-jokes and personal and cultural references shared between the couple.

In another example, Muneerah (22 years old) said in a personal interview that she often shares meaningful song lyrics publicly on her Path timeline whenever she has a quarrel with her boyfriend to get his attention and let him know what she is feeling at that moment.

"*The other day I was feeling very insecure and I felt something was off between us, so I shared a song of Abdulmajeed Abdullah* [a popular Saudi singer] *on my Path timeline and he got it. He asked me about it and we talked about it. I would do things like that to get his attention or to send an indirect message sometimes about how I am feeling*". (Muneerah, March 2016, one-to-one interview)

The lyrics of Abdulmajeed Abdullah's song translate to:

It is not just tonight that you are acting different
It has been a while now that your mind is not with me
Your body is there but not your heart
Has someone told you something about me?

This particular example highlights the use of innumerable linguistic and cultural tools such as song references and lyrics and anecdotes from popular culture to conceal the relationship itself yet display coded references to it that are public and functionally accessible by everyone, thereby succeeding in suspending the accountability of these public expressions of love/digital romance. Muneerah was able to communicate her insecurity about the relationship indirectly with her boyfriend without compromising neither her pride (by talking to him first after the quarrel) nor her public modest image (by posting a public rant which would disclose the existence of the relationship). She managed to find the perfect balance by sharing a public message but with a very private meaning that is ambiguous to the common reader. Thus, I conclude this section by proposing the condition of accountability suspension, in which young Saudi women are able to profess and engage in public displays of digital romance while still preserving honour and abiding by cultural norms in a constant effort to reclaim agency and achieve privacy on social media platforms. Now that this has been noted, the data suggests that mixed gender interaction on social media between Saudis is opening up the possibility for other forms of intimacy to emerge and develop between the two genders that are disconnected from romantic/sexual meaning. The following section addresses this theme.

9.5 Overcoming gender segregation and developing wider intimacies

A significant finding that emerged from the data collected through focus groups is that the mixed gender environment of social media networks has not only facilitated romantic relationships (both serious and casual), as argued earlier, but that it has also produced wider intimacies between the two genders that are disconnected from romance and sexuality. As a result, definitive boundaries were constructed around the romantic which distinguish them from other forms of wider mixed-gender intimacies. What is meant by wider intimacies in this research is feelings of affection and care that are commonly felt towards friends or family members, which is very distinct from feelings of love/romance or sexual attraction that are found in romantic relationships. New discourses of intimacy have emerged that revolves around nonsexual relationships like family ties (Chambers, 2013), and digital platforms have made it possible for people to network and develop intimacies, or 'personal connections' as Baym (2010) calls it, both as individuals and as groups that are mediated through these platforms. Several other scholars discuss a wide range of mediated intimacies developing terms such as 'mobile intimacy' (Hjorth& Lim, 2012) and 'ambient intimacy' (Reichelt in Deuse,2012, p.231).

The gender segregation of the Saudi community has definitely halted the development of these wider intimacies even amongst members of the same household, such as between brother and sister. However, the data suggests that the increased mixed-gender communication that is taking place on social networks is making up for it. Mohammad, a participant in one of my focus groups, asserts that social gender segregation in Saudi has impacted even his relationships with his own sister, who lives in the same house, with their occupation of two separate social settings (her amongst other women, him amongst other men) isolating them from each other. Yet they overcame this social gender segregation by occupying a socially integrated networked public that includes both of them:

"I'll give my sister as an example. We live in the same house and I never had an idea about what is going on in her head. I found out many things about her, her opinions and her orientations because of us both existing online [on Twitter]. Things I never knew about because she had always discussed them in the privacy of women gatherings that I was excluded from. I mean, just look at what is going on now! I never thought that I would be in a focus group with 3 girls just talking normally and exchanging ideas!" (Mohammed, December 2015, focus group)

A level of intimacy between Mohammed and his sister emerged as a result of their increased communication that was facilitated through the use of social media. Achieving this level of intimacy was much more challenging when Mohammed and his sister occupied gender exclusive social circles. Now, the existence of a mixed-gender Saudi public on digital networks is enabling Mohmmed and other Saudi men to develop such wider intimacies with women outside his immediate family circle, intimacies that are disconnected from romantic/sexual relationships such as the ones he shared with the three women participants in the focus groups. Prior to social media, there were limited opportunities to initiate and sustain intimate relationships of this nature with a woman outside the immediate family as there were very few opportunities for them to even meet, not even in family gatherings. As a result, such intimate relationships were often homological.

However, the rise of social media has facilitated the formation of mixed-gender relationships and created many opportunities for like-minded people who share similar interests from both genders to meet each other. Moreover, in many cases these relationships are not only limited to a digital context, rather they progress and develop to result into actual meetings as in the case of Ghadah and her hiking group on Instagram (Figure.36)

Figure 36: a post from Ghadah's Instagramwith her hiking group.

Ghadah followed the Instagram account @Saharah_club, which aims to connect people from both genders who live in Riyadh and are interested in hiking. They then organise hikes and meetings to socialise and discover new hike trails around the city. Even though their relationship with each other started in a digital context, Ghadah and her hiking friends have moved this relation from social media platforms to offline socialising.

The data suggests that the continued increase of mixed-gender communication, along with the emergence of wider intimacies between Saudi men and women, has further distinguished romantic relationships from mere mixed-gender friendships and that young Saudis are thus finding it easier to set more definitive boundaries around romantic relationships. This is a fascinating insight as it suggests that a process of 'normalisation' or maturing of socio-gender relations is taking place in Saudi. If platonic non-sexualised friendships are on the increase, it would imply that men are seeing women less stereotypically as humans that have specific roles in life and more as 'complete' humans almost de-gendering certain relationships with females. Aziz, in another focus group, explained that Saudi men today make a distinction between a friend who happens to be a woman and a 'girlfriend'. He spoke about a modern Saudi male mentality that is able to have female friends without confusing these feelings as romantic:

"*I know 'her' and I know other girls, but those are just friends while she is the one I love and want to spend my life with. And the same goes for her, a girl that has male friendships is not necessarily a loose woman who is involved romantically with all of them at once*". (Aziz, Jan 2016, focus group)

What we can draw from Aziz's comment is that attitudes are changing from both young Saudi men and women towards mixed-gender relationships. Men no longer confuse every relationship with a woman to be one with romantic/sexual implications. Instead, they acknowledge the existence of wider intimacies that are disconnected from the romantic and the sexual. Further evidence to support this finding was found in a different focus group in which two female participants engaged in a conversation about how both young Saudi men and women are no longer occupied solely by the thought of striking a romantic relationship. They added that there is a wider array/spectrum of relationships between the two genders in contemporary Saudi Arabia. They compared it to a time, in the early days of the Internet and social media, when they felt

Saudi men would confuse any form of communication or intimacy with a woman to be necessarily romantic or sexual, to which the participant Hadeel:

"Everyone now knows their limits, and knows when a romantic relationship is to be considered or not". (Haddel, December 2015, focus group)

Hadeel's comment is evidence of the definitive boundaries that are developing around romantic relationships and how they are distinguished from other forms of mixed-gender wider intimacy relationships. The statement also acknowledges the existence of both forms of mixed-gender relationships, romantic and non-romantic. Her comment, along with Aziz and Mohammed's remarks and other comments collected through the focus groups narrate young Saudis' attitudes toward intimacy between the two genders on social media today. As a young woman from focus group 5 states:

"*I met many girls and boys online whom I formed friendships with. We have grown so close that I even ended up inviting many of these male friends to my sister's wedding".* (Tuqa, December 2015, focus group)

This suggests these intimate relationships are significant even if they are detached from romantic/sexual sentiments, and that in some cases they even transcend the borders of digital communication. In conclusion, what this section has argued is that engagement on social media has developed several types of relationships and forms of intimacy between Saudi men and women that are distinct from the type of intimacy that characterises romantic partnerships.

9.6 Conclusion

My respondents perceive that social media platforms are facilitating their engagement in romance and developing wider intimacies between the two genders. This result corresponds to the findings of Costa (2016) in the conservative city of Mardin (see Chapter 4). This chapter showed that social media platforms are a new, gender-integrated space where women and men can connect and interact more frequently than in the past. It draws on the concept of networked individualism (Wellman and Rainie, 2012) to highlight the configuration of opposite-sex relationships amongst Saudis on social media networks. I found that social media is playing a transformative role in initiating and maintaining romantic relationships in this cultural context, with young Saudis naturalising them as a digital liaison tool between lovers and courtship perceived to be their

distinct and vital purpose. Thus, I acknowledge the role that gender-integrated networked publics (boyd, 2008) play in complementing the offline gender-segregated public of Islamic conservative communities. I also explained the functionality of private and semi-private areas of social networks in creating a shame-free space where my respondents were able to negotiate controversial themes and performances such as premarital romantic relationships. The data also indicates that the values of young Saudi women towards love and romance are changing due to their frequent engagement with the opposite sex on social media platforms and the low-risk environment of these platforms, which is encouraging them to experiment with romantic relationships regardless of their prospects of sustainability. The privacy that is facilitated on social media networks combines with the ability to socialise independently from primary social groups such as the family, leading the female respondents in my study to tolerate even casual romantic relationships and flirtations rather than preserve romantic endeavours to the most meaningful significant romantic attachments.

The data in the chapter indicated four ways in which social media engagement is impacting the norms of romance amongst young Saudis: democratisation, re-spatialisation, changing temporality, and shifts in gender etiquette. It also illustrated the ways in which my respondents are managing the tension between avoiding shaming their families and wanting to display romantic relationships to their peers. I proposed a condition of 'accountability suspension' that my respondents resort to in order to handle this tension. With accountability suspension, displays of romance can be made on public areas of social networks as long as they are opaque and indirect. The ambiguity of these social steganographic posts frees them from accountability while still achieving recognition amongst peers for what they really are.

Finally, I argued for the emergence of wider intimacies, completely detached from the romantic/sexual, between the two genders in Saudi Arabia due to an intensive and sustained engagement on social media platforms. The respondents in my research convey that the development of wider mixed-gender intimacies is further constructing the boundaries around the romantic ones and distinguishing them from other relationships. The underlining outcome from all of this data is that young Saudis have a positive attitude about gender integration and the mixed-gender relationships it produces, whether romantic or non-romantic. This finding is contrary to a study by Mona Almunajjed (1997), which suggested that Saudi women two decades ago were in the main against gender integration. This indicates the decisive impact social media

engagement is having on young Saudi women's values, norms and attitudes towards gender, love, intimacy and romance.

Chapter Ten. Conclusion

10. 1 Introduction

This chapter reviews and summarises the main findings of this research. By identifying the emergence of contemporary non-traditional ideals and values on social networks, social networks are framed as counterpublics for Saudi women where oppositional feminine identities are being developed and popularised. These contemporary oppositional interpretations of feminine Saudi identity are representing and promoting individual agency and a growing autonomy that might be impacting values and norms in relation to veiling, work, visibility, and sociality with the opposite sex in both a romantic and a non-romantic context. In addition, the findings suggest that social media engagement is facilitating Saudi women's negotiation of their public national image and role within the nation. To assert these claims, a bigger research with a significantly larger sample must be conducted. Nonetheless, the thesis in hand has provided an interesting preliminary examination that explored an under-researched area of study, and therefore can be used as a useful and informative starting point for future research on Saudi Arabia and particularly on Saudi women. The thesis builds on existing literatures of identity studies and individualisation theories. Recommendations and implications for further research are also discussed in this chapter.

This research employed a range of theoretical paradigms such as individualisation theories, identity theories, and gender theories in relation to nationalism. I worked through these theories in order to investigate Saudi women's identity construction through social media engagement and the way it is impacting their norms and values. Rather than adopting a classical interpretivist point of view and positioning myself as an uninvolved observer (Bernstein 1983; Hirsch 1976; Prus 1996, p. 196), I saw myself as a constructivist researcher with a particular gendered and cultural biography and spoke self-reflexively with certain moral values (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p. 18; Rouse 1996; Schwandt 1989).

10.2 Summary of Findings

Based on the data collected through netnography, focus groups and one-to-one interviews, a more self-centred individualised approach is observed to be adopted by Saudi women on social media both to represent themselves and to conduct their sociality. This builds on existing literature examining the rise of individualism in modern contemporary communities and its relation to

detraditionalising these communities (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2002). In addition, these findings are an advance on contemporary understandings of feminism particularly in Saudi Arabia. The findings in this research can be summarised into five, as detailed below.

The creation of shame-free spaces

The first key finding of this research is that social media platforms are enabling young Saudis observed in this study to create a shame-free space on which they can engage and experiment with non-traditional identities, attitudes and practices. This is central to challenging traditional cultural values and norms in a shame-honour society such as Saudi Arabia. The affordances of social media platforms and the possibility of achieving privacy on them is encouraging some Saudi women from conservative social backgrounds to turn to these platforms in order to overcome limitations set on them by the collectivity. In some cases, especially amongst older participants (aged 26-35), this is creating a case of what is termed in this research 'identity separation'. This multiplicity of identity performance is very strategic in Saudi women's negotiation of classical female identity in which they manipulate privacy settings and social media affordances to create semi-public spaces that exclude family members and conservative acquaintances who are the main sources of control in shame-honour cultures.

Nonetheless, the empirical data collected in this research shows that this practice is adopted less by female 'digital natives' (25 and under). Less weight is being given by younger female users to the task of preserving the family honour/reputation, which necessitates controlling and self-monitoring their own actions and behaviours online. This showcases a wider trend of individualism that is diffusing amongst young women on these social media platforms with an emphasis on individual agency and autonomy. Young, single Saudi women are performing and experimenting with new online identities that form part of new, detraditionalised values and norms that underpin new performances of femininity starkly at odds with the conservative ideals of femininity of the 1980s and 1990s (see Chapter 2).

The complexity of being a Saudi woman

One of the key findings of this research is the documentation of young Saudi women's efforts to claim identity online while balancing the complex demands of contemporary digital culture and a traditional conservative society. What I observe is indeed closely linked to Dobson's (2015) observation of emerging postfeminist identities amongst women in digital cultures. However, and as I explained in the literature review, the limitations of the term 'postfeminsim', as well as my

preservation on terming the practices I observe as “feminist”, renders the term incapable of encompassing the specific circumstances facing Saudi women at this juncture in Saudi Arabia history and their expressions of an aspirational femininity on social media and their search for agency within the site of popular culture and heterosexual romance.
The virtual ‘freezing in time’ of social relations for Saudi women during the period of 1980’s and 1990’s due to the influence of Sahwa movement is one of two factors that set the contemporary context, in which Saudi women grapple with expressions of identity and self-image in the digital age. The second is the appearance of digital technologies just 20 years ago and their now routine use especially by young digital natives. Combined, these two factors thrust Saudi women from an era of strict marginalisation directly into an age – the digital context – where they have the tools and space to re-imagine their identities at their fingertips. The implication of this, is that Saudi women’s experience of ‘feminism’ is very particular.

These non-traditional identities are defined by neoliberal qualities such as confidence, self-assurance, independence, defiance and a strong sense of individual agency and autonomy, which is very different from the classical traditional attributes of Saudi femininity that highlights values and norms of conformity to traditional collective values such as veiling, gender segregation and confinement to the private sphere. In agreement with feminist poststructuralist epistemology, this particular finding in my research suggests that gendered identities and femininity are not inherent properties but are rather constituted and produced together with performative and complex acts of self-presentation (Butler, 1990; Barad, 2003; Cover, 2012).

According to Giddens (1991), late modern communities are moving away from collectivism and systems of kinship towards individualism, which is in turn directly responsible for detraditionalising these communities (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2002). Similarly, my research finds that the new identities that are emerging through social media activity amongst Saudi women I observe in my research, are starting to undermining/disrupting ultra-conservative values and norms dictated by the collectivity in relation to veiling, work and gender segregation, and promoting the adoption of more liberal personal values and norms. These cultural changes, observable when comparing my data with data from Al-Munajjed’s 1997 study, confirm the association between individualism and the detraditionalisation in modern communities. According to Dobson (2015), girls and young women on social media today are regarded as cultural producers, and similarly my research observes that young Saudi women are producing a

novel and contemporary Saudi femininity characterised by non-traditional norms and values. That said, in their effort to claim identity online, Saudi women observed in my research are found to also reaffirm pre-existing gendered scripts in their portrayal of women mainly as consumers, as well as perpetuating norms that naturalise gendered power relations, such as male guardian approval. This particular finding highlights the complex ways in which Saudi women can now be in the world. Sometimes they reinforce values and norms of the traditional Saudi society in relation to beauty, class and male guardianship, and other times they challenge them whether it is by unveiling or engaging in pre-marital romantic relationships, or even by seeking fame and becoming micro-celebrities (which I discuss further in the next finding).

This finding answers the first question in this research about how increased social media activity is impacting the values and norms of Saudi women. The answer to this question is that the identities that are emerging as a result of increased social media activity and which emphasise individualism and defiance to collective values are starting to produce a modernised set of values and norms that are more liberal, specifically in relation to the following practices: veiling, gender segregation, work and seclusion in the private sphere. Certainly, there is yet a long way to go, but what is taking place on social media today is a start that is worthy of documenting, and I aimed to do so in this research. Therefore, while Dobson, along with other feminist scholars (Phelan, 1993, Wolf, 1991; Mulvey, 1975/1989), argue that women's visibility in western cultures might not necessarily lead to self-actualisation and empowerment, I argue differently. The level of visibility associated with expressions of identity online within the conservative shame-honour culture of Saudi Arabia might actually translate to self-actualisation and empowerment amongst Saudi women in the near future. The emphasis here is on social/cultural representation through visibility rather than sexual display. The recently provided opportunities to be visible culturally and socially on social media, is granting Saudi women a sense of agency and self-confidence, and providing them with an important platform on which they can present alternate ideals of femininity.

Female micro-celebrities as the vanguard of change

The second finding of my research is recognising Saudi female micro-celebrities on social media as vanguards of change amongst young Saudi women who are producing a modern culture and therefore turning networked publics into counterpublics where Saudi women are able to live, represent and promote oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. My

netnographic observation of Saudi women's activities on social media has documented the emergence of a new trend in public self-presentation on these networks, termed by Senfit (2010) 'micro-celebrity'. Saudi female micro-celebrities I observed in this research are either social media influencers, fashionistas, or entrepreneurial business owners. I identify the ways in which Saudi micro-celebrities are commonly challenging norms of Saudi femininity on social media. Firstly, they are placing Saudi women in the public sphere, which de facto challenges the norm of fixing women in the private sphere to protect the reputation of the family by remaining unobtrusive (Almunajjed, 1997; Le Renard, 2008; Hilde Granås Kjøstvedt, 2016). Secondly, and particularly in relation to fashionistas, the emphasis on physical beauty through highlighting body attributes, appearing with heavy makeup and revealing clothes, is challenging and negotiating the politics of visibility and the norm of veiling for Saudi women. Finally, micro-celebrities' entrepreneurial endeavours are developing a new norm of financial independence amongst Saudi women and further weakening the norm of the male guardian and provider.

The celebrity status of these women and the fact that they are followed by millions of young Saudi women is starting to popularise their newly produced culture, norms and values amongst their followers, thereby turning them into vanguards of change that are expressing an alternate feminine identity online which is influencing young Saudi women observed in this research, and encouraging them to do the same. The data collected through focus groups and one-to-one interviews highlight the role of these women as vanguards of change and their idealisation by the young Saudi participants in my research. This suggests that networked publics on social media are turning into a counterpublic, defined by Nancy Fraser as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (1997, p.81). This feeds into and further confirms Senft's (2013) recognition of social media networks as counterpublics of cultural production for women in which they compensate for their exclusion from the process of cultural production in the public sphere.

Saudi micro-celebrities' hyper visibility and activity online is compensating for women's seclusion within the domestic sphere and successfully bringing about a Saudi counterpublic on social media networks, in which women are playing a critical role. Additionally, identities expressed by Saudi women and micro-celebrities online are negotiating gender roles by challenging norms around the placement of women within the domestic and private sphere and

around limiting their role to that of home-maker. They are also challenging norms of veiling. The centrality and importance of visibility for engagement on social media, in addition to how frequent Saudi micro-celebrities are appearing unveiled is urging women in my research to reassess their values around veiling and visibility. Finally, the neo-liberal tendencies of contemporary identities on networked publics and their emphases on individual agency and autonomy can be viewed as a step towards gradually emancipating women from their conventional placement as representatives of the collectivity's honour and carriers of the family name.

Reconstructing the public national image of Saudi women

An unexpected finding in my research is the impact of social media engagement in reconstructing the national public image of Saudi women and reimagining their relation to the nation. The netnographic observation of Saudi women's activity on social media shows the persistence of Saudi conservative nationalists on deeming women 'carriers of tradition' and positioning them as the symbolic border guards and markers of the nation and representatives of its honour and piety, which de facto distinguishes the pious nation from other, ungodly nations (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Al-Rasheed, 2013). Al-Rasheed (2013) documents the efforts of Saudi women to portray a different public national image through their poetry and novels. However, I push Al-Rasheed's (2013) argument further by considering the activities of Saudi women on social media, an area which she did not study in her research. I argue that Saudi women's engagement with social media is generating multiple (and often contradictory) public images of Saudi women, especially upon associating unconventional identities with the Saudi label. This in turn is negotiating the classic, ultra-religious public national image of the pious woman which has long been held by conservative nationalists as the only 'true' representation of Saudi females. Once more, this particular finding suggests that networked publics are counterpublics for women in Saudi Arabia, where oppositional interpretations of female national identity in Saudi Arabia are being represented and promoted. The data also suggests that the individual agency that is expressed in in digital cultures today is gradually emancipating women from the burden of representing the family's (and by extension the nation's) honour, which is a key theme in the collectivist ideologies of conservative nationalists. This finding answers the second question in the research, about how social media activity is impacting on the public images of Saudi women. It also feeds into larger discussions of the role gender plays within the nation, even though the consideration of this was not an original aim of this research.

Changing Romantic Norms – From Collective to Individualised Values

One of the main aims of this research was to assess the ways in which increased social media usage is influencing Saudi women's attitudes towards romance. Naturally, with gender segregation still being an issue for young Saudis offline, the data revealed that a key role of social media in young Saudis' lives is to initiate and maintain pre-marital romantic relationships. The study has identified four processes in which the values and norms of young Saudi women in relation to romantic relationships are being impacted through social media engagement: democratisation, re-spatialisation, changing temporality, and shifts in gender etiquette towards a more autonomous femininity.

Specifically, democratisation of romance and the shift in gender etiquette highlight a development of an autonomous Saudi femininity in relation to romance and the negotiating of intimacy. As previous states of romance were commonly bound to official marriage proposals (which was closely bound up with families and communities), increased social media engagement has facilitated a process of democratisation in which women can find a match independently by putting them in direct contact with a larger group of the opposite sex, thereby increasing their chance of meeting an eligible candidate and rendering the family's role in introducing the match somewhat redundant.

In addition, the data collected through focus groups and one-to-one interviews suggests a shift in gender etiquette when it comes to romantic relationships. Young female participants in my research suggest that their engagement on social media has increased their agency and encouraged them to be more active in initiating and managing romantic relationships. This implies a context of networked individualism in which digital relationships are constructed and managed, as argued by Wellman and Rainie (2012). Similar to Wellman and Rainie's (2012) observations, social media engagement is causing a shift in the classical configuration of social arrangements and relations built around large hierarchical bureaucracies or tightly-knit social groups like the family through the use of modern communication technologies. As a result, young Saudis are operating less as embedded group members and more like connected individuals. The flexible autonomy of being a networked individual has a significant impact on young Saudi women's attitudes towards love. By removing themselves from traditional kinship systems and administrating their sociality independently, young Saudi women have also removed themselves

from the obligations that arise from their role within the collectivity/kinship system, i.e. to represent its honour. Suspending this obligation while engaged on social media means that these women are able to engage in relationships that are commonly deemed improper or shameful, such as pre-marital romantic relationships, which is why social media engagement can facilitate such relationships and therefore might change women's attitudes towards romance altogether. This finding answers the first question of this research in relation to how social media engagement is impacting young Saudi women's attitudes towards love and romance. As for how it is impacting their larger intimacy practices, this will be discussed in the next and final finding.

Developing wider mixed-gender intimacies

Assessment of the way in which social media engagement impacts mixed-gender social relationships amongst Saudis was divided into two parts: assessment of romantic relationships and the assessment of social media engagement with regard to wider intimacy practises. In relation to the latter, this research finds that due to frequent and continuous communication between the two genders through social media, intimacy is becoming disconnected from its traditional romantic/sexual meaning for the participants in my research. The data in this research suggests that young Saudis are able to develop wider intimacies between the two genders that are detached and voided from romantic love.

Social media engagement is found to be undermining gender segregation norms/values, developing new forms of mixed-gender intimacies and reducing the shame that surrounds pre-marital romantic relationships. The respondents in my research convey that the development of wider mix-gendered intimacies is further constructing the boundaries around the romantic ones and distinguishing them from other relationships. The underlining outcome from all of this data is that young Saudis have a positive attitude towards gender integration and the mixed-gender relationships it produces, whether romantic or non-romantic. This finding is contrary to an important study by Almunajjed in 1997, which suggested that Saudi women two decades ago were strongly against gender integration. Thereby indicating the impact social media engagement is having on changing the values, norms and attitudes of young Saudi women towards love, intimacy and romance, and on mixed-gender relations overall.

In conclusion, the findings in this research suggest that love and pre-martial romance has become an increasingly important part of young Saudi women's lives. The sample group of Saudi youth

often expressed more understandable and less judgmental attitudes not only towards love and premarital romance but also towards wider mixed-gender intimacies in general, reflecting a more tolerant social and cultural environment than that which characterises a contemporary Saudi Arabia still under the influence of the Sahwa movement. This could be linked to the growing sense of individualism that is facilitated and promoted through social media engagement (Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2007; Hopkins, 2002; Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, 2005; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Ringrose, 2013; Dobson, 2014), which is encouraging young Saudis to move away from conservative collective values and norms towards developing personal and liberal values and attitudes in relation to gender integration and mixed-gender relationships. The data in general reflect the development of a new trend amongst Saudi women that is encouraging modern individualised values that do not necessarily adhere to the traditional collective culture/ideology.

10.3 Contribution to The Body of Knowledge

This thesis makes a significant contribution to knowledge about the changing status, roles and identities of Saud women in the following key ways: First, the research on Saudi women contributes to knowledge on the area of the Middle East and on Saudi Arabia in particular and the way technology is impacting on conservative societies. Second, despite the small number of participants preventing us from generalising from the findings, it certainly provides a useful roadmap for future, more extensive, research that can produce quantitative results. A third contribution made by this thesis is that it deals with significant trending issues in the Saudi society such as female micro-celebrities, mixed-gender relations online and contemporary Saudi femininity. In this way, my research builds knowledge on these themes, as well as providing important pointers for future research to be carried out.

This project is amongst the first studies to utilise netnography to observe the practices, values and norms of Saudi women on social media networks. I personally believe that social media networks are an important area to study in relation to Saudi women's identities as they are spaces where women can self-represent and act somewhat freely and independently from the restrictions of both family and law. Therefore, observing them none-intrusively through netnography has produced a large and rich data set to analyse and consider, which strengthens the claim that this research makes a significant contribution to the field. Combining the observational methods of netnography with the interactive methods of focus groups and one-to-one interviews has also

enriched my personal understanding and interpretation of the data collected netnographically, while the triangulation methodology approach helped to a great extent to validate and crosscheck the data collected. Moreover, having a different sample in each method (micro-celebrities and regular women in netnography and regular users in the focus groups and one-to-one interviews) enabled me to capture different dimensions of the same process, i.e. identity construction/identity performance and to demonstrate the complex ways in which Saudi women can be in the world in this day and age.

I drew on Mona Almunajjed's *Women in Saudi Arabia Today* (1997) as the basis for a comparative analysis. This text allowed for an understanding of the similarities and differences between two points in time separated by twenty years and the advent of the widespread use of social media. The book was used throughout the research as an underpinning theoretical framework to compare the images and attitudes of the Saudi woman prior to social media engagement in the 1990s with the present position of high levels of social media engagement. Almunajjed examined the lives and social experiences of Saudi women in a traditional society through wide-ranging interviews with 100 Saudi women. She analysed social issues such as veiling, gender segregation, education and employment by focusing on women's attitudes towards the values and norms in which these issues were embedded. This approach gave *Women in Saudi Arabia Today* the advantage of being a reference point through which to assess the changes in the values and norms of young Saudi women, their attitudes towards romance and their wider intimacy practices, and the changes in the public images of young Saudi women observed on social media today. This historical enquiring framework helped me to examine the identity transformation bound up with the issues I am investigating and aided me in locating the individualisation process within the use of social media by young Saudi females and therefore further build on existing individualisation theories (for example, Bauman 2000, 2001, 2003; Beck 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2003, 2010; Giddens 1991, 1992; Hansen & Svarverud 2010; Yan 2009, 2010a, 2010b).

From a constructivist, ontological perspective I believe that the reality of who a Saudi woman is, what she looks like, her values and attitudes are constantly being reshaped through interaction. Thus, there is not a single reality of who a Saudi woman is. On the contrary, there are multiple versions depending on specific historical junctures (i.e. 'the time of viewing'). I hope that this study will serve as a snapshot of the ever-changing, dynamic Saudi society. The analysis proves

that conservative Islamic communities are not as static as they are often depicted, and that if you look below the surface, you can realise that they are constantly evolving.

10.4 Recommendations for future research

This research has generated a number of questions that require further investigation. By employing netnography, the findings reveal that some of the most successful Saudi fashionistas are conservative and would only appear modestly dressed in head scarf and *Abayah*. Not only in Saudi Arabia but all over the world the fashion industry is having what might be termed a 'modest moment', as the activities of 'Hijabi' bloggers on social media (such as Dina Torkia @dinatokio, Ascia al Faraj @ascia_AKF, and Saufeeya Goodson @feeeeya, for example) are diversifying the industry and forcing it to acknowledge Muslim women, resulting in 'modest pop-up shops', 'modest fashion weeks' and the formation of 'modest fashion lines' by mainstream brands. This raises the question of whether the veil is a symbol of either or both faith and fashion. In other words, does a fixation on 'external beauty' contradict the required modesty of the act of veiling? It is also worth researching the modesty trend in fashion and investigating whether the veil is an actual site of agency in the representations of Hijabi bloggers or merely an empty signifier and a way to insert the image of the Muslim woman into the world of fashion and consumer culture (i.e. the commodification of the hijab). A closer review of this would assess whether Saudi fashionistas on social media are rising on their own merits as models and fashion influencers, or rather the urban/modern female Saudi identity is being commercialised and used by major global companies to market consumer products to the Saudi/Gulf market.

The small number of male participants in this research is meant to be exploratory and complementary to the data collected on women's development of non-traditional identities on social media networks and not representative of Saudi men's engagement with the networks and the way it is impacting them. Therefore, I would recommend that research is conducted which fully explores this theme. Research on the ways in which social media engagement is impacting the values, norms and attitudes of male Saudis would be an insightful addition to gender studies on the retreat of patriarchy and would advance feminist theory. A further fruitful avenue of research would be to conduct quantitative studies on the subject. The data analysis in this research is mainly qualitative. A quantitative social survey in future research on the topic of changing values may enrich the findings and generate statistical results that can be more confidently generalised. It might also show an indicative curve in Saudis' conformity to tradition.

An interesting area for future research would be to assess the impact of the developments documented here on government officials and other powerbrokers in Saudi society and the immediate Saudi polity. While the women I observe in this research are all apolitical users of social media, it can be argued that their non-traditional practices online are laying the foundations for democratisation for Saudi women *offline.* From what I gathered from my participants in focus groups and one-to-one interviews, what is taking place online is impacting the values and norms and overall culture of Saudi Arabia in ways that are preparing the country to promote politico-legal changes that balance power relations for women. Furthermore, an influential Saudi feminist movement has been observed on social media. 'Nassawiat Saudiat' (Saudi Feminists) on Twitter is emerging as an organised collective that is demanding change in laws and the constitution in favour of women's rights. It would be informative to research the ways in which Saudi women are organising on social media in order to undertake more overtly politicised action such as a collective campaign against the ban on women driving on Twitter (#iwilldrivemycarJune15) (Taylor, 2016).

Indeed, a flurry of legal activity began towards the end of 2017 covering several socio-cultural aspects of Saudi life. For instance, the ban on women's driving was lifted in September 2017, women have been admitted to more public spaces such as sports stadiums, cinemas have been opened, and even deeper-reaching and more meaningful laws for women have been implemented such as a recent law granting custody of children automatically in the event of divorce without having to file a lawsuit (Tamara Qiblawi, 2018). However, the data in this research shows that certain aspects of the otherwise rising individualism of Saudi women is still shaped and halted by the collectivist ideologies of the Saudi state, such as the law of wearing an *Abayah* in public, for example, or the restrictions on travel without male guardian approval. It was beyond the scope of this research to focus on the state's role in dictating or enforcing certain societal values or norms on its citizens. However, it could be argued that there is no actual potency to digital political activism in a totalitarian regime, and that these sudden changes are merely a reflection of having a young 'reformer', Mohammed Bin Salman, as Crown Prince who is implementing his own vision of 2030, i.e.: law/government, not activism/people, is driving change in Saudi. It would be really insightful to explore the dynamic between digital debates/activism and the current legislative reforms concerning women, and to determine who is leading who; are young Saudis modernising their society and laws are catching up to this modernity, or is it actually laws that are

driving change in the community and it happens to be a 'modern' moment in Saudi Arabia's history.

10.5 Conclusion

This thesis examined the way in which social media usage impacts the values, norms and attitudes of young Saudi women and the way in which they perform their identity and socialise with the opposite sex. Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this study, it is now possible to state that social media engagement is facilitating Saudi women's transition into self-managing subjects, impacting their values, norms in relation to veiling, work and confinement to the public sphere, as well as impacting their attitudes towards romance and wider intimacy practices. Accordingly, this is bringing about significant transformation to the public images of young Saudi women and negotiating Saudi nationalists positioning of them as the representatives of the collectivity's honour. This may suggest a movement towards revising gender roles within the Saudi nation. Overall, by examining how young women approach self-presentation on social media today, this research feeds into a broader project of exploring Saudi women's public image transformation and the relation between the Saudi nation and contemporary feminine Saudi identities.

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Appendix

Social Networks Features

Features and functionality on social networks are diverse and they vary from one platform to the other, while Twitter features a 'polling' button for example (enabling users to survey their followers' opinion on a matter of interest), Snapchat do not. However, four key features are in common between most of them; profiles, friends or contact lists, public communicating tools, and update feed (boyd and Ellison, 2007). These features play a conspicuous role in setting up social network platforms as networked publics and they can be thought of as the main building blocks of networked publics. In order to take part in a networked public, you first need to handle the first block and construct a profile.

Profiles

Profiles are a direct form of self-representation online. boyd even describes the act of generating a profile as an explicit act of writing oneself into being in a digital environment (boyd, 2006). Users decide how they wish to present themselves to those who view their profile, actively and consciously constructing their profiles accordingly. Users' profiles can be literally public, in the sense that they can be viewed and accessed by anyone irrespective of whether the viewer is a contact on the user's friend list or not, or they can be semi-public, i.e. visible only to those who are on the contact list of the user, which might include an audience of friends, family, acquaintances and whoever the user wishes to connect with. This brings us to the second block of networked publics: the contacts list.

Friend Lists

Friend lists, or more accurately contact lists, are the lists of users on a certain profile who can view, connect and engage with the profile owner. Users add, 'friends' or follow people they know or might want to know, comprising the potential audience that they wish to address. However, if a profile is 'public' it is important to note that the audience might transcend the list's contacts to include members of the network who might not necessarily be part of the user's 'imagined audience'. The notion of an imaginary audience is quite central in networked publics and it will be considered throughout this study. The imaginary audience is the intended audience that users have in mind and hope to reach when participating on social media networks. Therefore, for many users, it is important to make sure that the members of these lists are all part

of the same social context, as they will be communicating with them en masse. For other users, merging various social contexts is acceptable or even welcomed. The way a user approaches the issue of social context determines who might and might not be included in the friend list. boyd asserts that "the value of imagining the audience or public is to adjust one's behaviour and self-presentation to fit the intended norms of that collective" (2010, p.6). Nonetheless, our imagined audience might not always be the only ones who are observing our online activity, especially if the profile is truly public. The repercussions of an unexpected male relative viewing the online activities of a young Saudi woman engaging socially with users from the opposite sex could be significant. Equally significant are the repercussions of a Saudi woman's unconventional practises going viral. Issues of context collapse and imaginary audience will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

Communication Tools

Communication tools are provided by social network platforms in order to enable digital social engagement. Tools such as the 'like' button on Facebook or the 'heart' button on Instagram, commenting, retweeting and snapping a photo or a video on Snapchat are all forms of actual connecting or a performance of social connecting before a larger audience. The tools allow users to generate content which they transmit into the update feed of fellow users or in the general common feed of the platform

Update Feed

The update feed, or the common feed, or on some platforms the timeline, is the open public area of a social platform that is accessible to all users. Costa (2016) terms it "public facing" social media; it is the area of social media that is visible to most of the user's contacts, such as the Facebook wall for example or the Instagram feed, or the Snapchat story. On the other hand, direct messages form a private area of a social platform where accessibility is limited to certain contacts. The distinction between the two areas is vital in negotiating romance and wider intimacies between the opposite sexes in Saudi Arabia, as I shall demonstrate in the analysis. The open accessible and collective nature of the update feed facilitates the emergence of a cultural public sphere in which Saudi women are active agents and cultural producers. A trending hashtag on a Twitter timeline might arguably be considered a virtual cultural public sphere where the current debates and issues of a community are discussed and debated, for example the hashtag that was created when the ban on women driving was lifted in September 2017. Moreover, the

affordances of social media allow the manipulation of contact lists and timelines to create an area between public and private – a 'semi-public space' (discussed below). Collectively, profiles, contact lists, and communication tools are the pillars on which social network profiles can be understood as publics. Succinctly, social network platforms are publics because of their ability to connect people as well as their production of a social, informative, interactive space. They are networked publics due to the fact that they are formed and configured by networked technologies.

Affordances

Affordances are conceptualised by Norman as "the perceived and actual properties of the thing... that determine how the thing could... be used" (1988, p. 9). Everything we use has an affordance, and this includes networked technologies and social media platforms. These affordances can shape the networked publics, and while they do not necessarily determine users' social practices, they are designed to make possible, or sometimes even encourage, a certain practice (boyd, 2014). It is important to map the affordances of networked publics because understanding them highlights what users need to leverage or resist in order to attain their objectives (despite the affordances), ultimately enabling an understanding of why people behave in a certain way on these publics. For example, in the early days of the Internet before emoticons were developed, participants used punctuation marks in order to communicate facial expressions and tone. Even though chatrooms at the time did not afford facial expressions, the affordance did not predict users' behaviour which ended up employing :-) to express a happy face. Tensions between affordances, platforms architecture design and user agency will be reviewed in Chapter 4, but here I will only mention the four main affordances that are common between most social media sites and which play a significant role in configuring networked publics and in the development of an online self-identity: persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability.

Persistence

Persistence is the affordance of automatically recording and archiving online communication and social practices on social media platforms. While the default in offline human interaction is for it to be ephemeral, online technologies allow for the recording, chronicling and saving of the content we produce on social media, whether it is a photo that we have shared, a comment that we have made or a 'like' button that we have pressed. And while we are presumably capturing the moment we have lived accurately by recording it (Benjamin, 1969), what we capture could be interpreted differently over time (boyd, 2010). boyd (2010) raises concerns over consuming these

recorded activities and practices outside the intended context on which they were produced. For example, issues of ‘revenge porn’ (where an ex-partner distributes private photos or texts once shared online with him/her by a former lover out of revenge), is an example of how persistence might be a potential hazard (Bates, 2017; Stroud, 2014). Because of this particular affordance, Saudi women end up grappling/dealing with issues of trust and concerns over privacy and family surveillance as they develop their online identities and engage socially on networked publics (see Chapter 4). Even though persistence has become one of the most common and normative affordances in social media platforms, some recent social network applications have questioned this affordance and challenged it, such as the case with Snapchat in 2013. Upon observing how social practices change once on Snapchat, we can understand how persistence influences our social engagement online. For example, users report sharing photos that are only humorous or relevant at a particular moment on Snapchat that they might not share on Facebook. These photographs would lose their significance when the moment passes, and so they are not meant to endure, or are not worthy of archiving (Miller et al, 2016).

Replicability

Replicability is the ability to duplicate and reproduce information that has been shared on networked publics. A user’s post on a platform can be duplicated and edited by other users before it gets redistributed again. Functions such as the ‘retweet’ button on Twitter or the ‘Share’ button on Facebook are examples of features that encapsulate this affordance. Replicability is what enables something to go ‘viral’ on network publics. Therefore, this affordance is key in explaining the ease with which people can spread gossip and undermine reputations and betray one another, something that Saudis are very mindful of in a shame-honour culture that values reputation and links it closely to women’s behaviour. On the positive side, the affordance of replicability is functional in building a reputation and achieving fame, something that will be returned to later in this chapter when the trend of micro-celebrities is addressed (Senft, 2008).

3.4.3 Scalability

Scalability is one of the central affordances that shape network publics. It is basically the potential visibility of the content we produce on social media platforms. A Friend list is an aspect of the scalability affordance (however, as mentioned above, it should be noted that the people on those lists might not be the only ones viewing our digital activities). The popularity of technologies and social network sites means that the audience that we imagine watching us could

easily be much broader or in some cases smaller than we think. Miller et al (2016) introduced the notion of 'scalable sociality' (which will be fully outlined in Chapter 4) to evaluate social media practices in relation to this particular affordance. In essence, scalable sociality is the act of adjusting the scale of socialising in terms of reach to accord with the user's preference. Because of the scalability affordance of social media, combined with the replicability affordance noted above, users have the potential to reach a massive audience, thereby achieving heavy visibility that grants them a degree of 'fame'. Indeed, 'micro-celebrities' (Senft, 2008) on social media platforms are a by-product of this affordance (discussed below). However, this is true only for a niche group of users who are able to reach that degree of popularity.

Searchability

Finally, searchability refers to the content and information generated and shared on social media platforms which can be found and accessed by simply online searching. Hashtags, for example, comprise microdata that are commonly attached to the content generated in order for it to be grouped with other content on the platform that falls within the same category, making it possible for users to search and access a certain hashtag to view all media content that has been labelled by it. This makes the emergence of 'hot topics' and trends or even campaigns much easier as people can group all discussions around the topic in a single space. For instance, current events usually get their own hashtag on Twitter, such as #InaugurationDay2017 #WomenMarch, and are practically compartments where all tweets generated around these topics can be found. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia hashtags such as #StylishSaudis and #SaudisAgainstMaleGuardianship are promoting new trends both in the appearance and in the attitudes of Saudi women. Furthermore, searchability means that anyone who is in the networked publics could be found, and as almost all online activities leave trace, it is also possible to obtain the location. Some platforms even allow you to track your contacts' geolocation and search where they have physically been. Just recently, in July 2017, Snapchat introduced Snap Map, which locates your friends and maps their movements live, thereby transcending the digital frame of the network public and entangling our digital existence with our physical one. This again has many implications for issues of privacy and surveillance, but it is also transferring Saudi users' opposite-sex connections, meetings and intimacies from strictly a digital context to include physical ones too. A young woman could check which of her male contacts is physically around her in a restaurant through 'Nearby' buttons in platforms such as Swarm and Facebook, which could encourage them to physically greet each other and have engage in offline communication.

These affordances shape the public that these actions take place in. As a result, scholars (Litt, 2012; boyd, 2010; Marwick and boyd, 2010; Hartley, Burgess, and Bruns, 2013) observe that certain dynamics are introduced which the users must contend with: the imagined or the invisible audience, context collapse and the blurring of the public and private. These dynamics end up impacting our communication and social relationships on social networks (they are fully explored in Chapter 4, which reviews intimate relations online). However, now that networked publics have been adequately discussed, the notion of identity and self-representation online can be reviewed .

Newcastle University

C O N S E N T F O R M

Project: Exploring Young Saudi Women's Engagement with Social Media: Feminine Identities, Culture and National Image

1	I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information sheet	☐
2	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation	☐
3	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project	☐
4	I understand that I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing, nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn	☐
5	The procedures regarding confidentiality (e.g. the use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) have been clearly explained to me	☐
6	The use of data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me	☐

I consent to participate in this project	YES	NO
I consent to any information I provide to the project being used in the writing up of the research, in publications, uploaded to websites and included in archives of research reports, **provided that** unless I give my express permission, my name and other identifying personal details will not be associated with the information I provide	YES	NO

Participant

Name of Participant ____________ Signature ____________ Date ____________

Newcastle University

Research Information Sheet for Focus Groups:

Research project:

We invite you to participate in this focus group as part of our research project on *Exploring Young Saudi Women's Engagement with Social Media: Feminine Identities, Culture and National Image* The project's overall objective is to understand the way social media platforms affected Saudi women's visibility in the media, society and relations with the opposite sex. This sheet provides you with information about why the research is being done, by whom and what is involved. This background information is to ensure that you are able to make an informed decision about whether or not to take part in the interview.

Who are the Research Team?

The research team members are Norah Altuwayjiri under the supervision of Deborah Chambers and Chris Haywood from Newcastle University.

What is the research about?

Our research is aimed at observing how Saudi women engage with social media today, and examines the effect this has on their level of comfort regarding how visible they are. While also considering the resulting changes in the way romantic relations and attachments are being made.

Who are the participants? When is the project running?

We are running focus groups over Skype with Saudi men and women about how they engage with social media today and their daily practises online, their views on the accepted and appropriate level of engagement between the opposite sexes online and offline. We are also conducting a series of personal interviews with some of the participants to further explore issues that need expanding on. The project runs from January 2014 to January 2017.

What would be involved?

If you choose to participate, we would request you give us your Skype address (if you don't have one, we will issue one for you) we will then like to ask you a series of broad questions about your attitude towards social media and how you engage with it. These questions include:

a) How have social media platforms changed the level of visibility of women in the Saudi society?

b) How did the introduction of social media change the way men and women approach marriage and romantic relationships in Saudi?

c) How are social media platforms enabling women to be heard and seen in a segregated community?

d) What is the role that social media plays in empowering women financially, socially and politically in Saudi Arabia?

How will the data be treated?

The Skype focus groups and interviews will be video recorded from the researchers Skype account if you give us permission to do so (you can choose to not appear on video recording and only participate vocally during the skype call). If not, we will take notes to record your answers and later transfer them into the computer. The information will then be deleted from any notebooks. Both the personal computer and research folder are password protected. The audio recordings will be transcribed into a Word document and linked with NVivo, a software package designed to assist researchers in managing interview data.

Will everything you say to me be kept private?

Yes, all information will be confidential.

The requirements of Newcastle University's ethical guidelines will be strictly observed. This means that at all times the researcher must observe the welfare of the research participants and respect the dignity and personal privacy of the individual. All data collected will also be stored securely and safely. All data to be published will be completely anonymous in order to protect the confidentiality of participants. In practical terms, this means that:

- All the information that is collected will be kept strictly confidential.
- All data will be stored and subject to usual security protocols, adhering to the requirements of the Data Protection Act via the use of passwords and encryption.
- Issues of commercial confidentiality will be respected.
- All data will be fully anonymised.
- This is achieved via the use of pseudonyms.
- This anonymity is extended to any other individual or organisation referred to.
- The data will be used to advance academic knowledge and/or professional practice only and will not be used for any other purpose.
- With this express aim, anonymised data may be incorporated into articles or presentations.

What will you get out of it?

You will have a chance to express your views about today's Saudi society and changes taking place in in it in relation to women. You will have an opportunity engage in the current debates about women's rights; and contribute your own experience with social media as a Saudi and the way it effected you personally. Participation involves no known or anticipated risks.

Is this voluntary? What if you change your mind about taking part?

Your involvement in this research project is wholly voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the research at any point you wish. If you do so, you do not have to give a reason.

What next?

We will produce the general outcomes of our research on the attached website: insert hyperlink. If there are any areas that require further clarification, you are welcome to contact the team on the contact email address below. We will be pleased to answer any questions. If you choose not to take part in this research, we wish to thank you for your time. You need take no further action.

On the next page is a Participant Consent Form. We will bring two copies to our meeting. I will ask you to complete and sign both copies and we will each retain a copy.

Contact: Norah Altuwayjiri, Newcastle University.
Email: n.a.altuwayjiri@ncl.ac.uk.

Exploring Young Saudi Women's Engagement with Social Media: Feminine Identities, Culture and National Image.

End-of-project debriefing document

The purpose of this debriefing document is to provide you with information about the findings of our research. At the start of our research project, we provided an information sheet that outlined our research plan. We explained that we are exploring the effect of social media on the visibility of women in Saudi Arabia. We are also studying the changing ways in approaching romantic relationships because of these platforms. Our aim is to assess the power of these social networks in changing attitudes towards women's increased engagement in society.

With your help via the processes of gathering information, this thesis examined the way in which social media usage impacts the values, norms and attitudes of young Saudi women and the way in which they perform their identity and socialise with the opposite sex. The findings show that social media engagement is facilitating Saudi women's transition into self-managing subjects, impacting their values, norms in relation to veiling, work and confinement to the public sphere, as well as impacting their attitudes towards romance and wider intimacy practices. Their participation on digital networks is facilitating The emergence of unconventional identities on social media platforms amongst Saudi women. Accordingly, this is bringing about significant transformation to the public images of young Saudi women and negotiating Saudi nationalists positioning of them as the representatives of the collectivity's honour. This may suggest a movement towards revising gender roles within the Saudi nation. Overall, by examining how young women approach self-presentation on social media today, this research feeds into a broader project of exploring Saudi women's public image transformation and the relation between the Saudi nation and contemporary feminine Saudi identities.

We have provided our details with this document should you need to contact the research team. We would like to thank you for your participation in this study.

Contact Details:

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