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Creating Public Space:

Counter-hegemonic voices in the social media age

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this work is my own.

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ABSTRACT

The rise of independent public voices in a space unrestricted by physical means of coercion has arguably changed the dynamics of media power in Saudi Arabia. This study looks at dissenting counter-discourses on social media platforms that coincided with the Arab uprisings, proposing new framings in the areas of liberty, religion, women and the arts. Using 36 in-depth and semi-structured interviews, the study argues that social media has allowed multiple publics to emerge and contest the dominant ideology and its singular mode of thought into a world that recognises diversity, pluralism, creativity and civil engagement. This study also explores public perceptions of rising dissent through 10 focus groups in different regions of the Kingdom. These groups on the one hand have welcomed and supported dissent not only in privileged social circles but also amongst the less privileged young generation who have found in the internet an opportunity to network, change their thought and support critical voices. On the other hand, some groups highlight the extent to which the dominant ideology is woven into the social fabric, reflecting what people believe, how they think and the ways in which they actively work to reproduce the hegemonic narrative from a bottom-up perspective. The study concludes that even though social media has provided a space where dissent may be welcomed and supported, it has been equally neutralised by the internalisation of hegemony.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF FIGURES

PART I:
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

The inception of social media platforms in Saudi Arabia did not bring about revolutionary protests and movements as it did in several neighbouring countries. Unique to Saudi Arabia is an image of stability, wealth and piety. This representation became highly contested when the public were able to put forward their own perceptions, opinions and cultural practices on social media platforms. Despite not bringing about a movement capable of toppling the regime, social media has witnessed a movement on an ideational level – one which challenges the dominant construction of the pious, loyal, stable and wealthy nation. There has been a shift in power dynamics from the elite religious and liberal centres of power, to the less privileged, yet highly educated younger generation who are better at representing their nation's grievances and concerns.

This chapter provides a multidimensional theoretical framework to the study of contentious expressions and discourses disseminating on social media by focusing on three main terrains of knowledge. The first terrain considers theories of hegemony and power chiefly through Gramsci (1971) and Bourdieu (1991). Secondly, it introduces social movement theories to appropriately situate this study in the social movement debate. Thirdly, the notion of the public sphere is introduced, as initially theorised by Habermas (1989) and later developed in Fraser's (1990) counterpublics. The fourth part of the chapter reviews recent literature on social movements and the online public sphere in mainly authoritarian contexts. The final part aims to demonstrate how democratically-born theories of power, hegemony, social movements and counterpublics can be tailored to authoritarian contexts. It additionally summarises different approaches to the study of social media contention: the technologically deterministic, the anti-technological, and the in-between approach.

1.1 Power and hegemony in an authoritarian system

Embodied in Gramsci's notion of power is hegemony, whereby the dominant class wins moral and intellectual leadership, forming a 'historic bloc' to legitimise and perpetuate its control. Despite originating from a class-based Western context, hegemony can be a

useful tool in explaining how power is secured through a combination of consensual and coercive control. In the Gramscian understanding of hegemony, the state is not the sole holder of power, it is rather intertwined with civil society, which provides it with the necessary 'consent' to legitimise and perpetuate its domination. For Gramsci, the state is defined as 'the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules' (Gramsci, 1996: 244).

In its Western democratic ideal, consent is secured via civil society while coercion is exercised by political society. It is vital for a hegemonic rule to incorporate an ideational frame of thought that propagates its ideology and normalises the status quo. In the Saudi example, this can be achieved through the state's ideological apparatuses that adopt a religious discourse, where the latter operates as a universal system of thought. It becomes embedded in mosques, schools, the media, and is embraced by the collective society. Although civil society is non-existent in the Saudi context, consensus and ideational authority is achieved through religious scholars (*ulama*) who issue fatwas, regulate public space, and govern social and moral aspects of society while officially appointed in the religious establishment. Achieving hegemonic consent through religion this way is not new, since 'in the political conception of the Renaissance, religion was consent and the Church was civil society, the hegemonic apparatus of the ruling group' (Gramsci, 1996: 170).

Gramsci's notion of hegemony in the analysis ideological domination of Arab authoritarian regimes has been borrowed in several studies (Ayubi, 1995; Bayat, 2007; Chalcraft, 2016; Prokop, 1999). What is new here is the attempt to incorporate this notion in a Saudi online context. These major works pave the way for a (modified) Gramscian approach to the study of Arab states and societies. Chalcraft states that 'Gramsci sometimes wrote of the hegemony of the state (rather than of a particular social class) and this is taken up here as a way to make sense of the combinations of coercion and consent at work in the construction of political community' (2016: 32-33).

Key to adopting Gramscian analysis in a Middle Eastern context is understanding hegemony as a political regime that owns both coercive as well as moral and intellectual means to dominate society. 'The history of the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] offers a vast amount of evidence in regard to the utility of hegemony' in that sense (Chalcraft, 2016: 539). Not only is hegemony secured in a top-down articulation – through the state's physical control and cultural domination – but 'upward delegation' is also crucial in the maintenance of the dominant bloc (Chalcraft, 2016: 540). This is demonstrated in the forms of loyalty and obedience offered by Saudi's predominantly tribal society.

In Bayat's (2007) analysis of the Egyptian 'passive revolution', he finds two mechanisms for exercising hegemony. One is through coercive authoritarian control, and the other is through what Gramsci names 'war of position' (Gramsci, 1971), that is 'exerting moral and intellectual leadership over civil institutions', represented in the case of Egypt by the Muslim Brotherhood's seizure of civil society institutions and propagating Islamism (Bayat, 2007: 21). Adhering to a fundamentalist reading of Islam served the Egyptian state in securing its dominance, as it exerted a religious form of repression which connects well with its secular authoritarianism (Bayat, 2007: 181-2). In the context of this study, it can be argued that despite the absence of civil society institutions in Saudi Arabia, the Islamist Sahwa movement (Lacroix, 2011) exerted a similar hegemonic role to that of civil society in Egypt. By mediating between the state and the people and exercising a form of fundamentalist Islam, Sahwists, like their parallel Muslim Brotherhood, are arguably 'winning over society by establishing institutional, intellectual, and moral hegemony: 'A social group can, and indeed must already exercise "leadership" before winning governmental power' (Gramsci, 1971: 207, cited in Bayat, 2007: 21). This is how Saudi's hegemonic power is articulated; in addition to its coercive nature, it manages to secure consent through Islamism.

1.1.2 Defining ideology

The classic Marxian definition regards ideology as false consciousness, which 'assumes that there is one true ascribed ideology per class' and sees that 'true knowledge must be subject to a sort of masking' (Hall, 1985: 97). This study counters this position in a similar way to Althusser (1971), and later Thompson (1984, 1995) and Fairclough (1992) in viewing ideology as a set of beliefs and meanings implemented in an invisible way, appearing as a given reality or part of an inherited social structure.

One important application of Althusser's thesis is the role of Ideological State Apparatuses in institutionalising and normalising ideology through processes of misrecognition and interpellation (Althusser, 1971), and therefore reproducing 'subjects' who assume their beliefs, practices and attitudes are their own, and align themselves unknowingly with the dominant power. This is especially useful in understanding how patriarchal control and religious conservatism in Saudi Arabia operate as common-sense practices, in which people become participants in 'the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of domination' (Fairclough, 1992: 87).

1.1.3 Symbolic power and the Habitus

Central to the study of contestation against the dominant ideology is understanding how power operates at times of rapid social change. This study incorporates the notion of 'symbolic power' (Bourdieu, 1991) to understand how power is embedded in everyday practice, and how it affects contentious voices in their quest to challenge the established dominant view: 'For symbolic power is that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it' (Bourdieu, 1991: 194). The importance of this concept is in uncovering the 'invisible' characteristics at play that constitute unconscious habits, practices, decisions and actions that individuals adopt in a seemingly natural manner (1991: 163). It is 'a power that can be exercised only if it is recognized, that is, misrecognized as arbitrary' (Bourdieu, 1991: 170), and it is what ultimately underpins individuals' subordination to the dominant system of thought, spread across state cultural institutions, informing public attitude and discipline.

Symbolic power is 'the power of constituting the given... of making people see and believe, of conforming or transforming the vision of the world' (Bourdieu 1991: 163). It works unrecognisably in classifications of sciences and educational systems, appearing as established facts. These classifications are strengthened by the ideologies shared in a certain social field. The significance of these ideologies lies in the 'imposition of political systems of classification beneath the legitimate appearance of philosophical, religious, legal (etc.) taxonomies' (1991: 170), thus securing dominance and easing its reproduction through what appears as scientific knowledge, established religious facts, inherent cultural traditions and acts of national interest.

The institutionalisation of symbolic power in a state system happens by incorporating the means of domination into cultural institutions such as religious and media institutions, argues Thompson (1995). Such institutions have been historically responsible for the accumulation and distribution of 'symbolic forms' of power (Thompson, 1995: 16).

A vital point in Thompson's analysis is what happens to symbolic power when old media forms – namely script – extend to new 'print' media. This development, according to Thompson, marks the 'emergence of new centres and networks of symbolic power which were generally outside the direct control of the Church and the state, but which the Church and the state sought to use to their advantage and, from time to time, to suppress' (1995: 53). This perspective is useful in looking at how centres of symbolic power shifted in Saudi Arabia when traditional mass media transformed into online social media platforms, appearing in parallel with non-state-regulated media sources such as electronic newspapers and other emerging centres of news dissemination. It also

helps with understanding what happens when banned sources of knowledge – like books that propagate an Islamic-democratic style of thought – become widely disseminated among Saudis *online,* where political-religious control is not always present.

Despite originating in a Western capitalist system, the notion of symbolic power is relevant to the Saudi context as it uncovers forms of dominance implicit in the official religious discourse which secures the regime's consent and legitimacy, using the religious symbol of *the cradle of Islam* to impose that divine form of power. Symbolic power is also key to unpacking the ways in which contentious voices attempt to challenge this seemingly sacred dominant narrative, which is deeply intertwined with Saudi's tribalist structure, religious practice and identity. It also helps explain social media users' positions from the seemingly subversive reformist, feminist and radical artistic voices.

There are also power dynamics embedded in what appear to be mundane everyday practices. To unpack these dynamics this study incorporates Bourdieu's 'habitus' (1996) as a way of highlighting the seemingly inherent individual characteristics and practices that work indirectly to legitimise the dominant ideology and act against dissent. These characteristics are structured by the individual's position in a social structure, and work to guide their manners, tastes, and attitudes in favour of the dominant interest. Such ingrained dispositions are another way to consider power lying in the most implicit places: in individuals' choices of media products and artistic taste, for example. These choices may not be contentious per se, but they nevertheless highlight the power of adopting certain tastes, which appear in the form of personal dispositions, while being constructed by dominant forms of social classification. Or as Bourdieu puts it: 'The schemes of the habitus, the primary forms of classification, owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will' (1996: 467). The habitus is therefore key to investigating the power dynamics inherent in dominant perceptions, underpinning prevalent acts of discrimination against less privileged groups such as women and artists.

As this research focuses on how counter-hegemonic ideas and perceptions are produced from within the social structure, it is vital to explore how social movements are produced and framed. The next section shifts the focus to how resistance is manifested in social movements research.

1.2 Social movements in an authoritarian context

The foregoing discussion outlined how mediated ideas can be controlled and acquiesced in a top-down form, how ideologies are established, and how hegemony is secured through the mix of coercion and consent. This section looks at the other side that contests dominance, how needs are expressed and how grievances are articulated in contentious framings and movements; for hegemony 'cannot be understood without reference to the subaltern population and the projects mobilizing it' (Chalcraft, 2016: 536).

Scholars have long theorised and debated about why social movements occur, how they are framed, and what it is that mobilises the masses. To achieve a fuller understanding of social movements, this section reviews the foundational pillars of social movement studies, to inform the relevant framework that formulates this research's questions.

Social movements studies highlight three factors central to the creation of a social movement: political opportunities, organisation and mobilisation structures, and framing processes (McAdam et al., 2008; McAdam et al. 1996). Political opportunities occur when a political regime is confronted with challenges as a result of regional instabilities, failure in repressive forces, or elite divisions (McAdam, 1999; Meyer, 2004; Tarrow, 1994), alongside collective readiness to push for social change – this occurs when sufficient awareness of civil and human rights becomes available, together with deep depression and feelings of injustice. *Political opportunity* gives emphasis to the cracks and ruptures in a given political system, leading to the creation of collective action frames by social actors who are ready to seize the opportunity (Zald, 1996: 268). *Contentious politics* draws on the relationship between groups, resources and political influence, focusing on the movement's organisation, strategic planning and mobilisation structures, highlighting how social movement groups navigate their way by necessary political means, such as connecting to power centres, coalition with elites, or perhaps protests and demonstrations (Tilly, 1978; Tilly, 1986; Tilly and Tarrow, 2007). Dynamics of contention for social movement theorists are situated at the heart of the political opportunity structure (McAdam et al., 2001) and thus may determine the success or failure of social movements (McAdam et al., 1996; Tarrow, 1994). Contentious politics therefore highlights the significance of collective action frames in utilising political opportunities for social change, either by institutionalised or non-institutionalised strategies, depending on the political climate they operate within (Johnston, 2014; McAdam et al., 2001; Tilly, 1978).

Social movement's stages of organisation, mobilisation, and political contention are fundamental components in political process theory. This theory looks at social movements from a political point of view (Jasper and Goodwin, 2012; McAdam et al.,

1996; Tarrow, 1996), where each stage exerts causal influence that progresses the movement to the next stage until it reaches contentious political mobilisation (McAdam, 1999; Tilly, 1986). These stages are also central to resource mobilisation theory, which especially focuses on the way social actors resource their movement through knowledge, funds, social solidarity and wider legitimacy (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). The more access to resources that political actors have the stronger their chance becomes to reach contentious political mobilisation.

Mobilisation may occur when cultural interpretations 'are brought into active contradiction by the force of events' (Zald, 1996: 268) leading to a disruptive situation. This contradiction is said to be driven by a discrepancy between political actions and ideological justifications given by official establishments (Zald, 1996). Examples of such contradiction could be traced across Saudi Arabian history from the Gulf War of 1990, to the war on terror, and recently during the Egyptian coup and declaring the Muslim Brotherhood to be a terrorist party. Each situation manifests a rupture in state legitimacy for acting in a contradictory manner to established religious justifications. The first example is the government's alliance with the West during the Gulf War which conflicts with the strict religious fatwas prevalent at the time. The second example is the demolishing of the notion of *Jihad* as a religious duty and instead labelling it as terror in a post-September 11 discourse. The third is the reversed relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood and labelling them as terrorists after their books and Islamic teachings were bred into the previous generation. Each of these conditions resulted in disruption, dissent and small-scale mobilisations, particularly from religious groups. Yet the further away the religious publics are from power centres, the less is their chance to effectively channel their demands.

The framing dimension focuses on discourse in the sense of creating cohesion, unity and guidance among social actors. Strategic framing consists of ideas that unite a group and lead to their mobilisation (Tilly, 1978: 7-8). Zald (1996) defines strategic frames as 'specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues used to render or cast behavior and events in an evaluative mode and to suggest alternative modes of action' (262). Frames and master frames provide their members with the necessary interpretations to create the ethos of a movement and guide its path (Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986; Snow and Benford, 1988). Zald (1996) exemplifies this with civil rights movement frames which provide its members with the necessary means to interpret the world around them and equip them with the global language of rights to communicate their demands (269). This process of interpretation also consists of 'the construction of meaning, the portrayal of injustice, and the definition of pathways to change' (Zald, 1996: 269). Johnston (2014) refers to these frames as 'the cognitive schemata that guide interpretation of events' (4), which is likely to operate on a

subconscious level (18). The moment strategic framing turns into collective action is when the cultural interpretations clash by the force of events (Zald, 1996). Through this dimension, the study of the Saudi Arabian anti-corruption campaigns that accelerated with the prevalence of social networking sites in early 2011, along with political campaigns and anti-media propaganda discourse spread through 2011 Saudi YouTube videos, can be drawn into a broader frame of civil rights and political recognition that began to arise in Saudi Arabian society.

Social movements are usually guided with 'big, change-oriented ideas' (Johnston, 2014: 13), and exemplified with the great revolutions in history: the French, Russian or Iranian Revolutions. Yet social movements do not necessarily reach the optimal point of mobilisation. It is important to state that the study of social movement does not necessarily imply a focus on protest or mobilisation in particular, but rather a general interest in the incentives leading to the creation of different forms of contest, whether or not they develop into significant action. This research is specifically interested in *the creation of subaltern frames as a form of challenge to the dominant ideology in the Saudi Kingdom*, and the socio-political dynamics that occur as a consequence of the clash in cultural and religious interpretations in times of political instability and rising grievances. The conceptualisation of collective frames provides the necessary tool to explore the ways in which human and political rights in the Kingdom have grown with the prevalence of social media and built strategic frames that guide activists' campaigns and channel their demands.

Another important aspect of framing in social movements is the distinction between frames and ideologies. Indeed massive, sweeping ideas are classic to social movements as they extend from their native nations and 'play out in other nations and cultures' (Zald, 1996: 273). Frames may be influenced by a Marxist or Islamic fundamentalist ideology, for instance they may operate on a cross-national level, albeit on a lesser scope than grand ideologies (McAdam et al., 1996). Frames tend to signify a certain way of thinking that may challenge the dominant, for instance some frames are humanist, as in promoting civil rights. Frames are ordinarily linked to established cultural or institutional patterns that exist in a social structure – they may alter, challenge and add to these patterns. Frames also share an inclusive relationship with the collective identity of a given group. A collective identity, known as identified shared beliefs and values, provides its group with the adequate support to adopt and spread its ideas, which becomes a vital element for mobilising resources as well as creating political opportunities (Melucci, 1995; Wright, 2001). There are sets of factors that add to the spread of alternative frames in the context of Saudi Arabia, including the substantial youth population, and the wide accessibility of social media and instant sharing sites, which have a vital role in the process of framing and interpreting events

(Lim, 2012), in addition to strict authoritarian control. Interest groups in Saudi such as the Islamo-liberals, women activists, religious discussion groups, emerging artists, as well as the – later banned – Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), manifest engagement with global civil and human rights frames.

Even though organisation and mobilisation structures are largely weak in the context of the Kingdom, contentious voices have been extensively formed and raised in relation to political, religious and civil rights and freedoms. Demonstrating the rise of collective action frames that challenges the dominant bloc, these frames are led by subaltern young population who no longer trust the exclusivity of the dominant narrative and therefore set up their own platforms to give alternative narratives to that of the dominant system. Social movements is a useful framework for investigating young Saudis' framing processes and is key to understanding (counter)discourses articulated on social media sites, described by al-Rasheed as a 'quiet revolution' (2015b: 55).

In his extensive study of Arab popular movements from the late 18th century to the 21st, Chalcraft (2016) stresses the significance of what he calls 'critical intellectual mediation' in shaping movements across the Middle East. He concludes that: 'Especially in the early stages of movements, inspiring ideas and normative commitments have helped to motivate adherents and leaderships, and shaped identities, frames, goals, and even strategies and tactics' (Chalcraft, 2016: 543). Yet alone, social movements are 'insufficient tools for connecting contentious mobilization to larger questions of power, historical context and change' (Chalcraft, 2016: 538). Hence the importance of connecting social movements with a wider theoretical framework that can explain questions of power and hegemony.

1.2.1 Religion in social movement research

Religion in the context of Saudi Arabia is a key factor that plays a major role in the creation of collective identities, as well as the spread and contention of collective action frames (Smith, 1996). Aminzade and Perry (2001) pay close attention to religion as a key aspect in the study of social movement frames – it is often neglected in studies with a Western secular focus. A notable distinction mentioned by Aminzade and Perry (2001) is the centrality of religion as the main 'transcendental' source of informing, which may disrupt the logic of action and construct a sense of harmony and stability with the hegemonic rule, inasmuch as it may support a 'revolutionary' purpose in other cases.

At times of political instability and unusual events, conflicts may arise between oppositional religious discourses: 'different interpretations of the same religion can produce acquiescence alongside rebellion and generate conflicts between "official" and

"popular" religion' (Garrett, 1985; cited in Aminzade and Perry, 2001: 157). This point is exemplified in politically-oriented Islamic fatwas produced by the official religious establishment at changing political times, which may disagree with previously issued fatwas, or fatwas propagated by non-establishment clergy. Over time these conflicts rupture the divine legitimacy that shields the political system and strengthen the possibility of growing social contention.

1.2.2 'Nonmovements' and the politics of everyday life

The concept of 'nonmovements' emerged from a Middle Eastern context in which tight restrictions on public spheres exist, and where there is little chance for the people to publicly engage in socio-political affairs. By coining this term, Bayat (2010) addresses the lack of theorisation that could help investigate subversive practices in authoritarian regimes. These practices cannot be regarded as social movements as they lack collective framing, organisation and leadership that may guide their practice. These groups rather act in a fragmented, yet homogenous manner, therefore described as 'the collective action of the noncollective actors' (Bayat, 2010: 14).

In explaining nonmovements, Bayat reminds us of the 'tactical' mobilities that the ordinary public adopts in their attempts to resist dominant forces, 'poach' 'proprietary powers', and subvert the enforced socioeconomic order, which are implicit in the work of de Certeau in what he calls 'an art of the weak' (1984: 37). The role of the people in creatively reinterpreting or perhaps misusing media texts through 'the tricks they use against the system, [and] the pleasures they find in evading or resisting it' is also an important aspect of subaltern resistance against systems of domination, highlighted in the work of Fiske (2010: 129).

If we were to agree that the state weaves its hegemonic rule into the fabric of society through its ideological structure and cultural institutions – in addition to apparatuses of force – then the nonmovement groups that Bayat (2010) describes challenge these very norms in a subtle way. It is not dissent nor activism, but 'mundane' everyday practices that subvert imposed norms and orders. The nonmovement social category can be especially relevant to groups of interest such as women, youth and the poor. Its activity becomes visible at the height of a state's political control, by challenging state's logic of power through their unnoticed presence. Moreover, their effectiveness is determined by the 'insignificance' of their looks. This concept provides an opportunity to consider the agency of non-political actors in which their practices of mundane everyday reality is inherently political. In Bayat's (2010) analysis of everyday Iranian subversive practices, he either conceptualises them through nonmovements, or through the lens of 'refolutions'. The latter conceptualises political activity which moves away from direct

mobilisation, revolution and violence, and tends to demand reform by combining democratic ideals within a religious rhetoric. Yet in times of social media networking, Bayat seems to think that social media sites facilitate the connection of ordinary publics with political actors, which subsequently helps them define their aims through a collective frame, and moves them to a social movement category, demonstrated in the Arab uprising events.

The way nonmovements were turned into active social movements in the Arab Spring context is demonstrated in Zayani's (2015) work on the Tunisian revolution, drawing on 'networked publics', that is, ordinary publics who were able to connect with social actors through the internet, allowing a wider collective frame to be constructed. Zayani's analysis carefully demonstrates the Tunisian government's early modernisation plans – including technological infrastructure – in that it allowed an average Tunisian to become digitally connected online (from 2010), whilst overlooking the growth of online networks as a result of the state's authoritarian control. In this period Zayani mentions that 'ideals of freedom and notions of justice become markers of a shared youth culture' (2015: 23), allowing a humanist rhetoric to spread amongst this group. So when the state belatedly decided to control the internet it 'backfired' and transformed non-political social actors into 'small-scale movements', reproducing collective action frames that enabled them to mobilise and advocate their rights and freedoms.

The Tunisian situation is carefully depicted as an online movement, endorsing Bayat's (2013) view of social media as a space that invites ordinary publics to construct political and civil demands. Yet Bayat is critical about the inclusivity of social media in the Arabic context, which transforms activism into 'chic politics' and 'short lived interventions' (2010: 23). This may not have been relevant in the case of Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, where citizens are predominantly digitally literate. Bayat's (2010: 23) other critical point, however, regarding the increased surveillance in cyberspace, may be more relevant in the Saudi Arabian context, disrupting the ability to gather momentum for collective action and create a long-standing social movement.

The study of Tunisian publics (Zayani, 2015) by and large highlights how nonmovements – breeding and embodying subversive practices and endeavouring to bring about social change – turn into a social movement when the political opportunity becomes available. If the 'story of nonmovements is the story of agency in the times of constraints' as Bayat states (2010: 26), then perhaps this story cannot be better suited to the Saudi Arabian context. The so-called Arab Winter and increased surveillance on social networking sites that followed in 2013 has affected the rising freedom and activism since 2011. This fact has resulted in publics resorting to silence on social media sites, or attempting to find other private means by which they can pursue their political interests. Considering youth

and women as subordinated groups whose demands are not fulfilled and whose space for expression is seized, the concept of nonmovement is a helpful tool to investigate the ways in which their grievances translate into everyday practice.

1.3 Social Media and the Public Sphere

In a Saudi context, the diffusion of the internet in the early 2000s, along with social networking sites later that decade, have arguably allowed for a wide public discussion to take place. It has put individuals from different social realms in contact and encouraged public debate in a way that cannot exist in physical spaces due to tight control over expression, assembly and media, as well as total restriction over civil organisations and trade unions. Virtual spheres have thus become the space in which a rational-critical discourse can arise as a counterbalance to the state's discourse. This can lead to disturbances and attempts to regulate online expression and publications by the ministry of media and information[1].

In this regard, the notion of the public sphere, coined by Habermas (1989), is utilised to address this critical debate taking place on social media sites. Identified as 'a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed' (Habermas, 1974: 49), the concept of the public sphere is problematic inasmuch as it is important in this study. The democratic grounds from which this notion arises are entirely different from this study's authoritarian context, yet some of its features are helpful in consideration of public discussions taking place in the Saudi context.

A notable feature of the public sphere is its emergence in Europe's 18th century salons and coffee-houses through members of the bourgeois society engaging in rational-critical discussion (1989). The importance of the public sphere lies in its purpose as a mode for social integration, constituting an essential part in the democratic process and representing the rise of a rational public, debating social issues and influencing political decisions.

Perhaps the first signs of rational-critical discourses in Saudi Arabia can be attributed to men's private salons, described by scholars as an 'informal public sphere' (Vogel 2012: 25), 'Saudi publicness' (Otterbeck, 2012), 'private *majlis*' (al-Rasheed, 2006: 54) or '*diwaniyya*' (Lacroix, 2004: 346-55). These early forms of gatherings are distinct from a tribal-based majlis where the tribe's chief is the host, ensuring the strict operation of structural social codes and norms. Private intellectual salons were spaces in which a

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[1] Available at: https://www.media.gov.sa/page/74 Accessed: 1 Feb 2019.

rational-critical discourse was formed, however being strictly limited to the intellectual and literary elite has lessened their influence on public opinion (Lacroix, 2004).

Similar to the Habermasian public sphere, political deliberation on Saudi social media has played an important role in the making of a Saudi public sphere in a way that was not available offline, in which something like a civil society can be formed, and where socio-political issues are raised and discussed. It can be further argued that public figures on social media sites have created what Habermas describes as an 'intermediary structure' between state and society, where deliberation takes place and influences the decision-making process (Habermas, 1997: 373). The latter is exemplified in the dismissal of ministers, initiating new laws or royal decrees related to issues arising from social media.

The internet has thus allowed the emergence of a public sphere where Habermasian liberal ideals can be witnessed, and members of the public thrive to create something similar to a civil society. The internet moreover has offered Saudis the space to amplify societal problems, propose solutions and finally make their way into influencing the decision making process (Habermas, 1997). This space for discussion that social media has allowed highlights, in some of its forms, a critical-rational public discourse where demands for civil rights and freedoms arise, forming a counter-discourse to the hegemonic one, and consequently influencing public opinion.

Grassroots attempts to form civil society organisations have undergone severe difficulties. Some of the private salons have witnessed a transition in the internet age into organisations, with their presence restricted to online activity. These organisations were unlicensed locally and later banned from maintaining their activity, with their main members detained, including The Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), which is officially based online (Erayja, 2016: 77). Additionally, Abul-Khair has been detained for hosting 'discussions about human rights in his home' and establishing an 'unlicensed organisation' (Amnesty International, 2018). However, a number of officially sponsored NGOS exist, operating under a religious umbrella (Montagu, 2010). The state later formed human rights organisations as a response to post-September 11 external pressures, in addition to the King Abdulaziz Centre for National Dialogue (Kéchichian, 2012; Thompson, 2014), which performs a cosmetic role for the state in an attempt to improve the Kingdom's image in the West.

Similar to the Habermasian conceptualisation of 'intellectuals, concerned citizens, radical professionals, self-proclaimed "advocates"' who have called into attention the 'great issues of the last decades' (Habermas, 1997: 381), the Saudi online public sphere, despite its less-organised and non-formal civil groupings, has brought attention to issues

of freedom, civil, human and women's rights. Together these groups were able to formulate a narrative contrary to the dominant one, a narrative that represents the public and their aspirations for reform, civil engagement and public representation. Thus, if we were to consider these social actors as aiming to fill the role of civil society actors and human rights activists in democratically open societies, perhaps the utilisation of the public sphere – or 'virtual' public sphere as the upcoming studies name it – would be necessary for investigating this phenomenon.

1.3.1 Critiques of Habermas' model

There have been numerous critiques and reviews of Habermas' public sphere, of which the most relevant is the notion of publicness and counterpublics. Criticisms of the original model include romanticising and overestimating public engagement (Calhoun 1992; Papacharissi, 2008; Lyotard, 1984), denying access to the less privileged, and failing to represent all citizens through its exclusivity to class-based, educated white men (Fraser, 1990; Garnham 2007; Lister et al., 2009) and therefore representing an obstacle towards pluralism (Mouffe, 2000). Several scholars have thus argued for multiple publics (Asen and Brouwer, 2001; Dahlgren, 2001; Eley, 1992). The merit of utilising this notion online is accommodating different interest groups and allowing deliberation to take place between them. A particularly useful theoretical development of this Habermasian notion is Fraser's 'counterpublics' (1990).

Fraser offers a post-industrial reformulation that, contrary to Habermas' exclusive model, embraces the voices of the disadvantaged. Counterpublics present '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' (Fraser, 1990: 67). Counterpublics is a useful conceptual tool in the Saudi Arabian example for investigating certain groups like women activists, Islamo-liberal thinkers and artists. Such groups are active in campaigns concerning, for instance, women's right to drive, media misrepresentation and land monopoly. Counterpublics can also be translated into Saudi youth who have long been marginalised not only from recognition in policy-making, but also from cultural expression. The so-called YouTube boom in 2012 marks a prime moment of producing a youth counter-discourse that challenges state-sponsored media propaganda. The acceleration in producing comedy-shows, video-blogs, short films and artworks highlights the degree of young Saudis' exclusion, the hunger for personal expression, and the intense energy to create a counter narrative that goes beyond collective norms and dominant modes of representation. These creative virtual spaces can be said to expand 'the discursive space' as a 'response to exclusions within dominant publics' (Fraser, 1990: 67). Finally, despite the number of weaknesses and critiques of

the original public sphere model, it nevertheless presents a fruitful departure point for research endeavouring to tackle online spheres.

1.3.2 Social media, (counter)publicness, and social movements

A theoretical divide has dominated the field of new media in relation to enabling a public sphere and social movements to emerge. One part is infused with an overwhelming technological rhetoric, hailing the role of new platforms in democratising nations and challenging media dominance. Another is pessimistic, denying the role of technology in the enticement of dissent, or criticising the overstatement of these business-oriented platforms in liberating nations. A third strand has emerged, paving the way for critical, context-specific studies, arguing that the technological focus is not sufficient in determining social movements or change, rather it all depends on context.

Determinism versus constructivism

The first strand to social media activism carries an optimistic sentiment, arguing for technology's empowering and democratising role in societies (Castells 2009; Howard; 2010; Shirky, 2008; Shirky, 2010). It promotes social change and influences public opinion through offering a space for dissent that is publicly 'forbidden' (Shirky, 2011), in addition to creating an alternative space that never previously existed (Bohman, 2004; Slevin, 2000), highlighting a multitude of opinions and individuals participating online (Goode, 2005). The problem with these accounts is that overstating the power of social media in determining sociopolitical change, as KhosraviNik argues, 'stems from this very dilution of society into what goes online in such a way that the availability of technological affordance per se is assumed to be the ultimate sufficient context *and* force for actual social, political, and cultural change in society' (2017: 586).

The critical (or pessimistic) approach towards social media questions the considerable proliferation of "empowered" users and marginalised voices, arguing that social media – in Western contexts – have not shown a significant revival in political discussions in relation to offline modes available for political discussion and dissent (Fuchs, 2014; Morozov, 2011). The same stance also questions social media platforms' commercial objectives in harvesting human agency and enabling social movements.

In this regard van Dijck (2009) and van Dijck and Poell (2015) argue that social media businesses do not have political liberation as their main agenda, rather they are interested in fostering any social activity for profit-making purposes. By seemingly appearing in an alternative format than mainstream media, social media platforms *deceive* social actors with an illusory sense of authority and empowerment. 'Media

power', in Poell and van Dijck's view, 'has neither been transferred to the public, nor to activists for that matter; instead, power has partly shifted to the technological mechanisms and algorithmic selections operated by large social media corporations', who own and shape today's alternative news (2015: 534). In a similar account, Fuchs (2014) provides a critical investigation into 'mainstream' social media platforms and search engines from a political economy perspective. His analysis of Twitter, for example, views data usage for profitable purposes as a labour exploitation element which only reflects existing power structures in today's capitalist society (Fuchs, 2014: 190-2). Although Fuchs (2014) has clearly set out his scepticism towards deterministic accounts that exaggerate the role of social media as an 'alternative' space for expression or democratisation, his Marxist vision of labour exploitation by dominant forces seems overdone as it downplays any possible role that social media can perform in different contexts and political systems, due to its profit-oriented structure.

In addition, Haunss (2015) points out a range of problems in analysing online movements. Ranging from social media's commercial orientation, to enhanced state electronic surveillance, and finally the major issue of users' ambiguity. That is, the inability to differentiate protestors from external sympathisers during campaigns and protests, as the latter category arguably encompasses the majority of users (Haunss, 2015: 25). Other scepticisms about online grassroots movements include minority domination, discourse fragmentation, issues of accessibility and anonymity, and limited spatial representation (Papacharissi, 2002 and 2010). Thus Papacharissi argues that the online sphere 'is dominated by bourgeois computer holders, much like the one traced by Habermas consisting of bourgeois property holders' (2002: 21). For Papacharissi the internet has become merely an alternative instrument for the existing political culture, therefore 'whether this public space transcends to a public sphere is *not* up to the technology itself' (Papacharissi, 2002: 9). In this regard Fuchs assertively states that 'Twitter is not a public sphere' (2014: 200). For him it reflects the 'continued importance of Habermas's argument that the bourgeois public sphere has created, as Marx has already observed, its own limits and thereby its own immanent critique' (Fuchs, 2014: 200), for it cannot bridge inequality nor achieve social representation – which the Habermasian model was criticised for. Twitter furthermore contradicts the very 'promises of bourgeois society' in Fuchs' view, such as freedoms of expression, association and assembly (Fuchs, 2014: 200; Trottier and Fuchs, 2015: 8).

Lister et. al. (2009) support the latter argument while reviewing Kellner's (2001) utopian view of the internet as an empowerment vehicle for 'large numbers of individuals and groups kept out of the democratic dialogue during the Big Media Age' (Kellner, 2001: 6; cited in Lister et al., 2009). For Lister et al. these are case-specific outcomes of certain micro movements, they 'appear online as a series of fragmented,

single-issue information clusters. Nowhere is there any necessary or prescribed causal or dialectical linkage between them, only the hyperlink-age of network media' (Lister et al., 2009: 220). This manifested *fragmentation* calls attention to the overestimation of the role of technology in the making of a public sphere and mobilising social movements.

Other sources of literature underscore the prevalence of fake news (Spohr, 2017), disinformation (Bandeli and Agarwal, 2018; Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017), and other negative attitudes such as hate speech (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017), cyber-bullying (Oladepo, 2015) and trolling (Cheng et al., 2017; Cruz, Seo and Rex, 2018). These studies point to important negative aspects of social media that inhibit a rational-critical debate. Such characteristics and practices were apparent in the Saudi case when social media activity reached a point of saturation and the so-called state 'invasion' by officials. When fake news and accounts are disseminated and the state capitalises on trolling and bots to curtail activism (detailed in the following chapter), social media platforms became less of a trusted public voice. However, the period examined in this thesis coincides with the newness of social media platforms on which a variety of non-mainstream opinions were formed, fostering a religious-political debate accordingly. In addition, since fake news and disinformation already existed as part of the official media machinery, the first few years of social media therefore witnessed a rise in subaltern views that were predominantly silenced.

A dystopian example

Social media's role in three different protests in the United States, Spain and Egypt, which occurred consecutively in close periods of time, was studied by Gerbaudo (2012), leading to his conceptualisation of 'choreography of assembly', which refers to social media's central theme in forming collective aggregation throughout these global protests in 2011. This role however has decreased in the Egyptian example following youth activated offline communication and face-to-face interaction in the streets. This finding, according to Gerbaudo (2012), is demonstrated by the way protests were not affected by the internet disconnection that occurred for a couple of days at the height of the street demonstrations. Salem's (2015) analysis of the Egyptian revolution builds on Gerbaudo's view of the inconsistent role of social media in the Egyptian revolution, stating that social media has not continued to achieve similar political engagement after the toppling of Mubarak, as the findings suggest less attention and publicity regarding socio-political concerns in the referendum phase than the protest phase (2015). This has led Salem (2015) to conclude that 'the nature of social media means that dramatic, sensational news travels faster than more mundane news' (185). Social media thus cannot stand equal to civil societies even in authoritarian conditions, for it does not guarantee continuation in political engagement, nor does it ensure democratisation of the public

sphere, as Fuchs (2014) argued earlier. What made the Egyptian revolution significant, according to these studies, was not the power of social media, but the political opportunity seized by the crowd, united in their demands, triggered by deeper and more complex social grievances that came to the fore and constructed a collective action frame.

In contrast, Howard and Hussain's (2013) study asserts the significant role played by social media sites in the Egyptian revolution. Their conclusion draws on the striking 'leaderless' organisation structure that was enabled by social media. While Gerbaudo's (2012) extensive critical study on three different contexts, including that of Egypt 2011, concludes on the existing hierarchy in all forms of online social organisation, according to Gerbaudo (2012) social media has developed a softer form of leadership which tends to replace older organisation structures and 'exploit the interactive and participatory character of new communication technologies' (13). This contrast again stresses the danger of overestimating the relationship between technology and social movements. The problem – of both optimistic and pessimistic accounts – lies in 'shifting the attention from social movements' attempts to create alternative online publics with their own tools and technologies, to social movements' use of existing corporate-provided and corporate-controlled social media tools to facilitate or enable mobilization' (Haunss, 2015: 16).

Another example, which was subject to a plethora of studies in the MENA, is the Iranian Green Movement of 2009. Where a number of studies emphasised the role of a newly emerging 'Twitter' sphere in the movement's establishment (Alexanian 2011; Golkar 2011; Sohrabi-Haghighat and Mansouri, 2010), other studies critically downplayed its role in a similar technological focus (Morozov, 2009; Safshekan, 2014; Wojcieszak and Smith, 2014). Yet the overarching conclusion is that this sphere has granted Iranians the opportunity to connect, communicate and collectively orchestrate this movement. This conclusion invites an examination of specific social movements contexts instrumentalised through social media, without adopting a 'technological discourse' (Christensen, 2011: 244), as the studies in the following section demonstrate.

The context-specific strand

Counterpublics and social movements in their so-called virtual extension offer new dimensions for public participation in non-democratic societies, where the regime's tight grip is lessened, given the newness and borderless characteristic of such platforms. Social media platforms thus have become widely used under Arab authoritarian systems (Ferjani, 2010), subsequently contributing to the Arab uprisings in 2011 that became the subject of intensive studies where scholars approached digital activism in different ways.

The relevance of this debate to the Saudi Arabian social media grassroots movements is essentially examining the same phenomenon in relatively similar contexts.

Nordenson's (2017) study of online activism in Egypt and Kuwait finds Fraser's counterpublics fruitful in understanding how marginalised groups – youth in this case – come to articulate their own private issues on social platforms, turn them into matters of public concern and therefore challenge the existing hegemony. The utilisation of both Gramsci's notion of hegemony as well as counterpublicness in Nordenson's (2017) work demonstrates the usefulness of adapting these theoretical notions in the understanding of online activism in Egypt and Kuwait. On a much wider scale, Wheeler (2017) looks at digital resistance in the Middle East, including Saudi driving activism. Her empirical analysis finds that 'ordinary people can create change in small ways by leveraging new media tools to network around the state, and other structures of power at work in their lives' (Wheeler, 2017: 115). These micro-changes have been effective even in spaces where no revolutions occurred, leading to shifts in power dynamics and stronger civic engagement.

Looking at the Iranian blogosphere, Sreberny and Khiabany (2010) argue that the use of this space during Iran's popular movement of 2009 has shown a multitude of voices that challenge the singularity of the standard view. Similarly, Radsch (2016) views the Egyptian blogosphere as providing 'alternative public spheres' (38). The openness that blogging has offered 'became a powerful engine of change by enabling a politics of small things that turned even minute acts of liking or reposting something into a transgressive act that chipped away at the state's hegemony' (Radsch, 2016: 36). Salem (2015) also finds that social media demonstrates a considerable space where 'narratives of Egyptian protestors' compete with the dominant narrative 'propagated by the elite' (172-8).

In the case of the 2009 and 2011 floods in Saudi Arabia, al-Saggaf and Simmons argue that social media has facilitated 'public participation and social change' in the country (2015: 14). By analysing four main online sites, they contend that political demands were key to online discussions. These demands affected governmental response against corruption, pushed boundaries of expression, and facilitated the creation of collective action frames (al-Saggaf and Simmons, 2015).

In addition, Fraser's (2014) findings on Eritrean online discussions demonstrate a 'new form of communication from Eritreans to their national leaders', executing a new form of Eritrean public sphere and influencing other opinions between local Eritreans and their diaspora community (56). This interaction resulted in an interconnected collective frame that combines diasporic political awareness with local needs and demands, therefore enabling them to challenge state hegemony. For Fraser, 'notions of "public"

and of "space" are especially relevant to cyberspace where audiences are not clearly bounded and where space is metaphorical rather than territorial' (2014: 75), which makes it sensible to study virtual spaces as some form of public sphere.

Another study, of Iranian women's spaces of contest, highlights social networking sites as spaces infused with a political rhetoric condemning practices of inequality exercised by the Iranian system (Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2017). By analysing Facebook content, Tahmasebi-Birgani concludes that this site 'has become a transient site for civil society, offering women participants the chance to identify, highlight, and examine intersecting patterns of inequalities' (2017: 190). As such, cyberspace for Iranian women is increasingly loaded with dissident voices, in an attempt to form a public sphere that allows them to address their concerns in a human rights framework, in addition to revealing optimistic results in recruiting, organising and mobilising women movements online.

Finally, Tahmasebi-Birgani's (2017) analysis of a closely connected region and political system of Iran suggests we look at Saudi Arabia through a similar lens, by viewing online discussions as important contestations that bring about public grievances, demands and political awareness in a way that was not previously available due to the tight restrictions over offline spaces and public gatherings. Although the literature stresses the incompatibility between the nature of social media and democratic processes, in specific cases such as the absence of an offline public sphere, social media may be the only available means by which alternative political opinions are publicly formed and expressed.

The previous studies underscore the significance of the virtual public sphere in authoritarian contexts, without arguing with or against the linear relationship between technological advancement on the one hand, and democratic ends and social change on the other (Poor, 2005). But to further explore the dynamics of dissent in repressive regimes, by understanding that such a result is not determined by the technology itself but rather by the 'mechanisms' that *may* enable wider public engagement (Poor, 2005). Hence the variety of the presented approaches invite a deeper investigation of case-specific examples of social media fostering, or otherwise failing to foster, socio-political change.

1.4 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has set out the basis for a multi-angled theoretical framework that explores how hegemony operates in an authoritarian regime and how counter-hegemonic discourses are produced as a form of resistance to the dominant ideology. It

does so by adopting a modified version of Gramsci's 'hegemony' to fit in an authoritarian system, and by applying the notion of the public sphere – as multiple spheres – in investigating forms of public participation and deliberation in Saudi social media.

This study intends to move beyond technologically-centred approaches to an inclusive approach that views the physical and virtual worlds as inseparable. Shifting the focus to the way in which collective action frames are produced and communicated in a social movement, this framework is essential in the construction of the research enquiry, as detailed in Chapter 3. Prior to that construction it is vital to shed light on the context in which forms of control and resistance take place, which is the subject of the following chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: CONTROL AND CENSORSHIP IN A SAUDI CONTEXT

2.1 Political and religious control

A close look at the state's historical alliance between the House of Saud and the descendants of Muhammad bin Abdulwahhab reveals the religious foundations that form the Kingdom's national identity. The Saudi Kingdom defines itself as Godfather and the Cradle of Islam, setting itself the mission of safeguarding and exporting Islam on a global scale. Internally, the adoption of the Wahhabi *da'wa* (message) seems to have secured the regime's hegemonic rule. The notion of *tawhīd* (the Oneness of God) in the *da'wa's* mission served as the basis for directing the nation ideologically as well as politically by conceptualising the political unification under the Al Saud's rule as the only way of achieving the creed of *tawhīd* amidst prevalent practices of associationism (*shirk)* and blasphemy *(kufr)* in the Arabian Peninsula (al-Dakhil, 1988 and 2013). This 'return to the tradition of the pious ancestors' was claimed under the assertion of the requirement to 'apply the *shari'a* at a time when the population of Arabia was believed to have degenerated into blasphemy, corrupt religious practices and laxity' (al-Rasheed, 2006: 22). In addition, the way history is taught in Saudi schools reflects the government's aim of unifying the population and creating a common Saudi identity' (Prokop, 2003: 80).

Wahhabism served not only in constructing a dominant narrative that unifies the nation and legitimises its rulers, but also in controlling dissent, and establishing an Islamic sense of identity and belonging that is backed up by Islamic awakenings in the region (Lacroix, 2011). The Wahhabi ideology, according to al-Rasheed (2006), served as a 'shield against subsequent 'corrupting' Western influences, undesirable social behaviour and immoral and unacceptable alien ideas such as secularism, nationalism, communism and liberalism' (23).

Given control over state cultural apparatuses, the hegemonic religious discourse pervaded education curriculums, mosques and the media, and infused the political rhetoric with its divine given authority. It was a 'social engineering' programme, in Shahi's words (2013: 68), to create a monolithic culture, essentially a conservative project that combatted the import or exchange of new ideas, technologies and cultural practices. Not only did clergymen stand against new technologies and condemn them for threatening one's Islam – as will be discussed further below – but being exposed to meanings beyond their authoritative realm was in itself subversive. This issue is played

out intensely in the age of social media, where religious authorities are no longer able to control what people know, how they think or what they choose to practice.

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the contextual factors shaping the socio-political life and contributing to the emergence of the contemporary Saudi public sphere. It does so through reviewing the formation of the dominant narrative and the state's apparatuses of control, which continue to shape and influence the cultural and intellectual space in the Kingdom.

2.1.1 Multiple Islam(s)

Crafting the official narrative from fundamentalist Islam serves to standardise religious consciousness and solidify the regime's hegemonic rule. However, associating one version of Islam with the sole divine truth not only excludes the rich plurality of interpretations and schools of thought practiced internally but keeps the exercised Islam 'subject to contention, primarily between the regime and the Islamists, but also among the Islamists themselves because of the multiplicity of visions that motivate them' (Lacroix, 2011: 2). This has led to the rise of different power networks within the Saudi system (al-Rasheed, 2005). The royals who are motivated by a political-liberal agenda, the official *ulama* (religious scholars) responsible for ensuring policy compatibility with shari'a, and non-establishment *ulama*, also known as Sahwists. The latter group is motivated by a transnational Islamist ideology, that is Salafism 'blended with the political discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood' (Lacroix, 2014). The Islamic Awakening known as *al-Sahwa al-Islamiyyah* was a transnational trend calling for the return to orthodox Islam with strong manifestations shaping culture and public space. It is the most prominent social movement that the Kingdom has witnessed in the past decades, detailed further in the next section.

2.1.2 Securing dominance through an Islamist ideology

Not only did the Islamic Sahwa endow the regime with divine power, but more importantly it participated in the construction of a national identity. The political leadership capitalised on its religious symbolic power by infusing nationalism with a sense of romantic Islamic nostalgia and belonging. A look at the political rhetoric (al-Rasheed, 1996), education curriculums (Prokop 2003 and 2005) or the media (Yamani, 2008; Mellor, 2008) crystallises this infusion. In fact, national day celebrations were condemned by clergy until its recognition was ordered and declared a national holiday during King Abdullah's reign. A typical political speech in the 1990s, as examined by al-Rasheed (1996), shows the monarch's role as the agent of divine shari'a, including vague references to the *ulama* as the King's consultants (1996).

Islamism not only offers a unified identity but also acts as a shield against geopolitical contenders. Ayubi's (1995) study demonstrates how prevailing dominant ideologies in the MENA region have influenced the dominant Saudi narrative. As pan-Arabism and republicanism were deemed a threat to the monarchy's legitimacy, pan-Islamism intertwined with state interests and was therefore welcomed and allowed to disseminate in educational, media and religious discourse (al-Khidr, 2011; Bayat, 2007; Prokop, 1999). This was also manifested in the migration and concentration of pan-Arab Islamist teachers and clergy, notably those belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood (Lacroix, 2011), all of which supports the Wahhabi narrative of *tawhid* and unification utilised by the state as a pretext to govern the Kingdom under a single monarchical rule.

This ideological harmony between Wahhabism and pan-Islamism moreover helps nurture and sustain the roots of authoritarianism and anti-individualism inherent in religious grand narratives and framings (Ayubi, 1995) – this is key to the construction of imagined nationalism and identity structure. This harmony also grants the dominant narrative of the Kingdom its mastery, which allows it to rule with prevailing consensus. The regime has hence capitalised on its material and symbolic resources to effectively normalise injustices and inequalities under its religious-nationalist discourse.

2.1.3 Islamist movements and mobilisation

The decision to create *the Council of Senior Ulama* in 1971, with religious *ulama* being appointed by the King, was a smart precursory move by King Faisal to bring the religious leadership under his control (Champion, 2003). This had led, with the momentum of Sahwists' influence, to demands calling for the religious establishment's autonomy. Petitions were sent to King Fahad criticising the official *ulama's* blind support for the political leadership, which in one instance resulted in *ulama* being dismissed from the council in the 1990s (Metz, 1992). On other occasions Sahwists' petitions were rejected, provoking the state to exercise coercive measures, including imprisonment of Sahwa's prominent clergy. This happened in the case of the renowned 'Memorandum of Advice', when Sahwists protested against the Kingdom's political alliance with Western powers, namely American soldiers on Saudi soil, during the Gulf War (al-Shamsi, 2011) – publicising their petition triggered a political crackdown.

A noteworthy aspect of the Saudi Sahwa is that it is state-centred (al-Rasheed, 2006; Lacroix, 2011). Islamism, uniquely in the case of Saudi Arabia, is not against the state (Lacroix, 2011): the state has co-opted Sahwa figures to run its cultural apparatuses, capitalising on their symbolic religious significance (al-Rasheed, 2006). This has kept

the Sahwa movement resource poor, with its members' livelihoods determined by the regime (Lacroix, 2011).

Conceptually emerging from the Muslim Brotherhood – while blending it with the Wahhabi tradition – has given the Sahwa movement a strong organisational base, unlike its rival, rather fragmented, liberal movement (Erayja, 2016). Yet internal contradictions, due to coercive measures exercised against the Sahwa, seem to have led to their demise as a social movement, causing the subsequent ideological split (al-Rasheed, 2015b). In Lacroix's insightful reading (2011), some have transformed onto an 'Islamo-liberals' path (Lacroix, 2011). That is, Islamists whose thoughts changed, leading them to become advocates of constitutional monarchy and civil rights, bringing together 'the language of democracy with that of Islam' (Lacroix, 2014: 3). This group, which has taken advantage of social media networks to connect with like-minded groups and renew their intellectual heritage, is the subject of Chapter 5. The second group diverging from the 1990s Sahwa movement are the radical Jihadis who joined the Saudi Qaeda and become the state's fierce enemy. The remaining members of the Sahwa movement have not changed their focus, forming what Lacroix depicts as 'the new Sahwa' (2011: 268).

Based on Lacroix's extensive empirical study on Sahwa members, he argues that behind their active contest and mobilisation between 1990 and 1994 is a frustrated young generation socialised by a hybrid Wahhabi-Muslim Brotherhood ideology, led by liberal technocrats of the older generation who share intimate relationships with members of the royal family (Lacroix, 2011). It is a generation that witnessed its religious identity being eroded by waves of political and social liberalisation. These grievances were sufficient to lead some towards a radical jihadi ideology, and others to questioning the basis of the Kingdom's religious legitimacy.

The Sahwa movement is noteworthy as being one of the 'only mobilizing structures with a large following' in the Kingdom (Lacroix, 2015: 180), capable of influencing public opinion (Niblock, 2004). The movement's historical phases provide an insight into how the young Saudi generation has formed its ideological base, in addition to highlighting the turning point in the Sahwa's course that allowed it to split into multiple trajectories, giving rise to a new intellectual category: the Islamo-liberals. The significance of this group in the Saudi intellectual field rests in its ability to bridge between Islamists and liberals by infusing the religious debate with political activism.

Fandy's (1999a) study of religious dissent in the 1990s found that the political grip over the Sahwa insurrection was tight enough to maintain stability, arguing that the influence of prominent religious oppositional figures does not precede that of the official *ulama*.

This situation was completely transformed at the beginning of the millennium, coinciding with the death of the two most influential Wahhabi figures, the Grand Mufti Abdulaziz bin Baz in 1999 and Sheikh Ibn Uthaymin in 2001, leaving the Wahhabi establishment in a vacuum. On top of that, the events of September 11, followed by the state's crackdown on so-called religious extremism and attempts to rehabilitate the education curriculum, have left the young generation 'ill equipped for today's challenges' (Prokop, 2005: 58). The dominant religious discourse is, on the one hand, suspected of nurturing terrorism, and on the other has lost its leading advocates, leaving the political leadership at stake:

> As it enters the twenty-first century, the ruling group fails to live up to popular cultural and religious notions relating to leadership, notions that have been constructed and perpetuated by the ruling group itself. This failure erodes the basis of legitimacy that the Saudi ruling group propagated throughout the twentieth century, which in turn has prompted a serious rupture in state-society relations (al-Rasheed, 2006: 188).

Al-Rasheed's latter comment details the ideological crisis as Saudi Arabia enters the new millennium. The speed of change left its young generation facing their most challenging socioreligious uncertainties, a situation that paved the way for the internet to rapidly spread amongst the frustrated, unemployed yet financially capable population.

However the demise of the Sahwa as a movement does not indicate the demise of its ideology, given their vast audience and ability to influence public opinion (Niblock, 2004). Lacroix's (2011) study concludes that the Sahwa's ideology remains valuable and widely available as long as no other source of ideological justification underpins the Kingdom's rule. This point sheds light on Saudi's majority conservative society which, despite its high internet usage, finds the mixing of secular and Islamist values foreign and threatening to their ideological foundation. It also gives insight into how the majority of the population may react against contentious voices (detailed in Chapter 8) given that they are socialised by the regime.

This study is interested in the contentious discourses arising from the context discussed above, that move beyond orthodox religious framings using an unfamiliar religious rhetoric, infused with global framings, calling for pluralism, tolerance and democracy under an Islamic-national umbrella and thus challenging both the religious establishment and non-establishment *ulama* and threatening their 'divine politics' (al-Rasheed, 2015b).

The rise of these deliberative, contemporary, specialised discourses shedding light on political and religious thought and women's rights have been referenced in different ways throughout the literature on Saudi Arabia. Al-Rasheed describes Saudi Islamists paving a 'third way' between 'two binary opposites' (al-Rasheed, 2015a), the group she names 'modernists' (2015b) – as opposed to fundamentalist Islamists – and those who Lacroix names 'Islamo-liberal reformists' (2004), as well as 'modernizing intellectuals' in Kéchichian's depiction (2013: 35). Together these identifications aim to crystallise independent, subaltern Islamic thinkers who establish liberal Islamic notions different to those theorised by the dominant Wahhabi school of thought, and actively reinterpret and rethink Islamic authority while harmonising it with notions of civil society and democracy.

2.2 Dissecting the dominant discourse

This dominant ideology, with its vested religious power, seems capable of preserving consensus amongst the monolithic bloc that continues to reproduce its own restraints and serves to sustain the status quo, which is vital for securing the state's hegemonic rule. This is achieved through a carefully developed cognitive dichotomy between two symbolic odds as a way of setting people against any form of expression outside the legitimate singular discourse. Henceforth an identity-threatening line is drawn between Muslims as faithful patriots versus atheists as disloyal traitors – where the latter represents the consequence of anyone who questions the existing doctrinal authority; between shari'a as a conclusive divine law versus democracy as (possibly) compatible with shari'a, where those who argue for the latter appear to be challenged by their 'pious' social circles prior to being challenged by the system; and between 'Us' and the West, where 'Us' represents the safety of belonging to a collective system versus the venerability of the Western example of individualism. The construction of this exclusivist binary mindset is an act of cultural dominance which has a powerful ability to implicitly justify the dominant ideology – itself inherently anti-individualistic and anti-secular – and justify the authoritarian system to which it belongs. The following section details the mechanisms by which the dominant ideology has become normalised in everyday practice and blended into a 'common sense' (Gramsci, 1971).

2.2.1 The fatwa culture

As 'a considered opinion embodying a particular interpretation of the *sharī'ah'* (Masud and Kéchichian, 2009), fatwas constitute an important communicative medium in religious governance, whereby scholars issue their legal opinion in every aspect of social life. The fatwa phenomenon, spread during the Sahwa, was recognised by a number of scholars (al-Ghathami, 2011 and 2015; al-Otaiq, 2013; al-Mubarak, 2010; al-Rasheed,

2006; Kéchichian, 2013), with al-Khidr (2011) specifically naming it '*the fatwa society*' (134. Translated from Arabic). Fatwas were the magical solution to any problem – magical in the sense of individual's simplistic trust in its truthfulness.

Times of fatwa obsession mark the height of the instructional discourse, when people were conditioned to expect dictation on every aspect of life. Looking for a prompt, ready-made religious answer to instruct one's behaviour became the norm, in the form of a fatwa, advice or order, especially in cassettes and media programmes. Entertainment media operates outside the reaches of the Kingdom, despite being in many cases owned by the Saudi elite. Thus when young Saudis attempted to produce their own entertainment shows online during what is known as the Saudi YouTube boom, the challenge they faced was to offer a new, democratic, non-instructional universe of meaning unfamiliar to the local mentality that is programmed to associate Saudi content with being constructive, advisory and enlightening.

The fatwa culture was supported by the conservative trend of the Sahwa, where clergy were in a mission to regulate public order, looking for the strictest Islamic opinion as a recommended solution to conserve society (al-Khidr, 2011: 137). The seemingly limitless fatwas that Saudis were exposed to appear to have programmed individuals' minds to seek dictation on every aspect of their lives, including what one should say to God in one's own prayer. In fact, clergy debates took place that discussed the right length of a man's *thobe* (dress) and beard, and went further to issue a fatwa regarding the details of how a woman's *'abaya* (dress) should be worn, whether or not to allow it to show patterns or a little embroidery, despite covering her body in black.

Music is another realm in which extreme religious contention is present (Otterbeck, 2012), seemingly one of the clergymen's favourite debates: a plethora of fatwas have been published to discuss its controversial prohibition. Banning musical instruments from public spaces is one of the religious police's best-known duties. However, music still operates largely in the entertainment sector, where pop-singers, many of whom are Saudis, and programmes imitating big Western music shows are broadcast on Saudi-owned television channels.

Another renowned fatwa subject is the prohibition of almost every new technology when it is introduced in the Kingdom, from voice speakers which later invaded all mosques, and television, which also became later dominated by religious shows (Kéchichian, 1986: 57), to, inevitably, the internet. From an individual's perspective, technological advancement brings change to an orthodox way of living, but from the leadership's point of view it brings their monopoly over information to an end. Books that are prohibited from entering the country become prevalent online, and the control over cultural

commodities no longer makes sense. However, even in the social media age clergy are among the most followed 'influential' figures (RT International, 2013), indicating the continuous desire for indoctrination among, regardless of the changing socio-political conditions.

The issue at stake during this instructional obsession was not confined to suppressing the diversity of Islamic opinions, forms of *ijtihad* (exercising juristic judgments) and the ways in which they adapted to different cultural localities, rather it transcended the disappearance of public space. With strict religious policing, no public gatherings were allowed outside the religious instructional realm. This, together with the wide affordance of transport means in Saudi urban cities resulted in the loss of public space. Manifestations of culture, art and entertainment thus remain hidden behind private doors.

2.2.2 The education system

School is where ideological conditioning is cultivated. By focusing on instructional teaching and rote learning (al-Khidr, 2011: 66; Prokop, 2003: 80), school produces an obedient, disciplined generation with no critical faculties for the nation. Prokop observes that: 'This philosophy of teaching inculcates passivity, dependence, an *a priori* respect for authority and an unquestioning attitude' (2003: 80). The philosophy that underpins this education ethos strives to "awaken the spirit of Islamic struggle, fight our enemies, restore our rights, resume our glory and fulfil the mission of Islam' and 'project the unity of the Muslim nation" (Riyadh: Ministry of Education, 1978: 5-9; cited in Prokop, 2003: 79). Given that more than one third of the education curriculum is religious content (Kéchichian, 2013), perhaps this language does not come as a surprise. The following section details the religious discourse in and outside the education system in relation to women, providing context to the introduction of women activism examined in Chapter 6.

2.2.3 Discourse on women

Since the establishment of girls' schools under King Abdullah's reign a few years after the turn of the millennium, girls' curriculums have demonstrated the discursive perceptions and practices of the feminine subject. In a way they have formed the official manifestation of what it means to be a woman in a dominant masculine society. The social construction of education distinguished the girls' curriculum from the boys' on many levels. Since they were designed 'under the supervision of the *ulama*-controlled General Presidency of Girls' Education' (Prokop, 2003: 78), the girls' education curriculum has had a particular focus on household subjects such as managing

household expenses, raising children, sewing and cooking. Girls had less scientific instruction in comparison with the boys' curriculum. The idea was that girls only needed to learn about science inasmuch as it can help in bringing up their children since a woman's duty in society lies in nurturing young men of the nation, or teaching girls who will soon devote their lives to the wellbeing of their men, who are capable of working for their nation and defending it.

Curriculums also vary with regards to religious modules. Where the masculine version has an extensive focus on shari'a laws and economies, the girls' curriculum has a special focus on social and biological perspectives such as the menstrual cycle and cleansing or purity from a jurisprudential perspective, marriage, and *hijab* (veiling). It hints at an overall objective of maturing the body whilst keeping the mind minor and less responsible. Religious leaders also have their say in biology. Scholars such as Ibn Baz do not hesitate to describe women as *biologically weak*. Men to the contrary are considered complete and more capable than women, and this completeness, explains Ibn Baz (2017b), is mental as well as physical.

To demonstrate the intensification of women's theorisation and subjugation in the Saudi cultural discourse, it is important to argue, as al-Rasheed does, that women were 'transformed into symbols of the piety of state and nation' (2013: 25). Women were in a sense *used* for the state's symbolic legitimisation of power, or as Arebi puts it:

> This tendency to utilise women in the game of power has been geared toward enhancing the view of women as "a gate for Westernisation", and has thus intensified apprehension about them. It is this very apprehension that makes the power of this cultural discourse so overwhelming. It goes beyond controlling women to using them as means of control for the whole society (1994: 18-9).

Support for women's subjugation was given from the main 'centres of power': royals, tribal leaders and prestigious religious scholars (Arebi, 1994: 13). What makes the subject of women even more troubling in the Saudi context is the fact that its representation surpasses the existence of women, signifying deep issues of modernisation and Westernisation that create in principle an 'identity crisis', in Arebi's words. Such issues relate to romantic nostalgia for the great Muslim ages, generated by present uncertainties that have occurred as a consequence of inevitable modernisation.

In Saudi Arabia it has apparently become the nation's duty to ensure women are aligned with their status as tokens of the nations' glorious past, as symbols of lost Islamic victories against what is modern, Western and alien. As a result, the face or indeed facelessness of a woman is transformed into a sign of compliance with the great national Islamic identity. Women hence sacrifice their identity as well as their diversity to appear

in a consolidated form that satisfies their masculine nation. Until 2003 women had no identity cards in Saudi Arabia, never represented as an identified citizen in a form of citizenship card with a face attached to it. Instead they had 'numbers' attached to a male guardian's citizenship card and photograph (Yamani, 2000: 82; Altorki, 2000).

The restrictions imposed on women in public spaces are indeed pervasive, welcomed by both the state and its religious establishment. Women in theory are expected to remain at home unless urgent needs arise. Otherwise their guardians are authorised to issue anything and everything on their behalf. Thus, for example, when foreign restaurants came to invest in Saudi's newly-developed market, they had to apply for 'permission' to legally allow women to become customers. The result was creating a private 'family' section with separate doors. Even though women today may dine regularly in these restaurants alone or with their girlfriends, the 'family' section signifies the underlying rationale behind permitting women to visit restaurants: being chaperoned by a man who ensures she is shielded from foreign gazes and whispers (Le Renard, 2014). It has become a masculine national duty to discipline women in public, undertaken by religious police as well as voluntary 'guardians of virtue' known as *muhtasibun*. Discipline also operates privately by guardians' default control over their women's clothing style, outgoing activities as well as study and job opportunities, in addition to male drivers who help control their mobility.

Women are thus an object of 'public scrutiny' (Arebi, 1994: 19). Any national *male* in that sense may intervene in a woman's private business to protect her vulnerability or perhaps invade it. Ensuring a woman's devotion and piety is key to protecting her virtue, and more importantly securing the collective honour of the family – represented by a husband, father or tribal leader. The 'honour of man' is an important social status in this context. It symbolises masculine virtue and social integrity, represented by the integrity of his female family members. A man's honour is commonly represented by their female family members' protection from unauthorised relationships. Hence concealing a woman's name and referring to her as 'my family' in front of other men is a common cultural practice. In fact nicknaming parents with their elder son – not daughter – is another signification of misogynistic practices implicit in everyday performative language. The following section demonstrates that dominant religious discourse is a key factor in constituting women's subordination, that normalises the embodiment of women as sinful, wrong and less capable.

Women as 'protected jewels'

Just as the objectification of women is contested by feminists globally, it is also a concern in the Saudi context, albeit in a different form. Instead of being the object of a

capitalist market, here a woman is an object of cultural fetishism. This objectification is represented in the full concealment of a woman, which hides her identity as a person to protect her from male gazes and uncontrollable desire.

The dominant religious discourse, most apparent in mosques, lectures, sermons, schools, as well as many mainstream media programmes, only draws attention to women for advisory purposes, predominantly concerned with obeying the masculine guardian and '*iffah* (bodily virtue). The latter can only be achieved by veiling the entire feminine body to hinder its apparent seductive 'superpowers', as well as to cut off the 'paths of evil' which often lead to committing sin. This obsession with nearly every aspect of the feminine body forms the foundation of women's identity and being, not only as an object of sexual incitement, but also as biologically lacking some mental and physical properties that men acquire by nature. According to the dominant religious discourse, a woman represents nothing beyond her sexuality. To demonstrate this perception, many accredited traditional Islamic jurists interpret and apply marriage-centred laws based on their view of marriage as a pay-for-pleasure relationship and not as a holistic humane relationship. Therefore a number of jurisprudential laws release the husband from all financial obligations towards his wife if they do not reflect his own enjoyment and gratification, but a man is only required to do the things that 'satisfies' him (Zein al-Abideen, 2016).

Just as marriage laws centralise their view on women as objects of pleasure, the overarching discourse that forms womanhood in the Saudi context is symbolised in notions such as 'protected pearl', 'cherished jewels', and 'queens'. These overused metaphors form the basis of women's objectification: they are like queens, released from the burden of work and mobility; they are like jewels that must be concealed, protected and locked 'safely' away for their owners' enjoyment. The notion of protection, even if applauded by some women, is meant to signify their fragility and passivity. The religious mode of preaching often enchants women with words that cherish them emotionally, whilst simultaneously reduces their human status as well as their physical and mental capacities.

The context in which this discourse reached its highest impact and dominance is between the 1980s and 1990s, at times that marked the religious Sahwa against trends of modernisation: girls were offered public education; women were under the pressure of dynamic social changes; marriage age was gradually delayed as some women entered universities and many were offered teaching positions in schools as the first generation of certified Saudi women. These conditions caused many people to constantly question accredited *ulama* for their religious opinions regarding social matters. For al-Rasheed, it appeared that 'Saudis turned to the certainty of the fatwa at a time of uncertain and

unpredictable social developments' (2013: 106). Hence this habit of looking for a fatwa or listening to a programme in which people ask a cleric for more fatwas has easily found its place in Saudi homes. This normalised practice only helped to increase passivity among people and tightened regulation and control over personal choices from those labelled as religious leaders, thus contributing to widening the margin between those who dissented and 'liberated' themselves and the dominant public.

To exemplify the fatwa's impact on women – apart from the Grand Mufti's enormous *fatwas*, which reaches thousands – we may consider the *fatwa* database of Sheikh Bin Jabreen. The first topics to appear include: guidance for women's clothing in front of women; the legitimacy of obeying the husband; the specificities and requirements of the *hijab*; the requirement of face veiling; attending women-only events (surprisingly prohibited); the religious opinion on *niqab,* make-up, tattoos, plastic surgeries, photographing, mixing between the sexes; the list goes on. *Fatwas* like those on women are numerous enough to fill a library. It is a problematic phenomenon that leads to questioning the politics behind the dispersal of religious topics interested in governing and regulating the everyday, instead of religion's typical focus on faith and spirituality.

Women always symbolise sexual excitement in a masculine nation: on one hand they are concealed for their sexual character, and on the other hand they are constantly brought up in men's social conversations, tales and poems as a subject of romance, beauty and eroticism. The point that unites dominant cultural and religious perspectives is a woman as object of sexual desire. Hence when a woman attempts to surpass this role, either by appearing un-concealed, demanding rights, or joining the labour force, she is challenged and threatened, not only by the system but also by the social structure to which she belongs.

2.3 The intellectual sphere: Islamist-liberal divide

Apart from the Islamist domination over the intellectual sphere, liberal voices and networks have existed as Islamists' primal opponents. Intellectual battles between the two rivals dominate the cultural sphere, from publications to media opinion articles and programmes. Liberal voices are concentrated in a few specific newspapers and Saudi-owned broadcast channels operating abroad, while Islamist voices dominate local media via television, press, cassettes and mosque sermons. With the introduction of the internet the intellectual battles moved to discussion forums and, later, to social media platforms.

As far as framing processes are concerned, social and religious freedom is the main liberal frame set against the Sahwa's orthodox orientation. Liberalist outrage was often

manifested against the religious establishment's control over public space; women's mandatory dress code; women's right to drive; mixing between the sexes; and in demanding public spaces for entertainment. Beyond Western retailers in large shopping centres, art and entertainment was non-existent – until the establishment of the General Authority for Entertainment in 2016. Liberals, contrary to Sahwists, are weaker in organisation, and prominent liberal figures tended to be technocrats who worked for the system, either in public institutions, or liberal-oriented newspapers and broadcast channels like al-Arabiya news channel, or al-Watan and al-Sharq al-Awsat newspapers.

The main issue with the Saudi version of liberalism is that it is state resourced. Some liberals are paid writers who work to advocate new governmental agendas (Hammond, 2008: 351): they are subsequently attacked by clergy who use the "liberal" label to call out novel ideas which stand against their normative values. It can be said, therefore, that the Islamist-liberal discursive clash is symbolic and vague, as both labels are overloaded with ideological interests that stand against civil rights and basic public needs. This results in a weak media that intends to challenge two opposing ideas within very limited boundaries of expression.

Intellectual conflicts between Islamists and liberals took their most intensive form in the 1990s. However, post-September 11 events helped to expose these battles in the press (Hammond, 2008), as newspapers were permitted to subject the dominant religious discourse to questioning. Al-Rasheed argues that the social division between the two groups is exaggerated by the media (2005: 121). stating that when it comes to actual reforms, the interests of both parties converge as they work together on producing petitions for reform (al-Rasheed, 2005). Hammond similarly points to a group of reformist Islamists who advocate for political and civil rights, but nevertheless may disagree with liberals when it comes to 'social and religious freedoms' (2008: 343).

The political leadership benefits from the plethora of social disputes in the media, on whether music should be played in public, or whether women should drive, as they continue to distract the population from focusing on their 'socio-economic realities' (Yamani, 2008: 330). These societal conflicts were soon challenged as a reformist discourse arose, using social media as a public sphere to raise voices and demand rights. Where the Saudi population, according to Hertog, has become 'less easily divided into the old camps of "liberals" vs. "Islamists.". A smaller subset of young activists have already proven resilient to the regime's largess, and young Saudis' general level of political awareness is far above that of any previous generation' (Hertog, 2015a: 71).

2.4 Media control and promotion of the dominant narrative

Historically, the Kingdom succeeded in securing its narrative through media monopolisation and ownership. 'Own or otherwise silence' was the Saudi policy with transnational Arab media (Yamani, 2008: 325). Taking advantage of high oil rents, the country has managed to buy shares in the majority of Arab newspapers and satellite channels from entertainment to news, while becoming a primal advertising client in those it does not have direct authority over (Cochrane, 2007). Doing so not only refined the Kingdom's image but boosted its popularity and religious ideology (al-Rasheed, 2008), serving as a 'protective and hermetic seal against any contaminating information' (Yamani, 2003: 145).

The 1990s particularly marks the emergence of the Saudi media empire (Hammond, 2007), the rise of then-Prince Salman as the media "king" (Yamani: 2008: 328), and the emergence of prominent Arab newspapers owned by royal Saudis while based overseas has allowed the political leadership to implement their agenda away from the influence of clergy.

Transnational media – and local media post-September 11 – thus demonstrate the Islamist-liberal tension between state-promoted social liberalism and Islamic conservatism disseminated in state cultural apparatuses. This tension used the press as a battleground for both parties to dispute societal matters (Hammond, 2008), as the following section elaborates. Television also illustrated this tension through its contradictory outputs of transnational entertainment shows and Islamic indoctrinating programmes. The problem, Yamani states, is that:

> Both modes of communication represent distorted pictures of reality, offering fantasies that present a one-sided version of adulthood. Sermonizing projects a strident sense of responsibility and an ascetic form of self-control, whereas tantalizing presents a libertine form of irresponsibility and abandonment. The one relates to the individual's position vis-à-vis the state and its repressive apparatus, and the other to his status vis-à-vis the market. The space in the middle – that of maturity, judgement, solidarity, and citizenship – is simply missing (Yamani, 2010: 16).

Both communicative modes are thus state projects that work to constitute a politically passive population. Together they participate in grounding a dichotomic mindset which classifies media texts into two universes of meaning: one is irresponsible, immoral, and useless; the other is indoctrinating, didactic, and serious. This collective dichotomy is rather critical as it continues to inform how society receives and interacts with emerging contentious discourses. That is to say, the more this collective mindset is prevalent, the more effective it works to socially repress dissent.

2.4.1 Mainstream media censorship and the ambiguity of red lines

The censorship system operates through several public institutions established for this purpose, such as 'The Supreme Information Council, the General Directorate of Publications, and the Department of Domestic Press Censorship' (Fandy, 1999b: 129). Their roles include 'controlling and supervising all audio and visual broadcasting services as well as censoring the contents of books, magazines, newspapers, films, recordings, bulletins, commercials, and virtually every other means of communicating with the public' (Fandy, 1999b: 129). On top of this, the state owns the major telecommunications network and can regulate the internet and censor phone calls. The judiciary is part of the state's machinery, and major television channel owners are the Saudi elite who are well-connected to the royal family. Thus, many studies outline the Kingdom's 'remarkable stability' (Lawson, 2011: 737) and effective 'soft power' (Gallarotti and Yahia, 2013) that is managed through a blend of control and consent (Lucas, 2004; Niblock, 2004) by dominating cultural and religious means of communication.

Despite being aware of censorship and information regulation in the country, writers encounter the issue of ambiguity in red lines. Beyond the conventional political and religious subjects that are off-limits, red lines shift constantly depending on current political agendas and visions (Hammond, 2008). In the 1970s Arabism and Communism were the greatest taboos, while in the 1980s and 1990s Islamists acted as a strong 'lobbying force' against demands for social liberty (Hammond, 2008). Their influence can be traced in Saleh Kamel's (a longstanding media mogul) attempt to please the clergy by establishing the *Iqraa'* Islamic channel (Cochrane, 2007; Galal, 2015), as well as maintaining all non-Islamic Saudi television network media operations outside the Kingdom's borders.

One post-September 11 political policy witnessed a shift in media discourse that allows criticism of religious extremism. According to al-Rasheed, the press is permitted to 'expose the ills of Saudi society, dissect its controversial Wahhabi teachings, criticise its radical judges, denounce its tribal heritage and confront the so-called social conservatism' (2008: 31). Of course, the minor variance in editorial orientation allows for different stances to appear when approaching religious conservatism. Beyond that, the press is subject to official censorship to ensure compliance with the political system (Al-Kahtani, 1999; Sakr, 2003, Yamani, 2003).

Pan-Arab newspapers and television channels, until 2017, are hardly any different in relation to Saudi Arabia. The country has succeeded in 'developing a pan-Arab media

regime enabling Saudi Arabia to project power and influence beyond the kingdom's borders' (Kraidy, 2013: 28). Censorship operates through Saudi's 'largest share of airwaves' (al-Rasheed, 2008: 30), in addition to its large advertising expenses, which makes television channels cautious of upsetting their primary client (Cochrane, 2007). The fact that Saudis are the largest Arab media owners lead to their depiction as media moguls (Sakr et al., 2015), and King Salman as the 'media King', due to his huge shares (Yamani, 2008: 328), while the Kingdom is described as a 'media empire' (Hammond, 2007) and 'beast' (Yamani, 2008). Perhaps the most challenging news network for the Kingdom has always been al-Jazeera. Despite Saudi's attempts to exert pressures on its news coverage, in addition to competing for its influence by launching al-Arabiya in 2003, al-Jazeera remains a strong rival that has managed to prove its autonomy from Saudi's hegemonic influence after the blockade against Qatar in 2017.

Journalists and opinion writers occasionally face sudden bans from publishing or travel bans because of their articles (Hammond, 2008). These sanctions cannot be predicted as they depend on the political mood. Another force is the religious establishment, which may ignite the political leadership or public opinion against critical or modernist voices. A plethora of prominent journalists and editors have been sanctioned for their positions as a result of the ambiguity of red lines (al-Maghlooth, 2014: 60-63; Hammond, 2008: 343-4). In fact any writer could arguably break the press law considering its 'vaguely-worded offences as "criticising the ruler", "disseminating false information", "disturbing public order", or "harming" national unity, public morality or relations with friendly states' (Sakr, 2003: 37). Sometimes restrictions are imposed on writers due to the wide circulation of their articles, which results in negative exaggerations and reactions or misinterpretations. Khazen (1999) thus indicates that self-censorship has become the worst form of censorship exercised by journalists, leaving the press with the mission of 'covering up' news rather than covering it (87). Thus the use of metaphors has become common between journalists as a way of avoiding trouble (al-Rasheed, 2005: 190).

Other than the press, censorship by the Information Ministry, as stated earlier, is applied on all media forms, including publications import, production and distribution. Like many other cultural realms, it is managed under strict religious authority (Hofheinz, 2007). The online access restriction policy describes 'violation of Islamic tradition or national regulations' as a main reason for website blocking (cited in Hofheinz, 2007: 57). The following section sheds more light on internet regulation.

2.5 The internet: a possible change/challenge

The internet arguably widened the intellectual discussion in traditional forms of media that were elite-centred and strictly censored by the state, from discussion forums,

popular in the first decade of the millennial, to subsequent social media platforms (Ehteshami and Wright, 2007).

Al-Rasheed (2006) found discussion forums liberating for Saudis from the imposed dominant discourse as they launched anonymous accounts and can 'thwart its official propaganda' (30). It is 'the arena where some of the most vigorous and honest discussion takes place' (Hammond, 2008: 327). The inception of social media several years later facilitated a wider, more interesting and serious debate in which users reveal their identities, demand reforms and mobilise campaigns. Discussion forums nonetheless mark the emergence of open expression in a society that had never-before experienced public debate, bringing 'a new political culture into being', and compensating the loss of public space and loss of trust in state's official media (Yamani, 2003: 145).

Communicating and networking through the internet have allowed different social groups, who cannot intersect physically, to join a single debate: the clergy and liberals; officials and the general public; men and women – people of all kinds who are completely segregated in public spaces and live in predominantly disconnected social worlds. With this dialogue happening perhaps for the first time, a new reformist discourse arose, allowing for the traditional equation of Islamist-liberal in the mainstream media to evolve into a conservative-reformist equation, highlighting *narratives of dissent* contrary to the pre-existing, overstated Islamists-liberals divide whose privileges are secured by the very system that they claim to be resisting.

Internet censorship in Saudi Arabia has gone through several phases. The Ministry of Media and Information has begun a mission to block sites deemed to be "against the ministry's regulations". Filtered sites are 'mostly pornographic, plus a smattering of Shi'ite, human rights and political sites' (Hammond, 2008: 347). Some forums in the early millennium experienced filtration, but the majority were open and available, perhaps as a result of users' complete anonymity, in addition to the unsystematic discussion topics that took place. At the outset of web 2.0 (Blank and Reisdorf, 2012) and the proliferation of social media sites, individual blogging activity witnessed a concentration of well-educated individuals expressing innovative, contemporary thought working towards religious and socio-political reform. This utopian moment, however, contracted quickly with the arrest of Fo'ad al-Farhan, a pioneer Saudi blogger who is considered a godfather for many, in 2007 (al-Maghlooth, 2014: 69). It was at this time that young bloggers realised they were not speaking in a borderless space. The incident appeared to generate enough fear to silence other bloggers or narrow their expression to mundane everyday matters.

Shortly after, the onset of the Arab uprisings in neighbouring countries regenerated the spark for socio-political demands. The social platform, Twitter, particularly served the intellectual and political debate. Although Twitter initially attracted hobbyists, techies, and amateur artists as a less-formal hub that connects people based on their interests, its user-centred structure nevertheless facilitated its dissemination among social actors. In June 2012 Twitter witnessed a '3,000% growth' in Saudi users (Guynn, 2012), and in 2014 it was reported that 'the country with the highest number of active Twitter users in the Arab region is Saudi Arabia with 2.4 million users, accounting for over 40% of all active Twitter users in the Arab region' (Arab social media report, 2014). The following section provides an explanation of Twitter's technicalities that exposes dissent and serves Saudi grassroots movements and campaigns.

2.5.1 Dissent exposed: Social media platforms in a Saudi context

Twitter is a microblogging service that allows its users to publish a *tweet*, that is a post consisting a maximum of 140 characters (which expanded to 280 characters in 2017). Images, webpages or video clips can also be embedded in a tweet. The ground-breaking aspect of the service was its emphasis on real-time information propagation. Its usability and convenience allows users to access a large *feed* of the latest tweets and access breaking news at an unprecedented speed.

Unlike other social media platforms prevalent at the time, Twitter was commonly used as a public platform where posts are not restricted to private groups but accessible and visible to all users. The *follow* feature on a user's profile page allows others to include them in their news feed. Certainly, being *followed* by hundreds or thousands, as is the case with Saudi public figures, allows a user's posts to have a large *reach* through circulation mechanisms such as *retweets*. Twitter also seems vertical in comparison with horizontal, friends-centred social platforms. This hierarchal feature on the one hand supports the rise of public figures who now own a platform to publicise their views and influence public opinion, and on the other hand, it allows for many lightly-active or inactive users to follow a multitude of accounts, as if they were reading a newspaper. This has the effect of exposing many inactive or lightly-active users to the expressed grievances and initiated campaigns in that space. Thus individuals who no longer trust mainstream media could follow a number of figures they consider credible to know "What's happening", in addition to local and international news agencies all in one *feed*.

Other important features in facilitating networking and mobilisation on Twitter are *threads* and *hashtags*. The former entails embedded replies or *mentions* to a single post, enabling all users to read and respond to a particular tweet and create a discussion around a subject. A *hashtag* is a metadata tag that includes a word or phrase prefixed

with a hash (#) symbol. It is a user-generated tagging mechanism to identify posts or to include ones' post in a specific category. Twitter hashtags have been widely used to mobilise campaigns, as in the Arab uprisings. In a Saudi context they have been especially popular for users' ability to launch a campaign by disseminating a hashtag that raises a specific demand. When a hashtag receives a significant number of posts in a period of time it becomes promoted as a *trend*. A list of hashtag *trends* appears on Twitter's main page depending on the most popular hashtags at the time in a specific region.

The rise of the Arab Spring coincided with a momentum of Saudi Twitter usage. It was a time when Twitter surpassed mass media news in variety and immediacy and stretched the boundaries of expression, when high ranking Saudi officials such as judges, ministers and a vast majority of renowned clergy joined or 'invaded' this sphere as older users commonly describe it. The state's strategy during the first couple of years of uprisings was to lavish people with its generosity – thanks to the high oil revenues at the time – 'coupled with renewed religious discourse about obedience to rulers and heavy security measures' (al-Rasheed, 2014: 353). Despite social media's revolutionary consequences in the region, it was never blocked in Saudi, instead Twitter was integrated into the state's machinery.

The same period also witnessed huge independent entertainment production on the video uploading website, YouTube. For a bored, unemployed young population, YouTube appeared as a blank canvas, ready to be creatively painted with its artist's free will and spirit, replacing both the loss of fun and the loss of space for mundane expression. In addition, several pioneering YouTube comedians joined the wave of activism, producing news satire shows as a way of expressing long-standing grievances against mainstream fake news and political propaganda. As their viewership began to hit thousands, sometimes millions, of viewers, comedy shows and short films developed into business ventures, profiting from online entertainment production.

Luckily the so-called youtubers were not subject to intimidation as much as their fellow social media celebrity figures who focused on micro-blogging. Despite the significant political messages implicit in news satire programmes, these YouTube shows nevertheless were deemed trivial in the eyes of the leadership. Among a plethora of shows and channels, only a single show was stopped as a result of political investigations. Otherwise, Saudi comedians seem to have enjoyed their emergence into the spotlight, unlike non-comedy activists whose fate is more uncertain.

2.5.2 Censorship on Twitter

Notable on Twitter since 2012 are the high ranking officials who joined the platform, revealing their full names, profile pictures and positions, in an attempt to adopt a contemporary, transparent and popular guise. This action was unlike Saudi administrative and public sectors who are known for their high levels of bureaucracy, centralisation and complexity in dealing with public affairs. During this shift, official public sectors also joined the platform, benefiting from Twitter using the *verified* service (shown as a check mark symbol to the right of the name) to emphasise their genuine, formal presence (Figure 1). This step seemed contradictory and ironic for members of the public who never stop sending public messages of outrage, criticism, and mocking to these accounts.

This dynamic transformation in the public sector's virtual extension shows a great measure of inconsistency between the openness of virtual spheres in expression on the one hand, and the formal, slow phase, propaganda-led output of state sectors on the other. This highlights the unreadiness of the public sector to cope with the level of transparency and immediacy offered online where no filtration restrictions are imposed.

Figure 2.1 Official state Twitter accounts

Left: The account of King Salman bin Abdulaziz, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King of Saudi Arabia (verified). Middle: The account of The Ministry of Justice (verified). Right: The account of The Ministry of Interior (verified).

The following extract explains the ministry of interior's vision for social media integration, as stated in a public representative forum:

> His royal highness Prince Muhammad bin Nayef [...] directed that the new media should be dealt with in the same manner as traditional media since it is part of the media, after the ministry has been reluctant to deal with it since its spread. He pointed out that the role that must be committed by the official speaker is proper media presence, following-up events and what is reported in social media, taking initiative and not waiting for events to happen (SPA, 2017. Translated from Arabic).

This statement shows the struggle of state representatives in coping with the immediacy of social media. It gives insight into the motive behind their official presence on the micro-blogging platform Twitter, highlighting their mission to compete with non-state representatives in covering news, minimising rumours and coping up with the speed and multitude of news sources. Implicit in the represented statement is the state's early reluctance in dealing with this platform, which then translated into a mission to control it through maximising state-run accounts' popularity, creating propaganda-led hashtags and posts, republishing news from traditional media anchored to state's agenda, and keeping the gaze open on the direction of public opinion.

Between 2011 and 2016, several decrees and laws were issued to regulate online publishing and information dissemination. Most notably the counter-terrorism law created in 2014, and the decree that proscribes any affiliation to several organisations, including the Muslim Brotherhood (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2015b). This listing was a shock for Islamist civil and human rights advocates, whose intellectual thought may be claimed to be affiliated or influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood ideology. Counter-terrorism law also included a vague, loose-fitting definition of a terrorist crime as 'every act… intended to disturb public order, disrupt public security and state stability, or threaten national unity' (al-Hayat, 2014; Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2015a. Translated from Arabic). This law was alarming to social media figures 'engaged in civil and political debate and call for reform' (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2015b), and subsequently shrank the space for expression. According to Amnesty International, this law 'extended existing laws used by courts to crack down on free speech through overly vague definitions of 'terrorism' – and legitimised and ramped up the punishment against human rights activists', starting with the prominent human rights activist and lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair (Amnesty International, 2018).

The political shift of 2017 – when Muhammad bin Salman ran the kingdom as the King's son and Crown Prince and imposed extreme oppressive measures to secure his grip on power – has significantly changed the fate of social media public figures. Censorship and coercion henceforth took different and far more extreme forms. Where the role of religion in governing was decreased, political oppression excessively increased, and the role of social media figures in running the leadership's vision was emphasised.

This recent shift is not of direct relevance to this study, since the empirical documentation marks the utopian period of Saudi social media activism and grassroots movements up until 2016. It is worth briefly mentioning that as of 2017 social media figures have taken paths different to the ones they willingly chose during the optimistic onset of social media activism, as a result of tight censorship and control. Some willingly

left the country, others have been banned from travel, detained without charges, or removed from their accounts and millions of followers, while the majority of artists and comedians were forcefully integrated into bin Salman's "vision 2030" propaganda machine.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction and research questions

The emergence of social media activism, coupled with the hopes and changes that the Arab Spring promised, marked a historical period of socio-political shifts in Saudi Arabia. Not only were the financially stable, technologically literate young population of Saudi able to see other nations demanding their rights and mobilising against corruptive systems, more importantly, they were using this new, open and yet-to-be-censored space as an opportunity to contest against their own system, and to find a space to express themselves in light of spatial restrictions. Based on the researcher's interest as an insider in Saudi, in addition to the previous contextual overview and literature, this study strives to answer the following questions:

1. How do independent voices on social media platforms contest and challenge the dominant narrative of the Kingdom, prevailing power structure and ideology in the areas of liberty, religion, women's rights and art expression?

Although Saudi Arabia did not witness significant mobilisations against authoritarianism during the Arab uprisings, several groups and campaigns have since arisen, capitalising on social media to reach out to the wider public and initiate a grassroots foundation. Hence, 'independent voices' encompasses several public figures who are resisting various forms of control, and establishing counter-discourses and framings to contest the dominant power and ideology. Research into dissenting voices has revealed that the aspects that gather greatest public attention are political and religious freedom, hence the question's focus on religion and liberty. Other attention is focused on women's rights campaigns, and the notable boom in independent entertainment production, ranging from stand-up comedy shows to established YouTube channels profiting from millions of viewers, as well as artists and art studios appearing in major cities, resisting spatial forms of control. To answer Question 1 more effectively, the following sub-questions are raised:

1.1 What motivates critics to express their grievances online?

This sub-question sheds light on the underlying rationale behind dissident practices, asking whether it is a radical reaction against political control and religious authority, a mutation in thought, or an intellectual privilege and engagement with global rights movements. These incentives play a crucial role in shaping dissent, and more

importantly, they explain how individuals' socio-political reality informs their subversive actions.

1.2   What form does dissenting communication take on social media platforms?

This sub-question highlights the different guises in which dissent may appear and the significance of each, whether they are explicit, implicit, or in-between, or whether they are campaigns, posts, comedy shows, video-blogs, or artworks. It strives to demonstrate how different forms may ultimately change, challenge or ease the way contentions resonate within society from their initiator's standpoint. This is especially evident in the arts where the challenge posed lies in its peculiar form.

1.3   What forms of mainstream responses do contentious voices trigger?

This sub-question is interested in a variety of mainstream and political responses to dissent, whether political intimidation, socioreligious pressure and degradation, or mainstream media condemnation. It highlights different degrees of dominant reactions against subversive voices which ultimately influences the course of their activism. This question also aims to highlight the embedded structures of power in dominant discourses generated as a response to dissent.

To further expand and demonstrate the significance of critical voices, this study also asks:

2.   What is the response of people, of different backgrounds, to this dissenting content?

This question asks how dissenting voices resonate within the wider social structure, and whether they are welcomed and supported, or resisted and challenged. It considers explanations for these different positions, and what they say about the nature of control and resistance in the Kingdom. The empirical investigation takes into account the variety of socioeconomic backgrounds to understand the underlying rationale that underpins each position. Moreover, Question 2 attempts to add another dimension of verification to the study of counter-discourses in social media. It constitutes a crucial part of this thesis as it shows why and how individuals from a variety of backgrounds may accept or resist change, highlighting the extent to which the dominant ideology may be reproduced from below.

3.2 Research design and data collection

This study adopts an interpretive approach to research, since this approach to knowledge seeks to explore and understand rather than evaluate or measure (Joniak, 2002). Moreover, it strives to discover how meanings are generated and negotiated based on individuals' 'idiosyncratic perceptions of the world' (Gunter, 2000: 7). This approach sees reality as multiple and socially constructed. Individuals' subjective experiences and perceptions therefore become enriching as they draw on the ways in which meaning systems are constructed. The interpretative tradition seeks to develop knowledge inductively to generate theory (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011: 9). This study employs qualitative methods, namely interviews and focus groups to answer its questions.

3.2.1 Interviews

In social movements research, interviews are often chosen to obtain extensive information from participants and to assess the context of dissent in ways that are inaccessible through other qualitative methods such as observations and surveys (Potter and Wetherell, 1988). Interviews in other words help researchers to understand motives and attitudes that generate contentious frames.

This thesis employs a mix of in-depth and semi-structured interviews depending on the nature of participants' experiences and narratives, to appropriately answer the first question. Some social media public figures have had a dramatic encounter with the political or collective system and have experienced depreciation, detention or political interrogations that has affected the course of their advocacy. The nature of their activism therefore required an in-depth interview. In-depth interviews are employed to encompass 'the emotional and cognitive dimensions in the creation of grass-roots' counter-discourses (Della Porta, 2014b: 232), to help explain the 'social worlds' to which participants belong (Yeo et. al., 2014: 178), and to give a detailed insight into a person's motives, opinions and points of view (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Despite representing the smaller proportion of interviews, in-depth interviews form bold narratives of control and resistance belonging to those who thoroughly engaged in contentious discourses. The advantage of such interviews lies in the longitude of their stories, which aims to 'capture the rhythms of social movement growth and decline' (Blee and Taylor, 2002: 95) by scrutinising the ways in which participants perceive their discourse, the social world and the forms of control imposed upon them.

The larger proportion of interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion. This form of interviewing is practically useful in targeting a pool of participants under a set agenda. The open-ended nature in this type of interviewing allows participants to

elaborate and recontextualise meanings and ideas in ways that serve the purpose of the research (Deacon et. al., 1999), while the set outline helps gather a 'broader and more diverse group of social movement participants' (Blee and Taylor, 2002: 93). Semi-structured interviews allows for breadth and depth in data collection, as participants are not confined to particular liberal, privileged or popular figures (Thompson, 2017). Targeted participants rather extend to the less popular, less prominent and less privileged social actors who also project an alternative voice that counteracts existing forms of dominance.

Merits of using semi-structured interviews include flexibility in questions, where the researcher can add and reformulate questions depending on the interview's need, allowing a better understanding of the interviewee's answers (Berger, 2000). From the interviewee's perspective it is favoured for giving freedom in constituting their reply in their own way. Unlike other forms of qualitative data collection, interviews capture emotions and behaviours, providing the researcher with 'longer and more complex, and so more rich and interesting' answers (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005: 74).

Sampling interviews

The selected method for reaching out to the targeted candidates is snowball sampling. According to existing literature (Blaikie, 2000; Miller and Salkind, 2002; Walliman, 2005), this appears to be the most appropriate strategy when researching sensitive topics in authoritarian contexts, as it allows for information expansion through candidates referring the researcher to other potential participants (snowball technique). This approach works through participants' nomination of other possible candidates through their social networks (Blaikie, 2000; Atkinson and Flint, 2001), helping to overcome problems of accessibility and sensitivity of the subject. It also has the advantage of establishing trust between the researcher and activists, knowing that their trusted acquaintances were interviewed facilitates potential participants' willingness to be interviewed and opens up their hearts to tell their stories fearlessly.

The main challenges with interviews are accessibility and gender segregation. Travelling in places where public transport is poor and without a male guardian available to accompany the researcher was a challenging task. Interviewing male participants was another challenge, under conditions of religious police control. The researcher worked hard to overcome this challenge by trying to interview male participants in workplaces where official permission is granted for female visits, or in places dominated by foreign professionals, where the religious police are less likely to intrude.

There was also an issue of sensitivity: besides being a female in a male-dominated society, researching a politically and religiously sensitive subject was a difficult situation to manage. This was dealt with by reassuring candidates about their right to withdraw fully or partially from the study, to participate anonymously if they wished to do so, and to only reveal what they felt comfortable with. In other words, participants were not obliged to detail the forms of control inflicted upon them. Presenting a consent form that details the institutional ethical standards to be taken by Goldsmiths College seems to have supported candidates' willingness to voluntarily participate. From a total of 36 interviews, all interviewees signed a consent form and agreed to be interviewed without requesting anonymity. Few participants asked for specific information not be recorded so the appropriate measures were taken to ensure their secrecy. Despite this, participants' names are largely present in this research since what they revealed is part of their public discourse on social media sites.

3.2.2 Focus groups

By gathering 'two to ten people together to discuss their reactions to a limited, but not explicitly bounded, set of concepts, products, problems, or design considerations' (Williams et al., 1988: 38), focus groups are an important way of validating contentious discourses. Scholars have long acknowledged and recommended their use for researching media audiences (Deacon et al., 1999; Henderson and Kitzinger, 1999; Jhally and Lewis, 1992; Miller et al., 1998). Although surveys may reach out to a larger number of participants, their role is limited to giving a 'snapshot of audiences' beliefs, attitudes and behaviour' (Hansen et al., 1998: 257). Whereas focus groups have the advantage of 'telling us about the *why* and *how*' – how audiences receive, accept or resist ideas (Fern, 1982), and the way media frames delve into everyday life and change how the social world is perceived.

In social movement research, focus groups are considered advantageous for examining interactions; furthermore 'they tend to resonate with the stress of contemporary movements on dialogue, consensus, and deliberation' (Della Porta, 2014a: 305-6). Focus groups also allow the researcher to observe audiences 'conducting their own discursive tests, negotiating meaning' (Hiemstra, 1983: 807), clarifying social conventions, as well as comparing positions regarding socio-political issues (Ritchie et al., 2014; Kitzinger, 2004). By stimulating natural conversations, focus groups in turn elaborate how certain discourses and 'genres provide resources for thinking about issues' (Kitzinger, 2004: 174). Although some scholars prefer one-to-one interviews over focus groups, in an effort to get more out of each person (Berger, 2000), the downside is diminishing the lively debate that a group discussion stimulates, which is meant to 'throw light on the *normative understandings* that groups draw upon to reach their collective

judgments' (Bloor et al., 2001: 4). As a 'concentrated interaction on a topic in a limited period of time' (Gamson, 1992: 192), focus groups are efficient in utilising research resources – cost and time – without affecting the depth and richness of information that this tool can provide.

Focus groups sampling

Targeting a multitude of views from various socioeconomic backgrounds is a challenging task in a predominantly conservative society with very limited public spaces. The main obstacle was making the sample as inclusive as possible of different socioeconomic backgrounds, ages and genders. Snowball sampling is also used here to help the researcher access a large number of people who are willing to participate, as there is no professional institution that is assumed to help the researcher find her targets. Deacon et al. (1999) point out the constant application of such a method in 'closed or informal grouping, where the social knowledge and personal recommendations of the initial contacts are invaluable in opening up and mapping tight social networks', which is definitely the case in Saudi Arabia (53). The nature of the research question (in relation to focus groups) targets a pool of social media users, with contrast and variance as a main aim. The following section explains how this was managed.

Navigating social backgrounds

To capture some of the diversity and richness of Saudi's predominantly active social media users, discussion groups were conducted in six different locations, ranging from the metropolitan sites of Riyadh, Jeddah and al-Khobar to the less urban spaces of al-Hasa, Unayzah and the outskirts of Dammam. One important element in navigating through different social groups and communities is understanding how their social backgrounds inform the ways in which they interpret and interact with social media's rising dissent. However, since conventional social class distinctions are not applicable in a Saudi society as they may be in Western contexts, the study navigates social status using a more complex set of variables.

To help distinguish social backgrounds, people are classified into 'privileged' and 'underprivileged' categories, where the privileged own cultural and economic capital that eases their familiarity and support for contentious discourses. They are generally characterised with higher educational attainment and incomes, and tend to be concentrated in metropolitan cities, having attended private schools. They therefore own the means to liberate themselves, thrive and progress in thought. The underprivileged are generally characterised by lower educational attainment and incomes, and tend to be concentrated in rural areas or the outskirts of urban cities. This group's livelihoods tend

to rely on low quality public education and employment. The means to either thrive or become confined to the local 'means of information and communication' (Thompson, 1995) however are not limited to the mentioned characteristics (education, income and urbanism); there are other culture-specific variables that come into play such as tribal descent, level of religious conservatism or liberalism, and the level of exposure to Western context and language.

Another important point is that the privileged and underprivileged distinctions are not fixed between the two social categories, they rather give a general guideline for understanding Saudi Arabian social backgrounds. That is to say, the underprivileged do not necessarily possess a lower tribal status or extreme religious devotion, nor do the privileged necessarily represent outstanding education and liberty. To elaborate, sometimes the privileged do not utilise their means to progress, so they end up in a 'passive' category that does not support social change. By the same token, some underprivileged groups use the internet as an opportunity for learning and mutating thought. This experience changes their perceptions and awareness of political injustices and social inequalities, therefore they become more supportive of critical voices compared to other privileged members. To overcome this conflation, another distinction is used to specify users' level of resistance to the dominant discourse or their submission to it, using 'progressive' and 'passive' categories.

'Progressive' and 'passive' draws on the participant's level of awareness and engagement with activism and liberty. An underprivileged progressive group is one that transcends conventional modes of thinking and engages in contentious frames which aim to reinterpret and reform the status quo. The privileged passive, to the contrary, represents a liberal, financially stable group who do not have an interest in changing the status quo, given that their privileges are secured by the system. The table below details the ten conducted focus groups and their social classifications.

Focus Group	Gender	City	Socioeconomic status	number of participants
1	women	Dhahran	mixed, mostly privileged, progressive	9
2	women	Dammam	underprivileged, passive	8
3	women	Riyadh	privileged, progressive	5
4	men	Riyadh	mixed, mostly underprivileged, passive	4

5	men	Riyadh	privileged, progressive	6
6	mixed	Jeddah	privileged and less privileged, all progressive	3
7	mixed	Jeddah	underprivileged, progressive	5
8	mixed	Jeddah	mixed, mostly privileged, passive	8
9	men	al-Ahsa	underprivileged, passive	3
10	men	Uniayzah	underprivileged, passive	7

To help construct participant's views and opinions in light of their backgrounds (Graber, 1984), acquiring information on their socioeconomic status was carefully managed through several steps. Firstly, by selecting places that vary in terms of standard of living and level of urbanism, which provides contrast in levels of social conservatism and culture (those who are cosmopolitan and those towards the Bedouin side of the social spectrum). Secondly, through snowball sampling the researcher managed to obtain information about participant's socioeconomic status through those who helped recruit them. Thirdly, at the opening or so-called ice-breaking part of each focus group, the researcher warmed up the discussion by introducing herself and asking each member to provide small biographical information: their names, where they lived and what they did for a living.

Focus groups process and challenges

Similar to conducting interviews, accessibility was also a challenge in conducting focus groups – more so because of the difficulty of encouraging ordinary people to participate in a study relating to social media at uncertain times, when detentions of social media public figures were happening, in such a limited fieldwork timeframe. The researcher continued to reassure participants about their anonymity, their right to withdraw at any point, and of only speaking up when they felt comfortable doing so. The researcher orally discussed the ethical standards undertaken by the institution to protect their voluntary participation.

Furthermore, the fact that the discussion was semi-structured – in other words there was no direct set of questions that people were obliged to answer – created a safe

environment for people to decide what social media campaign, show, or account they wanted to discuss. Probing and asking 'why' was key to illuminating the underlying assumptions behind participant's decisions to support or resist critical discourses on social media. Also, flexibility in questions gave room for the group to draw on their personal interest and experience (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) on social media platforms, depending on what they mostly 'follow', whether it is an interest in politics, women's rights, entertainment shows or religious contention. This allowed participants to engage passionately in a lively discussion with a minimum need for intervention or redirection by the researcher, especially when members of the group are homogeneous in terms of gender and socioeconomic background.

The issue of having few quiet participants and few dominant ones was present to some extent (Williams et al., 1988: 38). In these situations, the researcher managed the group with eye contact to encourage the quiet members to talk. In case it did not work, the researcher then called upon quiet participants and asked 'what do you think about that?' Another, less direct way to encourage them to speak was to ask 'what may others think about this?', since making the question less personal is an efficient way of encouraging participants to speak out without embarrassment (Fisher, 1993; Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook, 2007).

Managing gender sensitivity

As the earlier table showed, gender segregation was present in all groups excluding those conducted in Jeddah, where participants from that city were already gender-mixed at work and in social life, therefore they did not feel embarrassed joining a gender-mixed group. Apart from the Jeddah groups, men and women were separated based on creating a socially friendly, relaxed environment, since it is against the nature of participants' lifestyles to speak with a non-acquainted member of the opposite gender.

Focus groups with underprivileged, socially conservative male members presented a specific challenge, as they did not wish to attend a discussion where the moderator was a woman. To overcome this, the researcher hired two male moderators – one in each city – to conduct the focus groups on her behalf. The reason for doing so is that conservative men are an important data resource to be represented, and if the researcher insisted on being present, the discussion would likely not have been as open and spontaneous as it was when moderated by a man from their own community, because of the gender dynamics that are likely to shy away their natural expression.

Moderators were chosen carefully to suit the research requirements. Despite belonging to the same culture as the participants, they were themselves cosmopolitan and showed

a great deal of interest in this research. This facilitated the process of familiarising them with the research enquiry, as well as explaining focus group objectives and the relevant themes for discussion. Having sets of semi-structured questions was helpful in training moderators, as it gave them the courage to know how to start the discussion while realising that their role was confined to moderating, guiding and probing for more, without interrupting or offering opinions. Both were required to attend one of the focus groups moderated by the researcher to observe how they worked. Having spent the time and effort in training the moderators to ensure they would act exactly as the moderator would, the rich and resourceful data in return turned out to be worthwhile, given the fact that it would not otherwise have been obtainable. Finally, male moderators explained to their groups that they were conducting them on behalf of the researcher, and ethical consent was verbally given by each member to agree to participate anonymously and for the discussion to be recorded.

3.2.3 Secondary sources and data triangulation

This study uses web resources such as microblogging posts, short video scripts and artworks in the analysis of collected data, in addition to mainstream and official responses towards them. The selection of web material was confined to what was mentioned by primary data resources, that is, to what participants explicitly brought forward. This restriction not only helped conserve limited research resources (cost and time), but also made better use of the (already large) volume of data gathered in interviews and focus groups. In addition, it facilitates triangulation.

Triangulation is achieved through the three methods: interviews, focus groups and online resources. It is favoured for the credibility and validation it adds to the collected data (Bodgan and Biklen, 2007), through cross-checking what participants say with what is produced online, whether they are contentious frames or responses towards them. In addition, triangulation helps encompass multiple aspects and perspectives of the studied phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2013).

3.3 Data analysis

This study incorporates three different analytic methods, depending on the nature of the data and what the question aims to illuminate. Thematic analysis is used throughout this study as a primary tool for analysis. Other than being the most common methodology in analysing qualitative data (Bryman, 2012), it is well suited to the study's epistemological position to knowledge and therefore particularly useful in dealing with the research's questions. Thematic analysis is chosen for its flexibility in dealing with large amounts of qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) in a way that is analytically fruitful, as it

illuminates the rich detail of interviews and focus groups, in addition to shedding light on the variety of perspectives available. Thematic analysis works best with inductive approaches in research, enabling categories to emerge *from* the data and subsequently allowing interesting and unanticipated themes to unfold (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2004; Nowell et al., 2017).

This study follows the stages of data extraction, organisation and writing up as stated by Braun and Clarke (2006), from data familiarisation and transcription, to coding, establishing initial themes, naming those themes then writing up the final report. Data transcription and coding was done using ATLAS.ti software which allows interviews and focus groups to be added in their original voice recording format. It also allows transcriptions to be made using Arabic language, unlike other software that does not support this language. Coding was also conducted via ATLAS.ti, however translation was conducted and reviewed separately using the researcher's ability to translate from her mother language (Arabic) to English, with assistance from a translator who reviewed the presented extracts. Despite the enormous time and effort that transcription, coding and translation took, going over the recorded and written material over and over again supported the researcher's journey in uncovering interesting and unpredicted themes.

Other than thematic analysis, this study uses frame and discourse analysis to crystallise the *framing processes* (Snow and Benford, 1988) at play, which generates the foundational structure of social movements. Being theoretically suited within social movement studies, this research follows Lindekilde (2014) in combining frame and discourse analysis to focus on the framing aspect of a social movement, as 'both cast an interpretive perspective on the social interaction that constitutes social movement activity' (Lindekilde, 2014: 196).

Frame analysis is employed in texts that discuss the main themes of contestation: liberty, religion, women rights and the arts. It is used to view framing processes as 'signifying agents' (Hall, 2006: 131). This study draws on Entman's (1993) definition: 'To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described' (52, italics in original). This definition is particularly useful for looking at how dominant frames are constructed, and therefore informing critical responses against discourses that advocate for civil rights and representation, interpreting and evaluating them as being morally degrading, leading to Westernisation, threatening national unity or standing against religion. The significance of frame analysis lies in the way it 'directs our attention to the details of just how a communicated text exerts its power' (Entman, 1993: 55-6).

From social actors' point of view, frame analysis has the advantage of looking at the way in which grassroots movements construct and shape meanings, and become 'carriers and transmitters of mobilizing beliefs and ideas' (Snow and Benford, 1988: 198). According to Lindekilde, frame analysis crystallises the way in which social actors 'play an active role in interpreting grievances and defining goals, and not just as passive carriers of ideas and ideology' (196). By dissecting 'how ideas, culture, and ideology are used, interpreted, and spliced together with certain situations or empirical phenomena in order to construct particular ideative patterns through which the world is understood, and which can be used to mobilize support of particular political goals' (Lindekilde, 2014: 196). In other words, how these ideative patterns are infused with meanings counter to the dominant ideology, and therefore become themselves carriers of mobilising beliefs, like democracy, citizenship, feminism and tolerance.

3.3.1 Critical discourse analysis

Where a micro-level of analysis is applicable, this thesis uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a way of thoroughly examining '*the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance*' (Van Dijk, 1993: 249, italics in original), exposing power and ideology and underpinning the state's hegemonic rule, by looking into specific texts such as writings, tweets and YouTube videos.

Critical discourse analysis is specifically chosen for its detailed analysis of a specific text and its focus on power dynamics implicit in sociocultural texts and practices, helping to expose processes of normalisation and institutionalisation at play (Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak 2007). On the other side, CDA also helps with understanding how dominance is challenged by different social actors who deploy existing frames – such as religion and nationalism – in a way that counteracts the meanings and practices associated with their dominant usage.

Combining CDA with frame analysis is not new to social movement studies. The advantage it adds, as stated by Lindekilde, is that 'discourse analysis of single exemplary texts may serve as the starting point of a larger frame analysis designed to increase the explanatory power and external validity of the study' (2014: 223).

Where discourse analysis is applicable, this study deploys Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (1992). According to Fairclough, the first dimension looks at discourse as a text, where the linguistic form of the text is being scrutinised. The second dimension is the discursive practice, a macro-sociological analysis that considers the dynamic relationship between the text and the social

practices it is associated with. This dimension examines the text's 'production, distribution and consumption' (Fairclough, 1992: 72) – how a text is produced, the medium by which it is distributed, and the way it is interpreted by society. An example would be looking at the link between the text – be it a media statement or campaign headline – and social practices that interpret and interact with it. The third dimension is discourse as a social practice, a micro-sociological analysis of the way discourse is enacted as social norms, traditions and 'commonsense procedures' (Fairclough, 1992: 72). This dimension looks at the order of discourse – the ways in which social actors may use innovative methods to communicate their ideas that ultimately changes or challenges the existing order of discourse. This part uncovers relations of power and domination implicit in the existing order of discourse that work to justify injustices and inequalities inherent in the social structure.

By using CDA as an analytical framework, it is important to underscore its constructivist position. That is discourse as an act of 'constituting and constructing the world in meaning', from the construction of identities, to social relations, to knowledge and belief systems (Fairclough, 1992: 64). The purpose of CDA is to investigate 'structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language' (Wodak, 2007: 187), and to expose the ways in which 'social dominance' may be 'sanctioned by the courts, legitimated by laws, enforced by the police, and ideologically sustained and reproduced by the media or textbooks' (Van Dijk, 1993: 255).

In this study, CDA is proven to be analytically fruitful in addressing discursive texts, whether in the form of official responses against subversive actions, or counter-discourses (shows, tweets, published articles) produced by social actors to frame their ideational framework and innovate in discursive genres. It is also useful in unpacking the way counter-discourses are received – and indeed challenged – for not adhering to the established traditions and norms. In doing so, this study follows Lindekilde (2014) in combining frame and discourse analysis to the study of social movement framing processes, which enables the researcher to 'investigate more systematically how this dominant discourse is challenged by counter-frames across various types of actors in the field' (223).

While employing CDA to analyse social media content, this study stands alongside Jurgenson (2012) and Unger et al. (2016) in refusing the digital divide or 'dualism' between the online and physical worlds. CDA rather 'deals with discourse, not technology, as its central object of analysis. We are not only interested in what happens in media per se but in how it may shape and influence social and political sphere of our life worlds' (KhosraviNik, 2017: 586).

3.4 Summary

This chapter outlined research questions and methodological approach adopted in this study. Namely a qualitative approach that uses a triangulated methodology to explore dissenting voices in social media sites, official responses to them, and social media users' perspectives on them. It does so by using a combination of interviews, focus groups and cross-referencing online content with the gathered interviews and focus groups data. This chapter also detailed the analytical tools used to analyse the data, while indicating how each chosen method suits the nature of the enquiry.

The following four empirical chapters (4-7) outline the themes of online contestation in political and religious liberty, women's rights and arts as a form of contention (including official responses if available). The subsequent chapters (8 and 9) deal with social media users' perceptions on these in the four main areas, and finally Chapter 10 presents a conclusion.

PART II:
NARRATIVES OF DISSENT

CHAPTER FOUR: LIBERTY

The rise of the modern Saudi state is marked by rival waves of modernisation and counteractive conservatism contesting the social realm. The peak of modernisation is argued to have characterised King Faisal's reign, when ministries were formed, girls' schools were established, scholarships abroad were granted, and the prosperity of oil revenues created an infrastructure for welfare benefits (al-Rasheed, 2010). The classical narrative of the Kingdom follows the pattern of setting modernisation plans followed by a backlash from conservative and religious parties. This pattern was particularly salient during the introduction of new communication technologies such as television in the 1970s and the internet in the 1990s, where waves of rapid openness emerged, alternative and 'foreign' ideas were exposed, and calls to denounce these technologies got louder, particularly from the religious establishment and the hesitant conservative society that found itself struggling with both – holding up its traditional religious identity and coping with modernity.

The rise of social media as a space of contest, however, seems to have disrupted this pattern. Instead of waves of liberty followed by Islamic containment and control, we witness the rise of subaltern groups adopting human rights frameworks and demanding active civil engagement. The rise of these subaltern publics broke the monopoly over the cultural sphere and changed the liberal-Islamist equation into a traditionalist-reformist one, allowing public spheres to emerge and contest existing forms of control and dominance.

Through available online spheres, subaltern groups were able to transcend physical limitations and express their engagement with global human rights frameworks, while gaining a momentum of followers who, at the peak of the Arab-Spring, found activist discourse satisfying to their suppressed grievances. This contest happens in a context of a large youth population, many of whom experienced rapid change and global cultural flows that shaped their ideas and identities in a significantly different manner than previous generations. This enabled them to move beyond the false dichotomy of pious-versus-patriot that generates mechanisms of exclusion and coercion, into a space where dialogue, reform and pluralist opinions may take place.

4.1 Motives to activism

4.1.1 Engagement with regional rights movements

The onset of the Arab Spring that coincided with the newness of some social media platforms like Twitter have associated such platforms with activism and civil engagement. Participants from privileged backgrounds, whose education and intellectual interest fosters an engagement with civil movements and human rights demands, have used this opportunity to express what they have long desired. For a senior corporate manager and an activist, this space seems to compensate for the absence of civil society institutions:

For us, Saudis, social media networks have a special meaning, they are the only tool for expression [...] Twitter for us turned into something like a parliament, a civil society organisation, a financial regulatory authority, a regulatory authority over the public sector, and a tool for expression (al-Alkami, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic)

For a lawyer and an opinion writer, social media seems to be a space that takes responsibility for improving the status quo:

> Through reading and awareness I have developed an interest in issues of human rights [...], matters of public interest, and a feeling that it is an ethical obligation to take responsibility. Also writing something and receiving responses carries in itself a sense of pleasure (al-Ja'fari, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

For an established intellectual writer and publisher, 'Twitter is the platform for political expression in Saudi simply because all other means are non-existent' (al-Gudaimi, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). This online space in a way substitutes long-held aspirations for political expression and participation. In this regard the blogger and social media public figure al-Qahtani states: 'My motive is a social concern. I certainly believe that we deserve a better quality of life than the one we are having, much better' (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Having begun blogging and micro-blogging in their early phases, al-Qahtani's nostalgic narration depicts these spaces as intimate and open: 'I used to write what I want, without thinking about limits' (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Economist and pioneering social media public figure al-Zamil likes to make use of his hundreds of thousands of followers by inspiring them with economical ideas and solutions that may lift the nation's oil dependency and overcome financial corruption in the long run:

I try to educate – it has a sense of superiority to say 'educate' – but seriously, people don't care about economical issues, and there is no economics education in schools or anything. So my ongoing aim is to bring economic-related ideas forward so people can think long-term instead of short-term (al-Zamil, interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic).

Despite his acknowledgement of an existing hierarchy in the phrase 'to educate', al-Zamil nevertheless uses this open, free and interactive space as a chance to propose ideas unfamiliar to the normative mindset fed through indoctrination and rote learning, as well as to initiate grassroots framings and campaigns that target financial corruption and waste of resources.

A progressive Islamist writer finds in social media an opportunity to transform 'the elitist reformist discourse' into 'popular ideas, even if they appear unsophisticated and superficial' (al-Maliki, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). While the writer al-Ibrahim resorts to social media to raise his voice: 'I have things I want to say, and I have always wanted a platform where I can speak up' (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic) – this is in addition to engaging with a like-minded community of intellectuals, writers and activists that his small conservative social circle does not embrace.

Together the depicted incentives carry a sense of willingness to take part in shaping new ideational framings that expose social grievances and become part of an emerging movement that raises awareness of political and civil rights. The participants referred to above are a group who enjoyed an educational and intellectual privilege that allows them to become pioneers of social media activism and civil engagement, gaining wide publicity and greater opportunities for interaction.

4.1.2 Escaping ideological domination

Central to religiously and socially conservative groups is a desire to question legitimised structures of power and religious authority – being conservative implies being subject to strict upbringing and religious indoctrination. This section addresses such groups, beginning with Khalawi, who finds institutional authority resembled in the character of his father who is a *Jami*, a label used to describe pro-government clerics and their followers, as opposed to the Sahwists who are more rebellious. For Khalawi, this figure of authority has successfully imposed 'strict censorship' upon him as a child to raise a pious, obedient son. This form of parental control included the internet in his early years, as Khalawi was only allowed to browse a few trusted websites. During this period, which preceded his marriage and independence from parental authority, Khalawi states:

> I remained on the righteous path of the 'righteous predecessors'[2]. My father was actually preparing me to become the leader of the *ummah* [Muslim nation] and the carrier of the great Islamic duty. I had excessive Islamic education beyond school, even additional activities were religious (Khalawi, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

The 'righteous path' points to the religious cultivation Khalawi was subject to as a way of preparing him to fill in the nostalgic space of the great leaders of the Muslim nation. Khalawi confesses that he did not come across any natural science curriculum from high school up to university. He was busy with intensive religious curriculums inside and outside school, indicating the lack of rational thinking necessary for someone to become a clergy, preacher or leader of the nation. Instead all one needs is strict instruction to create the ideal pious religious model. Thus the father's motive in preparing his eldest to become the leader of the Muslim *ummah* signifies his approach in seeing the Islamic path as warfare that requires a commander to combat enemies – perhaps a small reminder of the Middle Ages when religious wars were the national call to arms for many people. It is not the earned skills of dialogue and rational thinking that creates a leader, but the power of preaching, excluding and commanding.

It perhaps makes sense that it took Khalawi ten years after 'marriage-as-freedom' as he puts it to be able to transition away from the *Jami* paradigm – although not entirely. There remain ideological traces from the mindset he was programmed to hold, especially regarding patriarchal authority, as he notes: 'In fact I have many authorities: I am a husband so I hold marriage authority. I am my mother's eldest son, in fact I divorced her from father so I hold authority against my own mother, I am her legal guardian too', in addition to holding legal guardianship over his wife and daughters (Khalawi, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Expressing the exercise of authority in an assertive tone, in addition to conforming to male guardianship in his social media speeches[3], highlights the deeply-rooted patriarchal ideology gained through decades of religious instruction as well as legal and cultural endorsement.

For other participants, such as al-Ohali, the authoritative figure is represented by the conservative society that he seeks to unravel after setting off on a journey of intellectual mutation:

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[2] 'righteous predecessors' is a term used by traditional salafis in Saudi religious institutions to refer to their methodology that is based on replicating certain religious texts that they trust – like Ibn Taymiyah and Ibn Abdulwahab – without opening up for new *ijtihad* or diligence.

[3] The following link refers to Khalawi's talk entitled "Man's Authority and boundaries of husband obedience", published on his YouTube page after sharing it via Snapchat, which received an average of 75,000 viewers as stated by the participant in the interview. The talk is delivered in Arabic (accessed 2 May 2017): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2MMWyIbf6A

The university phase for me was, in a way, a journey to discover oneself and truth. In that stage one discovers that many ideas we were taught are not as they seem, they are not the ultimate truth as we were told as children, and that the world is painted with colours ever more than we have imagined. At the time, I used to read sometimes as a result of my curiosity. I used to read books – the source that enables me to find these books is the internet. Because ultimately I belong to a very conservative environment, and I grew up with very conservative friends in high school and university. The books you get to know from them belong to their circles, limited to the strict style of thought that they experience. But the internet opened up possibilities, you go there, search, browse forums, different people from different places in the world, people who are in a way intellectually liberated from society, debating and recommending books, this is how I come across these types of [liberal] books (al-Ohali, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Through recalling his journey of intellectual transition al-Ohali constructs a beautiful metaphor of a world filled with colours far more than he had imagined, to signify the discovery of new ideas, opinions and thoughts that has opened his mind to understanding how dominant ideas have been constructed as given truths. His statement describes social norms and the education system as two powerful instruments that kept his community in accord with political and religious control.

Al-Ohali's narrative depicts an important moment of contrast during his intellectual development between the readings available in the unlimited world of the internet, and the type of readings he would get from his conservative circle. It is a moment of recognising cultural domination which he used to believe as the only truth, yet today he knows is limited to his conservative surroundings.

Moreover, looking at the internet as a resource for pluralist knowledge and networking beyond one's conservative community highlights the crucial role that this virtual space plays in the lives of young people like al-Ohali. It points to an important stage of transition from constricted traditional media into an online world that transcends classic forms of censorship, and subsequently escapes strict ideological control.

Al-Ohali is not alone in finding that the 'ideas we were taught' in schools act as a fundamental block against pluralism. Jaber, a cartoonist, shares a similar experience having been taught in public schools, where he used to believe that he deserved God's wrath as a result of the living creatures he drew:

I lived a horrific childhood. I was obsessed with drawing and at the same time I did not want to go to hell, I was a child, you know. I was afraid of fire, and more than once teachers intimidated me to the extent that I cried. They used to come to me and shout 'come, see', they lit a lighter, burn my finger and shout 'see this fire, God's hell is seventy times stronger'! Well you've burnt me now, you've tortured

me, my finger is burnt! And they carry on, a method of torture and intimidation, it's horrifying. Then finally when I grew up I discovered that it [drawing humans] is predominantly permissible (Jaber, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

Jaber's narration succinctly depicts the horror deployed in educational institutions, magnifying the method of creating an obedient subject through processes of intimidation that are believed to result in religious instruction. Such processes involve programming individuals to avoid prohibited practices – including most examples of entertainment and social activities – to avoid God's greatest torment. Children are trained to deny their ego from an early stage if they are to remain on the righteous path – a path strict enough to suppress Jaber's passion for drawing. The method deployed to keep Jaber away from the 'deviant path' as an innocent child is applicable to most restrictive religious teachings that result in normalising the distinction between right and wrong, and the definitive punishment or reward. What is at stake is the powerful yet hidden grounding of this dichotomy which continues to inform everyday practices and decisions, ultimately legitimising patterns of judgment and exclusion. This ideology is deeply embedded in the educational structure. Not only is it present in curriculums, but furthermore 'the impact of the underlying tone of the message, the efforts to instil fear of the 'other' and to enforce obedience towards those in authority, [are] further reinforced by the teaching methods' (Prokop, 2005: 60).

Jaber discovered later in life that the exaggeration of prohibiting human drawings is but a tiny jurisprudential interpretation amongst the majority Islamic scholarly material that allows drawing living creatures. Hence Jaber believes that he, like many other Saudis at the time, was exposed to an ideology of fear and discipline that distorted minds and personalities and strictly determined the ways they viewed the world. Hence his drawing seems to carry the desire to break free from ideological domination and critically highlight the processes of normalisation that are said to be divine teachings.

Figure 4.1 Jaber's Twitter post

@Jabertoon (17 Feb 2016): 'I was commanded to behead at the age of six. Cartoon #in_memory_of_sahwa' (Jaber, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic)

The cartoon in Figure 4.1, annotated with the phrase 'commanded to behead', ironically associates the practice of beheading animals to make their meat halal to the practice of beheading painted humans to make their drawings halal (permissible), at times of strict religious teachings that prohibited human or spiritual drawings. This problematic conception stems from a literalist Salafi interpretation that prohibits imitating God's creations in drawings or sculptures. The caricature in Figure 4.1 symbolises the ease and casualness of hearing a word such as 'behead' in school, which carries the desire to kill as a good deed, a notion which seems to have eased the acceptance of the terrorist ideology – killing as a person's reward. The school in Jaber's story is the place where one may unconsciously infer the ideology of exclusion and violence from teachers' spontaneous religious interpretations.

Jaber's emancipation from educational and religious authority was also a common experience to al-Arbash, who started her early expression through a painting she named 'emancipation'. She then turned to writing as her favoured form of expression: "emancipation' today depicts my approach in writing' (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). It seems that 'emancipation' represents al-Arbash's aim to free herself from the constructed identity she picked up from her strict religious surroundings. Being raised in a strictly conservative Shiite community and endeavouring to express an anti-sectarianism discourse that advocates for tolerance and pluralism is a rather challenging condition for a single mother with very limited family support. 'I realise that the battle for pluralism is the toughest battle' she contends, defining her goal as to 'abolish barriers that stand against awareness, most notably myths' (al-Arbash, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Al-Arbash here depict myths as one of the most powerful tools of passivity that normalise dominance and justifies its manifestations, such as sectarian violence.

Hamidaddin had a similar conservative family-based religious tradition, being born into a Zaydi sect family. He differs from al-Arbash in his privileged tribal dynasty, which previously ruled Yemen and is believed to belong to the *Hashemite* or *Ahl al-Bait*. They have in common the journey that they are undertaking to define themselves not through their 'other' religious sects but through their shared religious practice and experience that unites them with the Sunni majority.

Attempting to achieve such an aim is not easy – in practice it meant encountering structures of ideological exclusion that normalised the judgement of other people based on their religious label, especially among the young generation that was heavily influenced by the Sahwa teachings. Hamidaddin and al-Arbash were rejected figures in

the public image for many Saudis especially the predominant conservatives who were programmed to follow the teachings of specific clergy without hesitation.

In his early years, Hamidaddin was no different in his religious ideological programming than his Saudi peers. He was trained by his tribal clergy to 'revive the prominent role of *ahl al-Bait* in the Islamic intellectual tradition' (Hamidaddin, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic). His identity as part of the diaspora urged him to connect to the intellectual collective heritage of his family, formed in the first three decades of his life by a traditional Zaydi cleric who preached, taught and issued fatwas. After a major mutation in thought he found that this project of reviving the Zaydi heritage no longer made sense, and thus left behind his sectarian heritage and opened himself up to all types of intellectual ideas in Jeddah city to pursue a spiritual journey that moved beyond traditional religious boundaries. The act of leaving behind his sectarian objective and tradition was highly critical on a personal level:

> Part of the challenge that I have personally faced was that a fundamental part of my identity is built upon my *Hashemite* origin. That I am a *Hashemite*, a successor of the Prophet, and there is a message and all. So I started feeling that the logical conclusion I'm telling to myself is beginning to dissolve [...] this is honestly exhausting, it is like one's location in social geography is lost (Hamidaddin, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

This extract deeply illustrates the state of loss Hamidaddin experienced while he ventured out of his Zaydi zone in a quest for religious explanations beyond sectarian bounds, shifting a 'fundamental' block in his identity, that is based on his *Hashemite* origin. The stage of defining himself away from his Zaydi origin stirred an identity conflict due to the excessive religious cultivation that he experienced, which programmed his purpose and social identity based on tribal influence.

Similar to Hamidaddin's purpose is al-Arbash's desire to manifest her humanist, anti-sectarian discourse that stretches beyond her little Shiite community. For both al-Arbash and Hamidaddin, breaking free from control and authority occurred by moving beyond the exaggerated labels that determine their identities as different and alien to the dominant Sunnis to an all-encompassing condition that connects them with others on a humanist and national level.

4.1.3 Transition in thought as the basis for dissent

The phase of intellectual mutation for some participants is characterised as a 'deconstruction' phase of the common knowledge they have accumulated, followed by a

sense of deception. In the following excerpt al-Ohali narrates this stage of his personal transition:

> University level was a stage of deconstructing foundations if it makes sense, many ideas were broken or shaken [...] it was ongoing even in the post-university level, because one experiences internal transitions, reflects on himself, revises his ideas, and begins to re-articulate many things (al-Ohali, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Articulated in Arabic as '*taksīr al-Yaqīniyat*', which translates as breaking certainties or foundations, this phase of deconstruction that al-Ohali (and others such as Khalawi and Hamidaddin) has experienced against what he believed to be established truths, is a foundational incentive that underpins his dissent. Marking this phase as a shake-up, a reflection and a re-articulation explains his move to a critical questioning phase after years of passive schooling and excessive religious conditioning with no critical engagement or rational thought. It is a stage of recognising the construction of the dominant narrative glossed in a romantic rhetoric that propagates for a return to Islamic purity, unity and glory.

The overall narration of al-Ohali's personal experience highlights a condition of critical questioning, which distinguished him from his social circle of conservative young men. From discovering new sources of knowledge uncontrolled by state-religious ties, to expressing this transition in thought where he confronts clashes from within his conservative community, this story emphasises the great role of the dominant discourse that is deeply woven into the collective fabric of society, and continuing to win the majority's submissive allegiance.

Khalawi was subject to greater religious instruction and control than al-Ohali, operating from several spaces: the home, where the role of authoritative father is at play; the school, where he studied excessive religious material; and the little town in al-Qassim where he grew up in the 1990s, having no form of entertainment more prevalent than that of clergy's preaching and emotional songs in mosques, magazines and on cassette (Interview, 2015). His university years were not much different to his school's rote learning, preparing Khalawi to become a featured clergy with great emphasis on rhetoric and memorisation of religious texts, while critical reasoning was at a minimum.

  - Researcher: When did you recognise a transition in your thought?
  - Khalawi: After Twitter. Until I entered Twitter - 2011 - I was pro-government, a *mutawa'* [religious man] officially, the only difference is that I watch movies and listen to music. The rest, the thought is based on submission to religious text, *total* submission to religious texts, no debate about this. I am against any

practice outside the conservative frame, considered very right wing (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

The previous statement depicts the time in which Khalawi changed and reflected on his previous right-wing stance, which was mainly informed by 'total submission to religious texts'. The stress in articulating this phrase tells a great deal about the style of religious learning and social conditioning he underwent to totally accept the dominant narrative without questioning. The following comment from Khalawi manifests his initial surprise about Islamic opinions that do not support submission and obedience to those in authority, which he came across during the Arab Spring:

> This revolutionary thought totally opposes my political stance, of course it is against 'obedience of the ruler' that I was raised to believe from my father [...] This intellectual movement during revolutions have turned religious foundations upside down, in the country generally and for me especially (Khalawi, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Obedience in the excerpt above is constructed as a condition that ensures piety and loyalty to the ruling regime. It is a personal duty to support the nation's unity, security and religious application. The rapid shift that Khalawi experienced, with the prevalence of pro-democratic Islamic debates, was completely new and shocking. Because of the accumulated control imposed by the father and the education system, Khalawi was trained to 'respond to' such claims which 'totally oppose' his foundation of knowledge (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). The contrast and subsequent intellectual transformation in people like Khalawi may be more contentious than those emerging from elitist and privileged networks, since Khalawi's community of followers becomes exposed to criticism from within their conservative social structure.

In his early life, Hamidaddin was influenced by the traditional method of teaching religion through hierarchy, whereby the teacher performs a highly authoritative role as holding truth, and thus requires 'a priori respect for authority and unquestioning attitude' (Prokop, 2003: 80). In this regard Hamidaddin describes his previous method in religious teaching in relation to the open-ended discussions he currently conducts:

> Meetings I held in the 1990s were hierarchal. No opinions, and if there were, they would be mentioned to be denounced. I mean nobody would bring them to hold an opinion, but to say, 'there is this problem, how would we respond to it?'. Today there is no more "how do we respond" or "what is the right thing". Now the situation is more of "I see it this way" (Hamidaddin, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

Besides Hamidaddin's intellectual privilege and religious difference (as a Zaydist) he used to comply with 'hierarchal' rote learning in the religious meetings he conducted. Whilst stressing exclusion in the way he dealt with 'opinions' as a way of conserving the Zaydist tradition. As a Zaydist in a predominantly Sunni society, Hamidaddin had the opportunity to question the imposed gap between sects that induces each sect to denounce the other: 'My work on manuscripts opened up prospects' Hamidaddin adds, in terms of finding advanced ways of interpreting texts and critically evaluating social and political structures that influenced jurisprudential principles:

> So what these [readings] have done was make cracks. Gradually cracking and destabilising the foundations of my religious beliefs. It undermined to a high extent the black and white space, so the grey part became wider more and more... Up until 2002 when I realised that structures of religious sects are wrong from the very basis, therefore we should move beyond them... So I wrote a book... and tried to say in the beginning that the word Zaydi or those religious sects were shaped in a certain historical moment for certain causes that we have moved beyond, therefore we should move beyond it all. If we still need sects because there are different understandings then they should commence in contemporary settings (Hamidaddin, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

Hamidaddin explained his mutation in thought and emancipation from sectarian bounds as happening through widening his intake of religious literature, which left the 'black and white' area – including sharp ends, judgments and responses – with no room for opinions to diverge without a clash. The phase 'growing more mature' constitutes a widening of the neutral area that embraces difference, diversity and tolerance, and actively moving from exclusion to inclusion. Hamidaddin's phase of religious deconstruction came as a response to active reading and questioning the basis of sectarian difference, which led him to acknowledge their historiography that needs to be addressed critically rather than passively. Thus, this stage of destabilisation prepared Hamidaddin to write diligently beyond sectarianism, changing his exclusive methodology and transforming religious lessons he conducted into active discussions.

Hamidaddin's major transformation in approach was threatening to the wider public. His Zaydist background meant that many clergy resented his involvement in the religious Sunni culture – and ironically members of his Zaydist family discredited him for not properly sticking to the Zaydist tradition.

4.2 Demanding liberty

4.2.1 The citizenship challenge

Unlike the Western example of nationalism that is tied to the emergence of modern nation-states, Saudi Arabia has a weak affiliation with any national representation

beyond its Islamic identity. Peculiar to Saudi Arabia is the strong tribal affiliations and loyalty that the founder of the Kingdom was keen to gain and sustain from the establishment of the Kingdom. Tribes are inherent in both social structures and public institutions – in the latter certain tribes are known for belonging to a particular body (al-Rasheed, 2010). In addition to strong tribal affiliations, the state capitalised on Islamism to combat other transnational waves of Arabism and Communism, leaving the construction of national identity in a void.

The state-sponsored national identity project became visible during King Abdullah's reign in 2004, through a sudden extravagant attention towards national cultural artefacts, events and anthems, and more importantly the recognition and celebration of Saudi National Day, which was previously strongly rejected by leading Islamic icons, many of whom died in the early 2000s. Authorising a national holiday and permitting public celebrations – that keep the religious police busy hunting dancing boys in the streets – highlights the state's attempt to constitute symbols of nationalism away from their Islamic reference. This section highlights activists' positions in relation to the national discourse trend that proliferated at times of political shifts and religious ideology curtailment, coinciding with a series of sectarian terrorist events that popularised the call for national unity.

Unique to the reformists' discourse is the underlining of citizenship as an essential element of nationalism. Citizenship is weakly articulated in the Saudi context because of the peculiar political relationship between the ruler and the ruled that is based upon giving and gratitude, rather than obligations and rights. This relationship is apparent in royal decrees and grants, and the way the elite and the public celebrate these, whether holidays, budget declarations or changing leadership positions in state bodies. The celebratory culture apparent after each sudden announcement of a royal decree gives an insight into the structure and hierarchy of power that finds notions such as citizenship alien. Ruling power is rather communicated in a traditional manner: through a generous ruler who owns and grants concessions, and the subjects who long for his wisdom and celebrate his gifts. Subjects express their needs through petitioning the royal court, pleading for financial grants or medical treatment, and expressing gratitude in a form of oral poetry, songs, and street banners and slogans displaying royal figures and words of praise.

Resistance to the predominant manifestations of 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995) finds its space on social media. In 2012, Jaber drew a critical caricature for the national day that problematises the idea of celebrating nationalism whilst citizens lack basic citizenship rights. The sketch portrays the character of an unemployed young man faking a big smile and celebrating the national day, leaving behind his original patched

clothing and the green-hanged file used for applying to any institution in the public sector (Figure 4.2). This was Jaber's way of incorporating basic demands into his caricatures, which was meant to be displayed in the press, however his drawing did not appear in al-Jazirah newspaper as he drew it, so he published it on Twitter:

> @jabertoon (25 Sep 2012) 'I resigned from al-Jazirah newspaper, for their repeated copyright infringement of my moral and intellectual right. The latest is what happened in the national day caricature' (Jaber, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

Figure 4.2 National day caricature

Right: a copy of Jaber's resignation letter. Left: Original national day caricature without the newspaper's editing.

> I sent this caricature on the national day, it discusses the issue of the unemployed who celebrate in the streets, and tomorrow they go back to applying for a job [...] So I drew this person who is wearing green wanting to celebrate the national day, and behind him lies his patched clothing and his green handled file that he will attend to later. So the publisher without my notice erased the clothing in the background and edited it, because it's considered a criticism that isn't allowed on the national day. You must praise, otherwise your work is not permissible. So it ended up in a person wearing green and celebrating, that's all. So I resigned (Jaber, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

The excerpt above articulates the reason behind Jaber's resignation from the newspaper – before he reached a million followers on social media – for what he believes is a 'matter of a principle' towards the newspaper's violation of his rights (Interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic), that shifted the purpose of the drawing from critically addressing banal nationalism when basic citizen needs are not met, into a typical nationalist propaganda.

This event shows how the concept of citizenship remains culturally alien to the extent that it cannot be regarded as an artist's expression and viewpoint of nationalism. It is thus the editor's responsibility to align all national day expressions with the glorification

line. This poses for Jaber a sense of normalising the status quo instead of challenging it. Hence his journey as a cartoonist continues to advocate for citizenship as an essential component for nationalism. The post below shows this in relation to education, which arguably poses large scale institutional normalisation of a nationalism-as-obedience discourse:

> @jabertoon (25 Apr 2011) 'I wish for the removal *al-wataniyya* [nationalism] curriculum, and teaching instead a subject named (rights) since there is no nationalism without rights. This is one solution. #SAEducation.' (Jaber, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

Jaber is not alone in crystallising a notion of citizenship grounded in meanings of rights and obligations relevant to any modern nation-state. Al-Abdulkareem (2010) was the first to describe an account of citizenship in the Saudi context, aiming to explicitly deconstruct repression inherent in the political structure and religious tradition – as a result he was suspended from his academic career then arrested. Other reformists have endeavoured to articulate the concept of citizenship from different viewpoints. Al-Ohali in this regard sets his own understanding by articulating pluralism as an essential element of citizenship:

> I remember writing an idea that I believe is very basic in citizenship, that I do not care if you were a Sunni, Shiite, believer, or atheist – whatever you are, I care about your partnership in building this country, and I shall deal with you on the basis of citizenship regardless of your affiliation. What surprised me is the amount of criticism I received saying 'how do you dare say that', especially since I've written this in 2012 or 2013, many conservative people found this shocking. Imagine the mentality they had! That you're supposed to position yourself against others on the basis of their doctrine [...] Unfortunately this is the extremist thinking we grew up with which does not relate to the genuine Islamic thought (al-Ohali, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Al-Ohali in the excerpt above speaks about his micro-blogging activity regarding nationalism in its pluralist manifestation that encompasses and accepts all individual beliefs under one umbrella:

> @al_bara (13 Feb 2012) 'The country fits all.. Sunni and Shiite, Muslim and *kafir*, Islamist and liberal, believer and atheist.. It is not your right to impose your belief on others, only Allah is accountable for all' (al-Ohali, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

His statement is contrary to the state-religious discourse that is based upon religious bias and exclusion, disseminated in the educational system through Wahhabi foundations such as *al-Walaa wal-Baraa* (Alliance and Disassociation). Although such notions intersect with the political interest of unifying the nation under one religious

dogma, it does not represent dominant Islamic thought beyond Wahhabism. Al-Ohali's community nevertheless disapproved of his pluralist reformulation of citizenship, which challenges their conservative belief structure. Thus, instead of negotiating over this principle they accused him of what they view as a normalisation of *fisq* (moral corruption). Al-Ohali's previous position is in line with al-Arbash's nationalist advocacy, which she regularly puts forward on Twitter, in an attempt to layout the principles of nationalism as she sees it:

> @kowthermusa (25 Feb 2016) 'As far as the country is concerned, your sect, belief and trend do not matter. What matters is your position towards the country. Are you a builder or a destructor? A reformer or a corrupt? A lover or a hater..' (al-Arbash, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

Al-Arash's discourse calls to set aside religious affiliations and instead enable accountability and pluralism as the primal components for citizenship.

What is once more problematic about these counter-discourses is that the concept of citizenship remains underdeveloped in the Saudi context. The way citizenship is used officially only emphasises a 'distorted meaning' that shows 'total allegiance to the ruler', according to al-Abdulkareem, instead of demanding rights, civil participation and equality (cited in al-Rasheed, 2015b: 118). In the statement below Altorki confirms the alienation of such a concept:

> [T]he modern concept and practice of citizenship is alien to Saudi Arabia despite the increasing currency of the word in its political discourse. The Saudi Arabian opposition has tried to induce the state to make good on its pledges about democracy and the role of citizens, and it is largely in the discourse of that opposition that the concept is being developed and crystallized in the Kingdom (2000: 233).

Al-Torki stresses the foreign articulation of this concept that has not yet been absorbed on a socio-political level. This concept is limited to the progressive trend or misused to imply obedience. Citizenship thus manifests part of a political reform thesis articulated by reformists in an attempt to push forward for liberty in regard to nationalism and national identity.

4.2.2 The pluralism challenge

Al-Arbash's personal narrative is itself an advocacy for nationalism and coexistence, having lost her son in a terrorist attack in a mosque in Dammam city. Her son and two cousins were amongst three youths who prevented a suicidal terrorist attempting to blow-up the mosque during a Friday sermon gathering, just before he blew up himself in front of

them. Al-Arbash is a well-known voice advocating for religious moderation, peace, coexistence and tolerance, and her life journey plays a vital role in her advocacy. Belonging to a tightly conservative Shiite family, al-Arbash has been rejected by her own community, compelling her to move away from her Shiite town to the capital city (Interview, 2015).

Al-Arbash began to formulate her pluralist account after publicising Shariati's (1972) thought on pure Shiism on Twitter, which considers religion from the perspective of salvation and social justice. According to Shariati, this form of Shiism is against Safavid Shiism – currently practiced in Iran and amongst Saudi Shiites – which is believed to be a deviant version of Shiism that feeds on political domination and sectarianism. Apparently, al-Arbash's posts caused a huge stir amongst Shiites:

> Honestly I never imagined that my tweets would reach Kuwait, Bahrain and all gulf areas, gets printed on paper and delivered to Qom [...] they were widely disseminated and I was being strongly pressured to deactivate my account and so on. At the time my purpose wasn't clear, but when I saw the amount of hatred and sectarianism permeating into our very homes, my vision became clear. I know who is my adversary and what is my battle... pluralism is my toughest battle. Why do you reject the other opinion? why do you consider it an attempt to abolish yours? (al-Arbash, 2015, interview. Translated from Arabic).

This outrage against plurality in opinion against religious truth was not taken easily by the Shiites who consider themselves marginalised by their own system, and therefore stick strictly to the Iranian Mulla teachings. This event made al-Arbash recognise that she is regarded as 'sectarian against my own sect' (al-Arbash, 2015, interview. Translated from Arabic). Her advocacy for pluralism has continued in spite of the number of accusations she received from her family and community who no longer tolerate her dissent, some of whom condemned her for apostasy and called for her death (al-Arbash, interview, 2015).

After the death of her son in the mosque attack, al-Arbash shared 'A letter to the mother of my son's killer' on Twitter. In that letter she expressed empathy for the mother of her son's killer:

> @kowthermusa (30 May 2015) 'I thank Allah that I did not have a hating, provocative, sectarian son. Rather a son who chose to die defending other people's lives. I also empathise the mother of my son's killer. Your son chose the finest of all young men, if he was to search for the finest he could not be more accurate. I know that your heart now is just like mine, sad and broken' (al-Arbash, part of a letter attached to a Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

At the heart of the Sunni-Shiite sectarian divide, al-Arbash sticks to her humanist, tolerant discourse, which shares empathy for human loss instead of condemning the other sect or foreign interventions in her beloved son's death. Her discourse happened to overlap with the state's aspiration for women's representation and sectarian unity, thus al-Arbash was highly celebrated by the political leadership and moderate clergy who emphasised being united at times of extreme sectarianism. Furthermore, she was honoured at public events, and in December 2016 was appointed to the Consultative Assembly known as *Majlis al-Shura (*SPA, 2016):

> The Saudi columnist and writer, Kawthar al-Arbash, who is known amongst Saudi circles for rejecting sectarianism and her loud national voice, is considered one of the prominent women figures appointed in the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia in its seventh round (al-Arabiya, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

This report from al-Arabiya is among several other official newspapers and broadcast channels that reported al-Arbash's appointment in a similar fashion, commending her anti-sectarian rhetoric that supports national unity and peace – this highlights how her pluralist discourse is used as a token to justify the legitimacy of the dominant power. For the state, al-Arbash is a golden representation of all forms of marginalisation: a Shiite woman whose son was a victim of terrorism – the best available model for national unity propaganda. Her active demands for representation and citizenship are overlooked, however, as they do not currently intersect with political interests. As an official representative in the Consultative Assembly, al-Arbash appeared in a forum for 'public representatives', stating:

> Citizenship in its greatest meaning is participation, it is a practice and a guarantee for civil and political rights, and the citizen is part of the state's cohesion and therefore obliged to secure it, as a result to his civil rights. Stressing upon rights and duties towards the state that one belongs to (SPA, Feb 2017. Translated from Arabic).

Al-Arbash advocates not only for coexistence and national identity that surpasses sectarian divisions, but more importantly demands active participation, civic engagement and equal citizenship that is inseparable from the whole national-identity formation. The irony lies in al-Arbash's reformist advocacy that is explicitly stated in the state's official Saudi Press Agency, SPA, yet this rhetoric never turns into news headlines. Since her official appointment in the Consultative Assembly, al-Arbash seems to have become merely a transmitter of state propaganda to the public through a female embodiment from the 'other' sect – part of the state's appearance of modernisation that hides the failure to implement mechanisms that enable social integration.

4.2.3 Contesting corruption

Despite not bringing about significant political change, contentious voices on social media have had significant influence with regards to corruption. Exposing evidence of corruption in the public sector continually encourages a wealthy state to respond by changing ministers or fixing issues in exchange for popularity. Some social media activists use their high-ranking positions and large follower base to expose such issues, like al-Alkami:

> I am highly interested in issues of political reform, corruption, poverty, health sector and other service-related ministries... I find the state patient with me but people are easily enraged; those who have a deviated sense of nationalism think that calling for reform is a sign of treason or a call to overthrow the system (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Al-Alkami's appeal for the people reveals an interesting contrast: on the one hand, he is channelling their demands to those in power – which may possibly influence public opinion. On the other hand his activism, especially in relation to reform, is sometimes perceived as treason from a society who finds the language of rights alien – instead it expects expressions of loyalty, adherence and obedience to those in power. The following section details two cases of contesting corruption: judiciary and land monopoly.

Legal reform

This section addresses the campaign undertaken by three lawyers to call for reform of the judiciary system and exposing its corruption in 2013 from the viewpoint of the main advocate, al-Nogaithan. As an established lawyer and a Harvard graduate, al-Nogaithan felt deep grief for the deteriorating condition of the ministry of justice in contrast with the huge budget King Abdullah allocated to improving its infrastructure. Returning home to Saudi after getting the best available education to find 'our judiciary stuck in the middle ages' as he bitterly describes it, was a strong motive for al-Nogaithan to try and fix the situation (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). His grief was furthermore triggered by the significant media propaganda that the minister of justice was driving to improve his image, which contradicted the ministry's actual situation from the inside, as well as foreign news reports in relation to its performance (Interview, 2015). The following post is an example of al-Nogaithan's everyday resistance on Twitter to the ministry's media campaign:

> @SaudiLawyer (15 Jul 2014) 'Achievements of The Ministry of Justice continue to be merely news' (al-Nogaithan, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

This post comments on an attached news report that announces expansion plans by the ministry, including nine new courts and five notary offices. Al-Nogaithan's explicit criticism of the ministry's 'disastrous performance' continued (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Hashtags such as #deception_of_the_ministry_of_justice (translated from Arabic) continued to gather momentum, exposing criticism and fake news published on behalf of the ministry praising their performance or applauding their fictitious projects. Ultimately, this led to destruction of the reputation of the minister and the ministry during his service, due to the substantial credibility that al-Nogaithan had built through his network of popular activists and reformists, regarded as pioneers on Twitter.

As a 'ministry that imposes its prestige by force', the destruction of its virtual empire certainly did not resonate well with the minister (al-Nogaithan, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). A series of pressures were employed through the press, social media and lawsuits to intimidate al-Nogaithan and his fellow colleagues, yet he was resistant, confident of his skills in laws and regulations of electronic publishing. This confidence allowed him to act vigorously on any subjected report in the media or in legal cases referring to his social activity and criticism. An example of this are the two hashtags: #judiciary_watches_lawyers'_tweets and #judiciary_litigates_tweeting _lawyers (translated from Arabic). The first hashtag refers to the news report entitled 'The ministry of justice is watching lawyers' tweets' (al-Sharq, 2013), an act from the ministry to declare censorship and warn against subversive actions in social media, which indeed worked as a stronger trigger towards the lawyer's dissent against the ministry. This statement for al-Nogaithan appeared to be a naive attempt to regain the ministry's prestige, not only by censoring what is said on Twitter, but by acknowledging their censorship and assuming it will intimidate lawyers to stop their campaigns. For the passionate lawyer, this action further exposes the ministry's insufficiency in performing its actual role, which therefore leads it to monitor the media: 'They have no legal document that supports them in watching lawyers. The word 'watching' is not appropriate to be used against lawyers. If you focus on your performance, you wouldn't need to watch anybody. If you work well people tweet well about you' (al-Nogaithan, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Effectively the ministry's censorship declaration (al-Sharq, 2013) invited a wider engagement with the online campaign. The examples below demonstrate some of the dynamics of activists expressing solidarity for the campaign:

> @essamz (9 Sep 2013) 'The Ministry of Justice – foolishly – declares watching (lawyers' tweets) on Twitter, and threatens to withdraw their licenses. #judiciary_watches_ lawyers_tweets' (al-Zamil, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

@essamz (9 Sep 2013) 'The Ministry of Justice – one of the most unsuccessful ministries – instead of being dedicating to improving its poor performance, devotes its time to watch what lawyers say on Twitter. #judiciary_watches_ lawyers_tweets' (al-Zamil, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

@jabertoon (9 Sep 2013) 'Shhhhh. Cartoon #Judiciary_watches_lawyers'_tweets. #Ministry_of_ Justice' (Jaber, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

Figure 4.3 Caricature depicting the Ministry of Justice
The caricature quotes the news report title 'the Ministry of Justice is watching lawyers' in the header, adding exclamation marks. A senior official appears in a prestigious cloak and beard – indicating his high rank – fully engaged in social sites on his phone and hushing a client, while spiderwebs linger over the word 'case' on the side of the office, as well as the man who is pending for his case. 'Ministry of Justice' is written on the office's white banner.

Consequently, a lawsuit was issued against the three lawyers, filing a long list of ambiguous, unsupported claims (Interview, 2015). A copy of the lawsuit was obtained from the lawyer, which was also publicised on social media. Accusations include 'harming public trust in judiciary', 'mobilising public opinion against judiciary', 'intervening in judicial authority's business', and 'supporting those who hold negative or opponent stances against the Kingdom or those who disagree with the application of Islamic shari'a, describing the lawyer's social media activity as an 'organised campaign to harm the state reputation through its judiciary system' (Translated from Arabic).

The lawsuit crystallises how an individual in authority – the Minister of Justice in this case – has the power to enforce punishment over satirical comments published online

using generalised accusations that have no link to any articles or regulations issued by the government (al-Nogaithan, interview, 2015). For al-Nogaithan, the lawsuit inspired him to demand the minister's removal:

> @SaudiLawyer (8 Nov 2013) 'Blessed Jum'ah [Friday]. I am certain that we will soon hear news about #dismissing_the_minister_of_justice due to his failure in translating the King's vision of judicial sector development into reality. In fact we are behind!' (al-Nogaithan, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

Al-Nogaithan mentioned the post above while commenting on the lawsuit: 'The lawsuit has no basis in law nor shari'a whatsoever, it should not have been accepted from the start' (al-Nogaithan, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic), referring to corrupt conditions inside the judicial body that made the accusation legitimate, such as favouritism, nepotism and bribery. His campaign thus continues:

> @SaudiLawyer (8 Dec 2013) '#Minister_of_justice_leave' (al-Nogaithan, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

As a lawyer with strong networks and expertise, al-Nogaithan never thought such accusations could make their way to the supreme court, as they did not have any regulatory support. However, he was detained for nearly a year, until the new King Salman removed the minister from his position, and shortly after al-Nogaithan was released, in 2015.

This event showcases how far online activists have gone during the post-Arab spring period of openness and hope, initiating grass-roots foundations that can actively work to demand accountability and public sector reform and to fight corruption. Here social media works to substitute the lack of civil society, or as another lawyer put it: 'the media succeeds in places where the primacy of law is non-existent, as in our reality […] in our country we use the media a lot to reach for justice or solve problems' (al-Ja'fari, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

White land

In addition to legal reform, activists use their public presence on social media to raise an alternative voice that exposes several corrupt sectors, demand reforms and reformulate public opinion. A prominent successful campaign in this area is known as white land monopoly. White land refers to undeveloped land in urban cities which, due to a monopoly by royal princes and a few dominant merchants, is left undeveloped, causing a significant increase in housing costs. Two activists decided to confront this issue by putting forward the idea of taxation on undeveloped land as the only possible solution to

overcome this problem. Al-Alkami believes he was the first to mention the issue of white land on mainstream television, using the word *shubouk,* which means fence, referring to private land taken unlawfully, mostly by princes. This local term was considered a taboo in the mass media, yet 'today even official newspapers uses the word *shubouk,* so things have changed, but they needed something to stir it, a spark' (al-Alkami, interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic). Both al-Alkami and al-Zamil believe that their campaigns on social media against white land monopoly facilitated its formulation as a public matter.

> I think we created the atmosphere and momentum that facilitated the state's decision, so economically it is beneficial for the state, and publicly it wins popularity... my theory was that you insert an idea and make people convinced, so every time the government fails in solving the problem, people will divert it back, you cannot escape it, people live this on daily basis, they pay rent, see the shubouk, it is inescapable... it better be imposed sooner or later because the idea [of taxation] is already accepted (al-Zamil, interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic).

As an economist, al-Zamil's strategy was to propose solutions for the current socioeconomic issues and popularise them on social media. In this campaign, al-Zamil and colleagues published the *Monopoly* short film on YouTube (Sceen TV, 2014). Inspired by the director's struggle to find residence in that period, in addition to al-Zamil's article *Monopoly Kingdom* (al-Zamil, 2008), the comedy-drama tells the story of a young man who is about to marry yet is unable to find affordable accommodation, and therefore lives in his van by the coast, claiming he got the best sea view in the area. 'The popularity and influence it made was unimaginable, on a popular level as well as governmental level' (al-Zamil, 2015), where people from various social backgrounds welcomed it and supported the campaign (al-Qahtani, interview, 2015). In March 2015, a law was issued to impose taxation on underdeveloped land:

> @AlkamiK (23 Mar 2015) 'Thank God, the battle for land taxation ended successfully. Next battle: retrieving the shubouk granted unjustly' (al-Alkami, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

> @essamz (23 Mar 2015) 'Special congratulations to Bader al-Homoud @BaderAlHomoud, director of Monopoly film that highlighted the issue of land monopolisation and the call for land taxation. #officially_issuing_land _taxation' (al-Zamil, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

According to al-Zamil, it is the popularity of the film and social media campaign that made land taxation an option in the first place (Interview, 2015). Perhaps what led to its popularity is the way in which it touches people's daily lives without being politically sensitive or religiously controversial. Despite this successful outcome, the government

response towards movements remains unpredictable and uncertain, especially with al-Alkami and al-Zamil being behind bars since 2017.

The themes presented in this chapter demonstrate frames of active civic engagement and use social media to monitor the operation of the public sector and contest corruption – highlighting the deeper issues of corruption and oppression that underpin them. Through these active frames, public figures manage to create platforms on which users engage with their dissent and participate in popularising their campaigns, hence challenging the dominant ideology, which feeds on passivity, subordination and total obedience to the ruler. This tension continues its presence in the theme of religion, discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: RELIGION

The Saudi state has politically benefited from sticking to a strict interpretation of fundamentalist Islam to limit its ideological challenges, offering the appointed ulama full control over the cultural sphere to govern the social order through strict jurisprudential application. Yet the introduction of the internet and a post-September 11 religious ambiguity brought up mass questioning of the existing religious frames, where several religious figures resorted to wider Islamist readings to try and justify the religion's compatibility with modern challenges, encompassing global human rights frameworks.

Distinctive to social media is the capacity to popularise and disseminate grassroots counter-religious discourses at a mass level, therefore intensifying the tension between official religious discourse and collective beliefs, and threatening the legitimacy of the 'divine politics' in operation (al-Rasheed, 2015b). In this chapter, progressive religious figures express the newfound intellectual transformation that moved them from traditionalist exclusionary positions to an Islamic framework that embraces humanism and liberty. This was achieved by adopting a tolerant approach that is capable of cultivating dialogue and discussion beyond the existing doctrinal authority and its heavy ideological subjugation.

5.1 Resisting religious authority

5.1.1 Reforming the religious discourse: the democratic challenge

Several activists see themselves as part of an unorganised network or interest group, sharing a *majlis* (salon) to engage in an intellectual debate that addresses the status quo and challenges religious notions that justify political dominance. They support the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Organisation (ACPRA), led by the prominent progressive Islamist thinker Abdullah al-Hamid, and advocate for its demands. Activist names have been anonymised in this section to protect the identities of the speakers. One activist believes that his group 'represents an enlightened Islamist position that endorses democracy', adding:

> Our group is crystallised in the figure of al-Hamid, although we are less brave than him, we don't want to go to prison, but we share common grounds in terms of ideas... we raise demands beneath the level of imprisonment. They [the government] may ban you from opinion writing, employment, business deals, stop you in airports, I don't mind all of this as long as I am not imprisoned (n.w., interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Another political activist defines his limits:

> Today I avoid discussing constitutional monarchy so I do not ruin the rest of the message. The message of rights, freedoms, political participation and parliament. Because the label is sensitive I leave it and talk about each component separately. If I were to speak about constitutional monarchy I would've been with al-Hamid (k.h, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Another public figure clarifies the line he draws to protect himself from the risks associated with political activism:

> I do not regard myself as a political activist because it is a path for brave people like al-Hamid, al-Qahtani and Abalkhair, these people, this is their life track, sometimes you sacrifice a lot if you are going to this track. I endorse their cause, support them, I may participate in campaigns that advocate for their release. But I am not a leader in this track, I don't have this, I mean, my children are more important to me especially since the outcome is not guaranteed, you may sacrifice yourself and go to prison with no fruit (e.s., interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic).

Within different groups and networks, activists have common support for the ideas propagated by ACPRA, which demand political participation and the establishment of civil society, with the ultimate aim of achieving a constitutional monarchy. They support al-Hamid and his fellow members in campaigns that call for releasing prisoners of conscience, and they advocate for democracy within an Islamic framework. Another activist states:

> Though we are not members of ACPRA, it matters to us, they are our friends. The state knows we are not part of ACPRA yet we believe in them and their project. We must express solidarity in order to counter the mass media machinery against them (a.b, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

ACPRA appears to have grown into a symbol of political activism and freedom of expression. The activists discussed above share their political opinions in blogs, books and social media without directly addressing the Saudi political leadership. Their thoughts are widely disseminated and their influence has exceeded social media to invitations to several cities and countries where they are requested to share their progressive political-Islamist thought. In this matter, one activist observed: 'I like to believe that by being outside prison I participate in creating some sort of thought and awareness through my writings and media activism, make some sort of presence and influence' (n.w., interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Similarly, another activist adds: 'What we want from Twitter, the most important thing, is not to solve problems, but to raise awareness about them' (k.h, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). The

writer a.b. expresses astonishment about the debate he was able to stir when he spread his ideas on social media: 'You are now able to participate – I wouldn't say change – but participate in the process of change. Today you are able to reconstitute ideas, simply through questioning. At least by questioning dominant ideas' (a.b, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Through these narrations that frame political issues by questioning or demanding liberty, it is evident that online spaces not only give people a space to express, but more importantly facilitate the emergence of counter-publics away from direct religious authority and political control. A counter-discourse is thus able to emerge and challenge the singularity of the dominant narrative.

5.1.2 Islamic democracy re-interpreted: al-Maliki's discourse

In 2011 al-Maliki wrote an article entitled *Siyadat al-Ummah qabl tatbīq al-Shari'a* (Sovereignty of the Nation prior to Implementing Shari'a). It had become widely circulated on Twitter and caused enormous controversy, attracting huge attention in intellectual and religious circles[4]. Tens of articles were published as a commentary on al-Maliki's notion of 'sovereignty of the nation', and many clergy denunciations of his concept were published, including a petition signed by seventeen prestigious clergy sent to the royal court condemning al-Maliki and accusing him of apostasy and disobedience.

In his article al-Maliki contests the notion of shari'a sovereignty as an established precept in the Islamic tradition, arguing that shari'a is a human construct rather than a divine law, therefore its application cannot be prioritised over people's choice. Arguing that sovereignty in Islam is for the people and not for shari'a means that it is the people who have the right to elect the leaders who should apply their law (al-Maliki, 2012). In other words, he is incorporating the notion of political sovereignty into the Islamic progressive thought that addresses democracy either timidly behind the concept of *shura*, which according to al-Maliki is not enough for fair representation of society, or explicitly under the banner of Islamic democracy theorised by progressive Muslim thinkers ('Amara, 1988; al-'Awwa, 1989; Ghannouchi, 1993). These theses inspired al-Maliki in approaching democracy from an Islamist perspective. The notion of *siyadat al-ummah* (sovereignty of the nation) that he employs reinforces the people's rule as a condition to shari'a application through active public participation in electing their leader, regardless of the latter's piousness and devotion to Islam. Shari'a, argues al-Maliki, is a constructed mechanism unequal to divine superiority, therefore shari'a

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[4] Examples of renowned intellectual commentaries include al-Dakhil (2012); al-Duhayan (2012); al-Muzaini (2011); and al-Gudaimi (2011). Academic studies include al-Rasheed (2015b) and Wagemakers (2012).

sovereignty becomes a man-made idea that may very well legitimise patriarchy and authoritarianism instead of promoting Islam's noblest mission of restoring freedom, justice and equality (al-Maliki, 2012).

A thorough account of al-Maliki's *'siyadat al-ummah'* was written shortly after the article, under extreme pressure from critics awaiting his response to them (Interview, 2015). It was published as a book (al-Maliki, 2012) to provide a deeper explanation that thoroughly answered his critics. Apparently, the book did not satisfy conservative groups since it only emphasised al-Maliki's Islamic reasoning for democracy and pluralism. It only justified their dismissal of al-Maliki as a shari'a faculty member in an established academic institution. As a result, al-Maliki found himself identified with a specific cause:

> After this book I have become an advocate of this cause. I am not only a political reformist as I used to be, no. Today I am responsible for the 'sovereignty of the nation' and other issues associated with it like freedom, political participation, my stance from absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy (al-Maliki, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Al-Maliki's position on democracy developed into a contentious discourse, standing against the official religious narrative, which claims that in shari'a there is no place for the democratic process. Along with a network of young writers, he is bringing a new Islamic thesis to light, which interprets sacred Islamic texts in light of changing socio-political realities. Crucial to their dissent is their ability to engage young minds with their intellectual, eccentric ideas, and work towards initiating a progressive Islamist movement, at least on the level of framing. The popularity they have gained from social media sites seems to have moved the long-existing private intellectual debates into grassroots framings and movements towards reforming the religious justification for authoritarianism.

Key to this intellectual movement is the dissemination of alternative electronic media that allow for this form of contentious discourse to rise, notably al-Arabi al-Jadid, al-Tagreer and al-Maqaal, which attracted several young and daring Saudi writers. According to al-Rasheed, 'both the electronic media and the publishing house became important in consolidating an intellectual Tanwiri trend and making it visible in the public sphere' (2015b: 97) – the publishing house she refers to is al-Gudaimi's publishing company, which fosters Saudi critical literature, including al-Maliki's work (2012) and al-Gudaimi's own literature on Islamism and democracy.

This popularisation of the reformist discourse helped attract the *'wisayah'* youth – young ones who are in submission to religious authority – as al-Maliki describes them (Interview, 2015). Attracting them through social media and later through salon

invitations across various cities meant being able to spread a politically progressive discourse among the young generation. In this regard al-Maliki states: 'I have discovered that the youth I meet [say] "we entered Twitter in a certain mindset, in six months or a year so many beliefs changed". This motivates me and burdens me with responsibility' (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). This is a crucial component to al-Maliki's dissident practice: it indicates the initiation of collective framings that support religious reinterpretation, endorse democracy, turn elite-centred discussions into popular ones, and establish counter-publics – those who join public figures in expressing grievances and reforming the religious discourse.

Until his arrest, al-Maliki lived to fulfil the objective of deconstructing the output of official cultural institutions. He was therefore under double pressure: religious leaders on one hand condemning his theoretical opinion, dismissing him from his academic position and dropping his PhD enrolment in religious studies; and on the other hand state authorities investigating and accusing him of 'disbelieving in the legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy' and 'provoking public opinion' (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Hence, he was forced to minimise his micro-blogging activity in 2014 (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). In 2017 he was arrested without trial and remains there at time of writing, as is the case with several critical voices present in this study.

5.1.3 Reforming the religious discourse: the traditionalist challenge

This section addresses a reformist example that does not fully escape the traditionalist paradigm. As someone who broke away from orthodoxy to what he depicts as enlightenment, Khalawi's narrative makes an interesting yet highly contradictory discourse (Interview, 2015). Despite his mutation in thought, ideological indoctrination is nevertheless apparent in his style of speech and his endorsement of traditional normative practices like claiming to hold authority over his mother and wife (Khalawi, interview, 2015), as well as in adopting an instructional approach to expression, demonstrating how decades of religious instruction cannot easily be overcome.

Khalawi apparently succeeds in attracting a conservative audience because of his grand religious rhetoric and vocabulary, which adds a great deal of sarcasm when used in less-serious contexts. However, his ideas contain a mix of progression and orthodoxy. On social media, Khalawi enjoys expressing his mutation in thought in what he calls the 'preacher's style', in the sense of being direct, accusing, disciplining and ordering others to behave in a strict way (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). In the example below, Khalawi performs the role of the expert in law – although he admits in the interview to being quite new to the field – urging people not to comment on court

Figure 5.1 Khalawi's daily vlog 1

A video featuring one of Khalawi's daily uploads on his account originally published on Snapchat after being uploaded to YouTube for unlimited streaming. Title of the video: Bombardment in Hashtags.

decisions and sentencing, since they always know less than the upper circle of religious experts:

> As a lawyer I say: you cannot comment on any judgement, whether accepting or denying, without reading the full text. Brothers, you *cannot*, I'm not saying you shouldn't, you *cannot,* otherwise you'll look a complete idiot, because this case has many suspicions […] my advice to you, brothers, as a professional lawyer: do not bombard! And as a social activist in social media for more than four years or five years I say: first do not overreact about news you get from the media […] do not write or say something unless you are 100% certain about it. Brothers, I am talking to you from five-years' experience on Twitter that is full of bombardment, absolutely full […]. Plenty of times have we dragged ourselves into glamorous Hashtags, writing dozens of tweets, then we go back and delete them. Therefore, if you see an appealing hashtag and feel words waggling in your heart waiting to come out, do not write, wait. Wait and you'll be grateful (Khalawi, 2015a. Translated from Arabic).

The context of the previous excerpt and Figure 5.1 is a case of paternal rape that went viral on Twitter as users complained about the lenient sentence given to the rapist father. The case itself is not the focus here but rather Khalawi's comment on it. On social media sites, whether verbal or written, Khalawi prefers classical Arabic over his *Hijazi* dialect, which is unfamiliar in formal usage. *Hijazi* is often associated – predominantly in mainstream media – with mocking comedy. So Khalawi's preference of the classical *Fus'ha* works to embellish his language with prestige, formality and intellect, for it is associated with formal communication and clergy's rhetorical speeches. He learned to master it through decades of religious instruction from school up to postgraduate studies. His style attracts an extremely high viewership, reaching up to 75,000 views in 24 hours on Snapchat alone (Interview, 2015), providing the largest viewership of all interviewed reformists and activists on this specific platform.

Khalawi's sense of humour juxtaposes grand rhetorical speeches with the image of him in his underwear (as in Figure 5.1). Khalawi's publicity renders a sense of familiarity to people, both by appearing in the comfort of his home, doing his daily routines, and by satisfying people who enjoy being told what to do. He appears as an extension of the clergy-led audience – al-Maliki's *wisayah* youth – submitting to a less formal discourse that instructs them in a contemporary fashion. The other comedic side of Khalawi is achieved through infusing his formal rhetoric with colloquial wordings, or English phrases – as in his popular phrase "What the hell, *ya ikhwan?* [brothers]" that appears in transnational memes and hashtags on social media – or as in the word *dar'amah* [bombardment] used in the title of the video (Figure 5.1). In the interview he justifies this mixture by stating that:

> I make sure that my comedy doesn't ruin the prestige, so that when I discuss something [a serious matter] nobody comes to me and says, "just stick to your comedy". Because I've been speaking *Fus'ha* for a while now, even when I'm having fun I speak in *Fus'ha*, to maintain that prestige (Khalawi, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

The rationale of this mixture, for Khalawi, lies in the fun of practicing the skills he masters most: giving religious instruction in a formal language. The notion of prestige in the above excerpt shows a multi-layered justification, where the use of *Fus'ha* and word choice embellishes his speech with religious authority. It is a way of performing what he cultivated from religious instruction-based learning, apparent in the hierarchy he likes to maintain as the knowledgeable expert, always reminding himself and his audience that he studied enough religion to be able to instruct 'without somebody mistaking me' (Khalawi, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Knowledge and religious learning according to Khalawi is achieved through this hierarchy of religious clergy who instruct and passive students who obey and follow. This hierarchy has an underlying significance: it depicts the fallacy of a two-sided presumption that Khalawi unrecognisably follows, between the knowledgeable and the ignorant, the right and the wrong, the authoritative and the follower. It is the very hegemonic structure that is contested by social actors online, where they have been working hard to expose alternative forms of opinion and expression to break this hierarchy and facilitate a democratic dialogue. Khalawi's speech, sampled in the previous video excerpt, demonstrates how well he keeps that hierarchy intact throughout, despite his mutation in thought. He leaves behind the subject of discussion (the rape case) and uses a preacher's approach to order people not to participate in campaigning and popularising this case, but rather to suppress themselves and keep their 'idiot' opinions hidden – from shame and humiliation, for they are not part of the prestigious knowledgeable elite.

Although Khalawi's speech is articulated in a comedic sense, it nonetheless carries a sense of normalising dominance, implied in his rejection of open, free expression.

The following excerpt is part of Khalawi's video-comment on Snapchat – later transferred to YouTube – about the death penalty sentenced on the Artist and Poet Ashraf Fayadh in Saudi, after causing a stir on social media:

> People say the decision is brutal, equal to an ISIS approach. This does not make sense in judiciary nor in law, not even logically. Judgment relies upon legal documents [...] I will not discuss the sentence with you but I will discuss other things in the lawsuit [...]. We all, sisters and brothers, have moments of [religious] doubt and this may take us far, this guy has written a book and published it outside Saudi, and he isn't Saudi, so what's our judiciary relation to him? [...] We all sin, then come back to the right path, but the worry is when this mistake becomes our destiny. First, he was sitting in a public place discussing his ideas with people and lending them his book. If you have a doubt, a deviant or unusual idea, shut up, search and read, don't discuss this with anyone beyond your close circle, *secretly*. If you were led astray and published a book including your misleading ideas outside Saudi, do not distribute it among youth in Saudi! This way you have absolutely brought it to yourself [...]. Then, why do you admit?! You nosey, you superman! Why do you admit this yourself? [...] I am not saying that the sentence of death for apostasy is right, but *who are you* to discuss this with? You'll never get it [smiling]. The thing is, sisters and brothers, to be blunt this issue is a bit complicated and needs specialisation, it is not as superficial as you've shown (Khalawi, 2015b. Translated from Arabic).

Figure 5.2 Khalawi's daily vlog 2

Another YouTube video showcasing Khalawi's daily talks on Snapchat. Title: Lawyer Khalid Khalawi's analysis of the case of Ashraf Fayadh.
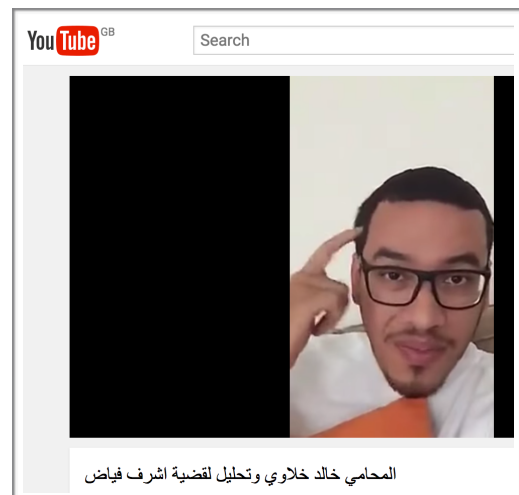
The image in Figure 5.2 shows the setting in which Khalawi recorded this video, holding his mobile phone with one hand, and pointing to his head while saying 'nor even logically' with the other. He chastises people's characterisation of Fayadh's sentence as brutal while laid back on his sofa, hanging on to an orange pillow. This is a consistent

characteristic of Khalawi's daily video 'snaps', where he is mostly driving or laying back at home to comment on recent affairs.

In the previous excerpt Khalawi assumed that by not having access to the indictment people were not eligible to campaign against the judicial ruling, complain about the brutality of the verdict, or express their sympathy on social media, simply because in his opinion, the man got what he deserved according to – what is assumed to be – justice. He disregards the value of free speech praised by campaigners and reinforces the value of the religious judge who employed a 'valid' religious procedure by ordering this man's death. By doing so not only does Khalawi overlook the fact that hiding statements from public inspection is itself a mode of control that online campaigners are resisting, but he also justifies the accusations against Fayadh, which were publicly contested in all forms of mainstream and alternative media for being politicised and made-up against the victim for two reasons. First, for the personal dispute between him and the prosecutor, who is said to have used this book against him. Second, since the sentence changed after appointing a new judge on the case a year later, changing the sentence from four years imprisonment to the death penalty (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Khalawi chooses the easy path, which is to show-off his expertise in law and ability to access the bill of indictment whilst others remain 'idiots' for not being able to read the accusations. He is therefore obliged to justify the indictment without reference to Fayadh's appeal, believing that Fayadh admitted apostasy and justified the death penalty, unaware of all other sources that denied that: 'why do you admit! You nosey, you superman! Why did you admit this yourself?' Khalawi furthermore feels obliged to command others not to comment on things they do not understand, performing the role of the teacher, the preacher and the superior. Reminding his audience in his unique sense of humour – by switching from classical to dialect Arabic – that only the superior in the Kingdom have the right to execute rulings based upon their interpretation without the need to explain their decision: 'But, who are you to discuss this with? You will never get it'.

In the end Khalawi demonstrates a model of a popular social media figure who has transitioned in some theoretical aspects in relation to religious ruling into a moderate, pro-democracy figure who may challenge the collective conscience in believing that obeying the ruler is part of their religious devotion. However, his transition appears imbalanced. It is heavily influenced by the preacher's approach, which he performs throughout his online activity, thus maintaining the hierarchy of the religious mandate that many other activists object to. By approaching people in the preacher's style – commanding and advising – Khalawi seems to be attracting people who are looking for safety under religious control. As he admits in the interview: 'People wait for someone to decide on their behalf, they come and ask me "shall I get a divorce?" […] I have a power

to direct people, and many of my audience are ready to become subject to this power' (2015. Translated from Arabic).

5.1.4 Reforming the religious discourse: the humanist challenge

This section presents the religious example of Salman al-Oudah as a leading rival to the dominant religious discourse. Al-Oudah is a leading figure in the Saudi progressive Islamist field, creating what al-Rasheed describes as the 'third-way' between the Saudi traditional Salafi discourse and the radical one (al-Rasheed, 2015a). The resultant discourse is distinct, hybrid, and open to revising Islamic political thought amid post-Arab Spring uncertainties, at a time when Islamists were looking back at their tradition and pondering Islam's adaptability to a post-authoritarianism political treatise. Al-Oudah, who himself underwent major mutation in thought in which he endorsed a radical jihadist ideology during the Gulf War and participated in the Memorandum of Advice that demanded autonomy in Islamic preaching and political representation to reassure the state's compliance with shari'a in all of its decisions. By the end of his imprisonment in 1999 al-Oudah transformed his Islamic rhetoric, evolving from the angry cleric whose focus was on '*dying* for Allah's sake', into one who embraces peace and life, 'now it is *living* for God's sake' as al-Ohali observes (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

For the majority of the young generation, al-Oudah represents a living mind that refuses to dwell upon early positions and prejudices that fail to offer solutions for contemporary concerns. He has become a model for Islamic progressiveness who excels in attracting youth and connecting with them using contemporary language that is natural, spontaneous, and free from scholarly hierarchy that clergy insist upon, avoiding the impressively-spoken classical jargon usually anchored in religious rhetoric. 'Do not follow me.. I might stumble, but share with me' (Translated from Arabic) is the expression al-Oudah chooses to display in his Twitter 'bio' today, as a prominent sheikh followed by more than 13 million users. This symbolises his status as a cleric who decided to step down from the position of exerting religious authority, leaving aside clergy's favoured debates on prohibition of and permission for any developments in technical gadgets or social practices.

Distinct in al-Oudah's transition is his adherence to the Salafi tradition, although he moved from the far extreme into becoming a moderate sheikh. A 'veteran' figure, as described by al-Rasheed (2015a), al-Oudah's contemporary project focuses on promoting tolerance, coexistence, and renouncing violence, racism and sectarianism. He wishes to change the judgmental cultural habits of exclusion, public scrutiny and

discipline to a humanist message that focuses on self-development and peace with others.

This organic transition maximised al-Oudah's popularity despite putting an end to his programmes on mainstream media. Until his arrest in 2017, he used over five different social media platforms popular among the youth in the Kingdom, engaging them with his evolving thoughts via instant video-sharing, posting, micro-blogging, and through his website. His YouTube show, *Wasm* (the Arabic word for Hashtag), promoted his tailored humanist-religious approach directed by a group of young amateur producers. Below is an example of al-Oudah's show's setting and speech, which he narrates in a self-reflective voice-over:

Figure 5.3 al-Oudah's YouTube show, *Wasm*

A snapshot from al-Oudah's first series of his show, *Wasm*, entitled: "Yes, I change"*,* achieving over two million views since its upload on YouTube on 11 May 2012.

Extract from the episode in Figure 5.3:

> Five years of contemplation have isolated me from the masses, granted me freedom, shifted me from tightness into spaciousness, from reclining into opening up to life. It has transferred me to recognise purity in faces, and to notice the positive side in others. When I came out, I came out to find a group that shifted towards violence, so I had to face them explicitly even if that meant losing them (WsmAl3odah, episode 1. 2012. Translated from Arabic).

Through this simple setting, al-Oudah sets out to offer his new humanist rhetoric that is meant to resemble ordinary living. It is a manifestation of the unpretentious lifestyle he chose to take on as a cleric, showing himself to be humane, natural and changing, moving beyond the glorified guise used to impose authority, prestige and knowledge, and choosing a contrasted appearance, bare headed, barefooted, helping to light a fire. The scene is deliberately very different to mainstream clergy programmes to reinforce a new representation of the clergy as humane instead of sacred, as someone who changes,

rethinks and reinterprets instead of being divinely unmistakable, someone who favours an opinion instead of enforcing one, as *evolving* instead of constant: 'religion is certainly constant, but human opinion regenerates' (Wsm-Al3odah, episode 1. 2012. Translated from Arabic).

By using his time in prison as an opportunity for isolation, self-reflection, contemplation and re-birth, al-Oudah in the latter excerpt celebrates the person he became. Putting an end to the angry Islamist he once was and opening new doors to view religious texts with a fresh eye that recognises peace, tolerance and coexistence. His statement in the excerpt highlights the contrast he found between the peaceful state he was in after leaving prison and the heated atmosphere he witnessed after September 11. Speaking a language of exclusion, accusation and violence, a language in which he no longer commits to its rhetoric or shares its vocabulary.

The shake-up that the Arab spring wrought on dominant religious and political constructs offered a new opportunity for al-Oudah to fill the void by publishing his book *As'ilat al-Thawra* (The Questions of Revolution), in which he attempted to tackle the political aspects of Islam that were at stake, yet left unrevised by the official *ulama*. It is an attempt to participate in addressing the rising concerns on Islam's position from demands for freedoms, rights and political participation. Along with the growing desire among Saudi progressive Islamists to draw the religious discourse out and away from traditional authoritarian frames into a progressive democratic-friendly field, following the line of preceding reformist Islamic thinkers in the region such as al-Turabi (2003) and Ghannouchi (1993). The humanist approach al-Oudah employs does not explicitly use terms associated with Western liberty such as 'democracy' or 'parliament'. Instead he infuses his rhetoric with idioms from Islamic heritage, such as 'freedom against oppression', 'justice' and 'consultation' (al-Oudah, 2012). It is an attempt to recreate an Islamic discourse that supports justices and freedoms without explicitly using a language that may ignite Islamists' fury.

Although al-Oudah avoids any reference to the Saudi political system in his book, in an attempt to keep his distance from politics and activism, his ideas were far from being traditional. His book was therefore immediately banned, allowing it to be widely circulated across the internet. Al-Maliki finds al-Oudah's line of thought comes under the same political frame (Interview, 2015). In al-Rasheed's words, al-Oudah overlaps with al-Maliki in the point where he 'reached out for humanist interpretations that assimilate western intellectual positions with this Salafi background' (2015a: 12) – perhaps the only difference is not explicitly demanding political reform.

Al-Gudaimi finds al-Oudah's work complements his own: 'we represent the same condition, despite his metaphorical manner' observed al-Gudaimi (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic), highlighting the points of divergence and convergence between them, which leaves al-Oudah a 'popular star' amongst people, or as a 'leader' described by al-Ohali and Khalawi. It is his implicit style which brings al-Oudah closer to people, who do not see a dissident character in him – the same point that keeps reformists less popular because of their explicit opinions and involvement in activism.

Other examples of connection between al-Oudah and reformists appear in al-Alkami's description –   a 'liberal' activist – of al-Oudah as a 'friend', for the closeness he feels when he meets him: 'I love Salman al-Oudah, we are acquaintances, he's like a friend, we have a connection, and I respect his thought' (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Khalawi expresses his sense of connection in relation to the episode presented in Figure 5.3, as the following excerpt shows:

> I downloaded my Twitter archive for the past year and a half, it is impossible, I cannot believe that I used to say this crap, you know. So when Salman al-Oudah uploaded an episode named 'Yes, I change', *yeah*, I know what you're saying! I understand what you mean *exactly*. Because nobody told me 'remember, Khaled', no, it is not 'remember, Khaled', I am reading my own words, I am reading my mentions, I used to have heated discussions, Twitter taught me how to become patient, but I used to be a very angry person using harsh words like those preachers 'You, enemy of Allah! This is perversion, you are going astray! (Khalawi, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Here Khalawi compares al-Oudah's personal transition to his own just after he had realised he had changed, while going through his own micro-blogging archive. This transition, for both Khalawi and al-Oudah, seems to be the core point that shifted their formation of thought and their expression accordingly. Opening up to new realms of knowledge and political awareness, and steadily losing the anger they were carrying against the other, letting go of the debating battles they used to set 'for God's sake', and replacing that with a desire to embrace the other, to coexist and live in peace. Al-Ohali also highlights al-Oudah as being an influential figure on his generation of conservative young men. For him, al-Oudah's transition along with his simple attitude serves as a source of empowerment for a peaceful reformist discourse, therefore participating in breaking the monopoly over traditional religious scholarship, and challenging the authority that clergy enjoyed over the public sphere for serving to maintain an authoritarian regime.

Al-Oudah's huge popularity is described by al-Gudaimi, who witnessed the crowds when al-Oudah joins public events, such as the Riyadh Book Fair, causing security trouble, which ultimately leads to expelling him from public events (Interview, 2015). The large

fan base attracted by al-Oudah is a source of constant disturbance to the state especially in times of change where mobilisations may occur. Al-Oudah hence remains a salient threat to the political and religious establishments, perhaps more dangerous than radical Islamists who are easily identified and eliminated. His peaceful discourse – which is increasingly gaining attraction – remains subject to the dynamic socio-political conditions that may redraw his ideas, just as his book did – all the more reason for him to be disliked by the state; an organically changing popular cleric certainly endangers a state's religious legitimacy.

This celebration of a religious figure is not new in the public collective memory. The crowd is a symbol of Sahwa times, apparent in clergy's emotional rhetoric with crowds applauding their speeches. It recalls 'the age of crowd power' characteristic of revolutionary phases in the mid-twentieth century (Le Bon, 1897). This crowd culture demonstrates an audience that is not necessarily passive, but those on a quest for a collective identity, a role model. Those aspiring for a leader who addresses their concerns and speaks their language unpretentiously, especially at times of political and social uncertainty, when the value of the collective is decreasing and subaltern individualistic practices become pervasive, some like to resort to figures who resemble their collective normative habitus as a way of finding connection and comfort.

This habitual social practice of surrendering to the superior is manifested in the 'follow' culture. It arguably extends from the crowds following a religious leader in the pre-digital era – as someone who addresses their emotions and needs – into following so-called influential figures in the social media age. Social media in some instances seem to have replaced this aspiration for celebratory figures who are cheered for. More importantly, the word 'follow', clicked when a user decides to follow someone's content, connotes an act of submission to their thought and practice. This submission is crystallised in users' decision to follow those who reinforce their ideological basis at times when religious and political values are shifting, because of the gap between the state's cultural instruments and the openness of the internet. Hence, we witness recirculation of dominant ideologies, norms and practices on the internet, which capitalises on those who share feelings of insecurity towards this openness.

Al-Oudah is therefore a critical phenomenon that challenges the dominant narrative by offering an alternative theological account, whilst allowing that power of the crowd to continue cheering for celebratory figures with his constant media exposure. He, along with the younger generation of reformists, is reviving an Islamic project that supports democracy and offers an approach to religion as a private practice rather than a scene for public policing and scrutiny; a religious culture that allows all groups and sects of

society to coexist while preserving their right to exist peacefully in a Kingdom of religious mandate.

5.1.5 Dissenting space: religious freedom of expression goes public

In the first decade of the millennium the city of Jeddah, like many other cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic cities, was experiencing rapid waves of change, globalisation and internet openness that accelerated what was offered on the ground, in terms of ideas available at youth's disposal. This made cultural institutions that could not cope with the speed of change appear outdated. Virtual spheres in these times have preceded physical spheres in providing space for intellectual dialogue to occur, mainly due to the absence of instruments of control, similar to what happened during the rise of first forums and then social media. This time, however, there was a common interest to shift what was happening in the virtual sphere into physical spaces: Jusour café and reading club in Jeddah.

Prior to offering religious and intellectual discussions to the public, Hamidaddin, along with a group of privileged and educated young men and women, gathered in a private office in 2008, creating a small community of interest that discussed common issues of cultural and religious interest. One year later, Hamidaddin published his book *al-Kaynunah al-Mutanaghemah* (2009) (Harmonious Being) inspired by the religious discussions the group carried out throughout the year. The gatherings then developed into formal sequential discussions in a private residence at a colleague's prestigious house that could host a larger number of attendees. Invitations were sent online through the social media platform Facebook, through a group named 'the official group for announcing any upcoming talks at the Bajnaid's House'5. However, due to the cultural complexities for meeting at a male member's private residence – especially for women and new people – members decided to move to a public site named Jusour, to allow for participation by a wider audience.

Initially, attendees were predominantly youth who shared a common interest in reconfiguring religious questions left unanswered, most likely since childhood, about religion and spirituality. Participant al-Banawi – a regular attendee – gives an account of pondering religious facts that had lingered since childhood concerning religious exclusion:

> In school days, many, many troubling situations would happen with teachers of religion. We had many questions that we needed an answer for from the curriculum, like for instance one of my friends had an American or British mom,

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5 Facebook group page: https://www.facebook.com/groups/78997612432/

so how would she go to hell? So this was something very problematic even though I was in the 5th grade. We used to discuss this always because she was my best friend, I know her mom, you know. So "how dare you say that she is going to hell, do you know what you're saying, do you hear yourself?" But of course, the questions we can put forward were restricted, you can't go beyond the frame (Fatima al-Banawi, interview, 2017. Partially translated from Arabic).

This testimony shows a traumatic encounter with the national religious curriculums and teaching methods that are fuelled with ideological exclusion and judgment. This black-and-white image is reflected in Prokop's study of Saudi religious curriculums: 'Teaching about the 'others' – other cultures, ideologies and religions, or adherents of other Muslim schools of jurisprudence or sects – reflects the Wahhabi view of a world divided into the believers and preservers of the true faith and the *kuffar*, the unbelievers' (2003: 80). This process of othering and ultimately judging had traumatising consequences on young students, creating a sense of hatred and anger either towards the divine power or the non-Muslim family member – manifested in al-Banawi's emotional tone while narrating this story and questioning 'how dare you say that she is going to hell, do you know what you're saying, do you hear yourself?'. Despite studying at a privileged private school, the religious instructor was nonetheless unable to answer the young girls' urgent questions, being unable to move beyond the inscribed text. This example sheds light on the way religion is portrayed as a struggle for conquest rather than a message of peace and tolerance, as represented by religious counter-publics.

It is evident that there was an insistent demand for religious discussion beyond short answers given by the established institutions, hence the need for Jusour in 2012. This newly opened café and reading club was a place that aspired to embrace Jeddah's young community, desperate for a dialogue beyond state-formed premises, a space that is less formal and hierarchal. Moving the intellectual discussion from a private residence into Jusour was a moment of utopia for many members who were witnessing their city opening up to embrace their capacities, aspirations and freedoms. It was also a serious attempt to bring the intellectual freedom of virtual spheres into public spaces. Unique to Jusour is its hosting a multitude of people from various socioeconomic backgrounds at one table, allowing for a deep dialogue to occur between contrasting cultural levels, from those declaring atheist opinions and those who completely adhere to the official religious narrative. This allows a distinctive social blend to emerge between privileged networks of interest who used to have private salons, and Jeddah's conservative, underprivileged communities.

Jusour meetings were also publicised through social media. The reason for doing it online, according to Hamidaddin, was to reach out to interested people beyond his own circle. Invitations used to reach up to 3,000 people, in a call for Jeddah's aspiring people

to join this novel gathering that brought men and women together, whether liberal or conservative (Hamidaddin, interview, 2016). Spreading these invitations via social media was vital for such discussions, since virtual groups exceeded physical spaces in the speed of networking and creating communities-of-interest beyond private premises, gendered segregation, and class-based or ethnic-based hierarchies that existed on the ground. The move to Jusour was also an attempt to bridge the gap between the preceding level of discussions in social media and the rather stagnant public gatherings. Figure 5.4 shows the online group created to introduce these meetings, connect people and spread invitations.
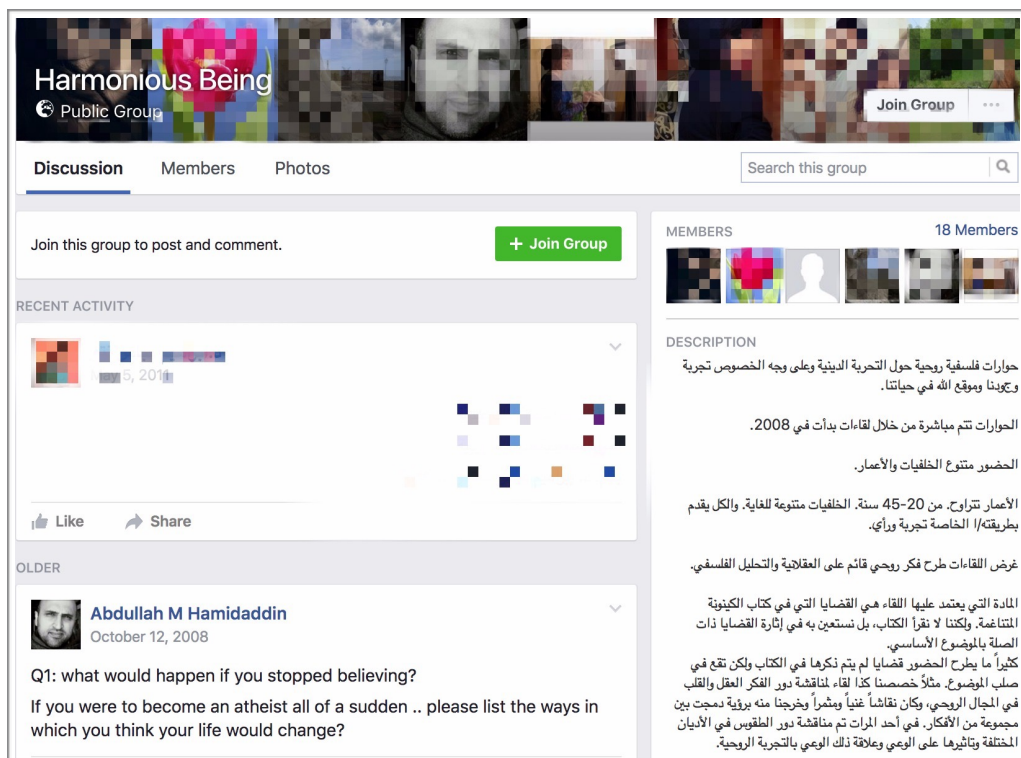
Figure 5.4 *Harmonious Being* Facebook group

The meeting's Facebook page where meetings are announced and questions are posed for the upcoming debates.

Group description:

Philosophical and spiritual discussions about religious experience and particularly God's presence in our lives. Discussions happen directly throughout group meetings that started in 2008. Attendees vary in backgrounds and ages. Age group is between 20-45 years, backgrounds vary considerably, everyone presents an experience and opinion in their own ways. The purpose of such meetings is to have a discussion in spiritual thought based on rationality and philosophical analysis. The material used in meetings are issues in the book al-Kaynunah al-Mutanaghemah. We do not read the book, but use it to provoke some points related to the main topic. Guests often discuss points not mentioned in the book yet very much related to the topic. For instance we have dedicated several meetings to discuss the role of thought, mind and heart in the spiritual sphere, it was enriching and fruitful, we came out with a vision that combined many thoughts. In another meeting we discussed rituals in different religions, the way it influences the consciousness, and the relation between consciousness and the spiritual practice' (Translated from Arabic).

Figure 5.4 provides a glimpse of the discussion group's style. It is important to note that the group (accessed in 2017), shows a minimal sample of members and questions, since many members have left the group and removed their archive posts due to the horror that followed Kashgari's arrest and the closure of the café. Unique to this group is Hamidaddin's methodology that is 'based on rationality and philosophical analysis'. It aims to fill what is left unsaid or unheard as a result of religious teacher-centred instruction and rote learning in institutions where religion is taught; to reach out for critical questions and opinions that previously had no space to be heard, most likely since childhood, as the attendee al-Banawi confessed (Interview, 2017).

The structure is key to these gatherings. Hamidaddin identified himself as the organiser of the group, not the scholar or the sheikh, letting go of the instructor's authority that is typical of religious events. Hamidaddin thus organises a vertical setting to divide the discussion equally between attendees, ensuring that his authority as the organiser does not persuade anybody to follow his religious path (Interview, 2016). That said, Hamidaddin still finds it difficult to direct questions towards 'the experience itself and not the judgment' (Interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic). It is challenging to train a generation programmed to receive religious instruction to open up and listen to what is considered a sin or indeed apostasy outside these premises, doing so without following, judging or stating what is wrong and right. Examples of sensitive open questions were 'what would happen if you stopped believing?' (seen in Figure 5.4) and 'why do you pray?' Hamidaddin describes attendees as 'mostly raised in a classic Salafi way' yet he was surprised by the spectrum of answers he received:

> So of course half of them would say we do not pray and others would say they do. What's unique is that I ask them to avoid answering with the typical school answer, unless it really resonates with them… so between those who pray, some say they pray for spiritual meanings such as constancy or so, to those who say I do not pray because it has no meaning, no benefit, to one who said I pray because whoever doesn't is a *kafir* – because of fear' (Hamidaddin, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

This diversity in opinions is held among people who have experienced the same approach in learning religion by instruction, whether in private or public schools or other institutions, as the official religious discourse remains similar to a great extent across such bodies. These discussions highlight the hunger that young men and women have for a place that embraces their difference away from coercive control. Hamidaddin's insistence on avoiding the hierarchal approach familiar to everyone underlines his dedication to learning through inclusivity and freedom, recognising that an intellectual debate can only happen if freed of judgment, exclusion and, most

importantly, instruction. This is an experience that he strongly appreciates after transitioning from a classical Zaydist cleric, *mufti* (issuing fatwas) and instructor into a liberated religious thinker. Hamidaddin seems to help equip attendees with the necessary critical perspectives to delve into their religious uncertainties and pave the way for personal spiritual journeys rather than collective modes of beliefs. He further emphasises his approach in the following extract:

> There was an insistence that no offence should be imposed on anyone, and that everyone may say their opinion in total comfort, feeling safe that nobody will attack them in person, so those who didn't like this atmosphere would leave. Many people would disagree with the majority of what is being said, yet they enjoy this environment (Hamidaddin, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

Continuing to attend despite their disagreement with what is said highlights a high level of tolerance unusual to religious discussion. It provides insight into people's readiness to move beyond coercive instructive instruments. For some, it is a chance to express their dissent, and for others Jusour was an eye-opener for new thoughts and modes of thinking. It was also an opportunity for social connections that transcend segregated educational and work places and private family circles. Jusour presented a humanist, pluralist experience, influenced by secular principles at times of rapid change and cultural openness, aiming to confront modern challenges through dialogue instead of coercion.

Another perspective

It is notable that Jusour's style of gathering was a novel experience for Hamidaddin himself, as it was for many interviewed participants in Jeddah, who commented about Jusour being a surprising and exciting space that resembled a utopia of free expression whilst ensuring security from judgments and attacks. It was described as an organic environment that embraced everyone's voices without having to stick to collective norms. Yet it has also been witness to a great deal of atheist or non-believing opinions that totally reject or denounce Islamic legitimacy and validity – considered a radical venture in an open public space.

Non-believers' accounts highlight an interesting contrast in their lives, which they publicly undergo as believers to avoid trouble – performing the role of a Muslim in public, whether going to pray, praising God, fasting or celebrating religious occasions. These duplicate identities are practiced daily between public and private lives, where one would easily switch from collective norms to a (real) individual identity that only appears amongst close friends or anonymously on social media. Anonymous accounts expressing religious deconstruction or uncertainty on Twitter were the subject of

Hamidaddin's doctoral study (2016). These young subversive voices have become alarming for the religious establishment and the state, as their growing voices question the ability of the dominant ideational frame to cope with modern demands.

Atheist opinions are life-threatening in a religiously-controlled system – this is proven to be so by the arrest of Kashgari, who was accused of blasphemy, extradited from Malaysia and jailed. Heated debates occurred in several media outlets between clergy who demanded his death and others who demanded his freedom – this case is further elaborated on in the following section.

While many middle class, educated participants expressed their admiration and respect of such a place, some less privileged members were left with a great deal of uncertainty. One of the reasons reported to have led to Jusour's collapse is parents' complaints about the place after finding their adolescent children left with concerning questions (al-Banawi, interview, 2017). Jusour caused a stir not only among the religious public who were wandering around this new and suspicious place, but to many young men and women who were in a quest to understand religion in a different way, yet were left with more questions. This experience was shocking and generated doubt among people's resting beliefs, let alone unstable ones. More importantly, this instability may threaten people's identities and perhaps their likelihood to continue to live safely in the Kingdom – having their lives guarded for the sake of being Muslims in the land of Islam. This condition of uncertainty is apparent in the following statement where al-Banawi expresses her feelings towards what she saw as a devastating situation for adolescents:

> I was like what, 17 or 18 years old... and most people that were with us were either older in age or younger like there were two in high school maybe 16 years old, and I was always, I felt like I am their acting mom, that we should be careful not to go too far or accuse the other too much, because they come from families like ours, we don't have to burden them with hatred against their families, because they are still growing [...] we are radicalising the whole subject, and instead of feeling this support we are putting this agenda forward that wasn't very healthy (al-Banawi, interview, 2017. Partially translated from Arabic).

The latter excerpt reveals the level of indignation present in discussions about modes of religious dominance. Discussing topics with such sensitivity, loaded with symbolic meanings that determine identity and security, was to some extent capable of destabilising youths' strictly constructed religious beliefs. As a consequence, they returned to their homes burdened with additional questions that their parents did not necessarily have the means to answer.

Adolescent members were left entangled between their schools' ideologically-driven answers and the group's sophisticated language, which stemmed from complex

philosophical questions that Hamidaddin addressed in his book and proposed at these gatherings. The nature of the questions was certainly not designed to cure religious uncertainties, nor was the focus of religion as an 'experience' aiming to reinterpret and re-establish religious thought.

In December 2011 – after over a year in existence – the religious police invaded Jusour, stating that they were notified about an event taking place that was provoking atheism, and closed the cafe down (Hamidaddin, interview, 2016). These stories of dissident young boys and girls provides another example of contesting the dominant religious authority in exchange for freedoms. What Jusour and the Kashgari incident (detailed below) depict is not necessarily a revolt but a 'youth explosion' (Cordesman, 1998) against outdated methods used to reinforce ideology by exclusion and coercion, whilst failing to renew the means of communication with the new generation aspiring to dialogue, critical discussion and rational thinking. The following posts serve as an illustration:

> @FatimaBanawi (8 May 2012) '#Jusour is not merely a place, Jusour is the people, thoughts and freedom...' (al-Banawi, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

> @FatimaBanawi (8 May 2012) '#Jusour remains open as long as the *jusour* [bridges] of solidarity and youthful ideas are accessible...' (al-Banawi, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

> @amiQ1 (30 Dec 2012) '#Jusour_bookshop_for_sale a story of nineteenth century inquisitions, performed in the twenty first century.' (Hamidaddin, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

The posts above show al-Banawi lamenting Jusour's unique identity, while Hamidaddin's post sorrowfully depicts the closure as a nineteenth century inquisition brought into the present day. This highlights the irony of imposing cultural hegemony by force in contemporary times, when such discussions can be freely discussed online. Here, Jusour appears as a shelter for the young people of Jeddah who long for an intellectual dialogue that embraces their differences and allows their individuality to be expressed physically, in public.

5.1.6 The freedom of expression challenge: Kashgari's case

Hamza Kashgari's tweets on the 5th February 2012, corresponding with Prophet Mohammad's birthday in the Hijri calendar, marked one of the most popular cases of freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia. It occupied both mainstream and social media

platforms as well as opinion articles. Kashgari wrote three fairly short personal 'tweets' on Twitter expressing his feelings if he were to meet the Prophet:

> On your birthday, I will say that I have loved the rebel in you, that you've always been a source of inspiration to me, and that I do not like the halos of divinity around you. I shall not pray for you.
>
> On your birthday, I find you wherever I turn. I will say that I have loved aspects of you, hated others, and could not understand many more.
>
> On your birthday, I shall not bow to you. I shall not kiss your hand. Rather, I shall shake it as equals do, and smile at you as you smile at me. I shall speak to you as a friend, no more (cited and translated by Giglio, 2012).

Despite their poetical style, those three posts were received offensively and sparked outcries and hatred. The online campaign against Kashgari was on the one hand a mix of racism, swearing statements, denunciation of such an outrageous act, and on the other hand it included statements of appeal and emotional poems asking the Prophet for an apology. Popular clergy considered Kashgari's act as blasphemous and condemned his apostasy, describing him as kafir (unbeliever) or atheist. Sheikh Nasir al-Omar, a notable cleric, appeared in tears on the al-Muslim broadcast channel because a boy known as Kashgari did not behave properly when talking about the Prophet. The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta' issued a declaration three days later, stating that what Kashgari did was a 'great blasphemy as well as apostasy', calling on the political leadership to refer him to the court (Alifta, 2012).

The issue with Kashgari not only lies in the ambiguity of his posts, it goes beyond Kashgari himself, highlighting the huge gap between the level of freedom he was familiar with in Jusour, and the level of expression on Twitter at the peak of its so-called invasion by the officials and the public (al-Ohali; al-Qahtani, interviews, 2015), which appears like raising one's voice in a crowded town square. This emphasises the merit of Jusour's gatherings in that period as probably the only public space where people felt safe to express themselves without triggering judgmental or intimidating responses. It furthermore highlights the contrast between somewhat private spaces like Jusour, and the public sphere represented by the millions of Saudi users on Twitter, where Kashgari's tweets appear as an attempt to break this rigid barrier between the privately free level of expression, and the official image that must be worn when speaking in public.

Kashgari's case also shows a socially puzzling reality about the sacredness of the Prophet's figure, which triggered emotional responses and created a social movement. Thousands demonstrated, according to Hamidaddin, calling for Kashgari's arrest or execution (Interview, 2016). Although hundreds of people considered to be atheists

regularly write about God in an increasingly open manner, the sacred symbol of the Prophet seems to have a significant aspect that mobilises people and stirs their emotions. This incident is bigger than Kashgari himself, illustrating the tensions between the Muslim identity and the Prophet's sacred self. It nevertheless indicates the power of the clergy in mobilising the masses when the issue relates to people's identity formation.

As soon as Kashgari witnessed intimidation he apologised, declared his penance, deleted the tweets that caused such outrage and fearfully left the country. However, due to the enormous demands to arrest him, he was brought back from Malaysia on a private jet and detained for 8-9 months. Several ulama announced that they rejected Kashgari's penance to God and called publicly for his execution, including al-Hudaif and Khadir bin Sanad who declared Jusour to be a 'nest for atheism, aided financially and ideologically from abroad', and denounced both Kashgari and Hamidaddin (Khalijiah, 2012. Translated from Arabic). In their view, Jusour was the source of religious deception and disbelief. Khadr furthermore urged Hamidaddin to leave young boys and girls to learn their religion from established institutions in the country (Khalijiah, 2012), ignoring the possibility that they might be the source of the problem.

5.2 Responses to dissent

5.2.1 Clergy response to Hamidaddin's discourse

An example of single-directed discourse – or perhaps judgment – is sheikh al-Shimmari's 'scientific and intellectual response to *al-kaynunah al-Mutanaghimah* for Abdullah Hamidaddin' (al-Shimmari, 2012. Translated from Arabic). It is notable that sheikh al-Shimmari is a University lecturer holding a PhD in Shari'a from Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University, known for its traditional Salafi approach. His article was published in *Saaid al-Fawa'ed*, a popular referential website for Salafi Islamic scholarly articles that are distributed widely on social networks. This website is followed by 62,400 people on Twitter, liked by 136,500 on Facebook, and constitutes what would be a typical example of Salafi religious content. After attempting to explain what Hamidaddin was doing in his book, sheikh al-Shimmari asks 'what could this book provide for general Muslims?', answering:

> It encourages them to thank Allah for the grace of faith that they find in themselves and experience in their reality, since everything around them comes from their faith in Allah. Hence, Hamidaddin's thesis will not provide them with anything but loss of that faith and replacement – may Allah not will – with disbelief that prevents its bearer from having a blessed life, and paradise thereafter (al-Shimmari, 2012. Translated from Arabic).

This rhetoric highlights the depressing state of clergy in communicating with alternative discourses. The 'scientific' conclusion displayed in the excerpt does not intend to discuss Hamidaddin's spiritual and philosophical thesis, instead its aim is to reinforce religious repression over the young population who are seeking deeper spiritual explanations and interpretations beyond the dominant discourse. The article then states the moral outcome for those engaged with Hamidaddin's ideas: loss of faith and paradise. Apparently, this article is but a continuation of the linear, intimidating discourse of state cultural apparatus, that which emphasises exclusion and punishment for those who do not adhere to the dominant 'truthful' path. It seems that the purpose of mainstream 'scientific intellectual' religious literature is to exert moral and social pressure over dissident voices as a way of normalising the traditional religious doctrine and maintaining its dominance.

Another Wahhabi scholarly website named after Ibn Abdulwahhab's book, *al-Dorar al-Saniyah*: *an authenticated reference on al-Sunnah and al-Jama'ah's discipline*, also shares a wide online audience, with 146,000 following their account on Twitter alone. This website also dedicates an article to responding to Hamidaddin's book, written by a 'scientific committee' of religious *ulama*. The critics introduce the book as:

> One of the controversial books of this time, especially in the region of the two Holy Mosques, the place of revelation and *tawhid* [oneness of God]; since the author's approach destroys the basis of religion and tenet, and demolishes its foundations. He claims to provide a new vision, followed by deluded young men and women, aided – him and his followers – by agencies and foundations. We shall present the important aspects of the book, and criticise the main ideas and conceptions in the book's second edition, sinfully published by the infamous, Dar Madarik, Beirut. The other face for Misbar centre, two faces for the same liberal mud [type] (*al-Dorar al-Sanyah*, 2013. Translated from Arabic).

The writers set out their attitude – a total rejection in this case – prior to engaging with the material, highlighting the article's purpose as primarily projecting their biases and preoccupations. The excerpt seems to be based on an Islamist-liberal divide, where the Islamic writers and their fellow Muslims appear on the side of the piety and ultimate faith, whereas Hamidaddin and his 'followers' are on the liberal side, whose purpose is to destroy the former's work. The excerpt furthermore links Hamidaddin and his group to a conspiracy of secretive agencies and external powers that aids their delusion.

Not only does the text pretend Hamidaddin had followers, but more importantly they are 'deluded', mentally manipulated to follow a distorted thought regardless of Hamidaddin's stress on the non-hierarchal nature of the discussion groups he led. Yet the dominant mind apparently cannot escape or look beyond this deeply rooted dichotomy, which perceives pluralistic interpretations as threats. In addition, the

emphasis on the gap between the pious Muslim nation of the Holy mosques and the author who is externally 'aided' to delude his followers reinforces the idea of crowd power – where any religious leader is assumed to have an army of followers – so the relationship between them is that of conquest, not alternative views.

Finally, the introductory excerpt discloses an attack on the publishing company, *Madarik*, and the scientific centre to which it is linked, *Misbar*. Again, this creates a gap between them (the liberals) and us (the Muslims), describing these centres in the original written language as *tinah wahidah,* which translates literally as 'the same mud', to mean 'same type' using a local expression that connotes similarity with disgust.

If the previous discourse proves anything, it is the failure of the traditional religious discourse to embrace the prevalent pluralism in Saudi's young and thriving society, and its inability to embrace religious expression beyond the imposed indoctrination. The examples in this section highlight a consistent pattern in mainstream religious discourses: othering and excluding religious reinterpretations as the only possible method to counteract the proliferation of religious dissent that it cannot embrace or understand.

5.2.2 al-Nahda forum participants and religious response

Al-Nahda forum, planned to take place in 2013 in Kuwait, was an example of religious dissent going public, where several activists and religious intellectuals were planned speakers, including al-Maliki, al-Oudah and al-Dosari. This forum was a yearly series of discussion-based intellectual meetings that engaged young men and women with scholars and activists in a particular socio-political theme. In 2013 the theme was 'civil society: means and possibilities', featuring scholars from inside and outside the Arabic region. Aided by a post-Arab Spring shift in political religious thought, this forum represented an unfamiliar progressive example that transcended religious moralisation to active civil engagement. Despite being predominantly directed, organised and attended by Saudis, it took place in neighbouring Gulf countries, since the politics of public spaces in the Kingdom would prevent such events happening. However, conservative campaigns reached out to Kuwait and called for its cancellation in 2013 through a mass defamation campaigns against most of the proposed speakers (al-Dosari, interview, 2016). Al-Dosari (whose discourse is detailed in the next chapter) was a victim of a virulent defamation campaign after she was announced as a guest speaker in al-Nahda's Third Forum – eventually it did not take place (al-Dosari, interview, 2016). For al-Dosari, the clergy's position was:

They thought, "oh my God, this is gonna be a new Islamist coalition" that is with a big outreach where it's gonna compete with the existing systems, and they didn't want want that. So instead of saying "well we don't want to support these Islamists" or to let them lay more grounds, or get them acquire like a tolerant image... so basically all the talks were rejected by Islamists (al-Dosari, interview, 2016).

Al-Dosari's comment above encapsulates clergy's hostility to al-Nahda that is based on its ideological competition, as the more alternative Islamist framings 'lay' their 'grounds' the stronger the threat they pose to the singularity of the dominant Islamist narrative. Instead they need to be fiercely combatted, and their human-rights infused discourse must be eliminated. Accordingly, a petition was published, signed by 36 clergy, some of whom were high-ranked officials, and some were renowned Sahwa clergy such as Nasser al-Omar, a popular religious scholar with nearly five million followers on Twitter today (*Saaid al-Fawa'ed*, 2012).

According to the petition, the Forum represented two main 'violations to shari'a'. One was the organiser's evil intentions, who was 'known for his position against shari'a application' and 'very keen on mixing young men and women together' (*Saaid al-Fawa'ed*, 2012. Translated from Arabic). The second was 'regarding the guests, constituting the atheist, the Christian, the *Rafidi* [a derogatory word for Shiite], the orientalist, secularist, and liberal'. The accusations continued, depicting al-Dosari as 'an advocate of liberating women from shari'a regulations, advocating for Western feminist agreements against shari'a, and has statements of glorifying the distorted Bible' (*Saaid al-Fawa'ed*, 2012. Translated from Arabic). The petition employed a basic process of othering everyone outside the traditional religious domain, using depictions such as liberal, secular, Shiite and Christian to directly falsify their argument according to their excluded label. What is interesting in the defamation campaign against al-Dosari, which relies on previous statement, is the combination of feminism, liberalism and Christianity – through glorifying the 'distorted' bible – as one entity that depicts falseness and perversion.

The main points of attack in the clergy statement are very common. Criticism is against the chosen speakers who are ineligible to speak due to their religious or intellectual perversion, and against certain topics such as secularism, which is claimed to be against shari'a sovereignty. The statement denounced the organiser's plan to mix between the sexes, a situation that would not have happened if the event was to be held in the Kingdom where constraints are present, ensuring women's sections are sealed behind doors with speakers that transmit the event without including their possibly-seductive input – this point is reemphasised continuously throughout the statement in different tones. The reductionist tone: 'what confirms the perversion of this programme is the anticipated mixing between men and women as usual' and the *fatwa* advisory tone: 'we

advise young men and women to be cautious about such events, and confirm that it is not permitted to attend such forums as a result of its evils' (*Saaid al-Fawa'ed*, 2012. Translated from Arabic) highlight the fallacy of the rigid polarisation inherent in the dominant discourse, between right and wrong, reward and sin, paradise and hell. This black-and-white mode of thinking reduces any possibility for plurality in religious interpretations, therefore it would categorise any different way of understanding as the enemy, the sinful, the threat, the traitor, and possibly the criminal. This dichotomy ultimately leads to imposing multiple forms of coercion over reformists and activists who entered the 'other' zone, which is typically false. Whether it is secularism, Christianity or feminism is not relevant, what is relevant is not adhering to doctrinal power.

Thus, the very discourse that legitimises the monarchy's rule is based upon this sharp binary contrast between evil and good, Muslim and *kafir*, divine and man-made, pure and profane, subsequently choosing shari'a rule over civil empowerment, and religious instruction as a substitute for dialogue and free rational thinking. This reinforces the doctrinal authority that the youth who attend such events are aiming to resist.

This preoccupation is embedded in state cultural instruments, feeding into public education, media, mosque sermons, and 'formal' social dialogues, reproducing cultural hegemony through modes of normalisation and repetition. Such fallacies of presumption often find their way in Salafi thinking methods – as the example of the al-Nahda Forum demonstrates. Where religious authorities continue to reproduce the same preoccupations, accusations and fears against contemporary discursive practices despite shifts in time, trends of thought, and the liberal pluralist influence because of flows of modernisation and globalisation. Through this very distinction lies construction of the dominant ideology, which 'operate as the functionaries of the superstructure', generating a prevalent passive consent that continue to recreate hegemony and perpetuate this dual fallacy in thought, whilst justifying acts that criminalise and denounce alternative voices (Schwarzmantel, 2014: 74).

This fallacy is the most profound challenge that participants who became advocates of pluralism and liberty have experienced. It is inherent in Hamidaddin's phase of deconstruction in thought, where the 'grey' area became wider because of his acceptance of a multiplicity of doctrines and interpretations, as well as accepting to listen to different views as religious 'experiences' rather than false assumptions that need to be denounced or corrected. It is also the very rigid dilemma that al-Ohali emerged from when he confessed that 'the world is painted with colours ever more than we have imagined' after his phase of emancipation. It is the continuous struggle that al-Maliki, Khalawi and Sheikh al-Oudah face as a result of their subversion from their conservative

communities, who are constructed products of this dichotomy. It is the threat imposed on political activists who attribute their most difficult endeavours to the deconstruction of 'the unity in voice', 'the singular mode in thought', 'the unification of state' (al-Alkami; al-Ibrahim; and al-Gudaimi, interviews, 2015). It is then a struggle against an exit from the dominant religious narrative that falsifies alternative options, for it does not hold the mechanisms that enables it to turn dissent into active dialogue, reform or constructive criticism as long as it operates in a binary mode of thought.

The discourses presented in this chapter highlight the dissemination of different approaches in tackling religion, which puts the religious doctrinal authority at stake for as long as it does not change its counterproductive approach in dealing with the nation's rising anxieties and uncertainties. The emerging themes of Islamic democracy, humanism, tolerance and religious freedom tackle religion in a horizontal, democratic way, highlighting issues of strict indoctrination and coercion that underpin the dominant religious discourse. They also demonstrate a complexity and plurality of ways in which mutated figures may express their beliefs, highlighting the dominant discourse as incapable of governing the social order. Interestingly this religious tension is also very present in the following chapter on women, where religious indoctrination is active in constructing a passive example of femininity.

CHAPTER SIX: WOMEN

6.1 Introduction

Prejudice against women is not foreign to the Arabic culture. Despite Islam's early role in eliminating many of the misogynistic practices that operated in pre-Islamic Arabia, many such practices remained and found their way into scholarly interpretations of religion. In modern times they participate in the establishment of cultural norms and state policy-making.

A glimpse at girls' public schools in Saudi shows a peculiar characteristic: girls' schools have no names, just numbers. Whereas boys' school are named after historical and religious leaders, girls do not need such association, their schools are rather surrounded by thick cement walls, filled with graffiti-like scribbles, love words, and boys' names followed by their contact numbers, symbolising the 'evil' behaviour of the 'human wolves', as they are called by teachers and preachers. Girls growing up between these walls are supposed to fear the masculine wolf who may intimidate them and lead them to sin. They also fear God, who doles out hard punishment if they do not obey teachers' instructions about that God.

Many teachers, especially those of religious studies, feel obliged to provide dozens of horror myths and legends about those who did not obey Allah and were punished in this world, or their punishment thereafter. Such myths included those who used to draw humans or listen to music and were punished by sudden death or creatures biting them. Since music is prohibited, the types of anthems young students are usually exposed to are Islamic jihadi vocals. A typical popular vocal song in girls' public primary schools in Saudi – which remains famous today – is *Farshi al-Turab* ('Lying on the sand'), which emotionally narrates moments of death and burial that every child should remember every day, to ensure they stay away from sin, for what awaits girls is not a simple life, but one full of with things she must not do. A girl in a public school perhaps does not know much about life choices or hope, she is too occupied by sins, as if the school is a panopticon, where extreme surveillance takes place, individuals are constantly reminded that they are watched and therefore should be disciplined, and they cannot see the light beyond.

The focus on paradise and thereafter at early stages of girls' schooling encourages a lifestyle of asceticism. The ideology of patience and enduring suffering rooted in religious material as a guilt-cleansing methodology promotes the idea of sacrificing life

in exchange for something symbolic. Despite the prevalence of such concepts in most world religions, and despite Islam's general encouragement for its followers to build a strong nation and work hard, these particular ideological concepts are strongly emphasised in environments such as girls' public schools. Such girls are prepared emotionally to suffer so that they deserve a better thereafter. The Saudi writer al-Bulaihi highlights this extreme cultural focus on dying rather than living, and the prohibited area instead of allowed spaces for creativity and practice, which contributed in the construction of what he names *thaqafat al-mawt*, the death culture (al-Bulaihi, 2010).

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Njoud Alanbari reminds us of the pressures expected of a young Saudi at school and how tricky it can be to emerge unscathed; she attempts to show the preemptive, often self-fulfilling, warnings that at times introduce the very attitudes it aims to counter (porn and drug warnings to 11 year old girls) and at others breeds intolerance to others (do not be like the Jews) and at even others are xenophobic (do not travel abroad). Young girls receive these messages every morning under the patronage of pointed swords–they are already at daily war with the exotic other.
#GharemStudio

Figure 6.1 Njoud al-Anbari's project

Showcasing a typical painting in girls' public schools. Made and showcased in Gharem Studio, Riyadh.

Figure 6.1 represents the work of a young Saudi artist, al-'Anbari, who drew typical wall art in a girls' school, carrying the symbolic dangers she is surrounded by on swords. Such dangers include: travelling abroad, music, imitating non-believers, drugs, immoral movies, and spare time – which can always induce girls to sin. At the centre is a pious woman as an example of resistance to these guilty pleasures, decorated with the phrase 'your veil, your honour', symbolising the embodiment of virtue. This wall art stands in a little girls' play area, working as a constant reminder not to indulge in such attractive

sins. Instead they should wait for the paradise they have been promised, where, ironically, they can enjoy such guilty pleasures.

Until King Abdullah's reign, girls' curriculums were entirely designed by 'the Department of Religious Guidance until 2002... which was to make women good wives and mothers, and to prepare them for 'acceptable' jobs such as teaching and nursing that were believed to suit their nature' (Hamdan, 2005), whilst boys curriculums were designed by the Ministry of Education. This was to reassure the conservative, non-urban families of the 1960s that girls' education does not intend to liberalise their daughters, but to preserve them under the same ideological roof.

Despite intensive religious lessons that constitute most of the curriculum, rarely do the subjects review spiritual and philosophical aspects of Islam; instead they often focus on the applied jurisprudential and controlling nature of religion. Religious discourse in schools is often displayed on walls and in paintings around the building, using phrases that prompt students to reject any form of Westernisation that aims to disable their religiosity and safety, encouraging them to refuse any other interpretation or view of life and work choices – a fear of being Westernised and losing their honour in life and paradise thereafter runs throughout. Female students in particular are subconsciously exposed to many forms of patriarchal domination: there is always a man with a long beard who they trust, the father they obey, the curriculum writer who teaches them, the sheikh who regulates their life-order through fatwas, the religious police who guards them in public, the judge who applies justice if they have misbehaved, and even the school security guard (typically an illiterate old man) whose purpose is to ensure every girl leaves at the right time, in the right car, keeping them away from 'human wolves' under his steady gaze. 'Human-wolves', or *al-the'ab al-basharyah*, is a common term used in religious discourse to warn women against mixing or speaking with foreign men. Hence the security guard often uses a stick to attract attention or discipline girls who may fail to see him due to schools' strict face veiling rules.

Thus, the normalisation of women's subordination comes to seem natural, aided by divine orders, deeply embedded since childhood. Many Saudi women who grow up in these conditions either remain mentally blinkered and controlled by patriarchal norms, or experience turning points where they feel betrayed by the religious institution, turn their back on the pre-conceived knowledge from school, and commence learning freely and individually.

6.1.1 Narrative problem

Religion (namely Wahhabism), together with cultural misogynistic perceptions, has contributed to the creation of a discriminative narrative that completely marginalises women from places of power, authority and enablement, aside from their reproductive role in creating more men. This study argues along with al-Rasheed that clergy discourse as a body of 'religious knowledge' is not the main factor in shaping women's reality, rather it is Wahhabism 'as a religious nationalism under the auspices of the state that may explain why women have lagged behind' (2013: 16), and the implementation of 'divine politics' that reinforces oppression in the legislative structure (al-Rasheed, 2015).

In a post September 11 discourse, women's status has improved in terms of a higher employment rate, and greater numbers of colleges and majors such as law available to women. Women have had the opportunity to obtain identity cards, gain a scholarship, and in 2011 women joined in the Consultative Assembly, *Majlis al-Shoura*, a formal governmental body that has some capacity to advise and pass its recommendations to the Royal Court. Later in 2015, women were allowed to take part in municipal elections. However, restrictive laws that affect women of all types and social backgrounds remain untouched. Women, even as diplomats or members of the Consultative Assembly, depend upon a guardian's consent to study, work, travel, or issue official documentation.

Women hence appear weak, bound to a narrative dichotomy: a liberal empowerment and salvation narrative on one side, and a conservative clergy narrative on the other. The first narrative subjugates women in mainstream media as a submissive group that needs to be saved from religious dominance; described be Doaiji as the 'cosmopolitan womanhood' (2018: 118). The second narrative is used by clergy-men, representing women as cherished jewels and justifying their oppression as a form of piety and obedience, described as the 'pious womanhood' (Doaiji, 2018: 118). In the middle lies a diversity of women who differ in beliefs, desires and perspectives. There are women who strongly endorse religious fundamentalism, and believe their duty is the embodiment of piety and subordination. Those with popularity and charisma advocate for the dominant discourse and justify its discriminations. This model of religious women, or *multazimat* (al-Rasheed, 2013), resembles the patriarchal regime in women's worlds, such as public talks in female schools, colleges and ceremonies. Although they face accusations from an activist perspective for defending the repressive laws and norms that reproduce other women's sufferings, they are socially celebrated to a high extent.

Other women find their guardians supportive and flexible, hence they try to 'negotiate greater autonomy from their families using arguments such as women's rights in Islam' (Le Renard, 2014: 162). This group finds themselves more privileged than Western women who need to work to survive. Additionally, they often find the

international 'victimhood' narrative irrelevant (al-Rasheed, 2013: 42) and the status quo bearable. As Vogel puts it:

> Many women, even elite Western-educated women, reject the ideal of formal equality, believing that Islam enjoins gender equivalence while recognizing gender differences; they often support the status quo while identifying abuses. For many women, opportunities depend crucially on the men with whom they live; while some spouses and fathers are oppressive, others are open-minded and supportive (Vogel, 2012: 25).

This statement highlights that the equality and rights sought by Saudi women are different from the Western ideal. Feminists therefore may not necessarily demand equality but require reform of the oppressive systems within an Islamic framework.

6.2 Motives to activism

Women activists enjoy privileged living conditions that allow them to advocate for their rights. Not only do they share an intellectual environment that cultivates awareness, but they also enjoy family support to be able to publicise their demands. In this regard Kadi states:

> A Saudi woman's fate is dependent on luck, if her family are supportive she is happy, if not then no, lots of women come up with "achieve your dreams" rhetoric, overlooking that without Allah's support through your family, you wouldn't have achieved a thing (Kadi, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

For a Saudi woman, the family is the centre of the universe – without them she is helpless and lifeless. As a pioneer Saudi YouTuber, Kadi attributes her motives to her family who have given her the space to express herself. She acknowledges that 'lucky' Saudi women can acquire autonomy and freedom to express themselves in their highly collective structure, while the majority remain caught between cultural norms and religious conservatism.

Another feminist finds her family's environment key in shaping her intellectual life: 'For my family, education is always number one, family members from mother and father's side would go to Lebanon after high school to pursue their higher education in the sixties' (al-Fassi, interview, 2017. Translated from Arabic). Born to a Sufi-oriented family, al-Fassi contends: 'what we study at school is reviewed again at home… so we come up with minimum cultural shocks as possible' (al-Fassi, interview, 2017. Translated from Arabic). This form of exclusive intellectual environment shaped al-Fassi's awareness, interests and knowledge in a different way than the dominant culture. Although being a Sufi plays a role in this special upbringing, it is through her family that

her activism was made possible. Al-Yousef similarly finds her family's intellectual atmosphere contributed to her interest and support in defending women rights:

> My father taught me independence and intellectual discussion since childhood. I was in this atmosphere since the sixties and seventies, then I got married and lived in different cultures, I lived in Japan, France and America; this have also refined my character […] so my environment wasn't ordinary or typical (al-Yousef, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

This non-typical life, both in parenting and practice – where al-Yousef's father gave her autonomy – has led her to step up and refuse to be a 'second class citizen' (interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic). Being exposed to different cultures also allowed her to recognise from early on that women's lack of independence is at the heart of their problem, hence al-Yousef's advocacy is centred on demanding equality in citizenship.

Al-Bakr also finds her upbringing to be a contributing factor towards her activism. Yet in her example it is not intellectual concerns and enriching discussions that mattered most, rather it is the actions of an uneducated, struggling divorced mother:

> My mother, although she wasn't educated she was so liberal in her mind and she personified the whole subject of women. Our father left us to marry another woman, but my mother was never fed up or gave up. She did everything she had to do to take care of her seven children, no help, no family, you know, she was the model (al-Bakr, interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic).

This excerpt shows feminism in action: a divorced mother of seven who never weakened in providing and caring for her family, despite struggling with oppressive men in her life – an unfaithful husband and absent male family members. It is through this 'model' that al-Bakr embodied strength to stand up for herself and drive in 1990 at the peak of Sahwa extremism. In a similar fashion, al-Dosari finds the detention of her activist friend – who was also a model of a struggling divorcee with children – to offer a strong incentive to advocate for women's rights:

> The personal story of Manal was very moving to me. A single mother who struggled really hard to get out of divorce and take charge of her life. Living in a different city to her home city to earn money. She was leading a tough enough life as it was. So, I wanted to help those women. I felt it is the right thing to do (al-Dosari, interview, 2016. Partially translated from Arabic).

The personal story of Manal al-Sharif's – who endangered her life for activism, then became an icon of women's driving – encouraged a new life mission for al-Dosari. It marked the moment she decided to transition from 'engaging in like-minded

discussions' on women's rights to going public: publicising her blog as well as her Twitter account to showcase interest and support those in need (Interview, 2016).

6.3 Articulating agency

Apart from the oppressive state systems that work against women, a significant proportion of women's issues relate to a lack of social agency and autonomy. A woman's appearance may therefore embody resistance, or what Bayat describes as the 'nonmovement' movement (2013). An attempt to regain agency occurred when several women decided to post their pictures along with their names online:

> I was very active among a group of progressives at the time [2009], so [one of them] was saying that Saudi women – including writers and those who are trying to be part of the public discourse – they are invisible, they have no voice, no image, they are just writers, they are words. The message is not personalised; therefore you can never think of a woman in a humane way like a man… So she added her picture and I responded by adding mine (al-Dosari, interview, 2016. Minor translation from Arabic).

By revealing their identities and faces on blogging and micro-blogging platforms, women are reshaping public spheres to transcend the nation's patriarchal control, crossing existing social boundaries, and moving between platforms using their 'real' identities and faces. Online spaces disrupt existing notions around women's sexuality, virtue, honour and shame, and consequently boundaries intersect between the feminine and the masculine, as well as the private and the public.

Revealing their faces and attaching them to personal social media profiles also adds a new layer of authenticity and originality in women's advocacy. Expressing themselves through identifiable and personalised accounts seems to break the fear of being exposed or harassed for revealing part of the body. The statements that such pictures make reverses the gaze that expects vulnerability and weakness – instead it invites the viewer to think twice.

Al-Dosari highlights women's lack of autonomy in appearance as the starting point in articulating agency. Commenting on her fellow friends who do not normally wear a *hijab* (headscarf) but do so when appearing in the media, al-Dosari says:

> Even non-*hijabis* who don't have a problem with their families wouldn't post their pictures [without a *hijab*], I see them in person without a *hijab*, they go on television and they put on the veil. I'm not talking about television inside Saudi, I'm talking about international television elsewhere… they have this perception that this is the only means for the system to accept them. The system including

the state and the people. But if I am in a position with an enforced identity and I don't accept an enforced identity, why am I seeking their approval? How can I change this enforced identity if I do not support my own value? Who will support my own value if I cannot stand up for it, right? (al-Dosari, interview, 2016. Minor translation from Arabic).

The embodiment of agency for al-Dosari is the most basic value of a feminist subject, it is the primal expression of identity and she therefore finds the act of veiling for mainstream appearances provocative as it reinforces women's subordination by informing their most basic right to choose their appearance. Thus, seeking socio-political 'approval' by voluntarily putting on the veil abroad when representing oneself, for al-Dosari, seems to kill the most basic value of feminism – retrieving a loss of agency. In a similar manner, al-Banawi describes this conflict through the social imposition of the *hijab*: 'Some of the comments that I would get and feel very completely offended by is "Fatima how come you're so progressive and yet you wear this *hijab*?"' (al-Banawi, interview, 2017). She then moves on to describe how the conservative side of her community reacts:

> There was this struggle between the two who are both censuring me, here because of my incomplete *hijab*... and the other group would censure a colleague for not shaking hands with men... I realised that this narrative is not healthy. It is the same but with different naming (al-Banawi, interview, 2017. Partially translated from Arabic).

For al-Banawi, the act of intervening in a woman's choice of appearance is offensive, especially among a supposedly intellectual liberal community. This act demonstrates the social duty of women's scrutiny and judgment, which operates in both conservative and liberal circles. Because it is the first thing to be noticed on a woman, the *hijab* is an important signifier of larger symbolic meanings and associations. It complicates identifications of progressiveness and backwardness, of intellectuality and ignorance, of liberty and conservatism, where a woman, as usual, sits at the heart of religious and cultural trends and clashes. Al-Banawi also finds it surprising that these two contrasted social circles share the same indoctrinating enforcement of identity that is practiced by the mainstream Islamic discourse. Therefore, the imposition of a *hijab* – or lack of it – is 'not healthy' as it deprives a woman of her autonomy and basic right to choose.

The same approach to articulating agency and choice through religious attire is implicit in al-Yousef's comment: 'I am religious since I was young, I am a *hijabi* and so is my daughter, Islam was never responsible for women being second class citizens' (al-Yousef, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic). Through her act of wearing the *hijab* while being an activist, al-Yousef is working to disassociate religion from discriminatory laws and practices.

A different experience appears in al-Fassi's bold choice to adopt the unfamiliar traditional Hijazi apparel, instead of the classic *hijab*, as a formal uniform in the capital city of Riyadh, where all women are dressed in global 'European brands' beneath their *abayas*:

> There was the time when I wanted to wear the *hijab* when I was in 6th or 7th grade and my father said: "no way, no way, focus on your heart", he didn't want me to be taken by the dominant culture. So this resulted in my decision to wear the Hijazi apparel instead; it came as an extension of this idea or this style of being raised, where one would look for an alternative representation of the self, especially since I am living in Riyadh whilst being from Mecca, so this cultural conflict was always present (al-Fassi, interview, 2017. Partially translated from Arabic).

This excerpt highlights an early strain of feminism emerging in al-Fassi's practice through her choice to wear traditional Hijazi apparel in public. This comes after an attempt to join her peers in putting on the *hijab* at an early age, an act that is met with discouragement by her father who wanted to maintain his daughter's autonomy from the 'dominant culture' that is different to her Sufi upbringing. Henceforth her decision to wear the Hijazi apparel in college 'came as an extension of this idea or this style of being raised' (Interview, 2017. Translated from Arabic). It was al-Fassi's way of expressing individuality that is associated with pride in tradition, at a time when all women don foreign apparel:

> It was a big cultural challenge to wear something different in – we are talking about Riyadh in 1983 – if people are considered racial and intolerant with the other now, then imagine how they were 30 years ago. When they saw me, it was as if I came from another planet, the laughing and so on. They cannot comprehend what it means for someone to be different, to choose to appear differently, although none of them wore something traditional by any means, it's all imported, there was this irony, it was a time one learns resistance, every day I go to college I feel stronger (al-Fassi, interview, 2017. Translated from Arabic).

Although choosing appearance may seem an everyday basic decision, for al-Fassi it means more: it is one of her strongest feminist manifestations in challenging dominant perceptions of women and sexuality. This act breaks the cultural imposition of two contrasting appearances: one is the completely veiled black apparel in public, and the other is the unveiled *semi-private* apparel in the women's section of the college, which is reliant on imported Western goods. Her act demonstrates this irony between normative Western-made apparel, represented by everyone in the university, and the strange appearance of al-Fassi in her Hijazi local costume, which includes white headwear that she appears in both in private (at the women's university) and in public, as Figure 6.2 shows. It is her chosen way of challenging cultural domination in everyday practice,

Figure 6.2 Image of al-Fassi

Al-Fassi posting a picture of herself receiving her Saudi driving license on 6th Jun 2018 (Twitter post).

representing 'the quiet encroachment of the ordinary', where resistance by marginalised groups – in this case women – happens quietly in 'discreet and prolonged ways' (Bayat, 2010: 14).

Women's appearance is a highly symbolic issue. On the one hand it represents an (imposed) cultural identity, and on the other it underlines notions of honour and shame that are highly critical of both women's and men's social status. Hence one form of challenge experienced by activists who post their pictures without a veil are accusations of dishonour:

> The video I published yesterday generated a lot of hate speech... one of them really crossed the line: "you're coming out from a pornographic film to talk about rights". Imagine! I wasn't even showing anything but my face. This is something very weird; how to shame you when you are in a public place and to set an example of you just to be silenced basically (al-Dosari, interview, 2016. Minor translation from Arabic).

Al-Dosari's highly regarded value of appearing in her unveiled *choice* on social media generates hatred, accusation and intervention, reinforcing the dominant perception of women being subject to the male gaze and choice of representation. Perhaps this explains why liberal circles strongly stand against the *hijab* as an attempt to radically oppose the dominant imposition of the veil on women, as represented in al-Banawi's foregoing excerpt, in which she describes the liberal intervention as unhealthy, just like the Islamists, since both leave a woman's autonomy behind.

6.4 Active resistance

6.4.1 Women's right to drive

Activists' discourse identifies large-scale discriminative acts against women as a government strategy that is justified through public mores and traditions, arguing against mainstream voices that associate it with religion or social conservatism. The popular state response that "society is not ready" for changes like lifting the ban on

women driving highlights the political leadership's unwillingness to respond to women's appeals, which participants interpret in the following ways:

> It's a simple call but it has a great symbolic meaning [...] It means mobility, it means choice, it means freedom, it means diversity in choices as well. You have a chance for work, for training, you want to go and have a cup of coffee, this is what it means, independence. And I think that's what made society fear it (al-Bakr, interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic).

As a woman who participated in the first driving campaign of 1990, al-Bakr perceives a collective 'fear' against this probable change, marking the gravity of women's subordination. Lack of mobility means lack of autonomy, a woman is thus restricted in her outgoing activities and needs to organise them beforehand, either with a high-waged driver, or with a male family member who may offer her a lift, since walking is not an option in cities. Driving crystallises a woman's inferiority and justifies laws that register her as a minor; working to normalise the perception that any male precedes her in taking control over the wheel, whether it is her 17 year old son or an illiterate migrant worker – both may have authority and control over her public movement. Driving also reinforces the idea of the public as a masculine domain, in which women are only permitted to operate under male supervision.

Other participants continue to view the ban on driving from a political perspective: 'whoever claims "society is not ready" – it is not ready because of the religious discourse that is enabled, and this is what makes Abdullah al-Maliki interested in religious reform along with political reform' (al-Maliki, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Al-Maliki here attributes the ban to the political activation of a popular religious discourse that censures women's driving. Another activist finds this ban politically fruitful as it limits the intellectual debate from going any further: 'Cinema, women's driving, if these were settled people will be in despair, they wouldn't know what to talk about. Therefore I [the leader] must retain something to keep the controversy going' (al-Qahtani, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Similarly, al-Yousef argues:

> I think that the issue of women's driving has two segments: the first one is to keep people busy with it, so they don't think of greater issues: they don't think about lost political rights, public wealth or corruption... It regenerates the clash between the rival trends [...] The second segment: I believe that if we were given the right to drive, it will bring about a new trend to the relationship between the ruler and the ruled; whereby the ruled demands and the ruler gives, and I believe that until the present day we are yet to be ready for this sort of relationship (al-Yousef, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

As an issue that affects the daily life of a large sector of society, both al-Qahtani and al-Yousef find the driving ban politically smart as it keeps society 'busy' discussing its

doctrinal controversy, feeding into the Islamist-liberal tension without any possible outcome. More importantly, al-Yousef interprets it as a political reluctance to implement what people demand, as the latter may generate active citizenship and engagement. After the strong momentum built by driving campaign activism, the decision to lift the ban became highly problematic, as it could signify a mutation in this relationship 'between the ruler and the ruled'. The delayed timing of the ban's lifting is highly significant: at times of radical shifts in power and mass activist detentions in 2017, the decision to lift the driving ban by the newly appointed Crown Prince came as an attempt to "soothe" public anger and shift the depressed public mood. However, the detentions of women's driving icons – even those who fled the country – weeks before the ban was lifted in June 2018, while portraying them as 'traitors' in local newspapers (Okaz, 2018), signifies the leadership's strong stance against active engagement and demand, actively reminding them of their repressive grip.

6.4.2 Campaigns against the ban on driving

Campaigns against the ban on female drivers have taken place in different phases and political climates – the first was in 1990 when 47 privileged, educated young women gathered in 14 cars, driven by those with licenses gained abroad on the streets of Riyadh at the peak of the *Sahwa* (al-Mane' and al-Shaikh, 2013; al-Bakr, interview, 2015):

> It was the 6th November 1990, yeah. I got into it right away, with the group [...] It was a complete scandal, we later realised the huge [Islamist] organisation, we drove on Tuesday – the following Friday all mosques in the Kingdom were talking about us. I was at my family's home and I saw leaflets distributed beneath the doors revealing our names and our husbands', which indicates the huge Islamist organisation structure that the government had overlooked their ability to organise themselves this fast, how were they able to print millions of leaflets at that time?! (al-Bakr, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

It was a scandal among educated women in a conservative society who witnessed the emergence of a radical religious movement, and nobody recognised how or when it was formed. Their organisation and consistency in attacking their opponents seemed politically powerful. Hence the activists' 'shameful and sinful' act was vigorously denounced in official and non-official media outlets, religious condemnation leaflet titles included "'Know your enemy: Women calling for perversion and sin" – this declaration ends with the phrase: "Here are the names of fallen women and the secularists and communists standing behind them. Do what you think is appropriate"' (al-Mane' and al-Shaikh, 2013: 80. Translated from Arabic). It was not merely a defamation campaign but an invitation for any angry man to take revenge on what is labelled as apostasy, prostitution and moral corruption, while revealing the full names of these women, their

husbands' names, license plates, and husbands' claimed ideological affiliation – often communist or secular (al-Mane' and al-Shaikh, 2013: 80-83). Women driving is described as a sin that clerics would not forgive, even if God did, labelled as 'apostasy', 'call for women's liberation' or a 'protest of immorality and prostitution' (al-Mane' and al-Shaikh, 2013: 80). In the following excerpt Al-Bakr describes her life after the 1990 driving campaign:

> My husband is a doctor at the Military Hospital, really he had a tough time, everyone comes and says "Oh your wife..." – even patients! He was compelled to leave his job later. I remember walking beside him in the hospital, then a man came, you can't imagine the curses and insults we got just because I was with him... the pressures were huge... yet my husband was very supportive, he left his job for 7 years, he really paid a heavy price for my activism (al-Bakr, interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic).

Here al-Bakr narrates some of the pressures experienced from religious defamation campaigns against her driving activism, which affected her career (as an academic) as well as her husband's. Challenges may come in any angry masculine form – as in the hospital experience – in a form of official clergy attacks in newspapers, or by the state through preventing women from occupying managerial and teaching positions, and imposing a travel ban (al-Bakr, interview, 2015; al-Fassi, interview, 2017). The family were obliged to pay a high cost for decades, and al-Bakr mentions that even today her teenage son suffers as a result of her activism and media appearances (Interview, 2015) as they generate feelings of shame and embarrassment among his masculine community.

The attack on the 1990 driving campaign was about more than just driving: it was a renewal of long-standing grievances regarding lost Muslim glories, as well as hatred and fear of Western progression and change. Women on the one hand trigger the most sensitive emotions in a masculine Arab perspective: they are a living representation of piety and honour. On the other hand, their minority and subordination allows men to project their sorrows and inadequacies on to women – it is easy to blame women's sexuality and 'evil intentions' for the nation's problems.

6.4.3 Social media driving campaigns

During the peak of social media activism, 'Women2Drive' was the first campaign that attempted to advocate for women's right to drive after a long period of stagnation, marking 17th June 2011 as their launch:

> When I participated in this campaign in 2011 I used the new media platform for it. I had an account on Twitter and I started to talk about the campaign. Twitter

brought us together, even women of 1990, so we formed a group and began to work since then on women's rights in general (al-Yousef, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

The excerpt above shows how social media has helped women to network across the state and revitalise their desire to regain their rights (Wheeler, 2017), beginning with driving as an everyday hassle experienced by all women. The campaign included a call for driving on the 17th June and posting videos and images of women driving in urban cities: 'I drove lots of times... I was never stopped, I don't know, maybe it was a coincidence, other women have been stopped' (al-Dosari, interview, 2016); 'I drove from 2011 to 2013 continuously. Nobody ever bothered me from the people. I used to go to very conservative areas in Riyadh, places of *mutawa's*, yet no one ever stopped me or harassed me... however I was stopped by the police twice' (al-Yousef, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic). These statements highlight how ordinary driving felt on an individual and societal level. Al-Yousef insisted on driving in conservative neighbourhoods to experience what it felt like to embody agency in the very places that was claimed by the state to be "not ready" to see women behind the wheel. These experiences marked a soft protest and highlighted the power of social 'nonmovements' in which marginalised, fragmented social groups embodied subversion through an ordinary practice – driving – in pursuit of social change (Bayat, 2013).

The June 2011 campaign included a Facebook page filled with videos and testimonies to encourage other women to drive, and an electronic petition to be signed and delivered to the royal court (Wheeler, 2017: 125). As a first attempt after the 1990 tragedy, the campaign was short-lived – it was suppressed as soon as its main icon, Manal al-Sharif was arrested:

> On the airplane I got a message that she [al-Sharif] was captured. At the time I felt we are very insignificant as women or as a social group. We are easily targeted. We can be targeted by any religious cleric and the government couldn't care less. We are a very easy treat to please any religious lobby. Like, we can just shut women and that's it (al-Dosari, interview, 2016).

For al-Dosari, al-Sharif's arrest was the benchmark for women's weakness. Although the pressure of the arrest motivated al-Dosari to advocate for women's suppressed rights while in voluntary exile, it is nevertheless a stigma of women's powerlessness and fragility. This vulnerability is crystallised in the way women are caught between clergy who invest their efforts in governing what they can govern – women and the cultural sphere – and the state who sells their cause to please the clergy. Al-Yousef interprets Manal al-Sharif's arrest in a different way:

> People always tell me 26th October [2013] was a complete failure. Of course, June [2011] didn't last long, it died after Manal's release. So 26th October was an attempt to revitalise what's gone... and I always say that the biggest success of the 26th October campaign is that it made it clear to the people and the state that society is in fact ready, and that it is no longer an issue of controversy or religiosity, the state is the one who isn't ready, that's all (al-Yousef, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic; emphasis added).

As one of the 'designers of the 2013 campaign', al-Yousef finds the political arrest of the campaign's icon significant, marking the ban as political and not societal as was widely claimed (Interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic). Despite the strongly suppressed 1990s campaign, the social media driving campaign made an important statement to the power holders: that the power distribution between the clergy and political leadership was at stake with the dissemination of women's active engagement and demand for rights, where women would no longer endure being 'caught between religion and state' (al-Rasheed, 2015c: 292).

On the 26th October 2013, driving activism reached a new height. The driving hashtag on Twitter was said to mark the second highest number of posts in the history of Saudi campaigns, according to the economist and activist al-Zamil:

> @Essamz (26 Oct 2013) 'Tweets of #Driving_26October reached more than 640 thousand, it is the second largest campaign in the history of Twitter in Saudi after #Wages_don't_ cover _needs campaign' (al-Zamil, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

The driving petition was signed by 17,000 people in 24 hours, then sent to the Royal Court. However, many women who drive decided not to sign it because of the strong "language" used in the sixth point of the petition (although al-Yousef did not waiver), which read:

> In the event that the government does not lift the ban on women driving, and does not provide justification for its continued refusal, we demand that it provides a mechanism to enable "society" to express what they want. We do not demand this as a means of adopting a particular ideology or importing values from abroad. But we ask for this because we cannot find any justification for the government's opposition to women driving their cars. The state is not a parent and citizens are not children or minors[6].

From this quote it appears that the petition adopts a language of reform and political engagement that is unusual for the Saudi narrative. At its heart it breaks the dichotomy

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[6] Available at: https://www.change.org/p/government-of-saudi-arabia-lift-the-ban-on-women-driving [Accessed 8th Apr 2019].

of victimisation and concession. It determines the King's political responsibility in the persistence of oppressive laws, leaving no space for those used to appealing to the King to "save" them from being victims of the religious establishment — which does not have the authority to enforce or remove laws. The petition moreover refuses the fatherly relation implicit in the citizens' relationship to the King. It goes beyond the binary relation of a kind leader granting his people favours to thank him in return – typical to Saudi's rentier system – into a relation of recognised citizenship. In the following excerpt al-Yousef comments on the petition:

> It was a remarkable petition, and that's why many men supported our campaign, because we stated there that we want the relationship to be that of citizen and state, not that of father and children. Many women activists withdrew as a result of our assertion on this tone... however when we published it on Twitter many people and writers joined and thought "okay, this is new to feminists", because feminists usually blame religious authorities and beg the state "save us from them", this trend is new (al-Yousef, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

Throughout the history of Saudi Arabian dissent, citizens have not been recognised as active participants in the political process. Only prestigious scholars had the status and power to write a petition to the Royal Court that does not adopt a language of demanding rights, rather an advisory opinion to their leader. This political structure is described as *Dawlat al-Amir wal Sheikh* (The Prince and Sheikh state), as theorised by al-Maliki (2013; and interview, 2015), referring to the intrinsic relationship between the King and the clergy where each party acquires its legitimacy through integrity with the other party, while the rest of the population remains outside this equation. Feminists thus not only challenge this political structure but furthermore challenge the official narrative of social conservatism that portrays women as cherished jewels who are not ready to get behind the wheel. In addition, feminists challenge the mainstream liberal narrative where women's demands hide behind a victim discourse that blames religion and culture for their subordination.

6.4.4 Contesting the guardianship system

Guardianship encapsulates the core of the women's cause, encapsulating the institutionalisation of their marginalisation and inferiority. Through the guardianship system a woman is legally registered as a minor who requires a male's consent to achieve her most basic rights, such as 'issuing travel documents, registering records for delivery (birth certificates) and death reports, enrolling in education (including higher education), applying for educational scholarships, and being released from state institutions (like prisons or rehabilitation health centres)' (Tønnessen, 2016: 8). This

responsible male may be her 18 year old son, an abusive husband, a controlling father or a further relative who is not part of her daily life yet is in charge of it.

Contesting the guardianship system consists of many phases: the first is recognising the problem amongst privileged women who are not obstructed by this system, since they have supportive guardians yet are aware of its power in controlling the lives of women who do not share a similar privilege. The recognition of this abusive system is not straightforward, as it hides behind cultural customs and religious conceptualisation. Men are already in charge of women's lives as the main financial providers for the family – for reasons embedded in the interpretation of the Islamic notion of *qiwamah,* where men are believed to 'protect and manage the affairs of [a] woman' (Ahmad and Abdul-Rasheed, 2018: 169). This dominant religious interpretation complicates the challenge against the guardianship system and portrays the feminist discourse as subversive. Many women with supportive guardians do not question the religious legitimacy of *qiwamah* and therefore find its contestation misinformed. Women with controlling guardians may also find the guardianship system aligned with their religious beliefs. As a result, the minority of feminists who have decided to contest this system have hardly attracted societal support. They find themselves doubly pressured: they are socially shunned for subverting a deeply rooted religious ideology and social norm, and they are suppressed for their perceived inferior gender and sexuality.

In the first phase of contestation, al-Bakr – who challenged the ban on driving in 1990 – registers the problem:

> You are fine as long as your guardian is good, but he isn't necessarily. So how do we ensure he is a good man? You even need to take into consideration his mental and psychological nature as well as the nature of his family, otherwise you will be left in the street... So the independence and treatment of women as rational human beings is totally non-existent in Saudi law. I have written tens of articles about this because I think we need to reinforce it in women's minds, so they can recognise the problem. So later when we demand this right we get it (al-Bakr, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

In this early stage, feminists such as al-Bakr endeavour to portray the underlying prejudices and oppressive effects of this system in public discourse. Al-Bakr highlights the effort a woman undertakes in maintaining the emotional and psychological wellbeing of her guardian – likely a husband or father – because if not, she loses everything. In doing so al-Bakr represents women's daily social hassles as an issue of legal dependence. A guardian means mobility, a chance to study, work, travel or even have fun with friends. Those who upset their guardians risk their freedom in return. A husband who is born into a heavily conservative family may, for instance, decide to impose the same level of strictness on his wife, hence a woman must be a very

considerate negotiator. The significance of al-Bakr's statement lies in her approach that singles out the social conditioning of the guardianship system as a legitimate religious rule or a normal social situation, therefore highlighting its symbolic power to threaten women's lives while operating as a social reality in public discourse.

The second phase explicitly demands the elimination of the guardianship system in mainstream media. It has commenced in 2006, prior to the emergence of social media, and following the new King Abdullah's attempts to involve women in the labour force. In this regard al-Fassi says:

> We've put a very important article on Saudi women's demands as a result of workshops in 2003... it historicises the initial recognition of the Saudi women's cause. I wanted to publish it in 2003 at the end of my period at al-Watan newspaper... they didn't, six months later I moved to al-Iqtisadiyah... I sent it and it didn't get published. I tried the following year, then the other year, then the other, I sent it to al-Hayat, al-Sharq al-Awsat, Okaz, until finally al-Iqtisadiyah agreed to publish it in 2006 entitled "What does a Saudi woman demand?" Many newspapers republished it and until today it is considered a big deal, a milestone... In the beginning we talk about a woman's *ahliyah* and determining a legal age. We didn't say *wilayah* [guardianship], it was more like *ahliyah*, it was the familiar concept at the time, and it is the same idea said differently (al-Fassi, interview, 2017. Translated from Arabic).

In this excerpt al-Fassi documents the demand for eliminating the guardianship system explicitly in the press, an action that took three years to achieve. This article marks a 'milestone' in Saudi women's early movement against oppressive systems. However, even with the victory of publishing this article, al-Fassi avoids explicitly demanding to abolish the *'wilayah'* system, instead she subtly demands ensuring *'ahliyah'* – women's eligibility as adults. The use of *ahliyah* aims to avoid religious backlash that may be triggered by *wilayah* because of its religious groundings. The point in relation to guardianship states:

> Ensuring women's legal and financial *ahliyah*, and implementing this through lifting civil guardianship against her so she can seek education, healthcare and work with her personal capability (al-Fassi, 2006).

Despite the sensitive wording – which at least managed to get the article published – the article highlights a crucial stage in feminism whereby Saudi women *negotiate* the Western concept of equality using familiar Islamist language and frameworks. This article moreover embodies a feminist movement that coincided with the elite women's forum known as *al-Multaqa al-Ahadi* (The Sunday Forum) – is a membership-only monthly meeting consisting of a large group of educated women engaging in an 'intellectual feminist' debate, where 'many of our [feminist] demands come from' (al-

Fassi, interview, 2017. Translated from Arabic). One of its outputs is the *Baladi* movement (Aldosari, 2016), which demanded women's participation in municipal elections: '*al-Multaqa al-Ahadi* was effective in the municipal elections, all the motion and campaign in 2004 resulted in the official recognition that women have the right to participate' (al-Fassi, interview, 2017. Partially translated from Arabic). Despite the forum's importance to the Saudi feminist movement in demanding civil engagement and recognition, its influence remains limited as members host these meetings within private spaces.

The third phase in the contestation of guardianship involves conducting research of shari'a law and enclosing its summary in a petition to the political leadership. In this phase a workshop was organised, featuring a religious feminist scholar (al-Yousef, interview, 2016), to explain women's position in Islam from a progressive Islamist framework that embraces equality and deconstructs patriarchal traces inherent in the Muslim legal tradition. Following this workshop, a group of women communicated with a progressive *tanwiri* scholar who works as a lawyer:

> We told him we – as a group – understood that there is no guardian required for a woman, and that guardianship is strictly applicable in marriage for young women before reaching maturity. So what are these government laws highly restricting us about? We wanted research conducted by jurists and lawyers outlining this so we can submit it to His highness [...] We sent the letter in August this year, I went to America and when I returned I found the hashtag, so right away we gathered signatures with the letter, printed it and I took it to the Royal Court (al-Yousef, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

In this excerpt al-Yousef narrates the process of establishing an Islamic understanding of *wilayah* contrary to the authorised one, in an attempt to demand its abolition. A month after submitting this petition the guardianship system campaign kicked-off on Twitter, with al-Yousef publishing the petition using the campaign's hashtag to gather wider support:

> @Hala_Aldosari (26 Sep 2016) 'Now: submitting 'End-male-guardianship' petition with 14,682 citizens signatures to the Royal Court' (al-Dosari, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic). Embedded Post: @Azizayousef (26 Sep 2016) '#Saudi_women_demand_ending_ guardianship_79' (al-Yousef, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

The embedded post included a picture of the Royal Court's service receipt to publicise its delivery to the Royal Court with the gathered signatures as a support for the campaign.

In the fourth phase, a pervasive movement was witnessed, initiated by networks of young women, anonymous and identified, from inside and outside the Kingdom. The

campaign highlighted a variety of Saudi women, some of whom had studied abroad or fled the country, and shared daily personal stories of domestic violence and abuse. Icons of Saudi women activism also joined this campaign:

> The credit goes to young girls... when I joined they were in the 4th or 5th trend... these numbers are accumulative, their goal is to reach a trend every day, a hashtag only reaches a trend once, so they change the number the following day to hit another trend and show that the interest is still there (al-Yousef, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

The anti-guardianship campaign was initiated by young girls who were ready to project their grievances and establish a daring campaign, which carried out extensive posting for months, and maintained its less-extensive continuous 'trend' aim for years through anonymous or overseas members. While activists stick to the title "*Saudiyat nutalib bi isqat al-wilayah*" (Saudi women demand ending guardianship), the number added to each hashtag changes to indicate the number of times it reached a 'trend', which reached into the hundreds. At the peak of the campaign, activists appeared wearing blouses or bracelets in support:

> @Hatoonalfassi (26 Sep 2016) 'And I got my share of this beautiful sign in this special day. #Saudi_women_demand_ending_ guardianship_79 #26th_ September_guardianship _petition_to_the_King (al-Fassi, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

Attached to this post is an image of al-Fassi wearing an 'I am my own guardian' bracelet, expressing solidarity with the campaign. This Twitter campaign marks the emergence of a new feminist movement that is wider and more inclusive than previous elite-centred networks of activism. It describes the state as incapable of containing women's dissent now that many had sought refuge abroad, awaiting and demanding system reform. Despite the relatively widespread support of this campaign, it remains controversial on a national level, with many public figures feeling hesitant to join. Part of this controversy is triggered by its name, *isqat al-wilayah*, where *isqat* (overthrow) implies radicalism, and *wilayah* refers to a dominant, legislated religious conception. In the following comment al-Yousef addresses this problem:

> I do have an objection, if I were to make the campaign I wouldn't have chosen this title... because *isqat al-wilayah* is religiously provocative. We are not demanding the abolition of something religious, if I were to make it I'd say, "changing oppressive systems against women". But with the current misunderstanding we lose a large segment of religious people (al-Yousef, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

In this excerpt al-Yousef explains part of the campaign's controversy, which comes from its provocative religious implication. Despite the campaign's clear demand for the removal of the guardianship system, the notion of *wilayah* raises issues of losing control of social order, losing religious foundations, and justifying moral corruption. Just as the 1990 driving event raised bigger fears about Westernisation and uncontrolled liberation, this campaign triggers similar anxieties as it threatens the symbols of the nation's piety and religious identity. The campaign's atypical gathering of secular, liberal, and atheist along with religiously conservative women further underlines this scepticism, keeping activists 'always attacked' (al-Dosari, interview, 2016). Not only is this sceptical network of women contesting male dominance in a masculine nation, but they are also involved in contesting patriarchal dominance inherent in the religious tradition, and the authoritarian rule that legislates it and justify their oppression. Perhaps it is no surprise that the state has not responded to this campaign or any of the submitted petitions except through more detentions and investigations. The campaign nevertheless succeeds in shedding light on the system's tragic consequences.

The campaign against guardianship on the one hand challenges the 'saviour' narrative in which women appeal for the state to save them from religious authorities, instead highlighting active feminist resistance and mobilisation. On the other hand, this campaign poses a significant threat to the dominant perception of the Kingdom's treasured pious women. The campaign's multitude of supporters from inside and outside the Kingdom builds even greater suspicion that a conspiracy of 'external forces' are driving the campaign to demolish the Saudi social structure, as the following section on the clergy response illustrates.

6.5 Religious response to women's activism

Two months after the onset of the anti-guardianship campaign, Sheikh Mohammed al-Arefe decided to step in and pose his opinion. Al-Arefe is arguably the most 'followed' cleric on Twitter, currently exceeding 20 million followers. In his life as a cleric he has hosted tens of television programmes in addition to building an extensive social media presence. He is active on five social media platforms simultaneously, all presenting his name and prestigious gestures to reinforce authority. His popularity also extends to the physical realm, where al-Arefe's fans – most notably women – fill his lectures, often describing him as the most handsome sheikh a woman could dream of.

Al-Arefe's decision to step in and fill the void by responding to the anti-guardianship campaign seems to be inspired by his emotionally impulsive nature, that he often justifies as a 'jealousy for the *ummah's* women' and a social obligation to combat any potential *fitnah* (social unrest). Through this act he is continuing the conventional Salafi

tradition that dedicates a large segment of scholarship, fatwas and media programmes to women, where scholars invest their intellectual time in regulating and governing details such as when and where a woman can go outside her house, and whether or not she is permitted to apply beauty products (Ibn Baz, n.d. and 2017a).

> @MohamadAlarefe (20 Nov 2016) 'Tonight, our show "Asbab" will be aired live on Twitter and Facebook, at 8:45 Mecca timezone #asbab_al-Arefe_bf_isqat_al-*wilayah* (al-Arefe, Twitter post. Translated from Arabic).

Attached to the above post is a poster of an episode aired live on television and on two social media platforms (Twitter and Facebook), perhaps as an attempt to include the younger generation who are more likely to engage in social media than television. The episode does not address women's concerns in the campaign – putting an end to male's authority in an adult woman's business – rather it focuses on what concerns them – as men of authority – in a cause that they are not part of, but which affects their symbolic status as leaders, guardians and authorised agents for the nation's female objects. The episode furthermore highlights the anxieties of four middle aged clergy about young women's activism, which appears constantly in an attack mode, threatening them that 'if guardianship was abolished, the woman will be the biggest loser' (Asbab, 2016). The following extract is from the episode's prepared reportage:

> Almost a year ago the homeland of the Two Holy Mosques have been subject to a never precedented distorting media war, where the enemy does not consider being equitable or honest, in addition to military wars and drainage from every side. On top of this we see a group of the nation's fellow people begging foreign countries to intervene in their country's affairs, overlooking the challenges faced by their nation and ignoring the consequences of their action. [...] Asbab programme traced 'Saudis demand an end to guardianship' hashtag and discovered the following: campaigners are few users, no more than sixty, tweeting simultaneously to incite other users. Some accounts belong to atheists, in addition to foreign interventions in internal affairs to support and endorse this campaign. Some demands were fake, so the question remains: how long are we going to let those stand like a sword that threatens the nations core, begging foreign countries and the West to pressurise our country, at a time we very much need to stick to each other and unite in one line to defend our nation against those who want to threaten it? (Asbab, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

The pictures that accompany this report feature several faceless users – by blurring their avatars – identified as 'liberals' and 'atheists' who are supported by a mysterious Christian Zionist organisation that aims to destroy the Saudi Muslim *ummah*. Beliefs such as 'Jew', 'Christian' and 'atheist' are used interchangeably across the religious defence discourse, pointing to one entity of the 'enemy' who is busy plotting to destroy Islam and strip it away from Saudi women. The episode reinforces the conspiracy narrative that only sees Saudi women as targeted and threatened by external (Western)

superpowers, and dismisses the young and educated women who advocated for their cause with their own names, faces, signatures. This dismissal perhaps explains the formation of the dominant religious narrative that only approves the voice of the superior and dehumanises women who are expected to bow to subordination and obedience. Whoever dissents is considered mysterious, foreign and dangerous.

The presented discourse condemns the anti-guardianship campaign by accusing it of the 'saviour' narrative where women appear 'begging' foreign powers to solve their internal problems, while it adopts a plotting narrative that imagines an external 'enemy' coming to destroy the 'homeland' (with dramatic music in the background). The imagined plot furthermore creates a sense of an external 'media war' against the country at times of military interventions and unrest, in the hope that this official unity-at-times-of-crisis discourse may draw audiences away from the guardianship campaign.

Notable throughout the report is the dismissal of a debate about the guardianship system, since the clergy do not find the religious legislation debatable or in need of modification. Their approach is to rather project the whole cause as external, conducted by a 'few users' who are atheists, Jews or Christians, aiming to 'threaten the nation's core', as if the main activists were mysterious aliens. Despite the clergy's intense usage of social media platforms, the language and drama used dates from the pre-digital Sahwa time, when people passively believed the dominant discourse because no alternative media was available.

In dealing with gender subversion, the religious figures' response was to mask identities of women activists, and cover up the diversity they represent in regions, social classes, personal stories and motives. All the differences between these women who decided to take part in activism, regardless of social pressures collides in one blurry image of a shameless, disloyal non-believer who does not deserve to belong to a safe country, questioning her right to speak up when she is in fact 'cared for' by these guardians (Asbab, 2016). The following extract includes the concluding remarks by the episode's guest speaker, al-Abdulkarim:

> The bottom line is, in every issue that they advocate they deceive society by making it appear as a totally separate issue which has its own reasons. Unfortunately, some may be tricked in this. Hence I say that the *wilayah* is not the first episode nor the final one. It is one in a series... In the end the goal is to abolish shari'a law (Asbab, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

It becomes apparent as the episode concludes that the pronouns *'they'* and *'those'* have been used throughout without clarifying who is meant by these terms. Al-Abdulkarim's comment represents the dominant view that, once again, resorts to conspiracy theory.

The pronoun 'they' perhaps does not need to be identified – it is the ghost that has been always blamed for social distortion and great Muslim losses. It is always an ambiguous entity – such as the West, Jews, Christians or all of them – who want to threaten naive pious Saudis. The guest speaker does not point at Saudi women as initiators of this campaign, he rather moves beyond to decode the plot that is planned to destroy the very base of his identity: the most masculine shari'a law. This religious rhetoric moreover represents women as naturally passive and easily *deceived*, which reinforces their docility and perceived lack of mental ability that is widely present throughout the Salafi tradition, contrary to the masculine divine superiority.

The episode – which claimed to include 'statistical facts' – criticises international human rights organisations for publishing what they believe to be 'fake' reports on women in Saudi Arabia (Asbab, 2016). The episode shows no statistics on Saudi domestic violence or rape, instead the host al-Arefe decides to display statistics from Sweden which, according to him, has the highest rate of rape in Europe. Audience are encouraged to think that if they were not lucky Muslims in Saudi, they or their women could have been raped in Sweden.

The episode dismisses women as well as their concerns. It represents a common attitude of attacking subversive practices and expressions that intend to challenge existing norms and truths, mostly by associating dissent with Westernisation, atheism and treason. It explains how religious dominance refuses dialogue and operates strictly through alienating the other and emphasising unity through the dominant belief system.

6.6 Conclusion

Unlike other contestations, women's advocacy is subject to severe conflicts. If they campaign for their rights they are denounced, attacked and singled out as victimising themselves for the international community. If they do not campaign, they are labelled as weak subjects and victims of religious dominance. Once they stand up for their rights, they are targeted by the state, labelled as traitors and become subject to defamation campaigns. Because 'women are sexuality' (al-Dosari, interview, 2016), they signify deep conflicting meanings of shame and honour, piety and sin, and they resemble beauty, privacy and possession. They are not expected to have agency but to embody the lack of it, so the dominant (male) gender steps in, symbolising strength, rationality and control.

Hence the pressure on women activists is doubled, hardly gaining popularity in exchange for what they suffer. As a result, women's rights activists are few, in relation to other areas of contestation. They are easily restricted when operating locally, especially

during the state's series of crackdowns in 2018, that left only diasporic Saudi women capable of advocacy.

However, the shift from traditional media to social media has witnessed a plethora of women's forms of expression, as it broadened women's access to the public sphere, and allowed them to oversee the construction of their own narratives. Women's advocacy, as a result, could not be silenced or ignored. Perhaps the threats and deprecation are not surprising considering the dramatic shift it makes in women's status: from icons of the nation's image and objects of fetishised fantasies, into independent citizens, recognised as equals to their fellow men.

CHAPTER SEVEN: ARTS AND CREATIVE WORKS

I don't make political art, but I make art politically.

- al-Dowayan (artist), interview, 2017

7.1 Introduction

The absence of arts is one of the domains in which the hegemonic narrative manifests itself, whether in the form of heritage, traditional crafts, or cultural institutions. It seems that oil wealth and urban expansion, combined with religious authoritarianism, has contributed to this absence of cultural, artistic and architectural manifestations, resulting in a culturally illiterate society. From another perspective, arts and entertainment produce potentially subversive output, something that is not easily defined or controlled by religious authority and state censorship, because the very form of art creates a secular universe that operates outside the dominant theocentric universe of meaning. Arts and creative expressions moreover propose values and ways of viewing the world that are different than the dominant singular view, in fact they are innovative and *changing*, hence they pose a threat to the puritan precepts of the dominant religious tradition.

The restriction over artistic and cultural manifestations is therefore often justified as caution against Westernisation and secularism, or against encouraging triviality and time-wasting in a nation that is busy filling the young population's spare time with ever more religious and moral instruction. Perhaps this explains the censure against Western cultural commodities as opposed to the welcomed non-cultural imports. As a result, cinemas were closed, theatres were non-existent, and museums were not deemed to be of public interest. Hence the significance of arts as a counter-hegemonic discourse: although arts may not be critical, it breeds on innovation and lives under the sky of fun and creativity. The more these independent works and animated voices become, the deeper the threat they propose to the doctrinal regime that is 'too narrow, rigid, and exclusive to accommodate ethics of fun' (Bayat, 2010: 154).

This chapter argues that artists, filmmakers and comedians – whose works has become visible with the boom in social media sites in the first half of 2010s – have popularised creative expression and initiated a grassroots counterculture that works to integrate

local comedy and art into everyday life. Thus, they have been subject to waves of social deprecation and moral degradation, in addition to censorship, as a result of their subversion.

7.2 Motives to creative expression

Incentives to artistic expression differ in participants' narratives depending on their social background and the nature of their expression. The significance of artists' motives lies in the way it informs and shapes their practice. For some, practicing comedy was done for the sheer pleasure of it. When Bazaid was asked about his motive he stated:

> The ideal answer that would make me look amazing is to say we want to convey a message and communicate ideas in a certain way. The very *real* answer is that we are having fun, totally; for us this was totally amusing. I love creating media content… and I enjoy watching similar shows in Western media like Stuart's daily show and other similar ones that discuss news satirically… It *coincided* that this pure joy serves greater interests such as providing an alternative media representation (Bazaid, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

As a former journalist who is exposed to the contradiction in mainstream media news, and a privileged part-time stand-up comedian who enjoys watching Western news satire, Bazaid expresses a desire to test out his comedy skills in a YouTube show that highlights the paradoxes in mainstream media discourse. This hobby 'coincided' with serving an alternative media representation, which many other comedians picked up from him – as a pioneer YouTube comedian – and exposed further at the peak of Saudi YouTube production. Bazaid's story shows a privileged motive for 'having fun' when the online sphere offered him the opportunity to embrace a hobby that could not be practiced offline.

Another privileged artist expressed this sheer pleasure of practicing art through creating a studio:

> Part of my manifestation is this studio, this space. For me, this space acts as a replacement for the absence of institutes and cultural cafés. Artists can use this space every day, they can use this library everyday (Mater, interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic).

Mater is a doctor who practiced art as a hobby on holidays at the traditional village of al-Miftahah, which was 'back then abundant in music, fine art and art masters from all around the Arabic world' (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Mater replaces this loss of art through his studio in Jeddah, which has become a prominent cultural hub for emerging artists in a rigid urban city that has been deprived of creative expression and

cultural cafes because of tight public control. This studio manifests Mater's belonging to a tradition, it comes as an extension to Mater's creative and artistic upbringing. Holding a book (Mauger, 1996) that shows *al-Qatt al-Asiri*, he adds: 'I grew up within these artworks [at home], my mom used to draw a rectangle and say: "fill it with yellow"' (Mater, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). This intimate 'entanglement with art' happened at a very early stage while joining his mother in painting *al-Qatt al-Asiri,* Asiri women's interior artworks (Figure 7.1).

Figure 7.1 An illustration of Asiri women's interior arts

(Mauger, 1996: 90)

7.2.1 Feminism

Privileged members often offer a rational interpretation for their creative expression. In this regard one finds women's voices absent in creative online content:

> There is a real gap: all YouTube stars are male, and they are discussing social issues, economic issues, politics, all from a very masculine perspective. What about our perspective? (Kadi, interview, 2015).

Kadi's motive came as a proto-feminist protest against women's absence in a space where state restrictions are not present. The social restriction that needed to be subtly negotiated for the very first Saudi show presenter on YouTube meant breaking a boundary that made this privileged woman, a mother and an academic, uneasy:

> I am doing a research degree and I belong to a very respected family... I don't need this [show] financially, but to exercise a hobby. So I thought that if this hobby will make me subject to insults and problems then no need (Kadi, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

As the executer and presenter of the *Noon al-Niswa* comedy show, that ran over five years, Kadi had moments of doubt and reluctance in a journey that made her subject to deprecation and insults (Interview, 2015), hence as a woman from a privileged class this challenge needed a strong feminist motive to maintain. Another female comedian who joined YouTube after Kadi states:

> Since childhood I wanted to be a presenter, and the whole household was accepting the idea... But my parents told me "If you were to become a presenter, you better become a responsible one... speak for those who cannot speak" (al-Abbas, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Al-Abbas similarly shares a supportive family who welcomed her expression and encouraged it to be a feminist manifesto against mainstream misrepresentation. The following woman finds in her works of art a chance to engage in a dialogue with her absent father who cultivated her early feminist embodiment:

> My father did not allow me to study art, "you think you are a princess? You graduate then stay at home? I don't pay for a degree for you to become idle". He never said it verbally, but he was a true feminist and he really understood the power of financial independence for a woman (al-Dowayan, interview, 2017. Partially translated from Arabic).

By introducing his daughter to a tough life, the privileged father was preparing his little feminist for a life different to her 'princess'-like peers who did not usually work while belonging to a privileged family. The father cultivated in al-Dowayan the autonomy, strength and endurance she needed to carry out her life independently as an internationally recognised artist today. The father who suppressed his daughter's early artistic motives – to foster her financial independence – is today her wellspring of inspiration:

> He has a big influence on my art and the concept I work on, although he never witnessed it. He died before he can see it. He witnessed my business, my independence, his dream. I did it for him and I gave it to him as a gift. Now I think I'm fulfilling my own dream (al-Dowayan, interview, 2017. Partially translated from Arabic).

Al-Dowayan, who waited two decades before 'fulfilling her dream', found her father's suffering from Alzheimer's, which led to his death, generating ongoing emotions and inspiration to explore notions of active forgetting, collective memory and representations of Saudi women, the predominant themes of her practice.

7.2.2 Desire for fame

Creative expression for others is manifested in a desire for fame, such as al-Abbas, who knew she wanted to be in the spotlight as a presenter: 'since childhood I longed to be a media figure' (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Three other comedians expressed similar motives. These comedians do not carry a sense of satisfaction towards their jobs or studies, they rather experienced unstable professional paths and lacked the social recognition that might have entitled them to enter the realm of media, fame or celebrity culture that they longed for, until the Saudi YouTube boom started:

> I did not start off because I wanted to change society, make my voice heard or anything like that, the main intention was fame. And why fame? like any guy who wants to become famous, simply wanting attention. I wanted any spotlight, whether on YouTube or television. I did not choose YouTube because it offered space and freedom, I never thought about it that way, but because it was easier to reach (Badr Saleh, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

While recalling the initial driver for comedy production, Saleh straightforwardly admits that he was not part of the 'social change' trend that spread among his comedian peers, he just took the opportunity to reach the 'spotlight' he longed for. Another comedian went to Malaysia on a scholarship in a second attempt to get a university degree that would please his father. Yet he ended up quitting his studies after the success of his YouTube programme, *Broadcast show*, initiated from his home: 'I knew where I wanted to head, I want to become a media figure no matter what, whilst my studies... I don't believe it works with everybody' (Ibrahim Saleh, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). The two Salehs represent under-privileged characters who believed that they had some sense of comedy and fantasised about taking it forward as a profession. They were clear about not rationalising it – as privileged participants do – with aspirations of freedom, creativity and social change. YouTube rather resembled a chance to find fame, and provided an outlet through comedy.

Popularity seems to have given comedians the authority of owning their space and gaining social recognition. This also applies to al-Abbas:

- Al-Abbas: I have 40,000 daily viewers on Snapchat. I can get a million followers in Instagram if I wanted, but I don't want any type of followers.
- Researcher: You do not aim for fame?
- Al-Abbas: No, possibly I do aim for fame. I want fame, but a selective fame, I care about being an elitist. The audience who would watch a dancer on Instagram would not follow someone who reads and writes, it is not their interest. I respect them, but I don't need them (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

When she was offered to present a YouTube show, al-Abbas's parents required it to be 'purposeful' (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic), and so she used feminism to make her first show *BanaTube* soar. This 'purposeful' ideological mindset continues to inform al-Abbas's practice in targeting and maintaining a widespread (but in her view somewhat selective and conservative) audience, whose interest does not merely lie in their masculine gaze towards a young lady who emphasises her extravagant appearance, elements of beauty, cosmetics and fashion (fieldnotes, 2015) – they are also expected to share a level of 'elitist' interest in literature, to give their celebrity the social privilege she lacked.

The story of al-Abbas does not appear to share any grievances against inequality, despite having modest public schooling and no experiences of intellectual mutation or phases of deconstruction (Interview, 2015). Al-Abbas therefore appears to use or perhaps exploit a 'purpose' – such as women's rights – to rationalise her desire for an 'elitist', 'selective' fame, a choice that serves to maintain the social hierarchy, and reproduce the dominant narrative, which most interviewed social media figures are contesting.

Further desire for fame comes about after the traumatic experience of detention. Belonging to a conservative middle-class family in Riyadh, presenter Bugnah found himself a celebrity after a mass Twitter campaign calling for his release and working to raise his followers from 7,000 to 50,000, putting his name at the top of Arab social media figures in 2011, and transforming his name from 'no one' into a popular activist (Bugnah, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

The impact of the campaign seems to have affected him strongly, so that he cannot rationally differentiate between symbolic fame and popularity: 'My father used to tell me you are famous by chance. This has been said to me a lot and it used to upset me, because my father was saying, you are famous just because the government arrested you' (Bugnah, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Four years post-detention, Bugnah continues to believe in the popularity of his serious, uncharismatic, non-comedy, community-building shows produced after his arrest to reframe himself in a positive way, arguing that 'this proved to my viewers and my father that I am not famous by chance. I have content to present and people like this content' (Bugnah, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

7.2.3 Aesthetic innovation

Other motives to creative expression are inspired by a desire for innovation and creativity in artistic styles and genres. This motive comes from a privileged position that is exposed to Western art and culture, holding a vision to reinvent comedy by adopting

Western genres to the native culture. This act brings about change as well as a challenge to the dominant mainstream genre of Saudi comedy, which to young artists seems outdated, poor in quality, and fails to encompass fundamental artistic qualities such as beauty, awe and innovation (al-Kenani; al-Kalthami; Bakr, interviews, 2015). Mainstream Saudi comedy, as Bakr argues, utilises stereotypical genres such as Slapstick and Screwball comedy in its attempt to imitate and express the Saudi culture (Interview, 2015), thus creating the 'biggest challenge' for contemporary innovative comedians:

> The biggest challenge is, there is nothing to build on, we have to totally depart from the Saudi mainstream comedy. But the Saudi mainstream comedy that was shaped in the 1980s and 1990s was a genre… that is kind-of different than our comedy taste today, we can classify it as slapstick comedy or screwball comedy… and we could not rely on this reference (Bakr, interview, 2015. Minor translation from Arabic).

A similar point is emphasised by Saleh while striving to re-centre comedy as an artistic genre rather than a tool to reiterate clichés: 'comedy was simply a creation of stereotypes since the times of *Tash Ma Tash*. If you tried to make a joke in an idea or something, people cannot get you' (Badr Saleh, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Consequently, in the example of Bakr we find an attempt to build a new paradigm for comedy where it is appreciated not only as a source of entertainment but as art, in the context of live stand-up comedy performance:

> Let us not forget that this is art, so the greatest success is that artists are expressing their opinions or the comedy they like… To me there is a beauty in him going on stage and failing sometimes, so I see how he copes with that. There is that artistic side that we have to take into account: how is he developing, how is he maturing? How are we developing, how are we maturing, and how are we changing the subjects we talk about? (Bakr, interview, 2015. Minor translation from Arabic).

What this means is creating a space in which comedy is appreciated and honoured as an artistic practice, where it is liberalised from judgmental attitudes and stereotypes embedded in normative Saudi comedy and transforming it into a kind of practice that embraces 'life observations' (Bakr, interview, 2015). By being open to learning, reflection, and exchanging a dialogue in a theatrical setting, 'we created an identity where, we struggled a lot to tell people there is an address, there is a place, where the deal is: buy a ticket, and get an hour and a half of solid entertainment' (Bakr, interview, 2015). It is an attempt to weave artistic experience into the social fabric and instil a culture of exchanging money to attend an event, a concept that is unfamiliar to the culture given the troubled history with art in the past decades, where art was considered morally degrading and therefore swept away.

Another perspective for aesthetic innovation, particularly in comedy, is challenging the dominant perception that portrays an artist in the guise of a preacher, teacher, or community builder as a way of rationalising his practice and making it "useful" in the eyes of the people as opposed to being "wasteful". Such portrayals, according to young comedians, dispossess the intrinsic values of art:

> The problem with celebritiness apparent in old school Saudi artists is that you reach a point where you believe you are *creating awareness*; this condition is always connected with 'art is a message' or 'art with a purpose'. Certainly, the artist has a purposeful role but let us not ask too much of him. It isn't right that art is a message, art is fun and pleasure in the first place. Those messages you carry have no meaning if you stuff them in content that has no beauty, no amusement, no astonishment. I can take a message from an article in a newspaper, from a lecture, whatever, but one becomes so narcissistic as to believe they should help others to become more aware (al-Kenani, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

This excerpt challenges the long-standing connection between art and 'awareness', which places an artist in a hierarchal position equivalent to that of a scholar or a scientist, who owns the authority to instruct a message. This expectation burdens artists with a purpose that they are obliged to embody and removes all creative and emotional values that enrich a drama or comedy production. Hence the dissemination of non-morally-valuable content by young comedians, which prioritises 'fun and pleasure' as well as 'beauty' and 'astonishment' to defy the overall moral message that mainstream celebrities have normalised and sustained. It switches the mindset that is normalised to receive an explicit moral message like that in a lecture (al-Kenani, interview, 2015), into a realm of free open expression and creativeness that invites viewers to enjoy and reflect, instead of a paradigm where they are indoctrinated to listen and obey. In the same regard, al-Kalthami adds:

> I personally believe that storytelling is one of the most powerful tools available to any culture. Our Qur'an, the most fundamental philosophical pillar in Saudis lives, is story-based. A story has enormous benefits, from generating a dialogue, reflecting, sharing empathy, looking at characters then reflecting on yourself. But we don't have that. Instead what we have is "let's go grab a coffee in the morning and make a message". No, it's not planned, it's just naturally there (al-Kalthami, interview, 2015. Major translation from Arabic).

As a filmmaker, al-Kalthami advocates for the restoration of the intrinsic qualities of art, such as storytelling, dialogue, and empathy that were lost in the rigidness and shallowness of mainstream Saudi art by relating it to the local religious tradition that is rich with such qualities. He does so while contrasting this aesthetic approach with the didactic convention that loads art with moral instruction to "make a message". Finally,

the news-satire comedian, Hussein, finds his accelerating popularity pressurising, as people demand more of him:

> One of the biggest dilemmas we have is that we're trying not to tell people anything, we don't want to say do this, do that, go there, stop, start, no, just think. We are going to present you content in a satirical way; after you laugh, just *think* (Hussein, interview, 2016. Minor translation from Arabic).

This excerpt highlights Hussein's social challenge, wherein the audience is normalised to receive instruction instead of information. This state of readiness for advice exposes the underlying didactic paradigm of meaning that dominates the mind, as opposed to the proposed open, free and subversive rival paradigm. Comedy thus transforms from a tool of control into a tool of *liberation* that does not function to inform viewers but to astonish them with the possibilities that lie within the realm of liberated thinking: 'we don't want to say do this, do that... just *think*'.

A final perspective on aesthetic innovation contests negative stereotypes inherent in the Hijazi accent, as an attempt to restore its historical prestige and glory that was subordinated once the Najdi became the centre of power and prestige:

> The Hijazi accent at the time was undesirable – if I think about why and travel back in time I would find that all what is Hijazi in the Saudi media since it started is confined in the character of *Fo'ad* and *As'ad Omar Gally* in *Tash Ma Tash* [series], one is a liar and the other has no character, always obeys his wife. Therefore, when you appear in a Hijazi accent after ten years of this brainwashing – and I was one of the brainwashed – you think "what's this silliness? Are you making jokes? You *are* the joke!" So, I confronted this challenge until there was a *concentration* of Hijazi content on YouTube (Badr Saleh, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

After decades of stereotypical 'brainwashing' that reduced comedy to stereotyping the subordinate culture and depicted Hijazis as unreliable, ridiculed individuals, Saleh (along with a wave of Hijazi comedians) decided to take the lead in re-establishing authority over their cultural representation, and to restore the tradition and prestige inherent in their native dialect.

7.2.4 Rebellion against conservatism

The socially privileged participants discussed in the previous section have secured more of an organic relationship with the art they cherish. Carefully nurtured within educated families, private schools and overseas universities, these artists enjoy the privilege of choice. Whether it is a feminist critique, aesthetic innovation or sheer pleasure, privileged artists enjoy an opportunity to practice art with minimal familial trouble, in

addition to managing to prioritise their creative work over their privileged professional careers.

Less privileged participants, in contrast, seem to experience a more troubled relationship with their social environment when practicing their desired art. Being deprived of the opportunity to discover and learn about arts meant that they had to embark on a special journey of their own, with steeper terrains and more difficult choices to balance. The following examples highlight narratives of ideological repression prior to such internet-led discovery and self-learning:

> The Sahwa's arm was completely controlling the region and especially Khamis Mushait... This religious movement was really dominant to the extent that they controlled our grades, as they were the most valuable thing in our lives as high-school students. So we had to participate in extra religious activities and camps in order to get better grades, so I became a double dealer to keep things going (Gharem, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Like many youngsters of his generation, Gharem was brought up in a conservative town, subjected to intensive religious schooling, and confined to religious teaching as his only spare-time activity. But unlike most young students, Gharem did not submit to ideological domination, instead he questioned its intensity in his private time, and went along with it in public. Being a 'double dealer' provided an escape for him from tight religious control, as opposed to the traumatic, guilt-infused encounters with religion that Jaber experienced:

> I was always afraid of God's torment as a result of my drawings, although they were not meant to be sacred or worshipped. I mean I did not create statues for worship but to simply have fun. Yet in the beginning I was terrified that God will sentence me to hell, behead me (Jaber, interview, 2016. Translated from Arabic).

Intense ideological subjugation has led Jaber to a distorted sense of religious value and deprived him of being able to properly enjoy his sole hobby. Al-Amer, meanwhile, contends that, 'if you raise a primary school student with true humanist principles he will grow as an undistorted person, with minimum traumas as possible', after his shocking encounter at school:

> I remember our Egyptian teacher... he came to me once and said "acting is *Haram*" [religiously prohibited]. I innocently replied, "but there are no girls amongst us, teacher", thinking that it is prohibited because of the mixing between sexes, I was a child in my sixth grade. He said "still, acting is *Haram*" (al-Amer, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Al-Amer's innocent distress at being banned from theatrical performance represents a recurring theme in artists' childhood traumas due to strict ideological conditioning. Intimidation against theatrical performance in al-Amer's example, and against drawing humans in Jaber's seems to explain some of their deep grievances in using art as a tool for expression, which then becomes key to reclaiming their own voice, individuality and freedom, and therefore breaking free from the collective structure. As Nejer puts it:

> Unfortunately, I was never respected before, in fact my ideas had a negative impact on me, everyone finds them strange and mocks them. Yet when I succeeded in *Masameer*, people started to care all of a sudden… you must become renowned to some extent for them to respect your individuality (Nejer, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

As a renowned artist and cartoonist today, Nejer experienced a tough journey of deprecation and ridicule because of his 'strange' ideas. His statement highlights the challenging path towards individualism in a highly collectivised system, since individualism encourages 'many voices' and thus poses a threat to the ideological unity of 'one voice, one system' (Hemming, 2011: 33-34).

Contrary to the previous examples – where art was an act of resistance and rebellion against ideological repression – Bugnah demonstrates a case of submission to the practices that others were hostile to: 'I have this dream of creating social change… so when I created this online forum I added rules such as no music, no discussion about films and no discussions on stuff like that, and that we have to focus on positive principles' (Bugnah, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Bugnah adds a contrast to artists' narratives in his motive as well as his discourse. In this excerpt he is dedicated to controlling the site he created for self-expression online, operating as an extension of ideological control offline. This act of control gives him a sense of safety, reassurance and continuity of being conformed to one's identity and 'principles'.

The internet as a stimulator and enabler in conservative communities

The second central component in nurturing participants' motives to rebel against the status quo is the internet, which offered up a new world. The internet marks an open resource that stimulates participants' stages of mutation in thought and networking with like-minded hobbyists. It is the university in which creative professionals learned and established their businesses: 'I always say the internet is the second Saudi oil' (al-Amer, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic); 'I am deeply indebted to the internet, it is an extraordinary gateway to learning' (Bazaid, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Both al-Amer and Bazaid are amongst early creative entrepreneurs who find their

current positions different to what they did prior to the internet. In this regard Nejer adds:

> When the internet came I read everything... I didn't read specific things, when you have the internet you have access to the entire world. You read so many ideas different to yours. So when you encounter people and see how they are fanatically attached to their ideas, you start to become less extreme, you become more floaty, I mean, you do not have a problem with pluralism and these things (Nejer, interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic).

As someone who transitioned from a rigid mindset to the multitude of pluralism, Nejer expresses this mutation in his unique Bedouin sense of surprise that he had in fact become 'floaty': floating with ease when he was exposed to diversity and pluralism, and leaving behind the strong attachment to the singular dominant discourse. Hence through producing the *Masameer* animated series Nejer was unwittingly cultivating a 'less extreme' perspective that questions normative, discriminative and racist practices (discussed in the following section). To another filmmaker, the internet brought to life a whole new opportunity for learning about film and music and establishing strong bonds with other creative professionals:

> Then the internet came... I found people like me, people who don't like the status quo... people who love music! [...] So I became active in researching music and researching artists, its similar to what I do now but on an exploratory level (al-Kalthami, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

After being an unrecognised worker at a local television news production in Riyadh, the internet provided a path of liberation for al-Kalthami, where he managed to establish the career he desired among the group of creatives behind the success of the *Telfaz11* channel. For Gharem, the internet is a space of comfort where he enjoys non-judgmental conversations that are capable of embracing his subversive character:

> I witnessed the effect of technology as I was doing performances and publicising them on the internet, like the tree performance and *Sirat*, and it used to disseminate quickly – it's more efficient than any other method. The publicity it creates precedes my exhibitions and portraits, so I started to witness my influence. At the time there were forums and chatrooms. That is why I call myself "the son of the chatroom", as I used to spend more time there than with my family. It was the only intimate place where you can speak freely and communicate with anyone you like, to me that was very comforting (Gharem, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

As someone who described himself as a 'double-dealer', Gharem only managed to find a reflection of his true self online, where he used to spend most of his time in his small hometown. The internet later became the sphere that granted his artworks local and international recognition, with one installation selling for $1 million, which he invested

in establishing the independent art initiative, *Edge of Arabia*[7] (Interview, 2015) and granting artists scholarships, because he thought, 'I don't want the next generation in Saudi to experience the same thing' (cited in Hemming, 2011: 21). Through this investment, Gharem also established a studio that remains hidden as a 'private villa' due to the restrictions on arts licensing (Interview, 2015). This studio represents a contentious living hub that stands against public control. It is where Gharem's discourse of rebellion is manifested in the way he trains amateur artists:

> First thing I do with artists here is to free them from the social damage in their minds, free them from the constraints imposed upon them from schools, society, anywhere, from religion, until they are back as natural humans, then let them practice their lives normally, without imitating (Gharem, interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic).

This radical description of freeing others from 'social damage' and 'constraints' and turning them into 'natural humans' resembles Gharem's personal grievances against oppression that he encountered as a young boy. This rebellious character infuses his artwork with an unusual insight into how power, religion and ideology operate in a conservative system.

Mater, Gharem's colleague and co-founder of *Edge of Arabia*, marks the emergence of the internet as the point at which his artistic career began, as it opened up his art to the world and introduced his name to global exhibitions and markets:

> Honestly the internet played a significant role. In a strict social system and rigid public media, the only way out was the internet. Nobody had thought back then that these young men would find a way towards world museums through this thing called the internet [...] The internet had in fact made us start off and transcend, opened up our way beyond the ministry of culture and information (Mater, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Despite Mater's privilege in learning art in the local village of al-Miftahah, the internet was a crucial enabler that encouraged him to practice his art while working as a medical doctor and enabled him to participate in the establishment of the first independent initiative to cultivate Saudi artists beyond public sector restrictions. Mater's international recognition (that he invested through his presence in a Jeddah-based studio) is arguably fostering a whole artistic culture and movement.

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[7] http://edgeofarabia.com/ [accessed 12 Apr 2019]

7.2.5 Concluding remarks

In the incentives to create art discussed in the preceding section, the less privileged artists seemed to share a rebellious motive to transcend conservative, ideologically strict social systems incapable of embracing art and creativity, and to cultivate art through the internet. The significance of these narratives lies in demonstrating that change and contest in Saudi independent discourse does not solely belong to the elite – it equally belongs to young men without the resources to learn, travel abroad or count on familial support to pursue creative careers. The internet was seized upon as an opportunity, acting as a college for their desired field of practice, enabling their knowledge transformation to take place in Saudi's independent and creative industry.

An interesting contrast unfolds in the connection between artists' online and physical presences. Less privileged artists, on the one hand, shed light on the way in which the internet is transformative to their living experience that enables them to master animation, stand-up comedy, art performances, installations, film and acting. Privileged artists, on the other hand, seem to enjoy a supportive offline world that helped to bring their artistic experience into being, whether in a form of belonging to a supportive social circle, enjoying overseas opportunities to exercise and professionalise art practice, or owning space that fosters their art. Mater's studio fits into this context, as a hub for interest groups to form events, project films and curate exhibitions (Interview, 2015), along with Bakr's theatrical, business-based comedy club, in which he aims to 'correct' the stand-up comedy industry, serving as an extension to the online comedy culture. An addition example is al-Banawi's establishment of the Theatre of the Oppressed where private invitations circulate to those interested in performing 'with no hierarchy, all are co-creators' in a play that stems from their private *Ethmed* intellectual discussion group (al-Banawi, interview, 2017).

7.3 Counter-discourses and framings

7.3.1 Aesthetic innovation

Aesthetic innovation is a challenge that lies in the form or genre of expression, challenging the established structure within which ideas are conveyed. It highlights how an innovative genre – in this case comedy – stands as a challenge to a dominant narrative that cannot tolerate alternative, sub-cultural genres of expression, since they could encourage critique or dissent. However, even if they do not appear critical, the possibility of an alternative form of expression embodies subversion against the dominant universe of meaning, as it belongs to a free, secular paradigm that challenges the singularity of the dominant one: 'the frame of mind associated with

nonrevolutionary joy and lightness would compete with, and instigate exit from, the ideological paradigm' (Bayat, 2013: 150).

This section highlights artists' challenges of being condemned with an argument that questions the overall moral message of their content and censures them for breaking the idealistic representation of public figures as 'role models'. A representation that is historically constructed by public figures who preach and offer moral guidance, as opposed to mainstream comedians who were constantly looked down on by society.

Establishing innovative methods of communication

In response to the moral 'message' challenge, artists aim to stress the aesthetic aspects of creative expression. Qualities of comedy, empathy, beauty, astonishment and storytelling – present in artists' incentives for aesthetic innovation – characterise this argument. By offering innovative methods of communication, artists are breaking the top-down formal structure of public discourse and offering more of a democratic, flexible and free structure for expression. A recurring challenge is thus being ridiculed as 'clowns' and 'losers' (al-Butairi; Badr Saleh; Bazaid, interviews, 2015. Translated from Arabic). In this regard Bazaid suggests that: 'socially there is this patronised look towards YouTubers as "clowns" and "do not make of them a wrong role-model"' (Bazaid, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic), while al-Butairi adds: 'Because we present comedy shows, people think "why do you discuss these ideas when you're just clowns", or "who do you think you are to talk about these people, you're only puppets" – that's another challenging concept' (al-Butairi, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Depicting comedians as clowns and puppets whenever they present social issues demonstrates a prevailing association between comedy and triviality. Not only does this association obscure comedians' intellectual depth, but it highlights a common attitude of not seeing beyond the comedic surface, as Kadi observed:

> People see you as a comedian and think you do not have enough depth, despite the fact that if a person makes you laugh then he is very smart; there is a difference between laughing at someone and laughing with someone – they are not actually laughing at me, they laugh with me (Kadi, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

The unrealised, taken for granted difference between 'laughing with' and 'laughing at' that Kadi mentions patronises comedians and challenges their engagement with socio-political issues on different social media platforms. As a woman, a mother and an academic, Kadi's comedy challenges the collective binary of being useful to the community – by submitting to rigid, defined social norms – against being wasteful for

the community, religion and familial traditions by appearing in the media and making others laugh.

The act of social degradation exposes an underlying intolerance in the secular paradigm that poses a threat to the singular indoctrinating system of thought – it appears foreign and ambiguous, marking any creative form of expression as subversive. Moreover, the dissemination of non-morally-valuable content by young Saudis seems to threaten the overall moral message that people work hard to sustain. Since Saudi YouTubers share an intimate connection with wider Saudi youth, and:

> The difference that YouTube makes to the people is speaking in their language. As a YouTuber, people share a feeling of "this is our guy, we can tell him about something and he speaks about it in the following episode". Whereas *Tash ma Tash* is made and then consumed, these [YouTubers] are ours (Bazaid, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

In contrast with Saudi's most popular satirical comedy, *Tash ma Tash*, public YouTube figures have a special intimate relationship with their audience: 'these are ours'. This relationship happens because comedians are 'speaking in their language', they are insiders to the local culture and subsequently they connect strongly with young people. This sense of connection is further sustained through interaction with public figures on different social media platforms. These comedians understand their language, share their worries, and give voice to their thoughts.

A reoccurring advocacy in artists' narratives therefore is to continue freeing art from acts of rationalisation and the over-emphasis on moral value, which imbues mainstream television content with authority and indoctrination. In this regard al-Kenani comments on the *Tash ma Tash* celebrity's narcissism and high expectations of his new comedy series, *Selfie*:

> The advertisement's subtitle attracted me: "Selfie with Nasser al-Qasabi, Comedy combined with awareness and smile". Relax guys, relax, what sort of narcissism is this? "Combined with awareness"?! [As if the producer is saying:] "Go ahead and watch my series, I am giving you awareness, I am enlightening you, you are the general public and we are the elite. We are giving you awareness; those people never understand". What awareness are you talking about? What awareness?! Half of the nation are watching *Game of Thrones*, 'Oh Fo'ad' (#*Luqaimat mawsim eyjab*i - 29, 2015. 06:58:00).

To al-Kinani, *Selfie*'s advertisement was provocative, positioned to raise public awareness through its fictional comedy-drama. Figure 7.2 shows al-Kenani's facial expressions while saying '*ya Fo'ad*', reminding the series' star, al-Qasabi, and his
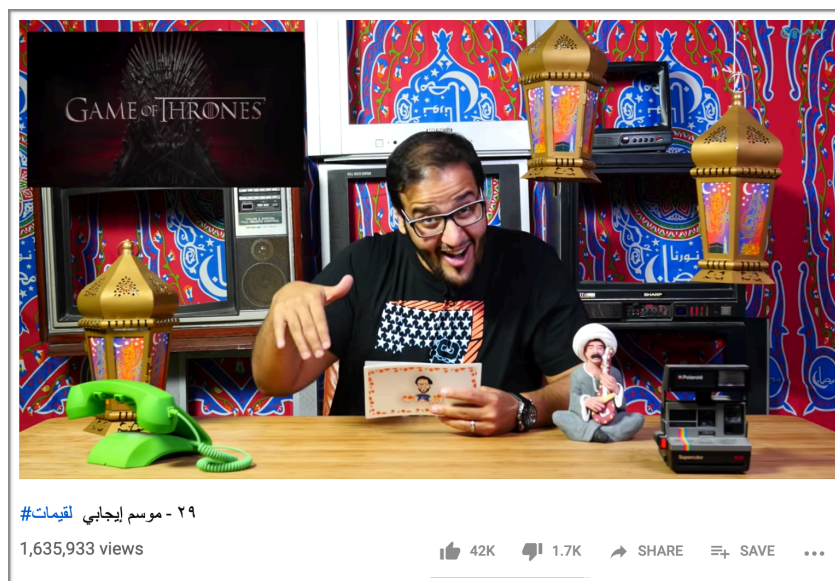
Figure 7.2 al-Kenani's YouTube show, Luqaimat

The episode on his critical commentary on Selfie, with Game of Thrones series logo in the top left corner.

(#Luqaimat mawsim eyjabi - 29 [positive season], 2015, 07:22:00)

audience about his low-quality comedy history that was based on stereotyping a Hijazi foolish character named 'Fo'ad' in the *Tash ma Tash* series. This irony is emphasised with the logo of *Game of Thrones*, a popular Western series, appearing on the screen, as a sign of his audience's high standards: 'people are watching lots of Western series. Look at how they comment on *Game of Thrones* or *Breaking Bad* or similar things on Twitter, you look and think "our audience are really good". Then you want them to go and watch *Mnahi*? There is clearly something wrong' (al-Kenani, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Al-Kenani's positive opinion of the young Saudi viewership points to the high standards they demand, as those who watch the best of what the global media market has to offer. He moreover wonders how they would digest Saudi mainstream series such as *Selfie* or *Manhi*. Not only are they examples of low-quality productions, but the hierarchal position they take – 'I am enlightening you, you are the general public and we are the elite' – challenges what social media figures have come to contest. Hence comedians contend that, 'what brings us together is the opposite of the "message". We want to be sincere' (al-Kalthami, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic), and 'we intend to discuss ideas without adding a moral value' (al-Butairi, interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic).

The highlighted intentions explain comedians' strong stance against mainstream media's imposition of a moral message, which deprives the content of its artistic value: 'what distinguishes these young men of *Telfaz11* and *Myrkott* is that they had the complete freedom with whatever they are producing' (al-Butairi, interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic). It is this freedom that makes their content significant, and what marks it as (potentially) subversive.

These positions represent a re-evaluation of local creative production, working towards the establishment of new artistic standards that reject the mainstream normalisation of poor production and indoctrination, and the recreation of Saudi comedy and drama in a way that embraces its aesthetic cultural qualities. In this context the creators of the *Masameer* animated series, al-Amer and Nejer, explain the challenge they face:

> What is striking is that a Saudi viewer watches an American movie without any message, and he enjoys it and praises it. Yet when it comes to a Saudi one... he asks, "where is the message?" supposing that an artistic work must carry some sort of message (al-Amer, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Al-Amer finds the expectation of a moral value as a puzzling culture-specific attitude, demonstrating that the problem, for the Saudi viewership, does not lie in watching entertainment, but in watching entertainment produced by Saudis *like them*, who have long been associated only with the serious indoctrinating paradigm of thought. Nejer similarly adds:

> People watch *Madrasat al-Mushaghibīn* [Egyptian comedian play] or a Disney film without asking for a purpose. Yet when they watch *Masameer* they say "okay, what's the purpose?" I think people are programmed – and this is Saudi-specific – so that any Saudi production must be purposeful (Nejer, interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic).

Nejer here asserts the same cultural specificity that appears in al-Amer's statement, where a 'purposeful' value is only desired in local content as it breaks the ideal moralistic local representation, into a multitude of genres and styles that express culture beyond strict social codes.

This over-estimation of the 'purpose' or the 'message' has been incorporated into an episode of the *Masameer* animated show, where a typical mainstream celebrity is presented on a television saying: 'I like art to be a message, and to have a goal. I love messages' (#*Masameer - Ayuha al-Fan Man Ra'ak*, 2013. 02:19:00). This satirical statement highlights the producer's underlying grievances against the exaggerated role of the artist that ultimately puts them in a glorified position, like that of a preacher,

instead of attempting to defy this hierarchy by promoting innovative methods of expression that ultimately respects plurality in opinions, views, and moral positions.

The overall position of artists in their attempt to break the 'message' hierarchy and structure is to advocate against indoctrination that underlies viewer expectations when they are confronted with a creative work, and to value the hidden qualities of art that makes it genuine, 'sincere' and natural, instead of that which is profane, politicised and overstated. The final excerpt in this section highlights what happens to a successful comedy producer when society has high expectations for his output as viewership rises:

> You then start feeling responsible because you start getting higher viewership and you start to panic as people lionise you and put you in a position where you don't belong (Hussein, interview, 2016. Minor translation from Arabic).

This highlights how independent comedians are sometimes drawn into the same loop that they intended to challenge: the position of a 'hero' who exists to 'tell' people what to do, instead of a creative comedian whose target is 'to let people think' (Hussein, interview, 2016).

Opposing views

Contrary to the previous examples, whose position was to defeat the hierarchy of indoctrination in art, two participants demonstrated total submission to the dominant hierarchal position. Both share a less privileged background and – unlike most underprivileged participants – did not experience an intellectual mutation through communication technologies. They aimed to please the social order to which they belong, and their narratives demonstrate active engagement and conformity with the collective moral of the 'message'.

In Bugnah's case the word *resalah* (message) in its singular and plural compositions was uttered thirty times, twenty of which refer to the message he creates throughout his social media activity, from forums in the early 2000s – 'I was trying to offer a message that proves that fun can be accomplished without crossing social limits' – to YouTube in 2011 – 'I entered YouTube because I have messages to deliver'; 'the message is number one' – and his ongoing role in a current television show – 'It is important that you present the right message in the right way' – right up to his plan for his next YouTube show: 'The idea of my programme is to deliver a message to the people and society...' (Bugnah, interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic). Bugnah does not seem socially pressured to load his shows with messages, rather he voluntarily takes this
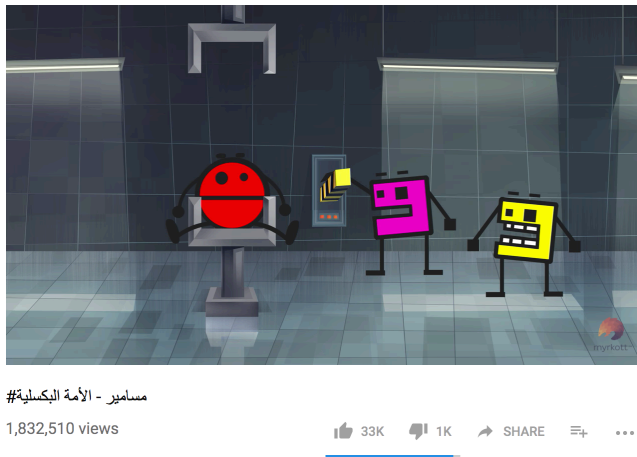
Figure 7.3 *Masameer* YouTube show 1
The Pixel Nation episode (*Masameer #al-Ummah al-Pixelyah* , 2015, 01:55:00)

active role in reproducing the dominant mindset, which continues to force creative expression onto a morally valuable path.

Bugnah – who only became famous because of his detention – did not intend to advocate for the poor or the marginalised. He is merely an obedient young boy whose ambition is to be a positive influencer and a righteous 'role model': 'what drives me to certain programmes is influence. My mother keeps telling me: "Feras, do not let anyone follow you wrongly, try to be the right role model as much as you can"' (Bugnah, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). The 'role model' notion depicted in his motive encapsulates the indoctrination paradigm and effectively manages to maintain its perpetuation by pressuring public figures to fit into the socially celebrated 'right role model' classification, and denouncing those who do not adhere to the moral message demand.

In a similar position, al-Abbas believes that her comedy show has a greater cause: 'I only used comedy because it is trendy on YouTube... I can offer something that benefits you and you can laugh if you like, but I am not out there to make you laugh, I am not a puppet' (al-Abbas, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). Al-Abbas has used the controversial topic of women on YouTube only to get enough recognition to earn her a mainstream media job there (interview, 2015). She actually denounces comedy and finds it a trivial practice that does not include a moral 'benefit'. Al-Abbas does not seem to choose this show on YouTube to advocate for women's rights, but to use it as a tool for greater means, that is, mainstream media celebrity (Interview, 2015). By seeing herself on top of the social hierarchy, in the 'spotlight', working to add 'benefit' and 'speak on behalf of the voiceless' (al-Abbas, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic), al-Abbas actively maintains the cause of inequality that she passively thinks she is bridging.

If Bourdieu's social habitus (1996) works to identify people's behaviours, preferences and tastes in relation to art and music genres – choices that subconsciously serve to sustain inequality between these social groups – then in the case of Saudi's growing

independent platforms, the social habitus seems to determine the level of adherence to the social hierarchy, which serves to perpetuate ideological power and dominance through patronising and denouncing those who demonstrate an innovative, alternative manner. This normative process of social conditioning and 'programming', as Nejer names it (interview, 2015), is portrayed in Nejer and al-Amer's favoured characters in *Masameer:* Pixels (Figure 7.3). In a city where all pixels look squared, a rounded pixel appears on the road. The squared pixels rush to take the odd pixel to the hospital to convert it into a square shape, accompanied by the following dialogue:

> - What is this? Why is he like that?
> - Why do you look like this, son of a circle?
> - No, don't be rude, don't curse his mother, try to be kind: Ok circle, are you ready to be one of us?
> - Circle, ha? Circle!
> - Heh bro, don't curse; let's take him to the squareness room (*Masameer*, June 2015, 01:23:00. Translated from Arabic).

This is the way collective conscience is visualised in artists' illustrations, as seeking to reproduce more of the typical circular heads and actively erasing non-squarable subjects. The pixels are a manifestation of the living social conditioning, racism, and active erasure of alternative representations, highlighting how the underlying dominant ideology operates and disseminates at a societal level as an extension of the regime's coercion.

7.3.2 Critique

This section focuses on the content of creative works that act as critiques of the established normative structures. These critiques lie in the ideas and discourses employed, not in the *genre* of expression as in aesthetic innovation. What also distinguishes such critiques is that the artists' intellectual contest of these structures is inspired from within the system, from belonging to a tradition, religion or spiritual thought.

Works discussed by artists highlight an artistic movement that comes from a sense of belonging to a cultural tradition that is absent, neglected, and replaced with concrete that masks the lost visual aesthetics of culture and tradition. This critique is employed by several artists who have shown a will to reclaim the aesthetic, as Gharem observes:

> All our culture is oral, so how do you turn it into a visual? After the years of prohibition that we've experienced, we've been deprived of the art and the image. So it's about how the visual may take over the oral and the text (Gharem, interview, 2015. Minor translation from Arabic).

Figure 7.4 Masameer YouTube show 2
The arts teacher teaching students how to draw a coffee pot (#Masameer - Ayuha al-Fan man ra'ak, 2013, 01:20:00).

Here we sense a radical movement, a reinstatement of the visual, a total 'take over' in the same radical act that dispossessed a culture of its visual heritage by setting the oral as the fundamental and the prominent, leading to a visual collapse with the arrival of oil and urbanism, promoting material imports, in addition to the Sahwa that defeated the visual and featured the oral. A less radical movement comes from an artist who had long experienced a visual attachment in his village-based everyday lifestyle:

> I remember those paintings on walls and inscriptions in Asir. These inscriptions have had a fundamental impact on our visual connection with art. Art was basically part of our every day life. It was not framed in symbols and icons like European art. It was rather part of our domestic lives (Mater, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Despite growing up in the same province, the two artists show contrasting upbringings: where Mater is strongly attached to artistic manifestations he experienced on a daily basis as he grew up in the historically and culturally conservative village of Rijal Alma', Gharem complains about the 'Sahwa movement' that made Khamis Mushait its 'lab' in the implementation of religious control (interview, 2015), ultimately depriving the town of artistic and cultural manifestations, and, along with oil urbanisation, turned it into a city of concrete. These two contrasting experiences contributed to shaping and informing the artists' subversive artworks, with the deprived participant focusing on themes of ideology, radicalism and social contradictions (exploring the relationship between religion and militarism, docility, destruction and bureaucracy), while the privileged artist, who is equally subversive, focuses on themes of spirituality and tradition.

The capital city – architecturally similar to the urban city of Khamis Mushait – also had its share of artistic contention against the concrete that triggered artists' nostalgic associations with identity, tradition and heritage. One of the *Masameer* episodes

mentioned by participants – *Ayyuha al-fan man ra'ak (Who notices you, oh art)* – features a narrator lamenting art in an 'artistically illiterate' society that offers no space for artistic manifestation, since nobody seems to appreciate it. The episode begins in a classroom setting where a bored teacher tells his students that drawing a *dallah* (coffee pot) is more difficult than they may think (Figure 7.4). The episode addresses the culturally troubled relationship with art that begins in childhood, in a classroom where the figure of authority (the teacher) presents art as a set of pre-determined, pre-configured objects to be copied and fixed for students to 'pass'. This traumatic encounter – also present in several participants' narratives – emphasises the significance of educational discursive practices in turning their subjects away from creative fields, since it may 'compete with' the dominant system of thought (Bayat, 2013: 150). Hence the politicisation of art, evident in cultural institutions like schools, remains effective in the reproduction of conformity under the protective shield of religious discourse, which classifies most creative practices as anti-Islamic.

We are newcomers to art; until recently art was seen as moral degradation, a shame and a valueless human quality. Hence, we have become artistically idle, we only care about art inasmuch as we would care about a couple's side-conversation in their village's cottage at the French countryside. Red bricks on top of our houses, which were not made for us, do not resemble us. Compact buildings where you can barely find the five differences between them, inside them are rigid rooms full of ornaments that do not relate to each other in any way [Figure 7.5] ... ceilings that deceive you into thinking you are in a spaceship, random

implanted trees in streets as if they were punished by being there [...] Those streets are stuffed with random billboards using all colours and any font [Figure 7.6] and the beautiful songs you wish they were played on the radio, nobody actually likes them (*#Masameer - Ayuha al-Fan man ra'ak,* 2013, 01:25:00).

Figure 7.5 *Masameer* YouTube show 3

A mixture of foreign, confused interior decorations that misses light and beauty (#Masameer - Ayuha al-Fan man ra'ak, 2013, 01:52:00)

Figure 7.6 *Masameer* YouTube show 4

An image of typical street banners in Riyadh. (Masameer, #Ayyuha al-fan man ra'ak, YouTube video, 2013. 03:55:00)

The rest of the script continues the satirical description of the distorted public space, determined by what migrant labour and global imports bring, crushed together to create a supposedly metropolitan city that 'does not resemble us' or any other culture. It only highlights the suppression of cultural identity and the dismissal of heritage in an 'oil civilisation' shielded with religious autocracy, consequently producing a chaotic culture that does not pay attention to the aesthetic, a culture in an 'artistically idle' state of mind, refusing any innovation in ideas, let alone creative practice.

A substantial number of artists dedicate their practice to expressing this deprivation, as Gharem puts it in speaking about his work: 'we were deprived of art and image... so it's about how the visual may take over the oral and the text' (Gharem, Interview, 2015). These artworks and creative works could be seen as a protest against their absence, silence and deprivation, a symbolic, quiet protest practiced in artists' mundane everyday realities (Bayat, 2013). Gharem's position highlights more of a radical position in the way he wants to replace or 'take over' the dominant expressions of oral and text and fill his city with alternative expressions of visuality. The very existence of Gharem and Mater's studios in the controlled spaces of Riyadh and Jeddah highlight the dissident element they advocate for: re-owning public space, and reclaiming choice and freedom of visual expression. The latter example of *Masameer* is one manifestation of artists' subversive acts in reclaiming authority over public space, an act that defies the dominant ideology and disturbs the imposed social order which guarantees consent within dominant discursive framings.

Another manifestation of the absence of the visual highlights landscape emptiness and veils. It is a feminist perspective that registers the hollowness in the country's visual space (Figure 7.7):

Figure 7.7 al-Dowayan's artwork 1

Landscapes of the Mind (al-Dowayan, 2009)

The grievances underlying this project are articulated in the following excerpt:

My mom and I started back then to collect portraits of women from *Alyoum* newspaper, the local newspaper for the region; back then there was a red line against portraying women faces. So what do they do when an article is about women? The black ghost! And it is never an individual, it is always represented in a crowd, just like sheep (al-Dowayan, interview, 2017. Translated from Arabic).

This project challenges the 'black figures floating in a space of absence' in a newspaper's portrayal of women as veiled and hollow, it plays with concepts of space, power and representation, questioning who dictates 'the rules of existence in the landscapes' (al-Dowayan, 2009). Concealing a woman's subjectivity transforms her into a fantasied object that cannot be seen but to be talked about and imagined. The project therefore challenges the active erasure of women from public space and from visual memory.

Concrete

This work manifests cultural materiality in 'concrete', a material used predominantly in urban expansion and developments across the country's recent oil civilisation. In Garem's work, concrete symbolises the simultaneous cultural and intellectual development that occurred in a similar materialistic manner. Hence concrete-based urban cities reflect the ways in which minds begin to function in a concrete way. This hard, imported material, void of aesthetic value or traditional reference on the one hand demonstrates the cultural emptiness and artistic hollowness that has grown from Saudi's oil boom, urban development and city expansion. On the other hand, its rigidness seems to be reflected in people's static habit of mind – refusing new ways of thinking and holding on to outdated ideologies – a habit which this artwork in Figure 7.8, *do not trust the concrete*, contests symbolically.

Figure 7.8 Gharem's artwork
Concrete displayed in exhibitions, inscribed all the way around with the phrase 'do not trust the concrete' (Gharem, 2017)

They think development is everything, what about education? What about the priority services that affect us, more than the show-off buildings? And on the other

hand, you can't protect any ideologies from coming by putting cement in front of it. Or the isolation that our society lives in: they call it privacy and conservativeness. Impossible – this has nothing to do with conservativeness, you are trying to isolate your society completely, keep it away from being able to accept any new ideas or to develop any new ways of thinking in a very sharp way... The religious regime is looking for social capital in order for society to be subordinated (Gharem, interview, 2015. Partially translated from Arabic).

Gharem's artwork (Figure 7.8) challenges the empty, distorted civilisation that invests in appearance (rapid urbanisation) while neglecting substance (tradition and identity). The materiality of Saudi's strongly religious culture is perhaps contested for the first time through artworks like *do not trust the concrete*, using a form of expression alien to society as a result of the 'social capital' maintained through material religious norms.

In a similar regard, The Evolution of Man (Figure 7.9), one of the most celebrated and popular artworks by Mater, critically questions what he names the 'oil civilisation', which forms the basis of Saudi's modern identity and civilisation, while simultaneously threatening it through the state's total dependence on oil.
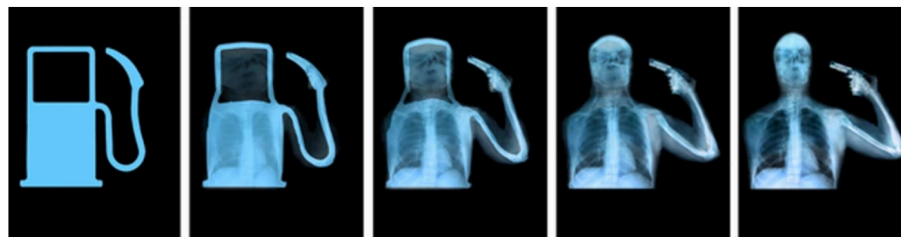
Figure 7.9 Mater's artwork 1

The Evolution of Man (Mater, 2010)

It is our identity as Saudis, we were born, grown and lived in an economic system that relies completely on a single oil resource. We are part of this system, so partially I made it to express this condition, you are the son of this oil life, it's a manifesto... my argument was that this complete reliance is suicidal. I named it *The Evolution of Man* to inject some satire, it is a form of black comedy (Mater, interview, 2015. Major translation from Arabic).

By ironically drawing stages of evolution, Mater shows how the total reliance on a natural resource manifests itself in a form of superficial development that feels temporal and unsustainable, and therefore results in a state that threatens its own being, as seen in the final suicidal panel. Mater's 'manifesto' is a strong statement of being and becoming 'part of this system', which reproduces this temporal rigid civilisation, and scrutinises the socio-political discourse underpinning it.

Contesting materiality

The artists' critical lenses appear to delve deep into their histories and identities, questioning the troubled relationship between materiality and ideology. In this regard the two aspects of materialism and religion are exposed in Mater's work, *Yellow Cow* (Figures 7.10-7.12), in which his interpretation of the dominant culture seems to converge in a single image of a 'careless' consumer culture informed by material religious instruction. Perhaps this culture reflects what al-Khidr calls the *fatwa society* (al-Khidr, 2011. Translated from Arabic), a culture in which religion operates as a regulatory body that disregards the mind and instead implements literal textual interpretations to produce ready-to-use Islamic guidelines and rules to govern the social system.

Oddly, the nature of religious control appears to adhere smoothly to capitalist commercialism, yet it becomes troubled beyond it with Western cultural references ideologically and religiously denounced and prevented from appearing in public spaces, including practices like partying, listening to music, watching films and presenting art. However, Western influences are not considered a concern with regards to the embedded capitalist and material patterns and practices that play a prominent role in shaping Saudi's consumer behaviour and commodified culture.

Figure 7.10 Mater's artwork 2

Mater painting a cow yellow with Saffron (Booth-Clibborn, 2010: 136-7)

Figure 7.11 Mater's artwork 3

"Yellow Cow" products (Booth-Clibborn, 2010: 140-1)

In his exploratory performance (Figure 7.10), Mater paints a cow yellow to resemble the sacred *Yellow Cow in* religious texts and gathers reactions and religious interpretations from villagers and visitors locally as well as on social media where it became popular (Interview, 2015). As part of the project, Mater later created a yellow cow brand (Figures 7.11 and 7.12) and sold its goods in the village where the yellow cow appeared – villagers started buying the products without questioning the relationship between the sacred

symbolism of the existing cow and the commercial products that began to fill the shelves:

> The idea is this relationship between religion and sacredness with commercialism and carelessness, for me this is a form of everyday life in Saudi. Without knowing, without noticing, Saudi is a highly consumptive country with low productivity, or perhaps we are not used to being productive. Yet at the same time a great deal of ideology controls us in relation to our religious references. A great deal of questioning and thinking is invested to restrict our lives. So this work carries a considerable intellectual dialogue (Mater, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

While Mater considers 'a great deal of ideology controls us' regarding moral order and social control, when it comes to habits of consumerism, all religious references disappear and such practices are tolerated. Mater's *Yellow Cow* performance exposes the paradox of capitalist Islamism, which operates under the umbrella of religious purity, where the contradiction is normalised between consumerist practices and rigid ideological control, highlighting a condition of religious materialism.

Feminist critique

This section discusses women's marginalisation and disappearance from the workforce and mainstream media, aiming to centralise women in the family and the nation as equal earners and citizens. One woman decided to take the lead in presenting a comedy show that discusses social issues from a 'female' perspective:

> We are even more than half of society, and we have our issues, and sometimes very small issues led by females, they lead to bigger issues, for example female consumption habits, they are leading to economic disasters, so yes we have lots of things to say, so why not start a YouTube show? […] I just took the chance, there is no female who is doing what I want to do, and there is a *real gap*, and I knew I can deliver the message, so I just did it (Kadi, interview, 2015).

The critique Kadi poses to the dominant ideology does not just lie in the ideas she puts forward in the show (such as disastrous 'consumption habits') but in becoming the first and only woman for some time to execute and present a woman-centred show: 'The first season was a "one woman show" I was writing, acting and presenting… the second season had a group of writers. Yet 95% I am responsible for the content' (Kadi, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

As the first female Saudi comedian, Kadi's support system of family and colleagues was crucial in strengthening her endurance to bear the collective 'attack from YouTube rabbles' and to continue representing a feminist perspective amidst the masculine

multitude (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic), thus contesting what could be seen as an online extension to the existing male domination offline.

Another woman decided to become the co-star in a Saudi independent film, *Barakah yuqabel Barakah* (2016), directed by the blogger Sabbagh, which addresses issues of public space in Jeddah city. For co-star al-Banawi the film is an attempt to 'put forward' a genuine representation of her nation, identity and culture:

> It was an initiative, and we should have films, and if I was gonna rely on the West to produce and portray Saudi then we are always gonna be stuck. Whenever we speak to anyone about Saudi, everyone is like "yeah but you know, don't speak much, you don't present much, you don't put forward much". So it is not only them to blame. Of course there is a media as well, but it's us to blame. We need to have our own agency (al-Banawi, interview, 2017).

This decision to act comes from a privileged, Western-educated woman who decided to put her representation forward, to fill the absence and misrepresentation of Saudis on the global market. The film can be seen as an attempt to professionalise the niche filmmaking industry and take it to a post-YouTube level.

More importantly, in a society deprived of films and cinemas, this film represents a grassroots 'initiative', a movement that invites talented producers to put their sub-cultural perspectives forward into films, which cannot be celebrated locally due to the prohibition of cinema. It projects a satirical statement that Saudi filmmakers have reached the level of global cinema without being able to view their film in their own country. Yet the international recognition – the film won awards at several festivals – along with a high online viewership exerts a form of bottom-up pressure, demonstrating that society is in fact ready to have cinemas that celebrate its local culture.

Another feminist expression critiques the marginalisation and 'active forgetting' suffered by rural women (al-Dowayan, interview, 2017), manifested in *Sidelines* (2016), an artwork that documents the demise of artisan women's crafts:

> *Sidelines* is produced as a response to women's poverty. I used to work a lot with craftswomen, they did it [the artwork] for me using *Sadu*... they are under the poverty line, they seek charity. It shocks me how a woman was centred in the Bedouin culture, she sits in the middle, weaves tents, makes money. A man would only herd sheep and fight. She used to sell and buy then they pushed her to the side-lines, marginalised her, that was the idea (al-Dowayan, interview, 2017. Partially translated from Arabic).

Sidelines tells the tragic story of Bedouin women who once were the breadwinners in the family, until oil, urbanisation and imported goods arrived and pushed them aside,

Figure 7.13 al-Dowayan's artwork 2
Sidelines (al-Dowayan, 2016)

embodied in the contrast of a beautifully woven *Sadu* that becomes more and more dismantled it reaches the ground (Figure 7.13). Not only did these women lose their financial earnings but they were also actively marginalised from becoming part of the national narrative that celebrates working women and fits them in the propaganda of a modern Saudi woman:

> This story will never be told because it doesn't fit into our colourful tourism brochures, nor will it give joy to the Western-based readers of our heritage themed websites and publications. Our Arab traditions see shame in documenting the demise of an individual (al-Dowayan, 2016).

This project contests many forms of dominance that not only actively neglect these women but also obstruct efforts to document their losses and embrace them as part of the national heritage.

Al-Dowayan's several women-centred participatory projects have benefited from social media platforms as a space to network, invite and gather women to participate in these projects (al-Dowayan, interview, 2017). The experience of executing them, however, is not straightforward:

> The hardest thing you can do in your life is gather women in Saudi and ask them to do something together – that is a social statement in a way, and under a political setting, because they are women, and I did that four times. Now participants in my projects have exceeded 1,500 (al-Dowayan, interview, 2017. Minor translation from Arabic).

Bringing together craftswomen who are already constrained and marginalised to take part in a group project poses a problem of order: waiting for them to appear and

170

explaining the project is harder than it may seem, since these women are unfamiliar with large gatherings outside the social non-orderly manner. Consistently achieving such projects characterises al-Dowayan's strong endurance and insistence on representing these marginalised groups of women, which underlies the strong sense of empathy and grief for their disempowerment. Al-Dowayan hence finds women strongly motivated to participate in a project after she has expressed the idea behind it, because 'there is an active erasure for a woman that makes her dedicated to find a platform to express herself, and she will take it in any form' (al-Dowayan, interview, 2017. Minor translation from Arabic). The online sphere manages to facilitate women gathering under one roof to support their cause in critiquing the social system, and creates a political statement in a space that does not normally grant women such opportunities.

The reviewed examples of feminist critiques challenge the dominant ideology through various channels. One is regaining women's agency that has been lost through the effects of modernisation, urbanisation and oil wealth, and the other is active representation, which works as a counter-discourse to the neglect of women's presence and participation in the public space. The depicted themes highlight women's non-movement movement, that is how women are embodying resistance without explicitly being involved in activism (Bayat, 2013).

7.3.3 Dissent

Dissent differs from critique in the sense that it is a direct, vigorous form of critical expression. What encompasses these discourses is a sense of daring and provocation. The discourses presented here are driven by external incentives and sources of knowledge, such as a desire for liberty, reform and freedom of expression. These discourses do not challenge the subconscious level of ideas and beliefs, the habitus (as in the previous sections), instead their challenge lies in active demands and exposure of corruption, especially in relation to mainstream media propaganda.

Contesting mainstream media discourse

At the outset of the Saudi YouTube boom, which coincided with the rise of social media platforms and mass Arab uprisings, Saudi YouTubers appeared eager to test the new sphere's limits, since it neither requires media expertise nor is it subject to public sector censorship and bureaucracy. Short films like *Monopoly* (discussed in Chapter 4) represent this phase, as does the show *'Ala al-Tayer*, produced at a time when independent satirical news shows by young amateurs began to flourish, in an attempt to mock mainstream propaganda and expose fake news. *Al-Tasi'a ella rob'* (15 to 9), the

pioneering Saudi news-satire show, was designed by a public figure who disliked 'the weakness in journalism', after he resigned from it:

> We all know, even authority figures know, how weak journalism is in Saudi... if I want to look at it positively and say it very politely I'd say that there is a sense of *ease* in dealing with receivers; if I say it explicitly I'd say there is a sense of idiotising readers, you write news and think that people live in another age where they cannot distinguish fake news, despite being in the internet age (Bazaid, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

In this excerpt Bazaid expresses shock at the extent to which mainstream media is subjected to propaganda, operating as a tool that patronises and 'idiotis[es] readers'. Not only does such news contradict transnational mainstream narratives – considered more credible by educated readers and accessible through the internet – but the triviality of the mainstream propagandist approach has no doubt constituted some sense of critical thinking and scepticism among the general public in Bazaid's view.

Unlike the previous example, *Mal'oub 'Alayna* was a short-lived non-satire show, as the producer was prosecuted after his fourth episode, entitled *al-Faqr* (poverty). Endeavouring to point out institutional fallacies – as was the trend in online shows – Bugnah created a rather dramatic documentation of corruption to add an alternative genre to Saudi YouTube shows (Interview, 2015). By acknowledging the fact that he was an unknown amateur YouTuber, through this show Bugnah aspired to a social media celebrity's recognition:

> Of course when I started *mal'oob 'aleina* those who followed me were people who knew me, they used to say "you couldn't make it in social work and now here you are creating a show". I used to ignore them and send my episodes to social media celebrities of the time... the only one who would respond and share my show was Malek Nejer... Only the fourth episode, *al-Faqr*, attracted al-Butairi's attention as he wrote "freedom of expression has been raised on YouTube" and linked to my episode (Bugnah, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

As a young fame-seeker, Bugnah worked hard to join the YouTube trend by following the convention in the critical exposure of corruption. Perhaps lucky to be detained in 2011 before the state tightened its grip on social media sites, the fourth episode transformed Bugnah from a young man who never succeeded in holding a job into a dissident who was considered a national hero (interview, 2015). It seems that the young man had not realised the symbolic significance of the King's popular idiom 'if you were well, we are well' predominant in official media at the time, which he thematised in the poverty episode to establish a message to the King, showing that the nation was indeed *not well*. Hence the episode persisted in repeating the amended idiom: 'if you are well, we are unwell' (*Mal'oub 'Aleina 4 al-Faqr*, 2011, 00:01:00).

Arguably the boldest example in exposing mainstream media propaganda is '*Ala al-Tayer* news satire, which gathered 'the attention of 20 million people' in its third season (Hussein, interview, 2016). For Hussein this meant that he had to become 'more than the guy who makes jokes' and to take social responsibility seriously with regards to public injustices and those who reach out to him expressing their grievances and seeking media pressure (Interview, 2016). Consequently, the show's great popularity resulted in political pressures to curb its subversion. Censorship was symbolised in the figure of a sun, which appears when the presenter is dissenting, combined with phrases such as 'Omar is going behind the sun' to metaphorically express the ongoing pressures he was facing (Figure 7.14). The way Hussein rationalises his dissent is by seeing it as a matter of loyalty and patriotism:

> You either betray the trust that has been placed in you, or you give it up altogether. It is a betrayal when you talk to your followers and fans about holes in the streets. We are done with that, we have different discussions to talk about now. If I continue to talk about holes in the streets it means portraying it as the most important thing. That is betrayal (Hussein, interview, 2016. Partially translated from Arabic).

(ملاهي مويا | #على_الطاير ٣٠٧ | @3al6ayer 307)

2,029,930 views   👍 31K   👎 6K   ➤ SHARE   ☰+   •••

Figure 7.14 Hussein's YouTube show

(*Malahi moya* [water parks] #'Ala_al-Tayer 307, 2013, 07:25:00)

As a show that influenced public policies and caused several ministers to invite or communicate with the presenter, Hussein portrays the demands that increase as the show gains in popularity as a problem of conscience, believing that his role has become a conduit between the public and figures of authority. Hussein's show concludes each episode – in the third and final season – with an explicit and dramatic message after

mocking mainstream media's portrayal of tragic incidents such as floods, fire, and medical errors by exposing institutionalised corruption in operation:

> There is a popular statement which says, 'do not ask what the nation has offered you, what have you offered to the nation?' Young people of the nation have offered all services in hand. They presented what they see in the media, they offered aid to the Civil Defence and the Red Cross as much as they can. When there was a need for blood donation, young people offered their blood as a service to their nation. The question that proposes itself now is: What have you offered the nation, your Royal Highnesses?' (@*3al6ayer 307 Malahi Moya,* 2013, 08:35:00. Translated from Arabic).

As the constitution of nationalism and citizenship is usually centred around solidarity and sacrifice for the social good, Hussein uses this notion to demonstrate the falsehood of its representation in mainstream discourse, driven by interests to maintain injustice and public corruption. In this serious part of the episode, Hussein effectively builds a synthesis of nationalism, which characterises the citizens as the core of the nation who are loyal providers and therefore expect their needs and demands to be met by the 'Royal Highnesses', who govern and satirically expect gratitude. This show portrays citizens as conscious and critical enough to contest banal nationalism as inflated by mainstream media and to expose the ideological dominance inherent in the dominant national discourse, which works to conceal corruption and authoritarian control.

Challenged by direct censorship, cyber-bullying and racism, Hussein thus decides to 'give it up altogether' and end the show with an episode entitled *Kharbanah-Kharbanah* (It is spoiled anyway) in which he states:

> There is popular saying that goes: 'the media is weak without people's interaction, it can be shut with one button'. The question that proposes itself here is: how powerful is our media, really? Or is it just a tool to anaesthetise? If so then I apologise, I shall not to be that tool (@*3al6ayer Kharbanah Kharbanah*, 2013, 12:10:00 Translated from Arabic).

Ending with an outspoken statement, Hussein exposes the existing polarity between mainstream discourses that offer the nation 'a tool to anaesthetise' their grievances and counter-discourses in independent online shows, to imply his intention of ending his show as he refuses to become an anaesthetic tool. That is, endorsing the dominant discourse that continues to reproduce hegemonic interpretations to justify the status quo and challenge alternative media representations.

Another less vigorous instance of contesting dominance and mainstream misrepresentation is the *Luqaimat* show. Triggered by a feeling of injustice against the monopoly of television drama (al-Kenani, interview, 2016), al-Kenani dedicates this

comedy show to 'critically mock the drama production in the Gulf' (*Luqaimat*, 2017), running for six consecutive years. The show is a substantial counter-hegemonic discourse that demonstrates young Saudis' movement towards contesting corporate control. *Luqaimat* expresses long-standing grievances against local production and accumulates a momentum of rejection towards the patronising of viewers and the normalisation of poor drama. Behind such poor-quality production are giant mainstream media industries, mostly based in the United Arab Emirates, where they enjoy the freedom of recruiting and filming what is religiously banned in the Saudi Kingdom. These businesses are tied to a political agenda that works towards liberalising entertainment through low-quality production. These capitalist interests of gulf media industries serve to sustain power by maintaining political consent and producing drama that ensures the two opposing societal forces – liberal and conservative – are kept busy debating their moral stakes.

Luqaimat not only gained high viewership – exceeding three million views altogether and over one million subscribers – but also challenged those who al-Kenani calls the 'dinosaurs' of the mass media industry, that is, long-standing celebrities and producers unconcerned with improving their cultural outputs (Interview, 2015). One so-called dinosaur has challenged al-Kenani not only in courts but also by influencing the state broadcast channel, al-Ekhbariyah, to accuse him of 'instigation against the state, its founder and its security agents' (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). The news report about this situation is a tragic manifestation of plotting against an independent art critic that gathered strong solidarity through Twitter campaigns (al-Kenani, interview, 2015). The lawsuit against al-Kenani represented a strong act of intimidation even though it turned in his favour:

> He has a right to file a lawsuit against me, but the lawsuit included bizarre things like involving my show in electronic crimes, for which the penalty is one year in jail and 500,000 riyals... we could not wait more to have a breather where one can finally express his opinions freely! [...] The greater story that happened, which is ridiculously amusing, is accusing me of instigation against the state, its founder and security agents in al-Ekhbaryah news channel. It is the most unethical and unprofessional act, there is no win from this, only that it did great marketing for my show (al-Kenani, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

Although al-Kenani won both the lawsuit and his reputation as a patriot, this rumour, broadcast by an official channel, demonstrates the leverage that mainstream figures enjoy at the royal court. The lawsuit seems to have challenged al-Kenani and broken apart his utopia of a 'breather', an out-of- place outlet where new voices are raised and heard, and new dialogues are created (Interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic). This case has furthermore affected his desire to express himself altogether: 'I thought about quitting this show entirely... I felt really offended at the Bureau of Investigation, I was

there waiting beside two criminals... I am an artist... it is not my place to be here' (al-Kenani, interview, Translated from Arabic, 2015).

The latter statement by al-Kenani depicts the ultimate act of giving up the value of free expression at the point it elicits an authoritarian response, and affected his decision to quit his show in 2017. The statement shows how the novelty of this 'free' platform is ultimately challenged and coerced in an authoritarian system. Even though young Saudis are eager to test their limits of expression, they may not be equally eager to pay the high costs that follow. The effect of a six year show, in terms of cultivating awareness and creating an ethos that rejects patronising and pacified submission to poor entertainment, is nevertheless not necessarily lost. The viewers are in fact co-creators of the show in al-Kenani's view, as they participate in exposing poor content (Interview, 2015).

Challenging the commercialisation of the Holy City

The *Desert of Pharan* project is a critical documentation about the commercialisation of the holy city of Mecca (Mater, 2018). This project presents striking evidence for the major so-called development and commercialisation of the surroundings of the Holy Mosque, which diminishes whole villages and centuries-old heritage sites. The project laments the loss of the spiritual and peaceful qualities of the holy spaces, and exposes the uncontested face of capitalism in the space that principally stands against it: 'I consider it my most important project, it's a documentation of Mecca and its transformations as the most important city... it is a vital project that I am nearly finishing, to be printed as a book and to exhibited' (Mater, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

This photographic documentation is a powerful tool for expressing public grievances against the loss of their historic space – it also carries a sense of outrage against the commercialisation of their holiest, most spiritual site. 'Photography can be a prognosis, photography can be inspection' Mater adds (Mater, 2018), highlighting the significant tool in hand to reframe Mecca's destruction in a critical lens amidst mainstream propaganda of such projects, appearing in Figure 7.15.

Mater's photography focuses on the enormous cranes carrying out massive development projects, turning private and historic spaces surrounding the Holy Mosque into even more commercial residencies, mapping 'the tension between public and private space' (Mater, 2018). Mater's work moreover exposes the way in which religion is quietly sold as a luxury product, where religious shrines fall into the hands of opportunistic capitalist moguls whose financial revenues seem to be worth the destruction. Not only

Figure 7.15 Mater's artwork 4

An image highlighting the mass expansion of Mecca, part of the Desert of Pharan project (Mater, 2018)

does the destruction operate on an architectural, archaeological and heritage level, it rather extends to affect the 'mental, physical and spiritual health' (Mater, 2018) of the sacred city's citizens and the millions who visit it.

By challenging the ongoing silence amidst these transformations – or praise of such so-called developments – the artist exposes the way in which political and capitalist interests are drawn together under the current 'material' religious ideology. Perhaps the fact that this project did not trigger intimidation – despite the artist's popularity – indicates the reduced role of the artist, and the continued negligence that art suffers, resulting in their dissent being overlooked by the leadership, which today cannot turn a blind eye to a subversive 'tweet'.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the various incentives underlying counter-hegemonic forces that manifest themselves in a creative form. For the privileged, artistic expression is about representation and alteration of Saudi stereotypes. For dissidents, it is about reconstructing the media in a freer way, that rejects patronising receivers and encompasses alternative ways of viewing reality. For the less privileged who come from conservative or poor backgrounds, it is about taking advantage of this trend to achieve

fame. For the less privileged who learned and transformed through the internet, it is about deconstructing ideological paradigms and replacing them with counter-discourses that encompass their individualities, freedoms and rights. It is a story of presence, and of reclaiming authority over the visual and the public.

The significance of the arts lies in the subtle way it presents a critique of the socio-political reality. What poses a threat in creative expression is the acceleration of viewership, which pressures the political leadership to restrict some comedians' dissent. To the social structure, creative expression challenges its ideological paradigm, where meanings are generated in an indoctrinated, pre-determined form. Hence the free, fun, secular and individualistic paradigm of the artists disturbs the dominant orderly discourse, triggering continuous acts of social denunciation and moral degradation. By valuing aesthetic, joyful practice and initiating a counterculture against the mainstream, creative expressions work on a subconscious level: reformulating the habitus to tolerate a democratic paradigm of meaning, which can then stand in opposition to the dominant ideology.

The depicted utopian freedom on social media did not last. Its fate remains ambiguous thanks to the new leadership's 2030 vision, which has brought (or perhaps forced) entertainment to society in a top-down form, with music concerts taking place on a regular basis, hosting global pop stars in cities where the musical instruments are still considered religiously *haram* and strictly denounced in public schools and institutions. For decades previously, 'art was something prohibited and counterproductive for the community, the public sector and schools. In fact, it was fought' (Gharem, interview, 2015. Translated from Arabic).

This radical change, which barely scratches the social surface, has been accompanied by more authoritarianism and crackdowns on social media public figures, making the fate of grassroots artistic movements uncertain, as the online sphere of freedom becomes lost amidst unpredictable transformations. Some artists have quit their social media activity as a result and fled the social media scene, while others have been compelled to join state-designed art projects, leaving behind the principles they advocated for, as the country moves towards stricter authoritarianism and an agenda of global openness and tourism. They find themselves once again entangled in the regime's propagandist machinery.

PART III:
PUBLIC VIEWS ON COUNTER-HEGEMONIC VOICES

CHAPTER EIGHT: RESISTANCE AS CONFORMITY

8.1 Introduction

The diffusion of counter-hegemonic discourses and framings in the previous empirical chapters seems to have challenged the singularity of the dominant system of thought and threatened the legitimacy of the existing doctrinal power. It has done this through the multitude of voices on social media that are animated with pluralism, creativity and inclusivity on the one hand, and the bold, vigorous voices that demand public engagement and cultivates citizenship within a human rights framework on the other.

The following two chapters dive into social media users' perceptions of counter-discourses to find the extent to which these independent contesting voices are welcomed, negotiated or indeed resisted and challenged by the public through long-established collective normative mindsets, and to find how dissident framings are incorporated into everyday conversations and cultural practices. They argue that although social media has created a space in which notions of pluralism, tolerance, democracy and equality are cultivated and disseminated on a grassroots level, social media has been partly neutralised by the internalisation of hegemony.

This chapter highlights positions of conformity to the dominant ideology that resist counter-framings and movements on social media in relation to political liberty, religion, women and the arts, and explains the role of their social backgrounds in informing this position. It argues that resistance is predominantly expressed by underprivileged social groups who are socialised by the system, where a strong belief structure and sense of identity underpins their unwillingness, denunciation of and desire to fight against contentious framings that may bring about social change.

8.2 Resisting political liberty: passive views on political dissent

This section presents opinions that support authoritarian enforcement though manifesting an explicit belief in the legitimacy of the dominant discourse, as well as an

implicit fear of losing that legitimacy since it plays a major role in users' identity construction and their sense of security as citizens.

In this regard, three young male college participants discussed the consequences of disabling the religious police's (*al-hay'ah*) power of arrest – a decision made in 2016 as a result of the new so-called liberal political agenda, which aimed to curtail theocratic rule – and to seemingly replace it with secular authoritarianism. These young men discussed the decision in light of public advocacy against the religious police before the decision, and the online public celebration via Twitter *hashtags* following its implementation:

> (1) Because most people are in search of personal freedoms they actively attempt to distort the image of religious restoration, so they criticise *al-hay'ah* strongly. I usually browse trending hashtags on *al-hay'ah* silently. I would only participate in promoting their effort, if it was a negative hashtag that fights them then I prefer to stay silent.
>
> (2) … I find this agency increasingly fought to the extent of exaggerating their deficiencies and concealing their advantages. While what I believe – and the actual reality of it – is the complete opposite, therefore I try to participate in the counter-wave. We are unfortunately witnessing an increase in the social hostility against this governmental body.
>
> (3) … People have become so sensitive to *al-hay'ah*'s men… just because a person is *mutawaa'* [religiously devoted] he is thought to be close-minded and ought to be challenged.
>
> (Researcher) So you believe in the functionality of this regulatory body?
>
> (1) Yes, and we're very sorry for the decisions of suspension.
>
> (Group 9. Translated from Arabic).

Whilst tackling the negative aspects of internet liberty, three semi-rural young men brought up the pessimistic aspects of *hashtags*, as in the example of curbing the religious police. Not only did these men object to restrictive religious authority over social life but they actively defy and criticise public voices that expose their negative consequences. This opposition to liberal politics comes in several forms. For participant No. 1 it is undertaken either by online active participation in favour of *al-hay'ah*, or by actively 'remaining silent' in critical campaigns. Participant No.2 takes a step further by criticising the discourse of online campaigns against the religious police who, in his view, tend to exaggerate their overall satisfactory function in regulating society. He thus takes pride in participating in the 'counter-wave' campaigns – those in favour of *al-hay'ah*. Participant No.3 finally builds on the previous defensive positions by pushing against the proliferating negative representations of *al-hay'ah's* pious men. Together these views manifest resentment towards the shrinkage of religious control over public spaces: 'we're very sorry for the decisions of suspension'. Overall this critical commentary uncovers the extent to which the dominant discourse is woven into young

men's belief systems, leaving no room to suspect or think for themselves even at times of internet openness and rapid socio-political change, instead these college-aged young men feel obliged to stand with this historic religious discourse and to continue reproducing it despite the state's altered stance.

The passivity shown by this group of men crystallises the conceptual belief of religious policing as an active tool in promoting public virtues and bringing about 'religious restoration', highlighting the extent to which freedom from religious control can be feared and rejected by people who were subject to its strict teachings throughout their educational and social lives. This results in a will to reject any deliberation of religious and political matters since this may go against the very system that grants them identity and security under its religious legitimacy.

Additional commentary about fearing political liberation includes a middle-aged man's disappointment over Twitter's enticement for freedom, because 'in the past no one dares to condemn the state... society was united' (Group 10. Translated from Arabic); and a young woman's prediction that, 'Twitter is soon to be banned... because of the talk in politics' (Group 2. Translated from Arabic). The first comment underscores the sacred symbolic status of the state, which offers a unified perception of Saudi society and its identity construction, resulting in this man's consent and reinforcement of the dominant narrative that clothes society in a single guise. In a way he is lamenting a time when this iconic representation of the glorified state was untouched and unchallenged, for it reflects – in its present authoritarian patriarchal model – his sense of belonging. The second comment, made by a young subordinated woman, highlights fear of the taboo nature of Twitter (despite the fact she does not use it) – she actively believes that political matters are not to be discussed in public. She goes further than the authoritarian regime itself in proposing a justification for suspending the (already monitored) online sphere.

What unites the views on rejecting liberty is the underprivileged status of those who hold such views, making them prone to the dominant discourse that grants them religious reassurance, collective unity, and political security. After all, why change habits that might bring about 'chaos'? (Group 1. Translated from Arabic).

The pessimistic positions presented above appear to originate from a passive fear of freedom from the 'past' normative conditions that crafted the participants' sense of nationalism and religiousness through authoritarian rule. Hence liberty appears to be a threat to their collective and individual beliefs, despite its popularity on social media sites and discussion threads.

8.3 Resisting religious freedom

This section considers several views of religious freedom of thought as invalid perceptions that lead people astray unless combated and constrained by an external form of control. These views highlight the extent to which the dominant religious narrative is embodied and reproduced, and how far it pushes against religious expression beyond the existing doctrine.

8.3.1 Adhering to social control

Amongst five underprivileged groups who discussed the topic of religious freedom, three expressed total agreement with the religious doctrine in operation, while two other groups desired space to express their religious uncertainties and communicate them without fear of social bullying or prosecution. In the following discussion, young women from Bedouin backgrounds underline the ways in which religious control is woven deeply into the cultural fabric, to the extent that crossing such boundaries appears to be an unquestionable transgression. The discussion comes in a context of evaluating the level of expression they witness in the up-and-coming platform, Path, which entices people to speak freely about their religious beliefs:

> (1) Some girls say inappropriate things. Why write them there?! Say it between your girl-friends, but it cannot be said there [on Path].
>
> (2) Yeah, these platforms make people feel free to say anything.
>
> (3) That's so wrong...
>
> (4) I see it as personal freedom, it's up to her, just like I can write anything I want...
>
> (1) No, listen, there is no such thing as personal freedom. There are boundaries.
>
> (5) There are limits!
>
> (1) I have personal freedom, and yet my freedom doesn't mean I expose myself to people and show them how awful I am!
>
> (4) Well still there is personal freedom. If you don't like what she says 'unshare' her posts.
>
> (1) Don't you respect yourself? ... You can't say things that shouldn't be said, I swear if someone reads it no one will respect me, they will see me as someone awfully wrong. Your freedom means saying things that only relate to you, not things that society disapproves of.
>
> (Group 2. Translated from Arabic).

This spontaneous but short, constantly interrupted discussion reveals how social conditioning – especially for participant No.1 – produces an association between religious control and the social coding of 'respect' – what is socially 'wrong' versus what is 'allowed'. In contrast to other passive underprivileged groups (9 and 10), this group of

women view religious control as a form of social code that ought to be respected *regardless* of ones' own religious devotion and piety. What matters, religiously speaking, is what one exposes to – or keeps from – their social circle: 'Say it between your girl-friends, but it cannot be said there'. This heated debate reveals how religious control, in groups such as these young Bedouin women, is desired and exerted because of the way it defines their constructed social identity. Hence their definition of freedom comes to adhere to that social standard: 'your freedom means saying things that only relate to you, not things that society disapproves of'. As the debate continued, without addressing a specific issue, a young woman finally stepped in and shared an example of the 'personal freedom' she considers to be a 'wrongdoing' that 'shifted our view of *her* [the girl who expressed it] entirely' (Group 2. Translated from Arabic):

> (1) There is one girl who says things that transgress to atheism. I really think she might be an atheist... Like for example she says "I saw foundation-level girls studying Qur'an. What's my fault? Isn't it enough that I've studied it for 12 years already"!
> (2) *Astaghfirullah* [God forgive me].
> (3) Okay, we got it, you don't like the Qur'an, but you can't say that! *Astaghfirullah.*
> (1) And you know what else she says? She supports gays and lesbians! She wants to change her gender herself and that's why she advocates for them!
> (4) *Astaghfirullah*, what an ugly social type.
> (Group 2. Translated from Arabic).

Again, the issue of not being religious – 'Okay, we get it you don't like the Qur'an' – appears to be secondary to the shameful wrongdoing of exposing faithlessness in a strict collective society: 'you can't say that!' It is interesting that the socially-forbidden 'crime' of atheism amongst these young women does not appear to be an issue of apostasy that needs to be addressed, it is rather the public expression and social humiliation that actually matters and creates the problem. This outcome suggests that social control and self-restraint are the fundamental basis for young Bedouin women's identity construction, regardless of their religious conviction. Such a community of women would consequently hold on to their conservative position regarding freedom of religious expression for the sake of maintaining the social rules of conduct.

8.3.2 Religion as a manifestation of unity, hierarchy and order

Like the previous community of women, an older group of countrymen in al-Qassim shared their anxiety about the spread of unwanted ideas such as atheism and liberalism on social media sites:

Since Twitter and social media sites arrived we have been witnessing people daring to talk about sensitive issues. Like in religion, we have seen people committing apostasy! No one dares to claim atheism in the past. If one becomes an atheist, he cannot stay in Saudi any longer. But now one commits atheism and say the most obscene things [on social media] yet he still walks in the streets and nobody says anything! (Group 10. Translated from Arabic).

Another man in the same context expressed liberalism's subversive impact on youth, as if the country is losing authority as the guardian of Islam:

Look at these atheists who damage the country's reputation, look at liberalism that deceives young boys and girls who are just opening up to the world. Nobody seems in control, nobody is "holding the reins" as they say (Group 10. Translated from Arabic).

These excerpts from group 10 highlight the fear of internet freedom that encourages religious dissent and consequently undermines religious authority and social unification, which was the prevailing normative standard 'in the past'. They also expose the consequences of internet freedom, which threatens the dominant structure of religious unification and adherence to the one ruling school of thought, bringing about notions of 'liberalism' and 'atheism' that 'deceives' the supposedly pure, conservative minds of young boys and girls. A view that crystallises ideological submission as the norm, as opposed to freedom and openness that is associated with 'damage', loss of 'control' and 'commit[ing] atheism'. Hence their views share an underlying desire for religion to reach out and govern the online social realm where troubling dissident voices are raised: 'Nobody seems in control, nobody is "holding the reins" as they say'.

Moreover, for this group social media is considered to bring instability to the basis of religion they know, which defines and unifies their identity, culture, and their sense of nationalism: a religion that can only manifest itself through exertion, enforcement and indoctrination. Hence their views manifest resentment against the status quo and a sense of nostalgia for the unified past: 'No one can claim to be an atheist in the past'; 'society used to be one in the past'; 'this sort of freedom is very damaging' (Group 10. Translated from Arabic). They long for the times when religious authority created a collective unification, as opposed to the state of chaos they witness on social media sites today, which translates as social destruction, frustration, and loss of control.

8.3.3 Religious authority as conclusive scientific authority

On a conceptual level, passive religious views place religion (as participants understand it) in a legitimate non-negotiable hierarchy, granting it conclusive authority to govern individuals' everyday lives based on the exclusive expertise of appointed scholars:

(1) Speaking about religious matters, I find that religion has its own field of expertise just like medicine has its own field and expertise, and just like any other educational realm has its own field of expertise and speciality. Religion never changes. Religion is our foundation, it is the basis of our life… that's why in religion I don't need to see what this person or that said about it, or what they criticised. I take the opinion of The Council of Senior Scholars; what they issue is the right thing that we're established upon and brought up with. It is number one in our lives, it is actually what we are created for.

(2) I also look at the consensus of The Council of Senior Scholars [in religious matters]. I don't care if any Sheikh slips elsewhere or changes his opinion tomorrow… I don't see it [religion] as a changeable variable to consider what society says about it, I do not care what society thinks.

(3) Any religious matter has its own divine source and it never changes no matter how changeable society's opinion is.

(Group 9. Translated from Arabic).

This discussion between three like-minded young college men reveals the centrality of religion in their lives. The excerpt not only reveals the significance of religion, but that an exclusive set of unchangeable truths produced by appointed scholars is what serves as their foundational base. In other words, it is the dominant discourse that operates as a divine source of guidance and as a field of established factual knowledge, 'like medicine has its own field and expertise'. Their views seem to overlook how scientific fields like medicine actually progress through 'facts' – instead they like to see religion as a concrete, long-established science as opposed to a lived socioreligious practice, and as the single 'unchangeable variable' in a rapidly changing modern world: 'Religion never changes'; 'it never changes no matter how changeable society's opinion is'.

This discussion not only reveals the static condition of religion in dictating everyday reality, but also its position as a sacred discourse that cannot accommodate opinions beyond those appointed in service (as participants No. 1 and 2 assert). Thus, total legitimacy is given to the politicisation of religion under the label of a specialised 'field of expertise', feeding into the dichotomy of religion as indoctrination as opposed to religion as a lived everyday experience, as well as religion as a static hierarchal authority as opposed to an open field of human progression, review and advancement.

A countryman in al-Qassim similarly endorses the idea posed by the three young men from al-Ahsa in representing religion as a scientific field of expertise. This comment came as a reaction against the ongoing discussion of a YouTube show, *Suwar Shuiab*, which hosted celebrity and medical doctor Tareq al-Habib to confront him about the misinformation used to deceive consumers into purchasing a diabetes device sold at his

healthcare centre, causing widespread outrage on social media[8]. The point of interest in this comment is not precisely in the countryman's refusal to doubt al-Habib's credibility, but rather in the total authority he grants to the medical establishment as an unquestionable field of scientific truth. He then attempts to exemplify this authority by comparing it to the religious conclusive authority:

> Tareq al-Habib is a very well-known man and doctor... how did *Suwar* know that the diabetes device was fake and that Tareq was lying? Tareq was justifying himself, he didn't say anything wrong, he persisted in his statement... So if you [the presenter] see the device differently, this [al-Habib] is a doctor. How can you tell a doctor you are wrong? You are a presenter; your degree is in media. Can you argue against a Mufti or a clergy in a religious matter? Can you ever argue against a clergy when you are a media presenter or argue against a medical doctor? You can't, it is his profession and his speciality area. You as a media presenter know 1% whereas they know 99%... and you dare to say you're wrong, he is the doctor, not you! (Group 10. Translated from Arabic).

This rural participant initiates his argument by questioning the media presenter's credibility and confidence in hosting a doctor to 'tell' him 'you are wrong'. This critical stance against the media presenter is a result of him being a non-specialist in the medical matters. To amplify the incompatibility of the situation, he compares it to arguing against a clergyman: 'you are a presenter, your degree is in media. Can you argue against a Mufti or a clergy in a religious matter?' and the conclusive answer is 'you can't'. The argument is further justified based on a statistical rating of each party's knowledge in the field. Such reasoning supposes that knowledge fields (like religion and medicine) can be established mathematical facts that do not bare change or further discussion. The excerpt reveals a deep state of ideological conditioning by which individuals offer complete submission to the fields of knowledge as constructive structures, supposing their superiority and authority in manufacturing reality. This reality then becomes reproduced in a bottom-up level by individuals who grant this discourse its dominant position.

In a similar context, a semi-rural young man in group 9 shared the idea that producing religious information should be restricted to the appointed official scholars, to preserve religion from unwanted expressions and situate it in a specialised, authoritative position:

> Religious matters cannot be taken from social media... In fact, anything religious to be said there ought to be rejected. We can only trust our scholars, Council of

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[8] Dr al-Enazi, who exposed this misinformation, was sued by the seller, Dr Tareq al-Habib. This turned into a public opinion case due to al-Habib's high media profile. In the end, al-Habib lost the case and was compelled to dispose of the diabetes device. Information obtained from al-Enazi's interviewed lawyer and social media activist (2015).

Senior Scholars and the *ulama* – they are the ones authorised in this field (Group 9. Translated from Arabic).

The excerpt above demonstrates the strict commitment that a young man from al-Ahsa cultivates to remain on the right path, subsequently rejecting *any* religious interpretation or discussion beyond not only renowned clergy, but those specifically appointed by the state to exert religious governance. Another young man reaffirms this position by adding, 'our approach is Qur'an and *Sunnah*, that's what we know', then a third adds, quoting a Qur'anic verse, "'*Lakum dīnukum wa-liya dīn*[9]*", it's a matter of heaven or hell' (Group 9. Translated from Arabic). In other words, when it comes to religion, one sticks to his own beliefs and distances himself from other religious views and practices, as it is a matter of 'heaven or hell' with no middle-ground for disagreement or inclusion. These participants seem to share the perception of the previous countryman from group 10 in relation to religion being equal to scientific fields like medicine. For these communities of men, this rigid, 'authorised' religion reinforces the idea that religion cannot be subject to normative conditions but is a rather rigidly mandated order.

The suggestion that 'religious matters' are something to be 'taken' or given (whether through social media or authorised channels) in the latter excerpt from group 9, in addition to the general emphasis on the strict authority of official religious figures that is reasserted by the following participants, crystallises the hierarchy that group members absorb and reproduce in a form of religious conviction. It appears that the younger generation of group 9 are responding to the anxieties raised by the elder countryman (group 10) with regards to not allowing conflicting religious views on social media to destabilise their total commitment to the dominant religious paradigm.

These three passive, underprivileged communities, represented in groups 2, 9 and 10, highlight a state of extensive ideological conditioning in relation to religion, where the younger and elder generations do not give a second thought to their instructed religious views and teachings regardless of the rapid transformation in thought they witness on social media. Such a situation only demonstrates the power of religious discourse when it is authorised to dominate and govern social life.

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[9] Qa Qur'anic quote of verse 109:6, literally translates to "*For you is your religion, and for me is my religion*".

8.4 Resisting women's liberty

This section presents the views of objectors and negotiators regarding women's liberty and rights based on the nature of their concern.

8.4.1 Fear of the Western model of equality

The following conversation between professional young women in al-Khobar is about the campaign calling to end male guardianship. The participants share concerns that it may go as far as demanding the Western model of gender equality, which is perceived to be a strict model that would deprive them of the luxury of having men as primary financial providers:

> (1) We live luxurious lives; we can't live like women abroad, we only see the bright side of their lives that we miss and want in films and series.
>
> (2) Yeah, we don't look at their ugly reality.
>
> (1) Precisely, we don't look at the dark side, you know. Forget about it, here even in a mixed work environment a woman is always prioritised and given excuses.
>
> (3) Just go to an overcrowded place and look [at the prioritising].
>
> (1) If you go out there, you and him are the same! I'm always afraid of those who call for equality, always! Because *we* are going to pay for it at the end of the day.
>
> (Group 1. Major translation from Arabic).

The argument of participant No. 1 focuses on appreciating the benefits of the existing gendered hierarchy resulting in the present 'luxurious lives' they enjoy, hence she argues against the lifestyle of 'women abroad', because 'we are going to pay for it' at the expense of their luxury. Such statements represent a refusal of gender equality based on privilege, as the Western model undermines the status of privileged young women of being financially supported by men (whether fathers or husbands) in addition to being excused from work due to their weaker gendered nature.

Other comments on the 'ugly reality' and 'dark side' of the Western example of women's independence, as well as the favour of being 'prioritised' and 'given excuses' for being a woman in the local context, highlight a state of active refusal of gender equality based on privilege. Coming from middle class professional backgrounds, these women do not fall into the highly conservative or liberal sides of the spectrum, rather they represent average urban families on the Eastern coast who are exposed to Western contexts through language, media and travel. Yet they have become acclimatised to their present conditions, which seems to offer privileges more than it poses problems.

The discourse of these professional young women may be considered a passive approach to feminism by women who consciously refuse change, or indeed find it threatening to their financial security and communal solidarity. Such advantages give them no motive

to support change and lose their privileged status – which they enjoy at the expense of other, less-privileged women who do not share similar financial, career-optional luxury and community support.

8.4.2 Undermining state security

Further discussions at group 1 centred around campaigns such as ending male guardianship. In the following conversation the young women express anxiety about possible Western intervention that could take advantage of this movement on the pretext of freeing Saudi women:

> (1) I find that "end guardianship" hashtag is a gateway for foreigners who are waiting to catch anything scandalous on Saudi. You know what I mean by foreigners; there are countries who intend harm for Saudi, so they would use this to turn over our young men and women [against their country]… then we have chaos. How did revolutions start? Through media, one spark from Twitter makes a huge deal. May God preserve safety and security of Saudi, the Muslims *qiblah*.
> (2) As a Saudi female citizen I personally don't want to be equal to men, but I want my own comfort. At the same time if this comfort would cause any glitch to the state's security then I don't want it. At the end of the day my priority is to go to my bed undisturbed by wars or anything.
> (3) Yeah, look at poor ones in Syria.
> (2) Exactly, to me that's more important than ending guardianship or whatever else.
> (Group 1. Major translation from Arabic).

The young professional urban women in this excerpt share a pessimistic view of contentious campaigns and tend to favour a conspiracy interpretation that fears external interventions driven by 'harmful' intentions. These intentions are imagined to entice the nation's young men and women through controversial campaigns towards 'chaos', the very fate of the lost Arab revolutions; 'look at the poor ones in Syria'.

This troubling anxiety of the dominant West plotting to destroy a peaceful Muslim nation is not new to the national Islamist narrative. It has been typical of the dominant religious discourse in its attempt to prevent any progression in technologies or ideas. Regardless of the validity of this conspiracy, the idea of projecting external fears to prevent domestic change is the easiest way to mentally resist social progression and maintain the monolithic social nature. The scenario discussed by participant No. 1 concerning the media causing a revolt that ends in political unrest – as observed in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings – feeds into the collective stagnant mindset of refusing social change in case it brings about destruction, in addition to feeding into the dichotomy of Western, harmful, external influence as opposed to the innate Islamic,

pure reality. Such a portrayal of external threats has been specifically classic to the dominant discourse on women (Arebi, 1994) that is implemented to nationalise and integrate women as subordinate subjects in a patriarchal society, covered in a religious guise.

Participant No. 2's comment gives rise to a negotiating position that desires comfort – through freedom from guardian's paperwork restriction – without putting an end to the male hierarchal order. This halfway situation reemphasises the status of passive feminism that desires a conditional freedom or prefers to maintain the existing inequality, for it provides her with the necessary 'comfort'. This community of women's response to the campaign is generally to maintain the status quo that promises 'safety' and 'security' – essential values to be sought in the Muslims' '*qiblah*' – as well as prioritising their 'own comfort', represented in their exclusive privilege as educated middle class women enjoying unconditional support from their male guardians. These women's position can be characterised as sceptical of the campaign as it promises little in exchange for potential 'chaos' and socio-political uncertainty, 'if this comfort would cause any glitch to the state's security then I don't want it'.

The previous excerpt also points to a state of depression and loss of ambition for genuine reform because of the miserable consequences that followed Arab grassroots mobilisations and genuine quests for change and reform. All of which pushes young women to let go of any desire for legal reform to not risk what they already have.

8.4.3 Campaigns not effective in changing collective beliefs

A conversation between professional middle-aged men and women in Jeddah reveals scepticism about the anti-guardianship campaign, for it lacks the authenticity they usually witness in social media campaigns:

> (1) I don't think that the end-guardianship campaign had anything realistic or sensible.
> (2) Yes, like a real event.
> (1) Yeah, a real issue that people can relate to and empathise with…
> (3) I find that change brought up by campaigns isn't social change inasmuch as it's about legal change… for example in the campaign against girls' early marriage, I don't think you can convince someone, through a Twitter campaign or something like, not to impose marriage upon his under 18-year-old daughter. You won't establish new beliefs, but you can change laws. So, the change you're making may influence a new legal system, but changing peoples' beliefs, I don't think that would ever happen… campaigns are hashtags that boom in one day; mostly it is unsystematic and not convincing as it includes attacks and anger so you don't respond to it (Group 8. Translated from Arabic).

The perspective of discussants, as the conversation above indicates, is a technical one. As middle-aged media specialists and journalists, they argue against anti-guardianship activism for it does not embrace a humanist story that can create community engagement and solidarity with the cause. Although discussant No.3 acknowledges that social media campaigns influence laws in the country continuously, group members discredit it for lacking what is 'real', humane and sympathetic. Since these qualities form the basis of successful campaigns that discussants either witnessed or ran (mostly focused on community building), an attempt to change collective beliefs for them seems 'not realistic or sensible'.

The example of the campaign against early girls' marriage, shared by participant No.3, indicates the little interest he shares for the end-guardianship campaign, and therefore he brings in another example to project his high scepticism of hashtags as 'unsystematic and not convincing'. The example that participant No.3 uses argues against the impact of feminist campaigns in changing collective ideologies, whilst acknowledging that they could make their way quickly into legal reforms, but never to the collective belief system. In any case, 'changing peoples' beliefs, I don't think that would ever happen', is perhaps a typical statement to be made by a privileged, professional, middle-aged man about what are seen as radical feminist movements. Thus, he continues arguing about the 'end-guardianship' campaign:

> (3) There are some stories from here and there, but there is no objective. It has no substance to build upon, just scattered stories here and there.
>
> (4) … Yes, it is the human-interest story versus the idea. Human-interest stories are always more effective because they touch the affectionate side of people… but it is very hard to change ideas and beliefs as… [participant No.3] said.
>
> (Group 8. Translated from Arabic).

This traditional middle-aged journalist (No.3) believes that the 'scattered' nature of Twitter hashtags carries 'no objective' or prospect, due to their lack of structural organisation and credibility. He overlooks the significance of the underlying grievances raised by vulnerable women who can only challenge the injustices they are subjected to through social media, to gather prominence and attract public attention. The following urban, professional woman (No.4) agrees with No.3's view. The differentiation she makes between sympathetic 'human-interest' campaigns as opposed to the apathetic, logically-oriented 'idea' supposes the latter has no humanist element to it, and therefore finds it inefficient in affecting the collective conscience. This group thus seems to be normalised into accepting the existing social system and shares no resentment that would entice them to resist it.

8.4.4 Fear of losing the legitimate religious hierarchal order

In addition to the previously raised concerns about Western intervention or implementing a Western model of equality that might undermine existing privileges, the following conversation shifts towards the disadvantage of losing symbolic male authority as perceived and fulfilled in women's socioreligious contexts, should the end-guardianship campaign succeed:

> (1) What's bad [about the end-guardianship campaign] is that they are demanding unrealistic things. They've gone too far in wanting a woman to be independent, on her own.
>
> (2) They are going to the extreme, you know. They aren't taking it step-by-step.
>
> (3) I mean, if you look at other people in the world, this is not extreme, but considering the environment…
>
> (4) No, you can't compare.
>
> (3) Why wouldn't you?
>
> (4) Because the religious notion of men's wilayah is not recognised.
>
> (1) I'm not saying don't free yourself, but they [women activists] understand freedom in a different way.
>
> (4) They look at freedom from an entirely different spectrum.
>
> (Group 1. Major translation from Arabic).

The excerpt debates what is perceived as a radical movement towards liberating women as proposed by the campaign's advocates. Those who see it as radical come from a religiously traditionalist position that grants *wilayah* (men's authority over women) an authoritative position to govern women's social lives. Pushing for women's financial, logistical and legal independence consequently becomes 'unrealistic', 'too far' and 'extreme'. Those holding more of a liberal position, such as participant No. 3, do not consider the campaign radical, in fact it seems normal by the standards of international women's rights. This woman takes an inclusive position towards women's liberty, which encompasses cross-cultural environments where women's freedom and independence is far from being depicted as radical – 'if you look at other people in the world, this is not extreme' – and thus situates the campaign in light of these global feminist trends, which cannot be separated nor ignored in times of extreme global connectedness.

Negotiation over the notion of *wilayah* is triggered by participant No. 3's provocative comment about the familiarity of the campaign's demand for equality, which gives rise to the underlying concern behind the other women's conservative stance (participants 1, 2 and 4) as a result of their religious belief in the conceptual legitimacy of guardianship, known as *wilayah*. Despite the similar professional and social status that they share, the extent to which discussants submit to the dominant religious discourse apparently

varies. This discussion reveals a major internalisation of the dominant religious doctrine as it is taught and practiced in the Kingdom; such internalisation seems so well-grounded and widely practiced that it cannot be shaken by modern demands for rights and equality.

This firm religious position perhaps does not reflect the group's slightly liberal lifestyle as modern, progressive women who have been exposed to Western contexts and generally do not object to working in mixed gender environments nor driving when the ban is lifted (group 1). It seems that the notion of *wilayah* captures considerable symbolic significance that transcends strictly conservative communities to shape the perceptions of less conservative social groups. All of which grants guardianship a 'recognised' hierarchal position that defines their identities as contemporary Saudi Muslim women. In general, it seems that only a minor proportion of elite and highly educated women have access to the contemporary feminist reinterpretations of *wilayah,* while the rest simply acknowledge it as part of their religious tradition.

Another fundamental incentive behind privileged women's surrender to the gender hierarchy relates to their financial advantage, backed up by the same religious tradition that sanctions male's superior position as the main provider for the family (Mir-Hosseini, 2015). When financially privileged middle-class women who already enjoy a degree of liberty and autonomy in their everyday lives (such as studying and working for their own advantage without contributing to the household) argue against ending guardianship to maintain the Islamic concept of *wilayah*, one underlying motive is to actually safeguard their existing social privilege against a feminist egalitarian model. However, the louder, religiously traditional position is re-emphasised in more detail in the next excerpt, where participant No. 1 of the same group adds:

> When the 'end-guardianship' hashtag started it was fine, I followed it from the very beginning; now it is around 190 days. It was heading in the right direction, like demanding rights for all women whether they're divorced, widowed or students. If I'm wanting to enrol in Princess Nora's University I shouldn't need my father's written consent, whether or not he agrees… Then suddenly they [campaign participants] bounce into a wholly different side, it has become something else, if you go there and read you feel as if they were locked up and they want to break free all of a sudden. As if ending the guardianship would make her live alone and do everything on her own, that's their understanding (Group 1. Translated from Arabic).

In this excerpt participant No.1 makes a sharp distinction between what she sees as the positive demands of anti-guardianship activism, such as revoking systematic guardian consents that slows down women's progress, and the radical, negative change of

claiming freedom and independence 'as if they were locked up and they want to break free all of a sudden'.

The latter statement implies that the speaker is not in a 'locked up' situation but rather optionally set free by her guardian, thus providing another reason to advocate for maintaining *wilayah* whilst enjoying a kind guardian's patronage and freedom. This detailed commentary gives an interesting insight into an average middle-class woman's position on a campaign that concerns her as a woman, yet does not affect her as a privileged member of society. It therefore becomes sensible not to support any change in the existing gender roles, normalised and legalised by the juristic tradition in operation, and to fear equality that would undermine the religious norm as well as her optional privilege as a woman with a supportive guardian who provides financial support and legal consent for her to prosper and thrive. Despite her support for the 'divorced' and 'widowed' to claim their autonomy exclusively, deep concerns are apparent in her language – 'sudden', 'break free' and 'bounce' – about any serious change that may endanger her ideological and financial stability.

Another supportive view that agrees with maintaining the conceptual hierarchal order of guardianship further considers the religious notion of *wilayah:*

> *Wilayah* – that a man becomes *wali amri* [my guardian] – is something important in religion and s*hari'a* law, but there are things that complicate a woman's life here where *wilayah* have been taken extra miles. I mean, I don't really need my guardian's signature approval to enrol in a university, why would I? (Group 1. Major translation from Arabic)

This young woman in group 1 adds to the conversation that emphasises the religious significance of guardianship. Her argument is in line with the previous position supporting the authority of men as both a legislated religious framework and a lived reality. The statement intends to place *wilayah* in its traditional patriarchal interpretation as a legitimate, incontestable juristic law and practiced religious norm. The distinction she makes between the desirable procedural change, 'I don't really need my guardian's signature approval to enrol in a university', as different from the legitimate conceptual authority, '*Wilayah* – that a man becomes *wali amri* – is something important in religion', reveals how deeply established the notion of guardianship is to these women. Essentially it is patriarchal order that defines a woman's socioreligious identity, determines her role in society, and is unconsciously perpetuated by its own female subjects who associate themselves with modern, progressive and free ways of thinking. Perhaps this explains why (semi-)progressive women support the removal of bureaucratic consents whilst challenging what they consider an 'extreme' feminist movement.

Most advantaged women presented from group 1 found the advocacy for eliminating guardianship problematic. On the one hand it is what they know about religion and shari'a law, and on the other its elimination threatens their financial privilege, which cannot be guaranteed if the guardianship system ends. These testimonies together demonstrate how the refusal of gender equality is reproduced within society. These women help breed patriarchy and nurture it, while simultaneously shunning their own autonomy and agency in exchange for social interdependence and patronage.

In a similar manner, a young underprivileged woman in group 7 discusses the notion of *wilayah* as well as *qiwamah* in an attempt to make a similar distinction to that in group 1 between functional liberty and conceptual liberty:

> There is difference between *qiwamah* and *wilayah*… they think it's like "you just want to live like that with no men", it isn't that, but I need my own autonomy, I want to issue my identity card by myself without my father attending, you know, it's hard (Group 7. Major translation from Arabic).

By mentioning the religious term '*qiwamah'* this young woman refers to the conceptual authority of a guardian, that is a male's socio-economic superiority over female members of his family. She therefore asserts that she does not endorse complete autonomy, '"you just want to live like that with no men", it isn't that', but rather gives in to the legitimate authority of men for the family's stability and structure. However, in the excerpt *wilayah* refers to the institutionalised, procedural system that requires guardian consent for state services and jobs – this is what she challenges: 'but I need my autonomy, I want to issue my identity card by myself without my father attending'. Interestingly, the motive that could be understood from this argument is an attempt to justify her support for eliminating '*wilayah'* (or procedural guardianship consent) since this opinion goes *against* the normative collective conscience of the underprivileged. Yet her position as a recent graduate from a public high school and her work to become the financial supporter of her family (group 7) gives her credit for progressively refusing the complications of the guardianship system that stops women entering the labour force and benefiting from public services.

Unlike privileged women from group 1, the young women in group 7 are graduates fresh from high school with little professional experience – some ambitious to pursue their university degrees in state-sponsored Universities on top of the full-time workload. Essentially their choice of work and university degree is based on the need to support their low-income families (group 7). Despite their progression in thought in relation to the average underprivileged – apparent in their support for women's right to drive and

functional liberty – they do not doubt the legitimacy of guardianship, which is perceived as the foundation of their socioreligious lives.

It appears then that even women who need to financially support their guardians find it unrealistic to demolish guardianship, preferring to loosen the functional aspect that hinders their mobility and employment. One explanation is that guardianship forms the basis of their tradition, identity-construction and religion. Another explanation is that these women are not in trouble with their guardians to the extent that would push them to defy their systemised authority. Perhaps it also highlights the exclusivity and unpopularity of the recent egalitarian reinterpretations and readings of the Qur'anic patriarchal tradition, which are yet to become recognised and legislated on a wider Islamic scale, as gender equality remains a highly contentious concept from an Islamic perspective.

Finally, although women in both groups (1 and 7) represent a progressive social model in terms of advocating for women to drive and deliberating socioreligious practices that govern a woman's life, they grant the conceptual idea of guardianship supreme authority, hence identifying them as negotiators. That is women who grant the need for space to negotiate and deliberate their rights, although not the exclusion of everything else. Thus, if a social media campaign against guardianship encourages them to negate functional authority and to debate, perhaps for the first time, their own status, perhaps this conscious recognition of their (possible) rights is one step forward in Saudi women's liberty, even if contemporary Islamic feminist discourses are not yet within their reach. This semi-progressive negotiating position is more clearly situated in contrast to the following underprivileged groups (2, 9 and 10) who refuse any call for women's liberty or driving altogether.

On the objectors' side, young men from group 9 propose and justify their stance regarding women's right to drive. The researcher's question comes after the young men's strict oppositional opinion against guardianship and women's right-to-drive campaigns:

> Researcher: Would you ever consider changing your personal opinion regarding women's ability to drive, for instance?
>
> (1) It's impossible, I have my own beliefs, once your life is established upon certain values and principles and you consider this thing wrong, whether it's women driving or something else, then it's better not to speak up in social media that would amplify such a case. I would maybe give my opinion in a majlis if the topic was brought up, but I'd never participate in a space that may amplify such cases whilst I'm against them…
>
> (2) Same here regarding these issues. One must check out the trends, but you honestly don't know who is standing for these cases.
>
> Researcher: What if it was someone well-known?

(2) If it is someone well-known, then my opinion of him would change if he speaks up.

(Group 9. Translated from Arabic).

The first point in this excerpt confirms group 9's position regarding religious subversion (mentioned in section 8.3), which consists of holding on to normative beliefs as 'established… values and principles'. It is a powerful ideological base that not only justifies their stagnant beliefs but also preserves them from changing in response to emerging issues and situations. Participant No.1 highlights the mechanism he uses to cope with rapid social changes facilitated by the global interconnected structure of social media, which encourages subversion against the established ideological system. This technique works by actively ignoring debates relating to women's right to drive on social media, and not interacting with the debate, even in condemnation, so as not to 'amplify such a case'. Participant No.2 underscores his fellow's position and expresses his suspicion of the motive behind such campaigns, expressing a sense of resistance against these tempting 'trends' that he (ashamedly) enjoys checking out: 'one must check out trends'. He then adds another coping layer for popular social media figures who change their opinion regarding controversial issues. His response, 'my opinion would change in that person if he speaks up', sets a clear boundary of judgment of failure. In other words, instead of rethinking his position on the issue or listening to this new opinion, the participant would rather disregard the subversive figure altogether to preserve his orthodox way of thinking.

Notable in this excerpt is how socialised young college-aged men may become when subjugated to strict ideological conditioning. They represent a younger generation that not only passively submits to the patriarchal system, but that is also unable to function beyond its singular mindset, let alone cope with the dynamic contemporary changes that threaten their ideological and social order. All of which takes the discussion to the next concern about women's liberty that is further elaborated on by objecting underprivileged groups.

8.4.5 Undermining the social order

In a similar stance to group 9, who ideologically refuse to reconsider allowing women to drive, group 10's underprivileged middle-aged men also express refusal to engage with the case, albeit from a social-order rationale. This comment comes as a spontaneous response to a discussion on YouTube shows, when a participant was triggered to express resentment against a young Kuwaiti presenter who regularly interviews popular Saudi figures and discusses their issues:

> He [Kuwaiti presenter] was saying it's okay for our sisters to go out. What the hell does he mean – what does he want? I think it's an insult to us, Saudis. The moment I saw that episode I knew he wants to turn us against our country, he wants more Saudis to speak up, but you know what? "Women driving" and that sort of crap doesn't happen here, we genuinely believe it cannot happen here. And what does this guy say, he says "why not? it's okay", well if this is normal for you, we didn't come in to the world like that (Group 10. Translated from Arabic).

This furious interaction with a YouTube show presented by a young Kuwaiti man, discussing mostly Saudi societal issues, highlights emotions of resentment: 'What the hell does he mean', as well as a racist suspicion, judgment and disapproval: 'I think it's an insult to us, Saudis'; 'I knew he wants to turn us against our country'. This passionate response is triggered by a sense of an outsider threatening to 'turn' Saudi's 'against' the supposedly desired state of monolithic unity and stagnation. Hence his determined refusal: 'Women driving... we genuinely believe it cannot happen here', followed by a justification, 'if this is normal for you, we didn't come in to the world like that'. The final comment significantly crystallises the same rationale that underpins opinions that refuse social change, undermining the ideological basis, the social order and the identity structure of a community. Thus, he draws a boundary between outsiders' normative structures and their own: 'we didn't come in to the word like that'. The latter statement emphasises the extent to which this group of men are determined to maintain the existing hierarchal structure to save their long-established social order in times of rapid social change.

In the following conversation young men in group 9 describe their position on the end-guardianship campaign on social media:

> (1) Honestly it is something that is very negative, and I am totally against it. I try to stay away from it as much as possible and I don't participate in it, until it reaches a point of failure where it doesn't attract any fans or interactions, and it falls out just as it came out all of a sudden, hopefully without causing any negative impact on society.
>
> (2) [We participate] by silence.
>
> (1) Exactly, by keeping silent. Even if we see a hashtag trending, even if it instigates certain issues. As an individual my personal responsibility is not to participate in anything that may harm society or harm the state religiously or legally. So I try to stay away from it, as the saying goes, "bury the demon by keeping silent".
>
> (Group 9. Translated from Arabic).

This group of men not only persist in objecting to women's rights campaigns but move further to propose coping mechanisms to deal with the subversive demands to end the guardianship system. They condemn it for being a 'negative' enticement that may 'harm society', and take actions to discourage it, such as to 'stay away', 'not to participate',

'even if a hashtag is trending', one ought to resist the desire to respond. Finally, they express an optimistic wish that the issue will be 'buried' and 'falls out... without causing any negative impact'. These depictions demonstrate a higher level of ideological consensus, where individuals not only become subject to ideological conditioning but become an active tool in reproducing and promoting it as a sense of duty: 'my personal responsibility is not to participate in anything that may harm society or harm the state either religiously or legally'. This statement holds several layers of active refusal to women's autonomy that is portrayed as a threat to the whole religious, social and legal system. Consequently, this group of men will continue to reproduce patriarchy and dominance as a way of holding on to their religious identity and nationalism, and as a way of contributing to defending the social order.

In a similar manner to group 10's apprehension that women's driving would undermine their social reality, group 9 also demonstrated an interconnected relationship between religious conservatism and identity construction, 'this is the right way that we were raised' (Group 9. Translated from Arabic). This relationship highlights the depth of cultural norms' imprint on their lives, and the primary role it plays in shaping their identities. All of which suggests that such simple, semi-rural underprivileged communities may pose a challenge to the state should women's liberation take effect on their agenda. Even though they may not wish to become active campaigners against the state, deep grievances are nevertheless present that can encourage a rebellious conservative backlash to defy the state's secular orientation, similar to that of the Sahwa, since the sense of the nation's legitimacy for these groups is based on reserving Islam in its homeland.

From a relatively similar underprivileged social circle, a group of Bedouin young women brought up the sensitive subject of the 'end-guardianship' campaign:

- I didn't understand this end-guardianship thing.
- Ending guardianship means having no guardian, right?
- I don't care about it whatsoever, I never even read it, even if I see it [hashtag] there.
- I didn't read it...
- I don't do politics.
- "End-guardianship" like I don't have a guardian?!
- You can have a guardian, but he can't control you...
- Oh my god, imagine if I had no guardian! I swear I would be debauched.
- I swear I would've left the country.
- Yeah, I would've left too.
- I'm glad I have a guardian, there's someone holding me back.
- [group laughter]

(Group 2. Translated from Arabic)

The women in this excerpt try to navigate their way around the socially forbidden subject of male guardianship. 'I don't do politics' is one brief comment that highlights how taboo it is to speak about women's rebelliousness in such communities. This sense of partially-desired, partially-terrifying rebellion manifests itself in these short, constantly interrupted comments between them. Where young college-attending women believe they would have 'left the country' or gone against social customs if they were to have no male authority, the final comment defines the primary role of male authority as the only possible way to maintain social order and stability. The group laughter following this comment underscores how relevant this fact is to most of the group.

This issue of ending male guardianship undermines their sense of stability and religious devotion, which is believed to be only feasible through coercive, forceful male control. Statements such as, 'if I had no guardian I swear I would be debauched', and, 'I would've left the country', highlight a state of insecurity should patriarchal control disappear. This perception uncovers the greater ideological conditioning of women as seductive and shameful and therefore the male hierarchal authority and gaze are exerted. Such deeply repressed beliefs are brought to the fore by movements such as the 'end-guardianship' campaign, creating a state of mixed emotions for young women who may dream of such freedom, yet fear losing their religious commitment, the fundamental construct of their identity.

After tackling different topics, one young woman brought discussion back to the topic of guardianship, which she seemed to have reconsidered:

- It [ending-guardianship] would be good in a 'I'm going out with my girl-friends' kind of way. If my family know that I'm leaving just for fun and I'm coming back in the end, but it's wrong for others.
- Right.
- Researcher: Wrong for whom?
- For those who go out with boys.
- Or leave the country without a guardian's consent.
- Those people don't mind 'mixing' between sexes, for them it's freedom. They call it freedom, its wrong in the end. I think it's the biggest mistake.
- Researcher: So you think ending the guardianship relates to this?
- Yes, precisely.
- Yes, for sure [majority of the group].
- If these things are happening now with the presence of guardians, even here in this college there are girls who make it out [with boys], I wonder what would happen if there isn't guardianship…

- The world would be ruined!
- Strife! Because of the extreme strife that is happening everywhere.
  (Group 2. Translated from Arabic).

The young women in this excerpt attempted to deliberate the guardianship issue further, highlighting the advantage of allowed freedoms (such as time out with others of their gender), yet the cause does not seem worthwhile as it may encourage greater 'strife'. It may particularly pave the way to adultery, a problem that is already pervasive in their social circles and requires the continuation of male control over women's demonised nature, for the community's own good. This form of patriarchal authority represents the *only* power that holds women back from illegitimate relationships and 'strife!'. A point that is sufficiently articulated in the following concluding comment:

> I don't support ending guardianship all the way, but it's nice to have freedom, the sort of freedom that would keep me alert because I know I have a guardian, so I can go out with girls, but I won't make scandals because I know I have a guardian whom I fear. So, I go out discreetly. Not like when I totally don't have a guardian then I do whatever I do, and I go out and… you know… some people lose their senses (Group 2. Translated from Arabic).

This nearly 20-year-old college student sums up the general mood of the group in desiring a 'discreet' form of freedom that would ensure the maintenance of patriarchal oppression as a vital tool in stopping the social order falling into moral decline: 'I won't make scandals because I know I have a guardian whom I fear'. This comment signifies a state of being completely socialised by the patriarchal system that not only succeeds in convincing women to believe in their immoral nature, but to continue to seek and desire male dominance throughout their lived realities. These statements reflect a slight *negotiating* state, in the sense that they desire only *some* freedom from guardians. This represents lower level of negotiation than found in group 1 because this one does not demand functional liberty, requesting only some social freedom: 'it would be good in a "I'm going out with my girl-friends" kind of way'.

These young women (group 2) live simple, passive lives as college students who share no ambition for any particular major offered by the College of Arts – chosen because it was the only available college to accept their grades while approved of by their guardians (it has strict entry and exit rules similar to girls' high schools), in addition to the modest financial allowance it grants – it thus becomes clear why such women would be alarmed should the guardianship system end. Not only do their guardians hold the primary role in their lives, in terms of control and regulation, but the women do not have any means to operate beyond the male authoritarian structure. In other words, they have neither the intellectual means nor personal incentives to challenge the patriarchal system that

provides them with a sense of identity and social integrity. Young women are as a result obliged to stick to male authority as a matter of principle and to continue *defending* it, as it formulates what they know about being a woman in a patriarchal Kingdom. It is the system upon which their troubled, anxious supposedly-evil essence can find resistance and self-restraint to preserve society. The significance of such a position is that they will continue to *passively* transmit this patriarchal form of oppression as mothers and nurturers of a future generation, believing it is the only way to guard the community against immorality and social decay.

Despite the opportunities for change that social media opened for Saudi society, for this community of women, as with the underprivileged semi-rural men (groups 9 and 10), there seems to be no prospect for counter-discourses to shake their rigid ideological mindsets, which fully embody the dominant discourse and reproduce it in a powerful collective form.

The negotiators presented in this section exist in the middle of the spectrum: their mindset is somewhat changeable but they are determined to accept their subordinate state, as it represents a deep religious conviction that they are unwilling to exchange for an underdeveloped feminist egalitarian discourse that is yet to become popular, or the lesser financial freedom that gender equality might represent.

8.5 Resisting creative expression

Social media users' engagement with and views on Saudi creative and artistic content varies depending on their place in the social spectrum, with the passive and predominantly underprivileged viewing it as dangerous, wasteful or trivial. In this section viewers express a sense of resentment for watching Saudi comedy, for it challenges the ideological convention of indoctrinating a moral message, an educational input or valuable information (groups 1, 7, 9). Excluding the *Masameer* animated show, an underprivileged young man contends, has the value of encompassing different social spectrums: 'I have found that *Masameer* is watched by those who watch positive content, educational content or negative content... this made me value Malik Nejer' (Group 9. Translated from Arabic). As a pious young man who despises 'negative' content that has no value beyond possible moral corruption or 'going against shari'a' (Group 9. Translated from Arabic), this young college student makes a useful distinction between the informative, the valuable and the invaluable. This distinction informs the decisions and tastes of audiences who are unable to move beyond the didactic universe into a world that is more flexible, fun and (possibly) subversive.

Several social media users admitted feeling guilty or shameful for 'wasting time' watching nonsensical comedy instead of investing free time in watching 'purposeful' and beneficial media content (groups 1, 2, 5, 8, 9 and 10), without acknowledging the merit of watching local and independent content. On the contrary, they blame Saudis for their triviality and misrepresentation (group 2), which could have been replaced with something more 'beneficial' (groups 1 and 5. Translated from Arabic).

Other members find Saudi independent production on social media unworthy as it carries no 'news value' (Group 8. Translated from Arabic), or 'because it's wrong and shouldn't be watched' (Group 9. Translated from Arabic). For young college women they are 'unworthy of watching' because 'nobody knows them or desires to watch them' (Group 2. Translated from Arabic). The latter comment shows a state of ignorance towards independent Saudi content, while pointing out that what they enjoy watching is Turkish and Korean translated soap operas broadcast on Arabic mainstream media outlets (group 2).

Both groups 8 and 2 state that they watched Saudi YouTube content in its initial flourishing, but the first group prioritises 'something that is informative and educative' or 'newsworthiness' (Group 8. Translated from Arabic), while group 2 looks for 'thrills' and celebrity 'scandals' (group 2). Another conservative group in al-Qassim expressed a lack of interest in 'those who discuss ideas and topics' referring to intellectual or religious content (Group 10. Translated from Arabic), yet after watching Saudi comedy for some time, one man reached the following dismissive conclusion:

> I thought they [comedians] had a purpose in life, then I realised how disastrous they are... they are not creative, all they do is imitate other [Western] people's work. If I had a son I will never let him watch these guys, then he'd act as they do and make them his *qudwah* [role model], the boy will be lost completely! (Group 10. Translated from Arabic).

This rural man highlights a sense of deception by young comedians who transgressed his fundamental standards by imitating Western entertainment, deeming them a threat to the young generation by challenging the idealist position of a *qudwah* (role model). Because independent comedy is appealing to the young generation striving for something that looks like them (group 6), this traditionalist middle-aged man found them even more subversive and challenging. Perhaps the motive behind this rejection is the fear of arts' rapid influence once it reflects ones' own language and culture. Such influence means opening the space for youth to break away from the authoritarian mindset and seek alternative methods of self-expression that threaten the singularity and unity of the collective system.

Tools of authoritative control thus appear essential in ensuring the next generation are only exposed to righteous 'role-models' and not 'disastrous' comedians. Another man from the same group adds to the danger of establishing socially degraded figures as role models:

> Yeah, they used to warn us against football players in school. Do you remember? "What do you want to become?", "I want to become like Abu Timyat" I say. "What! Abu Timyat doesn't dress properly and uncovers his hips!", and whenever we come to school with a football t-shirt with "ART" channel [as a sponsor] they tear it apart... it is *haram*! (Group 10. Translated from Arabic).

This comment was followed by a laugh, indicating the ridiculousness of artists and football players being considered role-models. This spontaneous memory of ideological conditioning shows that the rejection of comedians and celebrities stems from the dominant discourse they have been subject to as children, and continue to submissively give in to, regardless of the rapidly growing counter-discourses offered throughout the internet.

In a similar context, albeit from an advantaged background, a young man pursuing his higher education in the West also honours this hierarchal position of watching beneficial content instead of wasting time on Saudi comedy content, bravely opposing his fellow discussants who acknowledge the value of offering local art, comedy or entertainment and admitting it to be a shameful practice:

> Sometimes I watch entertainment and I'm not proud of it, like wasting my time doing that. I just hope everyone uses their thousands or hundreds of thousands of viewers to achieve something, anything beneficial with a defined purpose, instead of being a waste of time (Group 5. Partially translated from Arabic).

Here, entertainment again comes to pose a threat to the dominant theocentric universe of meaning, which views creative non-didactic content as a 'waste of time'. Despite coming from a privileged young Saudi who is familiar with Western contexts, it seems that the association of fun with triviality remains highly popular. Hence another professional young man adds: 'it is the user's fault, "don't make stupid people famous" we should only value those who deserve it' (Group 5. Translated from Arabic). By endorsing a saying that frequently appears in the media to blame audiences for creating a celebrity culture, this young man implicitly challenges the non-theocentric frame of mind that is associated with fun and laughter. Instead, the presented examples pressure public figures to occupy the idealist role of educator, advisor and preacher.

In a similar regard, a less advantaged young man adds, 'I like to ensure that those whom I follow add something beneficial to me so I can come out with something useful instead

of being a waste of time' (Group 9. Translated from Arabic); and a middle-class young woman similarly thinks that, 'some YouTubers are trivial, but as there are those who offer triviality, there are others who benefit society' (Group 1. Translated from Arabic). Given the social variance between the advantaged urban young man exposed to Western ideas and culture in group 5, the professional urban middle-class woman in group 1, and the young man studying at the college of shari'a in a suburban area (who seemingly has never been exposed to foreign ideas and content) it is interesting to find them emphasising the same point, which praises investing one's time in 'beneficial' entertainment. This point demonstrates the normalisation of devaluing art and entertainment across different social spectrums, either explicitly by denouncing comedians or implicitly by expressing a lack of interest. In addition, it demonstrates how foreign art is to local tastes, which only attributes prestige and privilege to intellectual, instructional and religious pursuits.

In summary, the subversiveness that art naturally cultivates does not lie in the unfamiliar ideas it offers, but rather in the alien nature of art and comedy as to the local culture. Hence the presented views show a sense of hostility against creative genres for being unpredictable, uncontrollable and indirect, and thus 'negative' and 'wasteful'.

8.6 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed a position of conformity to the dominant ideology by social media users who interpret the rising counter-discourses as negative, threatening or wasteful. In political liberty, there is a persistent anxiety that dissent may target religious-national cohesion. In religion, a sharp distinction is present between religion as a conclusive authority and contentious re-interpretations that are deemed to be transgressions against doctrinal authority. In art, there is a reoccurring pattern of denouncing comedians or the works they perform as they challenge the normative structure of adding value through didacticism, in addition to being free and open and thus unable to be governed by collective norms or strict religious control. Among women, the rejection of rights takes a more complex shape, as the anti-guardianship campaign that was unfolding at the time of conducting the focus groups demonstrated.

Peculiar to women is the overwhelming majority of passive and objectionable views that do not necessarily subscribe to an underprivileged social status. Many rejectors are privileged professionals or progressive underprivileged women who endorse functional liberty yet submit to the dominant perception of *wilayah*. Women's demands for liberty and equality were resisted and rejected on many bases. On the one hand, the notion of equality is associated with anxiety against the Western model that strips away the existing financial and community privileges that a woman may enjoy at the cost of her

subordination. On the other hand, women's subordination is legitimised under the divine authority of *qiwamah*, which is a yet-to-be-contested religious percept. Finally, a perception of women being weaker than men both physically and mentally means that the former's independence may disrupt the social order and spread immorality. Thus, the egalitarian reinterpretations of Islam seem unfamiliar to a large extent, and women's activists do not represent patriotism nor piousness but radicalism and dissent.

The presented groups appear highly socialised by the regime, where the underprivileged majority submissively give in to the dominant system of thought, while the privileged minority rationalise their resistance with wider notions of state security and national cohesion, which underpins their desire to secure the privileges they enjoy under the status quo.

This chapter has demonstrated how ordinary people guard the dominant ideology on social media platforms, because it is an act that reserves their sense of security, identity and religious nationalism. The significance lies in the continuation of this hegemonic reproduction, which hinders grassroots movements within the social structure, and restricts the public space even online, where censorship and religious authority are less present.

CHAPTER NINE: SHIFTING MINDS

9.1 Introduction

As some social media users saw a rejected act of dissent and subversion in activism and creativity, others found a reinforcement of their liberal values. For this group, counter-hegemonic voices seem to have triggered long-standing grievances, heightened the level of expression, and re-created public space to embrace their desires for pluralism, freedom and liberty. Hence, they express a sense of soft endorsement of counter-discourses (by questioning dominant norms) or more explicit support for for activists' advocacy.

Views in favour of contentious voices are predominantly expressed by those who share an elite position, in addition to some underprivileged groups who found in the internet new possibilities to transcend physical limitations, and new ideas and interpretations that respond to their ambiguities, clear uncertainties and reflect their diversity.

9.2 Liberty

In general, people who endorse and support contentious discourses are those who share liberal backgrounds, a sense of cosmopolitanism, and socioeconomic privilege. In issues that relate to institutional reform and contesting corruption, we find the underprivileged also endorsing these causes, as it triggers their grievances against what they believe is injustice. In this section, progressive social media users debate the limits of liberty permitted by internet openness, because of either censorship and oppression or social control as this virtual space encourages action against the public rules of conduct.

9.2.1 Multiplicity of narratives and voices

For most users, social media seems to foster a multiplicity of views. The freedom offered by a platform such as Twitter to an underprivileged semi-rural man in al-Qassim signifies trustworthiness and credibility, offering opinions and information alternative to propaganda-driven journalism: 'Social media outlets are very beneficial to us, man. We were lost before them. It's useful in news dissemination, because now you can distinguish the real from the fake' (Group 10. Translated from Arabic). His friend adds:

> Twitter is the most credible platform, especially when you follow verified accounts with real names... when *Asefat al-Hazm* [the war on Yemen] started I followed news on Twitter because it is more reliable. You can see pro-government accounts

and other news outlets, whether international news or those against us (Group 10. Translated from Arabic).

For middle-aged men who enjoy a relaxed routine and lifestyle, the rise of a public social media platform such as Twitter meant a shift in news retrieval mechanisms, as well as diversity of perspectives in articulating current events. Depicting a non-professional, social-based platform as 'credible' and 'real' marks the extent to which these men felt left out by the prevailing journalism; hence it is this open, somewhat chaotic, online platform that may help them construct a better picture of ongoing events.

The previous extracts signify an important shift in the media paradigm where audiences no longer accept one source of information, but rather enjoy retrieving news from multiple agencies, including non-media-professional accounts such as activists, economists, and lawyers: 'A reputed person on Twitter who's specialised in a field like Essam al-Zamil... is more trustworthy than any news agency' (Group 9. Translated from Arabic). This young semi-rural man from al-Ahsa emphasises the point about the credibility found in social media regarding local news. Both groups share a sense of celebration for the multiplicity of narratives offered by social media when it relates to political news construction and analyses, highlighting a critical stance against dominant news construction, yet not necessarily translating into resistance of the socioreligious collective discourse.

For one man in group 10, Twitter also symbolises empowerment, as it 'enables you to raise your voice boldly, and write things that you cannot otherwise bring forward to an official' (Group 10. Translated from Arabic), referring to the large-scale campaigns against institutional corruption, prevailing medical errors and the like, which in most cases trigger ministerial responses, as his friend explains: 'Twitter helps you get your right. If the public sector didn't sort me out I go to Twitter and "mention" the minister' (Group 10. Translated from Arabic). Twitter has fostered optimism and public recognition by offering a space for people to publicly express their grievances and have their voices heard by both officials and the public. The significance of Twitter as a public sphere was made possible when state establishments decided to join the site and give it credibility through their "verified" accounts and responses to issues of public interest.

For privileged members, social media offers a space for the public to practice political deliberation and enjoy a never-before witnessed public sphere: 'Twitter is similar to a popular parliament, a public arena for debate'; it is 'an entire political realm... where you see all sorts of political trends'; 'it is a media tool for those who don't have one'; 'it delivers public voices to the officials' and 'promotes news criticism' (Group 8. Translated from Arabic). From the leadership's perspective, a media professional in Jeddah believes that 'the importance of Twitter for the political leadership is that it reflects the public

mood' (Group 8. Translated from Arabic). Another media sector professional in Jeddah adds: 'There is a general sense of trust on Twitter because anyone can speak. Whereas television in the end [is selective], I work there and as a producer I decide what's to be shown and what's to be discarded' (Group 6. Translated from Arabic). This emphasis on trust and 'significant credibility' (Group 8. Translated from Arabic) shows consensus amongst different social groups in relation to the shift that people have witnessed in the ways they can engage and interact with local affairs at times when the mainstream fails.

Notable here is the convergence of views between privileged and less privileged social groups in relation to social media as a tool for empowerment and political liberty. Privileged groups tend to focus more on the democratic qualities such as Twitter being a 'popular parliament' where opposing political 'trends', views and voices can be raised and heard, and where 'news criticism' is a popular habit that is striving to counterbalance propaganda lead news; while the less privileged (groups 10 and 9) seem to centre their argument on the empowering sense of overcoming media misrepresentation and propaganda.

9.2.2 Tolerance, pluralism and dialogue

Beyond political liberty, Twitter is characterised as a sphere of free expression, a 'breather' and 'window for cultural exchange within Saudi Arabia' (Group 8. Translated from Arabic). There is a general sense that the internet is positively fostering 'tolerance', 'leniency' and 'acceptance' between what used to be hostile opinions. 'For the first time in history we are all in the same place' adds another social media user (Group 3. Partially translated from Arabic). In this congregational space, 'tolerance towards opponent views is greatly evident' (Group 8. Partially translated from Arabic) as this online sphere facilitates 'leniency in dialogue', 'helps tolerate and accept alternative opinions' and 'raises boundaries of freedom' in speech (Group 5. Partially translated from Arabic).

These recurring depictions of Twitter as a facilitator for tolerance and leniency in dialogue indicate the emerging public sphere that was previously absent, which may not necessarily lead to democratic ends but recognises multiple narratives as opposed to the dominant singular one, promotes independent rather than collective views, and stimulates social liberty. For a privileged social media user, this space is also helping to progress society towards intellectual maturity:

> I feel that in forty or fifty years the Saudi society will share the same level of intellectual awareness. People are actually accepting that not all Saudis think alike, not that anyone thinking differently is blasphemous (Group 3. Major translation from Arabic).

This young woman envisions and hopes for a time when – if public dialogue continues – tolerance can reach a point of saturation and maturity, where scrutiny and control are minimised, and instead alternative views and beliefs that no longer pose a threat to one's own community or the unity of the nation are embraced.

Overall these views bear witness to an era of limited freedom: where an opening has been made available for people to transcend their collective constructs and express their difference; where the singular discourse has been contested; where the public have their say; and where 'for the first time in history' opposing social classes, cultures and genders can share a conversation beyond the rigid doors of social privacy, class, tribalism and gender segregation.

9.2.3 Implications of internet liberation: views on political control

Because of the existing repression that is effective in numbing interaction and activism, political control is hardly expressed because of its sensitivity in an authoritarian system, in addition to the reserved cultural nature of Saudis in avoiding explicit political comments when speaking in a semi-public environment.

Some users nevertheless have managed to reference political restrictions: in this context, a young underprivileged man comments on his social media experience: 'social media now isn't like it used to be. I am watched by security services… it was bolder and much more exciting before' (Group 7. Translated from Arabic). As an active social media user who is followed by thousands on Twitter, this young man has experienced censorship in the form of security services as well as religious authorities (group 7). This political invasion of Twitter – experienced by several activists as well as users – has not only changed the general mood of expression on these platforms but has furthermore undermined this young man's own motive to express freely and engage actively with others (group 7). The fact that he is underprivileged yet emancipated by this 'exciting' sphere, which opened possibilities to connect with celebrity comedians and participate in their projects (group 7), demonstrates the functionality of social media in expanding the possibilities of intellectual liberty. Yet the political grip over this sphere seems to limit this sense of agency and liberation.

Several media professionals also referred to political repression whilst discussing the extent to which social media offers freedom in their society:

(1) Many are prosecuted because of their tweets.
(2) The existing liberty, I believe, is a social one rather than anything else. Security-wise everything is under control, if you tweet about certain [political]

matters you're done with, even if your account was anonymous. But socially one can hide his name and let out everything that bothers him.

(3) Yeah freedom is only constrained politically. Otherwise it is open.

(4) Me too, I think the level of freedom of expression has generally risen... if you reflect throughout the years you can see the difference across society.

(Group 8. Translated from Arabic).

This discussion presents several positions in relation to internet liberty. Three participants mention or endorse the political curtailment following the introduction of Twitter, and furthermore agree on Twitter becoming a controlled zone in relation to dissent. Yet the discussion ends with an optimistic view on the condition of social interactivity, dialogue and deliberation offered by this space, where participant No. 4 underscores social liberty and freedom (apart from the political) offered by this online sphere, especially when considering the pre-internet condition in retrospect.

The latter discussion highlights consensus between participants regarding the political oppression exercised to quell dissent on social media platforms. Perhaps this is what marks the political significance of such platforms – reflecting the public mood and opinion – and the way in which people deliberate and circulate ideas. The discussion nevertheless overlooks control beyond the state's grip – participants tend to see 'liberty' and 'freedom of expression' prospering online. Possibly due to this group's age, these middle-aged men and women who have experienced decades of total social control and adherence to collective norms consider social media a space that actually opened up individual freedoms and allowed them to thrive in ways that were never possible 'if you reflect throughout the years'.

Some younger social media users find that they are suffering collective social control, which kills their motive to express themselves online. They do not find themselves fearing state inducement but rather social exclusion that damages reputations and social profiles, generated by the prevailing cyber-bullying and defamation campaigns as detailed in the next section.

Views on social control

In this section, user's comments highlight vulnerability and insecurity towards Twitter, which transitioned from being a safe place to express their individuality and free themselves from the burdens of socioreligious norms into a space overflowing with public scrutiny and judgment after it gained maximum popularity by the end of 2011.

Despite having raised the level of dialogue and intellectual discussion, one participant finds that on Twitter he is 'always confronted by zombies, these strange Twitter

troops' (Group 6), also depicted as 'keyboard gangs' (Group 7), referring to the waves of defamations and insults that attack most recognised accounts by anonymous users, or state-sponsored automated 'bots' (Jones, 2018). In this regard other users add: 'It's impossible to express freely or to say all that is on my mind' (Group 2. Translated from Arabic), referring to Twitter; 'I don't think one is free to express [on Twitter], society has its guidelines'; 'people never forget what you say on Twitter' (Group 4. Translated from Arabic); 'Twitter turned into a cyberbullying spectacle' (Group 6. Translated from Arabic). This medium is furthermore repeatedly depicted as 'discontented' (7), 'angry' and 'negative' (4), indicating the amount of social scrutiny, judgement and criticism on the rise, resulting in ordinary individuals' migration to private platforms like Path to enjoy a space for free expression in semi-private, like-minded groups (groups 2, 3, 4, and 6). For these users, Twitter remains a primary source for retrieving local news from multiple sources, whether authorised by the state, global sources, oppositional overseas sources, or recognised activists and specialised economists, lawyers, artists and feminists within the Kingdom (groups 5, 6, 8, 9, 10).

By recognising the public gaze that operates on Twitter, users on the one hand benefit from the interaction they have with other social and religious segments and opposite genders who they otherwise cannot be connected with (groups 3 and 4). On the other hand, this communication is hindered once users become vulnerable to the submissive judgmental attitudes that continue to dominate the platform. On Twitter, 'close-mindedness remains widely popular' (Group 4. Translated from Arabic), so 'if you are not part of the collective wave you tire and lose' (Group 5. Translated from Arabic). One young woman reported stopping tweeting following her father's appearance on Twitter (group 6), while another young man confessed to 'having huge arguments with my father' for wanting to express his views (Group 6. Translated from Arabic). Another couple of privileged young women also suspended tweeting as the platform had grown to incorporate a larger segment of Saudis, consequently replicating the patriarchal reality practiced on the ground:

> (1) All girls [in her community surrounding] stopped when social media got big, and all the guys became huge.
> (2) Yes!
> (1) We felt like "I can't do this anymore, and I'm gonna pull back.
> (Group 3. Minor translation from Arabic).

After time spent expressing their individual interests, for these young women Twitter changed to become more like the collective conscience that they wished to escape. By describing it as a space which embraces masculinity and suppresses their vulnerable feminine freedoms, these participants highlighted the extent to which this space is

becoming socially suppressive, regulated and monitored, making everything one says accounted for, as a result it has become just another space governed by the collective order. These young women have thus regretfully transitioned to other private-based platforms to enjoy a level of personal freedom.

The views addressed by various social media users underscore the significance of online public spaces in cultivating diversity in narratives, social representation and cultural dialogue to exist and thrive under an authoritarian rule. They progressively consider the way that social media, most notably Twitter, exhibits diverse narratives and voices, while also lamenting its restriction as a result of either social control or increased censorship and coercion.

9.3 Progressive views on religious freedom and control

The following views on religion share a desire for communicating religious uncertainties away from the official religious doctrine. Although the majority belong to a similar underprivileged social background, these young men and women from Riyadh and Jeddah highlight a disparity in views against their collective communities, as well as a sense of readiness to listen to other views, to open up to different religious opinions and to transform their own intellectual religious experiences and belief systems – systems that had previously operated under force of intimidation rather than contentment.

9.3.1 Resisting social control

In the previous chapter, group 2 expressed a sense of restrained religious expression as a way of adhering to the social rules of conduct. The following discussion by three young men in Riyadh demonstrates a contrary sense of resistance against these very rules:

> (1) I feel that one should have the right to express his religious views, religion shouldn't be confined to [clergy authority] … People take this too far, whenever a person says something about his religion they jump and say, "your view has nothing to do with religion. Religion is confined to certain things, there are principles"… but there is a difference between rejecting things in religion altogether and merely saying these things are interpreted in a different way.
> (2) I wish society was more tolerant towards others' views. Personally, I may have religious opinions that others may not like, but I won't say them because I don't want people to say, "oh, you are a *kafir* [infidel]". I really wish people were more open about religious expression.
> (1) That's the first social change we need to create before anything else.
> (Group 4. Translated from Arabic).

This excerpt shows a language that is unusual compared to the conventional discourse, such as stating that 'one should have the right to express religious views', which suggests a stage of intellectual mutation that these youngsters have undergone that is contrary to their upbringing and schooling (further highlighted in a later excerpt). The notion of tolerance is also present towards different religious interpretations: 'we... [are] merely saying these things are interpreted in a different way'; 'I wish society was more tolerant towards other views'. Such statements highlight a progressive stage of exposure to a counter-dominant religious discourse that allows for diversity in opinions to emerge within one religious framework, which ultimately rejects the authority of controlling individual beliefs in order to govern their practices.

The latter excerpt also emphasises collective boundary making, which was referred to in group 2's attempt to validate ideas of social disrespect due to expressing subversive religious views. The youngsters in group 4 attempt to cross, disprove, and 'change' boundaries despite their current state of reluctance, due to the severe rejection and cyber-bullying that follow attempts of expressing atypical ideas publicly.

9.3.2 Religion as a tool to resist unity, hierarchy and order

Following on from the latter debate, a third participant in group 4 adds a contrary view to the conversation that gives emphasis to hierarchy and order in controlling religious expression – a notion present in groups 9 and 10's comments on the importance of controlling socioreligious expression on social media, as well as validating the sources of religious opinions strictly through appointed scholars. Following the question, 'where does this authority over religious expression come from', the third participant adds:

> (3) Its human nature. This is something natural, not only Muslims practice it but even *kuffar* [infidels], even Christians and others have sacred things that shouldn't be touched. There are certain red lines' (Group 4. Translated from Arabic).

The discussion continues:

> (1) But we are more narrow-minded than others.
> (4) Yes, so much more, to the extent that we refuse change, we don't accept other interpretations or anything.
> (1) We link religion with fear... we have been taught to fear things, not to prevent them because they are right or wrong... Religion is directly linked with authority. We used to fear the wrong because we fear the authorities and not religion itself.
> (3) Yeah, maybe we have been taught to fear something more than to expect a reward [the stick used without the carrot]. Instead of teaching us "pray to go to heaven" they tell us "If you don't pray you're going to hell", maybe that's why.

(Group 4. Translated from Arabic).

This debate highlights the variance in views among young college men of Riyadh, where religious ambiguities are consciously acknowledged and critically examined in their attempts to create 'social change'. As participants have been subject to extensive religious teaching and intimidation, their experiences have evolved in different ways, where some question this imposed authority, 'we are taught to fear things'; 'religion is directly linked with authority'.

Participant No.3 shows a socialised position towards religious expression in which he wants to maintain a 'natural' religious order and authority, whereas others critically reflect on schooling indoctrination and refuse to become submissive to the dominant discourse. Hence, they demonstrate a desire for freedom and openness (despite being 'more narrow-minded than others') as well as to free religious experiences from the profanity of authority, control and intimidation. Participant No.3 however sticks to the argument of unification and authority, and after the discussion demonstrates a somewhat lenient position by rejecting fear and imposing reward as a better approach to maintaining religious authority.

In a similar context, an underprivileged young woman from Jeddah shares a critical position against religious intimidation operating in public schools, as in the school she attended:

> Sometimes nothing is wrong with the curriculum, but the teacher's attitude is totally devastating. For her everything is *haram*, to the extent that she made a big deal about soap operas with one of the students, where the teacher was insisting that it is *haram* and you cannot watch them, and they made a big issue out of that. The problem lies in the way things are approached (Group 7. Translated from Arabic).

Despite the underprivileged status that has put this young woman and two of her colleagues under intense religious instruction at public schools (group 7), this comment shows progressive resistance against the school's ideological subjugation, and a critical assessment to the situation. There is a sense that this woman has developed by opening up to moderate religious resources. Perhaps such strong resistance also led her to question religious authority and be open to different views and understandings. Consequently another member of the group adds:

> I used to watch religious programmes, now I still watch them, but I watch the ones produced by people in the West, because their religious thought is different than ours today, it is the right way (Group 7. Translated from Arabic).

Such a statement demonstrates a transcendence beyond forms of hierarchy, hegemony and control that is latent in local religious discourse into a non-authoritarian religious experience where young people find interpretations that resonate with their level of consciousness. In a way, this statement also resembles a loss of trust in the religious doctrine that members of group 9 attributed great value and reassurance, discussed below.

9.3.3 Religious authority as a non-conclusive scientific authority

As passive groups in the previous chapter placed religious authority in the same conclusive position of scientific knowledge and expertise, the following progressive groups highlight mistrust in the religious establishment and its model of knowledge transmission, and subsequently enjoy the liberty that the internet allows to foster religious pluralism. A conversation between a young woman and a young man in Jeddah points to mistrusting the religious establishment:

> (1) If I had a somewhat difficult [religious] question, their opinion [the official establishment] is going to be biased, it is all going in one direction. They don't have flexibility in answering questions.
> (2) Even if they answered, they won't convince you. It is like giving you the same answer to all questions, no matter how contrasting your questions are. Convince me then, let me understand better, they just don't.
> (Group 7. Translated from Arabic).

This conversation underscores rejection of the old method of indoctrinating religious teachings in a set of rigid, decisive fatwas. This problem has many dimensions: first is sticking to one school of thought and denying the variety of religious practices in the Kingdom, a point which leads to mistrust, as 'their opinion is going to be biased' towards their fundamentalist interpretation. Second is using outdated methods of religious instruction and control in times of internet liberty and freedom (at least on the level of knowledge), which emphasises the disconnect experienced by the young generation who want to express their religious uncertainties but cannot rely on the appointed scholars to give 'convincing' arguments or deliberate their questions further. This disconnect is illustrated in the young man's following comment: 'Now if I had a triggering question I won't go to a government authority or anything like that... in the end fatwas share a range of diversity in scholarly opinions, and they are all online, why would I go elsewhere?' (Group 7. Translated from Arabic). This highlights how old school instruction available in state institutions no longer seems viable in the age of maximum exposure to religious pluralism on the internet.

The idea of religion-as-conclusive-authority is further challenged by middle-aged media professionals through their satisfactory statements about the change they witness in clergy's tolerant response to criticism on social media:

> I find that clerics have become more tolerant. We did research on the most influential Twitter users... and we found that among the first twenty in Saudi, fourteen were clergy users, and if you see their '*mentions*' you find curses, attacks and disagreement; I think this created a sense of tolerance in accepting opposing views that they probably were not exposed to before that. In the past they would only hear veneration and sanctity and now they are being attacked by the youngest user on Twitter (Group 8, Translated from Arabic).

The above excerpt carries a sense of triumph about religious disagreement and diversity observed by this media specialist, fostered by Twitter where clergy statements are responded to in a series of conversational *mentions*, thus situating clergy's religious views in constant dispute, as opposed to the holiness they enjoyed in the past when face-to-face interaction would only allow for 'veneration and sanctity'. The social media stage seems to force clergy to descend to Earth from that venerated position, where their audience argues, attacks and interacts with their teachings. This condition of 'tolerance' comes as a result of bridging the one-way flow of religious indoctrination, typical of schooling systems, into a multi-directional interaction between clergy and their followers.

The discussion that follows the latter excerpt goes as far as to argue that traditional religious discourse is undermined today by social media exposure. One participant adds: 'I believe that social media has given people the opportunity to become religiously diverse, I mean it uncovered different religious opinions and doctrines' (Group 8. Translated from Arabic). Another participant added:

> [Social media] has given space for dialogue that wasn't available before. So today one can adopt ideas that are contrary to the dominant ideas in society, especially religious ideas. This was not feasible before, the fact that anyone can criticise a jurisprudential opinion (Group 8. Translated from Arabic).

The two latter statements emphasise the significant achievement fostered by social media in terms of giving space for dialogue to be initiated not in a top-down hierarchal format but in an interactional, multi-dimensional way. The clergy are no longer able to enforce their authoritative opinions as they witness the inevitability of pluralism in this sphere, and users are permitted to 'adopt ideas that are contrary to the dominant' and thus challenge the singularity of the dominant narrative, which had proved futile under contemporary conditions.

Younger participants of group 7 also reflected on religious diversity in relation to Salman al-Oudah, a moderate cleric renowned for his constantly evolving discourse and humanist approach to religion. Al-Oudah, as mentioned in Chapter 5, has succeeded in attracting young fans through his extensive presence on social media sites, including presenting a YouTube show:

> (1) When it comes to religion people are divided into two types, some people hold on to the same religious opinions since the nineties, I think they are the ones in charge of the Ministry of Education – I don't know if you've noticed that religious precepts in curriculums haven't changed since the nineties. The other type is like Salman al-Oudah and others like him who get it right. Those ones say that religious precepts *change* according to different times... we have mentalities from both types, the type that won't accept that a photograph is *halal* no matter what you say, it will remain *haram*.
>
> (2) You cannot argue with them.
>
> (1) No, you can't because they cling onto their old principles... we are currently confronting the largest social proportion, the one that doesn't want to let go of its old mentality, and that's why we are having so many problems.
>
> (Group 7. Translated from Arabic).

Participant No.1 attempts to define the 'two types' of society to distance himself from the other 'largest social proportion' as he argues, which enjoys clinging 'onto their old principles' to preserve their religious precepts. Linking this conservative social category with educational curriculums further indicates the way in which religious conservatism is reinforced through early schooling, thus reproducing the passive pattern that refuses religious diversity and interaction. The example of prohibiting human photography is brought up as a classic illustration of this group's mindset and strong ideological programming.

The significance of such categorisation and criticism of the other party – who do not resemble participant No. 1's way of thinking – is to highlight the growing disparity between the way young people approach religion and the way it is enforced as singular, socialised sets of truth. Even if young men and women are obliged to chant such truths in schools, each is today granted access to a parallel world where ideology is not the key to become part of a community, and where religious views are debated, deliberated and changed in response to contemporary conditions. This is perhaps another reason why Salman al-Oudah is amongst the most popular clergy for youth, and another reason for his detention.

9.3.4 Religious freedom in public: views on Jusour cafe

The phenomenon of Jusour cafe and its consequent shutdown (detailed in Chapter 5), presents the fate of expressing religious freedom in a theocratic system when performed in an 'organised', physical public setting (group 6). The fact that it was exhibited in Jeddah, Saudi's arguably most liberal and culturally diverse city, apparently did not help prevent its closure in 2012.

Three groups from Jeddah demonstrate different positions and awareness of this youth-attracting phenomenon. Middle-aged men and women in group 8 stated their lack of awareness regarding Jusour. It seems their busy conservative lives were untouched by events at Jusour, and that the type of freedom practiced there does not concern them, with one man pragmatically suggesting: 'It's the state's law in the end. Most religious principles are part of the state's constitution and its policies, which you cannot violate in the first place' (Group 8. Translated from Arabic).

The latter statement justifies Jusour's shutdown by stating that religious expression beyond the official line is naturally off-limits. It shows how religious subversion for a community of privileged, mature men is practically unfeasible: 'It's the state's law in the end'. The overall disinterest or ignorance about Jusour among this group shows that the members do not share similar anxieties and uncertainties as the younger generation, who were perhaps exposed to stronger clashes between religious conservatism and internet liberation. Another group member commented on Kashgari's case:

> This represents what was mentioned about transgressing what is *Emphatically Known to be Part of the Religion* [jurisprudential rule] or coming against principles, like the Prophet himself, this is an issue we are done with (Group 8. Translated from Arabic).

The case of Kashgari (detailed in Chapter 5), which gave rise to a vigorous campaign accusing him of blasphemy and calling for his arrest or execution, was known among group members as a prominent public opinion case. The above excerpt offers a rational explanation for Kashgari's case, suggesting that he had challenged a key tenet in shari'a law with regards to provoking ridicule of a religious symbol. Thus, the participant shares no humanist sympathy towards Kashgari's actions.

A considerably younger, less privileged group in Jeddah admitted they had not been to Jusour – only one young man knew about it:

> (1) Looks like it was the beginning of destruction, this Jusour thing.
> (2) I've longed to go there. There wasn't destruction or anything, it was an ordinary cafe, no smoking or anything. They just had a library where you can go

and read a book. Perhaps the reason it was considered destructive is because people used to go there and talk publicly.

(3) Okay.

(2) So they decided that this talking is no good... even at Andalusia cafe, if anyone speaks up freely they would be stopped.

(3) They don't get it, even if you stop people from talking, it is the mind that is working!

(Group 7. Translated from Arabic).

While female members (participant No.1 and 3) did not know about the cafe, an older young man (No. 2) did. The discussion shows a young woman's suspicions about a cafe that was suspected to breed religious subversion. Her comment, 'looks like it was the beginning of destruction', is a manifestation of the damaging reputation that this space accrued among city residents because of its unfamiliar talks and activities. The young man who 'longed' to become part of the intellectual celebration that the city embraced in Jusour perceived it to be an open learning environment where youngsters hung out, read and discussed ideas beyond dominant and normative limits. Hence, he attempts to explain to his fellows that Jusour's public events were far from typical unauthorised gatherings hosting immoral behaviours such as 'smoking' and mixing between sexes.

The reason behind Jusour's closure, in participant No.2's opinion, rather transcends rumours of immoral destruction to issues of free public speech. The discussion shows a young woman's condemnation of the ways in which public spaces are suppressed as if no other means exist to circulate these ideas: 'even if you stop people from talking, it is the mind that is working', revealing how young people ridicule physical oppression in the age of free information circulation. The above discussion is a manifestation of an underprivileged group's willingness to transcend ideological intimidation to a realm where free expression and dialogue exist, where people are allowed to communicate their uncertainties and explore different views and interpretations, and declare the times of indoctrination and singular mindset to be over.

If we consider the notable social gap in Jeddah between privileged and less privileged, evident in the different schools and events they attended, the nature of their spending, and the level of religious conservatism they are subjected to, we get an indication about the different worlds they experience within the city. Young high school graduates from group 7 represent the less privileged Jeddah culture that attended public schools, were subject to significant religious indoctrination in schools and mosques, and religious police in public places and malls where they congregate. Group 6 represents the opposite side of the social spectrum as young, privileged liberals who attended private schools and spent a considerable time in the West. This social group enjoys an exclusive world of (mostly) private business environments, cultural and social events in cafes, restaurants

and private residents where mixing between sexes occurs and a high level of freedom is offered. For this social group, Jusour was a reminder of the 'normal' intimate environments they have, just on a bigger scale:

> (1) Jusour was like a safe haven. It's like "what is this cool place!", people can express, most of my teenage years were in the States so I was used to talking like unfiltered and hanging out with people without even thinking about it [which] Jusour kind of gave me.
>
> (2) It felt normal to people, speaking spontaneously.
>
> (1) Exactly, and watching documentaries – we did literally whatever we wanted in Jusour it was really nice, it was kind of that haven, my parents knew about it, my mom even came a couple of times… and it was heart-breaking when it closed.
>
> (2) …I heard about the workshops they had, and the level of expression that people wanted to have on a public platform. It wasn't surprising when it closed down.
>
> (Group 6).

For these two young women who have spent some of their lives in the West, 'unfiltered' discussions and conversations are considered 'normal'. Jusour is furthermore depicted as a 'haven', an intimate home-like space but on a bigger social scale – it had the quality of bridging their exclusive liberal community with the wider public. It is a first-time moment of social integration and unity not as a result of a united subculture identity or belief but as a result of being united in their desire for a space for free and safe expression: 'It's like "what is this cool place!" people can express'; it was 'the level of expression that people wanted to have on a public platform'.

Jeddah youth's moment of utopia, perhaps expectedly, could not last for long: 'It wasn't surprising when it closed down', as if it was too good to be true. The sense of expectation for Jusour's shutdown points to the gap between physical and virtual spheres, as well as the private and the public, when it comes to freedom and control. The expectation moreover refers to the tight control that the country experiences on public spaces especially in relation to religious codes of conduct. Thus, while subversion against religious control occurs on social media networks, physical public spaces remain under strict surveillance by state religious authorities.

The fact that Jusour represented a 'spontaneous' atmosphere for young women, where a family member of authority attended and was pleased with the spirit of the place, highlights the extent of familiarity that elite circles share with Jusour's level of discussion, unlike one professional young man who belonged to a more conservative, but equally educated, environment. For this native Jeddah resident who had not been to the West, Jusour was more of an exciting experience:

Jusour, oh those days! I got to know Jeddah's young people through Jusour, before Jusour there was nothing... Jusour was a first serious attempt for change on the level of culture, intellectuality and awareness. It was like a state of rebellion, you know the first rebellion which is normally followed with a real movement. I am not talking about movement [as in revolution], no, I am talking about cultivating awareness and rights... [At the time] there was also the issue of religion, tolerance and coexistence rising... Jusour was an uncommon condition... even conservative people attend! Clergy sometimes speak there, it was the only place where you would witness Islamists attending as well as liberals, attendants were from all social types, men and women, books everywhere, music, it was a very intimate place. It has created a sense of homogeneity, I felt like I found my home. It was the place I dream of, the environment I strive for, but then it turned out into what young guys call an [intellectual] massacre in 2012 because of Hamza Kashgari's case (Group 6. Translated from Arabic).

This young man's nostalgic memory of Jusour shares elements about what it means to be part of this cultural experience for the first time in Jeddah. The fact that he knew Jeddah's 'young people' through Jusour indicates the peculiar nature of these events which not only gathered different social groups in one intimate environment but also cultivated a genuine sense of social inclusion and homogeneity, and promoted intercultural dialogue as well as religious tolerance in a way that is strikingly transformative considering the dominant indoctrinating approach to religious expression in the Kingdom.

The contrast made in the above excerpt between the stages of intellectual enlightenment, depicted as a 'serious attempt for change on the level of culture, intellectuality and awareness' and the 'massacre' following Kashgari's arrest, highlight what Jusour meant for progressive young men and women who were expressing 'a state of rebellion' and readiness for 'change' with the approaching revolutions around the Middle East and the rapid intellectual openness and movements facilitated by social media. For people like this young man, Jusour represents 'a real movement' and moment for social change as a natural consequence of the religious freedom and intense debates between opponents. It was a space where dominant discursive hostility between 'liberals' and 'clergy' dissolved into a tolerant, thorough and fruitful dialogue, where their differences were cultivated in an integrated national discourse that moves beyond rigid mindsets and dualistic ways of thinking into a celebration of the city's intellectual richness and diversity.

Jusour here appears as a dynamic space that challenges the (assumed) mainstream religious dialogue that is based on attacking, accusing and intimidating the other. It rather moves into a discursive space that embraces alternative opinions and interpretations and promotes freedom and pluralism. The latter does not pose a threat to people's identity but rather helps them to integrate, unite and develop a discourse that recognises their diversity, rights and demands, which would ultimately threaten the

singularity of the dominant narrative and its authoritarian legitimacy. It is therefore remembered as a nostalgic 'dream' and a place to 'strive' and 'long for' (groups 6 and 7).

To sum up, although Jusour represents a unique public event that attempted to bring about religious debate and dialogue as an equivalent freedom of the online sphere, the ultimate shutdown and consequent fear meant that the attempt failed to progress, leaving young men and women's striving for an open, embracing environment unresolved. In the aftermath of Jusour, as narrated by members of group 6, all events turned 'private' and thus had no effect nor presence in the public sphere (group 6). This devastating condition has perhaps delayed the ambition for a 'real movement' for a while (group 6), and also suggests that the gap between online and physical spheres remains sharply defined, unless the online sphere also declines and becomes silenced.

9.4 Women's liberty

This section presents views of women's liberty as publicised by the ongoing end-guardianship social media campaign. Few women support this controversial cause, all of whom share the privilege of being unrestricted by their guardians while *recognising* disadvantaged women's troubled realities and hence advocate for their right to claim independence from their oppressors. In addition, several men recognised the importance of women's liberation on social progression.

Beginning with the men's view, young cosmopolitan men found in the end-guardianship campaign a positive initiative for exposing injustices and raising the voices of disadvantaged women. One man highlighted the momentum gained by this campaign that had popularised the women's cause: the 'end-guardianship campaign is the most prominent female voice raised... [the campaign] is the largest stage that projected women's views, it maybe not the most successful but definitely the loudest' (Group 4. Translated from Arabic). Depicting it as the 'most prominent', 'largest' and 'loudest' gives the campaign significance in the sense of reaching out to the public, uncovering women's grievances as if it were performed on a 'stage'. The reason it is popular is due to the 'loud' and long life it had: 'End-guardianship campaign is the longest one I've seen, it has been there for six months or maybe a year' (Group 4. Translated from Arabic). This campaign again is depicted as a persistent long running voice. A conversation between first- and second-year university students, who belonged to average, slightly less privileged families in Riyadh ran as follows:

> (1) "End-guardianship" campaign has exposed many women in society who've been subject to injustices, and they really began to speak up.
> (2) That's right.

(1) They were basically saying our situation is miserable.

(3) But most of those who speak were critical, they would criticise in a taunting manner.

(2) In a childish way.

(1) Yes, very childish… without having any reason for it, just because he was brought up to believe it is wrong, he thinks he should fight it.

(3) That's why when you check the hashtag you find only little useful things. Most of what's useful is posted by supporters, opponents however are more. People against ending guardianship are way more.

(Group 4. Translated from Arabic).

Despite their social status, the discussion shows access to a new, progressive way of thinking that is 'different from our fathers in many ways' (Group 4. Translated from Arabic). One of these significant differences is supporting women's end-guardianship campaign, which demonstrates a high level of awareness that is not present in the more privileged and experienced professionals of group 8. The interest that group 4 shows towards this cause does not tend to challenge it (as groups 2, 9 and 10 have shown in Chapter 8), nor to measure its technical impact (as in group 8) but rather to connect and empathise with the humanist element, such as the 'injustices' and the 'miserable' conditions that were present. Another underlying element in this conversation is the sense of readiness to endorse this cause despite the crucial shift it would bring to gender power dynamics.

As underprivileged yet progressive young men, this group takes a striking supportive stance, which is ready to abandon stagnant collective beliefs to support better contemporary conditions. This is highlighted in the way participant No. 1 critically assesses the position of the campaign's opponents as not willing to let go of their beliefs, 'just because he was *brought up to believe* it is wrong, he thinks he should fight it' (emphasis added). This notion of holding on to long-established social constructions due to being 'brought up' with them runs as a continuous theme in the feminist opponents' points of view.

However, after endorsing the projection of women's grievances, participant No. 3 wraps up the discussion by confirming that 'people against ending guardianship are way more'. This statement endorses group 8's view that such campaigns cannot target the collective belief system and increases scepticism about the potentiality of achieving social change the more they are exposed to stubborn views across their conservative circles (discussed in the previous chapter).

More privileged social circles in Jeddah are also exposed to the spirit of resistance against women's liberty campaigns. A young journalist who is highly active on social

media expressed frustration once he reviewed actions against a young woman who posted an image without *abaya* (women's mandatory gown in public) during the end-guardianship campaign, in an attempt to register a statement of individual liberty:

> That poor girl who left home without *abaya* in Riyadh for a coffee only meant to make a statement, suddenly there was ruthless attack, defamation and death threats, it's scary! [...] Twitter is becoming like this, it's really scary to be against the norm, it is really weird that you can't say something that pleases you, you just need to go with the flow (Group 6. Translated from Arabic).

This story demonstrates the stubborn collective position against women's liberty, especially when challenged visually and physically. It shows how a woman's existence without the rules of the supposedly superior gender conveys a threat to patriarchal sovereignty. In a sense it claims authority over the male-dominant public sphere, and therefore her existence is a danger that must be eliminated. The young man adds: 'There were several calls [on social media] 'kill her!', kill her? it's like ISIS' (Group 6. Translated from Arabic). The way this incident is told reveals surprise, shock and terror that follows a physical challenge to the dominant patriarchal system. It moreover reinforces group 4's statement on the significance of women's liberty opponents.

9.4.1 Women's view

When a group of private school attendees residing in the capital city were asked whether they knew about the end-guardianship campaign, two said they had not heard of it, another two responded, 'I support it' (Group 3. Translated from Arabic), and the remaining couple had lengthier views:

> (1) It's not for me, because my guardian is a person who allowed me to do a lot of what people don't have, and I know that a lot of people [women] can't get jobs, can't go to work, whereas for me... I think the way to liberate women, not in a political-liberation – although it kind of is – but to liberate women in Saudi in a functional sense, is to allow them to be able to get jobs, feed their families and take care of their children.
> (2) It's human rights, it isn't even restricted by Islam, this is something for the community, why would they force us, scrutinise us, and make us feel as if we broke out of Islam for doing them?
> (Group 3).

It is perhaps striking to have women acknowledging their social privilege despite the social sensitivity of explicitly referring to ones' own social class, an acknowledgment that does not intend to patronise the disadvantaged, but to express empathy for and awareness of their miseries and to support their needs. The above statements are loaded with reasonings that dismantle the previously stressed concerns about guardianship as a

primal Islamic concept and ending guardianship as a probable Western influence and threat to the state. In contrast with all of the women's positions previously presented, this group demonstrates a courageous initiative in deliberating this cause even when these women are not directly affected by it but affected by a society where their fellow community of women are idle and unable to claim their autonomy. They continue:

> (1) I want these women to be able to feed their children, I want them to be able to feed themselves, I want them to be able to feel they're not trapped. I want them to have the chance to become productive members of our society because you can't function when half of your society is not pushing it forward. I know it is a controversial opinion to say 'end the guardianship system', but at least in our circle it is not.
>
> (2) Disabling guardianship system wouldn't make a difference for us.
>
> (Many voices): Yes, makes no difference...
>
> (1) It matters for me because I know my life will be affected by a society where women participate more.
>
> (Group 3).

The discussion highlights a state of being well informed about social issues met with a high degree of social liberty and progressive thought. These young women actively deliberate the socio-economic advantages of disabling the guardianship system without proposing any religious or financial concerns, as in the previous privileged women's conversations. For these young students, early professional workers and entrepreneurs, the desire to end the guardianship system has a wider nationalist benefit that transcends their own social 'circle' to mass society that is in desperate need of such action. This group corresponds to women's activists' feminist discourse in terms of pushing for women's rights from an egalitarian human rights discourse that they believe to be compatible with the wider Islamic humanist message. It is about giving less privileged women the opportunity to benefit themselves and their community by being 'productive members of our society'.

The discussion highlights a status of being fully capable, independent and aware of societal issues. It represents women who are privileged and progressive enough to be given their autonomy, while mixing with disadvantaged women and recognising their need for systemic reform. They therefore explicitly stand for their cause even though it 'wouldn't make a difference' in terms of their own freedom, a statement that implies an elite status where this topic is not considered 'controversial'.

What is particularly interesting is how young women's statements in the two previous excerpts dismantle each of the concerns raised by the objectors and negotiators (presented in the previous chapter) and view the women's cause from a completely

different aspect, which is active, well informed and progressive, as the following demonstrates.

9.4.2 Deconstructing the fear of Western influence and threatening state security

Women in group 3 see in the campaign against guardianship a step towards 'political' and 'functional' liberation, enabling women to become 'productive', 'feed their families and take care of their children'. In other words, they advocate for the less advantaged to be able to secure their basic needs away from dehumanisation and patronising they may suffer under inequitable guardians. It is a comprehensive humanist perspective that prioritises the marginalised and the disadvantaged over ones' own financial privilege or status, as was the case with group 1: 'We live luxurious lives'; 'we don't look at the dark side... forget about it'. Women in group 3 moreover consider the benefit they would enjoy in return when 'half of the society' is enabled to be 'pushing it forward', in contrast to the concerns raised by members of group 1 about the negative 'freedom' that would encourage a woman to become 'independent', 'live alone and do everything on her own', or allow 'foreigners' who 'intend harm for Saudi' to use (supposedly passive, objectified) independent women as their tools of destruction.

9.4.3 Deconstructing the conceptual legitimacy of *wilayah*

The religious conception of guardianship is another important dimension in women's rejection and scepticism of the anti-guardianship campaign. For the supportive members of group 3, they would expect empowerment to result from women's independence, in contrast to group 2's conservative attitudes, believing that women would become 'debauched' or 'would've left the country' should the government abolish this system.

Another contrast can be seen in the supporters' will to empower the less privileged by advocating for this campaign: 'I want them to be able to feel they're not trapped' (group 3), versus the privileged objectors' position against campaign advocates, 'as if they were locked up and they want to break free all of a sudden' (group 1); and the campaign's conceptual position, '*Wilayah*... is something important in religion and shari'a law' (group 1); 'There is difference between *qiwamah* and *wilayah*' (group 7). It seems that the ways in which each community of women conceptualises the religious authority of guardianship comes into opposition. Thus, while members of groups 1 and 7 hinge on the fundamental premise of *wilayah* as the basis of their socioreligious identity and nationalism, a woman from group 3 demonstrates a contrast based on a 'human rights'

premise that 'isn't even restricted by Islam', which entitles women to become fully recognised as independent, full citizens.

The way this woman portrays activism against guardianship as a basic human right suggests a higher level of engagement with the dominant structures of subordination – obscured in the guise of divine order – that traps women in a permanent minor position. Hence, she wonders, if 'this [campaign] is something for the community, why would they force us, scrutinise us, and make us feel as if we broke out of Islam'? (group 3). This is a rare feminist defence of the campaign's objective for 'community' progression, and a rare egalitarian reading of the Islamic discourse which does not associate gender equality with breaking 'out of Islam'. The latter position transcends the support of eliminating the bureaucratic complication of women's guardian consent into the 'controversial opinion to say "end the guardianship system"' (group 3), posing a direct challenge to the patriarchal hegemony, which is predominantly generated by women themselves.

Yet perhaps because the majority of young women in group 3 have experienced complete autonomy, in addition to preferring to speak in English while in a discussion group (group 3), indicates the liberal, well-educated lives they have managed to lead in difficult situations, such as living independently in the West, and therefore not fearing what autonomy and equality may bring. All of which explains why this community does not perceive women's independence to be a threat as the majority of women participants did, especially the advantaged ones who enjoy passive 'luxurious lives' (group 1).

9.4.4 The concern against social order

Particularly significant in the progressive perspective shared in group 3 is the way it sharply contrasts with the underprivileged, less urban and less advantaged young women in group 2, where each group manifested completely different qualities associated with ending the guardianship system. Instead of bringing about social destruction should this system end (group 2) it is creating social prosperity and economic growth (group 3), and instead of being a state of moral decay (2), it is the rightful, civil direction for women to 'feed their families' (3). Also, instead of women 'losing their senses' at the first sight of sexual temptation should a male gaze become absent (2), it is women's ability to enter and compete in the workforce when guardians can no longer dictate their major life decisions (3). Finally, instead of escaping from their oppressors (family and state) should guardianship end (group 2), for group 3 women appear to support and bond with other women for the community's good. It is a totally contrasting way of viewing the cause, which initially started to support the less

privileged. Yet eventually the cause appears to be very exclusive, so that only a minority can comprehend and defend it.

Interestingly, disadvantaged women – such as discussants of group 2 – do not perceive the economic advantage of their enablement. It seems far beyond their comprehension and interest to aspire for financial independence. One explanation is that women are usually unconcerned about family income, which is traditionally the primary function of the male figure. A custom that keeps young college-aged women less occupied with culturally disfavoured career ambition and more engaged with day-to-day (forbidden) relationships with the other gender that is popular amongst their peers. Hence their insistence on guardianship becomes explained as the only way to safeguard society from committing adultery. It is the only exciting, allowed (in marital relationships) but not allowed (in pre-marital ones) way out of the 'trap' (group 3). The trap of not only being unable to make major life decisions – whether marriage, study or work – but to consciously grant guardians the power to predetermine and predesign them, and to furthermore justify that act by associating it with religion, tradition and social order.

The outcome is that women's rights campaigns, such as ending guardianship, instead of prompting women to recognise their rights, seem to participate in numbing women's senses and surrendering their minds to the dominant perception of women as lifetime minors, and women as emotionally and financially dependent, because men are naturally available to take over the wheel and lead.

9.5 Arts

In this section, viewers debate their views and opinions on Saudi independent productions. Mostly, they consider comedy an essential part of society and highlight pride and engagement with independent shows that have begun to thrive for the first time. While others negotiate or contest this position as they find these shows deprived of a moral 'purpose' or against their taste.

9.5.1 Breaking the didactic paradigm

Brought up in urban cities and exposed to Western media and culture, some groups mentioned being amused and entertained by Saudi independent shows (groups 3, 4, 6 and 7). In addition, they shared sentiments of recognition and honour towards local comedy content as a step towards social inclusion (groups 3, 4) and breaking free from 'traditional societal norms' into the spacious sphere of individuality and freedom of thought (Group 4. Translated from Arabic). In this regard a professional young man in

group 5 finds the collective structure plays a crucial role in turning entertainment-based platforms into spaces of formal lecturing:

> (1) Snapchat videos were designed as short as 10 seconds, so no one lectures there.
> (2) Yes, yes.
> (1) I think those have misused it.
> (3) Those who present content?
> (1) Precisely, those who present content, they shouldn't present it on Snapchat.
> (3) I'm actually glad they use Snapchat here in the Gulf, although the way they do it is really strange because the application is designed for entertainment, if you notice the "filters" and all, here it turns into a theatre.
> Researcher: Why this pattern, do you think?
> (4) I think idealism is an obsession here where everyone wants to reach that state of appearing in the perfect image, in addition to the social boundaries that perhaps adds more pressure, like you barely find an old man telling jokes on social media.
> (Group 5. Translated from Arabic)

The distinction that the group draws here between spaces 'designed' for entertainment (like Snapchat) versus a 'theatre' lecturing space is significant. It brings into play the power relations invested in normative social practices that would typically turn any discursive space into a lecturing rather than an entertaining one – lecturing allows the hierarchy to be maintained between the dominant indoctrinating position on the one hand, and the listening position on the other. The significance of formalising an entertainment platform by turning it into a tool for the reproduction of hegemonic discourses by social actors – who are already conditioned for this reproduction – is continuing the circulation of the dominant narrative in a bottom-up model. In addition, it ensures that this sphere of entertainment cannot entice subversive discourses that may transcend authoritarian control.

From the previous point, a participant in group 4 praises entertainment platforms for allowing individual agency to rise and break free from the collective paradigm, which was described in the latter excerpt of group 5 as the search for 'idealism' that would eventually meet the satisfaction of the collective system. Young students in group 4, to the contrary, seem to enjoy the interruption of this ideal condition:

> The explosion of social media content gave us the agency to have our own minds – one can decide his own opinion and become himself, instead of adopting the singular collective opinion just because it is our fathers' way (Group 4. Translated from Arabic).

The point of this excerpt is viewing online platforms as a space that fosters individualism, which may ultimately turn individuals against the 'singular collective opinion' that is transmitted through the generational reproduction system of the 'fathers'. This opinion (along with the following) is manifesting the finally available freedom from the collective boundaries into the vast, pluralist world of self 'agency' and self-expression. Such a freedom allows the cultivation of ideas that are unusual for the dominant mindset, like feminism:

> It makes people think and bring about ideas, like feminism and women driving, which were exclusively on Twitter previously [as forms of activism] but now they are brought up not in an angry or aggressive way, no, it is more like a joke (Group 3. Majorly Translated from Arabic).

This young woman points out the innovative ways of thinking spreading on Saudi YouTube shows, implicitly working to shift the mentality of singular thinking into the vast world of trending movements like feminism. She recognises the ways in which YouTube shows bridge networked activism available 'on Twitter' and comedy by infusing feminist manifestations into their production. Consequently, these new ideas become embedded in everyday normative practices, 'it is more like a joke', that does not necessarily trigger anger or defence but is rather implicitly produced and consumed.

9.5.2 Valuing the aesthetic

Progressive views on independent Saudi production draw specific attention to the inventive, original and aesthetic aspects that capture their attention and emotion as they stimulate their senses of connection and belonging: 'when I was doing my masters in the States I used to watch *Telfaz* a lot and even re-watch episodes because I felt kind of homesick, and I thought it was really funny' (group 6). This statement draws on this privileged young woman's sense of nostalgia and belonging, where she describes enjoying watching the Telfaz 11 YouTube Channel. Similarly, another privileged woman comments on the same channel by saying: 'The real comedy are the young guys of *Telfaz* 11, My God they are really funny! They have so many shows… I watch them for fun though, nothing useful' (Group 1. Translated from Arabic). These young women endorse group 3's comment in terms of expressing a sense of relation and real amusement, while distinguishing them from intellectual lecturing that typically dominates entertainment platforms. Another young woman adds:

> Some of them really reflect reality, you know. It's not like they're coming from another world or another culture, no it's our culture, we share the same ideas, so you relate when you listen to them speaking about something you know or see (Group 1. Translated from Arabic).

This excerpt gives deeper consideration of the motive for watching these shows: as an alternative to Western media, for which they have the language access for, or to mainstream Arabic outlets. The motive lies in the originality that makes such shows 'reflect reality' without overloading it with instruction, as is the case with mainstream production; and also in reflecting the everyday mundane reality of native culture, instead of a globalised package of production that one cannot relate to, it is rather something 'you know and see'.

As the previous few excerpts highlight how the privileged in society enjoy and connect with Saudi independent production in a way that was not highlighted among the underprivileged, it also suggests how Saudi art is disseminated and interpreted across specific social circles. However, in a contrary view, another woman admits to not relating to Saudi YouTube shows as they are predominantly masculine: 'I just find men's humour that we have in Saudi boring, it doesn't make me laugh' (group 3). As the most popular shows are produced by and targeted to men, this young woman finds herself out of the loop, and expresses a sense of resentment for being outplayed by men. Yet, she contends, 'It's fine. You are creating content for a deprived audience. Audience who had never, like, only for five years now that we got this' (Group 3. Minor Translation from Arabic). She acknowledges that Saudi comedy is a way of taking a (gendered) initiative to amuse and represent 'a deprived audience' who had perhaps never experienced a genuine reflection of their native culture. This implies the participants' outsider sense of belonging that transcends her own culture, perhaps as a way of alienating herself from the dominant patriarchal culture to which she objects.

9.5.3 Debating and interpreting independent comedy

In the following discussion, group 5 discuss the director al-Jaser's production on the Telfaz 11 YouTube channel:

> (1) He is an artist... There are things that he is doing now which he couldn't do back in high school and share it just like that. So social media or YouTube gave him the opportunity to express himself and his art and show it to people, and also to target those who would appreciate his art, without entering the dilemma of, you know, we are a collective society and people may censure him or put him down...
>
> (2) It [his content] is so weird, but he is an artist honestly. As a director he is original.
>
> (3) I appreciate what he does but he doesn't suit my taste. His production shows hard work, the ideas are strange, maybe I don't agree with his ideas, like the one with blood and suffocated people, so weird. But he makes you feel something, and I guess that is art. If it makes you feel something, then it is art.
>
> (Group 5. Major translation from Arabic).

Participant No.1 highlights the value of having a platform that supports one's sense of individualism. For him, the quality of art as a tool for self-expression can only be manifested when a path is secured *outside* the collective circulation of ideas that leaves no space for invention. Regarding the same show, participant No.2 highlights the value of originality of director al-Jaser. Differentiating between his personal taste as 'weird', and the upper level of art appreciation, 'he is original' reflects the artists' authenticity and creativity that fosters a deeper level of connection with the audience. Participant No. 3 similarly distinguishes between his own taste and the artist's achievement: 'but he makes you feel something, and I guess that is art'. Notable here is recognising and acknowledging the artist's success in achieving his purpose, which is not necessarily a direct message to be taken from the show nor is it related to the audience's desires, but rather to a deeper layer of stimulating audiences to interact with an artist's creation.

Again, this example highlights an appreciation of the aesthetic aspect of art, which comes as a result of the privileges they enjoy that enables them to transcend beyond collective norms. It is interesting to contrast this position with the dominant Saudi perception of devaluing art beyond information and moral dictation, which the following example highlights in relation to another YouTuber.

9.5.4 Another perspective

In the following conversation, participants express their views on different shows presented by Omar Hussein, who first appeared on the *'ala al-Tayer* news satire show (presented in chapter 4), which discusses socio-political issues from a critical lens and ended in 2014, after revelations of censorship. The same figure continued to appear on other social media platforms and initiated an independent YouTube channel to present *vlogs* (video blogs of daily life) and a *3 minute show* that discusses societal issues from a critical satirical lens, similar but less explicit than *'ala al-Tayer.* In the following conversation young urban women discuss their views on Hussein:

> (1) He is really beneficial, the information he brings is really useful and he always comments on recent events.
> (2) I really like his style, never boring.
> (1) Yeah, his style is so fun, even on Twitter.
> (4) Honestly, I find him boring.
> (1) What? Have you watched *'ala al-Tayer*?
> (2) Yes!
> (1) It's so fun.
> (4) I don't know... he fakes idealism, you don't need to show-off the world that you are pro-women or —
> (1) Oh no, I never thought about it that way!

(4) I always do, like you don't need to stuff your episodes with "this is wrong, don't do it; the nation is really important; the nation comes first; this is right, Bravo" Chill, dude!

(Group 1. Partially translated from Arabic).

In this discussion young women highlight the informative, 'beneficial' aspect of Hussein's shows, which some of them enjoy, as well as the entertaining, 'never boring', 'fun' aspect. However, participant No. 4 who is a comedy lover, finds Hussein's type of comedy problematic, as it seems imbued with idealism and instruction. Despite the satirical sense of instruction that Hussein uses in his shows (see Chapter 7) participant No.4's comment demonstrates an act of refusal to the instructional paradigm of meaning when one is looking for lightness, openness and fun.

The fact that they are urban, privileged and exposed to Western genres and cultures perhaps facilitates their sense of ease and joy with this horizontal, democratic and entertaining paradigm of thought. Hence this group continues to deliberate Saudi comedy in relation to Western comedy and concludes with a hope that it will become better once it becomes more widespread and audiences heighten their expectations: 'When the expectations are higher the content keeps improving' (Group 1. Partially translated from Arabic).

To the contrary of urban women's position, members of three different groups confessed that they preferred Hussein's informative content. When three women were exchanging views on their preferred social media appearance of Hussein, one contended, 'but you feel that you get more value when you watch his YouTube channel', as opposed to other entertainment platforms (Group 7. Translated from Arabic), and her colleague agrees: 'on YouTube he is more serious, he gives you a subject to think about' (Group 7. Translated from Arabic). This discussion highlights an audience's desire for 'serious' input, value and information. In the same position another professional man adds 'I would rather watch the awareness-rising, educative 3 minutes' than anything else on YouTube (Group 8. Translated from Arabic), and a young college student praises Hussein's recent valuable 3-minute educational show:

(1) He has his own channel now and I find his content getting better; he has this *3-minute show* that discusses some topics, he presents really good studies, it's very nice. In contrast with his previous work with *Eish Elly* and the group [in UTURN channel] I find that he was restricted, but now he is blooming. Now you can see that the man has valuable information.

(2) He finally has something positive, something beneficial, instead of just laughter.

(Group 9. Translated from Arabic).

In this excerpt, young men demonstrate their longing for social media figures to stick with the didactic paradigm and add valuable, 'beneficial' and serious input. The presenter's old satirical show *'ala al-Tayer* (on UTURN channel) is criticised as trivial comedy that 'restricted' the comedian from the instructional genre where he is 'positive' and 'blooming'. Interestingly, the same show that is denounced for being 'laughter'-centred is criticised by group 1 members who do not find it fun enough and therefore censure Hussein for being idealistic and offering a serious line in the beginning or end of each episode (see Chapter 4).

Another interesting contrast is how a comedian is 'restricted' in the world of entertainment, yet he is set 'free' in an educational genre (Group 9). In their view, Hussein was compelled to stick with triviality while working 'with the group', although independently he may be of additional 'value' and information. The comedy of *'ala al-Tayer* that is blamed here for triviality was criticised by professional young women in group 1 for being boring, idealistic and didactic. This divergence highlights the ways in which different backgrounds inform different audience's interpretations. Highly socialised members of society cannot escape the linear association between comedy and time-wasting, because for them, the depth of the arts in translating symbolic issues of oppression, injustice, racism, inequality and misrepresentation implicitly *and amusingly* is irrelevant and foreign. For others who may find themselves immersed in comedy it is a matter of taste: they may enjoy some and dislike others, because what matters is accepting this free universe of thought and encouraging its proliferation.

9.6 Conclusion

The views presented in this chapter demonstrate that those in favour of social media activism, contention and creativity are on the one hand privileged members of society who own the cultural capital that enables them to become exposed to ideas beyond doctrinal authority, hence they find dissident voices to reinforce their thoughts and values. On the other hand, less privileged yet progressive members have found in the internet the chance to network with like-minded groups and subsequently mutate in thought.

For these groups, political liberty opens up possibilities for deliberation, freedom and pluralism, while religious liberty opens up possibilities to reinterpret Islam in ways that are compatible with contemporary conditions and human rights frameworks. It turns religion from an everyday policing reality into an everyday peaceful individual experience. Women's liberty means achieving real change by enabling the half 'idle' nation to become independent, active and productive, and creative expression is

'original', entertaining and 'fun', as it resembles their reality, language and culture like no other mainstream production.

These views however are partly hindered by passive positions that continue to reinforce dominant values of control and indoctrination as a way of shielding society from possible subversion. Hence as social media may cultivate and expand critical attitudes and voices, it also represents a threat to its very diversity since it also fosters views that conform to the dominant ideology and greets dissent with greater hostility.

CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSION

This thesis documents the short-lived Saudi freedom of expression on social media. Between 2011 and 2016 there existed a space in which political and religious deliberation took place, bursting with creative expression, cultivating civil rights, shaping political consciousness, and actively challenging ideological didacticism and religious doctrinal power – a condition that has been predominantly silenced following mass detentions and crackdown on activists in 2017. This study furthermore argues that in a highly coercive system, social media acted as an incubator for dissent, allowing people to transcend existing mechanisms of censorship and control, at least to some extent.

Online dissent appeared in different areas, in religious freedom, political freedom, women's rights and local entertainment production. Dissent was also physically manifested to some extent, as in independent human rights organisations, public religious discussion groups, women driving on the streets of the main cities, and art studios appearing quietly in urban cities. However, because of the restrictions and crackdowns that follow physical manifestations of dissent, online expressions were generally bolder and more enduring.

Online contention appeared in many forms. Its explicit manifestation is represented in micro-blogging posts and campaigns that expose corruption, demand political representation, end male-guardianship, and reinterpret religion beyond doctrinal authority. Less explicit contention appears in other indirect forms of communication, such as independent online shows and artworks that use the same framings of civil and women rights, exposure of political propaganda, and religious reinterpretation, albeit in a less direct way. The third form of contention is an implicit one, manifesting itself in pure entertainment. Comedy satire that does not have news and politics on its agenda is arguably political for adopting an open, free, democratic paradigm that challenges indoctrination and didacticism. By appearing 'trivial', it crystallises the deeply rooted dichotomy inherent in the collective memory, which operates through sharp distinctions between two supposedly oppositional universes of meaning: one that represents religious and national unity and normative cultural practices, and the other representing the foreign, threatening paradigm accused of breaking 'our' national cohesion and undermining our religious truth.

This carefully maintained dichotomy is the mechanism by which the dominant narrative manages to secure consent and maintain its perpetuation, and it is the underlying incentive that determines the ways in which counter-discourses may resonate within

wider society. This reveals an interesting split between passive and progressive views, between individuals who submissively subscribe to the dominant ideology and therefore voluntarily challenge alternative views, and those who are resilient enough to communicate and mutate in thought, who do not find open spaces of expression subversive or threatening to the collective-national structure but rather liberating and progressive.

This chapter argues that within these creative, open and free spaces for expression – which existed prior to state campaigns against dissident voices in 2017 – hegemonic power did not chiefly appear in a classical, heavily-studied authoritarian and coercive fashion. Rather there seems to have been *other means by which contentious discourses were challenged, from within the social structure and away from state censorship.* In other words, hegemony was apparent in the implicit ideological, cultural and religious roots that are inherent to the collective structure, in the way it defined social norms, religious identity and individuals' sense of nationalism. The way these limitations were expressed in this study's empirical investigation suggests a powerful yet invisible internalisation of the dominant system of thought, which makes people ready to reproduce their own restraints without direct political oppression.

10.1 Key findings

10.1.1 Social media allowing space for dissent

This study argues that despite a recent political shift, social media platforms – notably Twitter – seem to have embraced a public sphere that was not previously available, creating a space in which different social groups came together for the first time to communicate, connect, express and deliberate religious and socio-political ideas, needs and demands. Never before could a young woman communicate with a minister, police officer, or journalist she found deceptive or biased, let alone receive instant response and interaction. By the same token, men had never been exposed to the exclusive world of women and the ways in which they express their interests, thoughts, and beliefs. Even though this multi-directional flow of dialogue did not grow into a saturated organisational movement, it seems to have given room for counter-discourses to be formed and to subsequently challenge the singularity of the dominant discourse.

At a time when social media was a new and exciting space – especially with the ongoing Arab uprisings – Saudi members of the public were able to utilise this political opportunity to raise their belated demands. This space embraced demands for democracy and civil rights, exposed underlying corruption and sought to spread notions of pluralism and tolerance. This can be observed through users' depictions of their

experiences on Twitter, for example, as 'similar to a civil society', a 'public-lead parliament', and as a space that cultivates grassroots action for liberty and social change.

Social media also facilitated the dissemination of religious views and interpretations outside the dominant Wahhabi school of thought, leading to contrasting outcomes that ultimately work to stretch the space for free expression. Cases like the campaign against Kashgari highlight a mass rejection of individual religious expression outside dominant religious precepts. Cases like Jeddah's Jusour café, however, demonstrate a deeper, multi-directional discussion that creates a sense of social cohesion between liberals and conservatives, who arguably never intersected in one social circle or sat at one table. Al-Maliki's widely cited and celebrated opinion on Islamic democracy is another manifestation of religious pluralism. When it comes to religious discussion, social media seems to offer a space in which people can network, communicate and engage in a contemporary discourse that moves beyond the limited and binary-based accusations informed by the singular authoritative mindset.

Feminist campaigns have also found in social media a space to stretch their voice and demand their rights. Regardless of the outcome of women's campaigns, feminism on social media platforms has stretched and reached women's voices to a mass level, giving them significance despite recent clampdowns on women rights figures that strikingly coincided with the lifting of the ban on women driving in 2018.

Finally, the popularity of independent comedy production online sheds light on another aspect of plurality and freedom. Not only do these shows use innovative methods to criticise injustices and inequalities, but they furthermore challenge the system in the very act of having 'fun'. The ways in which joyful, everyday practices turn subversive and counteract authoritarian systems are found in Bayat's (2010) study of Egypt and Iran where, similar to the Saudi Arabian case, the public's appetite for 'fun' carries profound meanings of agency and resistance and therefore threatens the dominant ideology:

> Fun disturbs exclusivist doctrinal authority because, as a source of instantaneous fulfilment, it represents a powerful rival archetype, one that stands against discipline, rigid structures, single discourse, and monopoly of truth. It subsists on spontaneity and breaths in the air of flexibility, openness, and critique – the very ethics that clash with the rigid one-dimensional discourse of doctrinal authority (Bayat, 2010: 156).

Here Bayat endorses how fun proposes a 'rival archetype' to the dominant structure. The act of fun in a highly controlled society is subversive: on the one hand it offers an uncontrolled secular universe of meaning, which may instigate an exit from the indoctrinated system of thought. On the other hand, fun is individualistic by nature, thus

opposing collectivism – itself an important component in identity construction, ideology diffusion and national unification.

10.1.2 How counter-discourses resonate within wider society

Reception of contentious discourses suggests that while those from liberal backgrounds accept and push for reformist and feminist expressions, the wider conservative and less privileged communities remain in favour of the dominant ideology.

For some people, contentious demands and expressions represent a reinforcement of their liberal values, which is informed by wider sources of cultural capital. For this group, free and open religious discussion is depicted as a safe 'haven', and ending guardianship is seen as 'basic human rights' and a demand that is 'not restricted by Islam' – local comedy shows represent original 'art', something they can 'relate to', and are themselves aesthetic and joyful. Their exposure to other forms of media and scholarship beyond the local, in addition to social and education merit, underpins their support and celebration of these movements.

For others, dissent is rejected and perceived as a threat to national and religious identity, and a tool for social degradation and moral decay. This group sheds light on the ways in which hegemony operates in an authoritarian system: it is not oppression that hinders dissent but rather the internalisation of the dominant system of thought. This group is represented by women who refuse to surrender patriarchal beliefs, fearing that even if it paved the way for functional progress, it may threaten the safety and privilege associated with being subordinated to their male guardians, which in return secures their social and financial privileges and defines their socio-religious identity. Such men and women cannot bear the openness found on social media platforms in relation to religious diversity and creative expression. It seems they have been subjected to severe ideological indoctrination that, as a result, makes 'flexibility, openness, and critique' a threat to their anti-secular belief structure (Bayat, 2010: 156). What they encourage therefore is the didactic utilisation of social media, commonly described as 'beneficial' and 'purposeful', as opposed to the undetermined creative expressions described as 'trivial', 'useless' and sometimes 'shameful'.

Contribution

This thesis highlights a sweeping consensus and defence of the dominant ideology, demonstrating the extent to which hegemony implicitly operates in the age of the internet, and resulting in obscuring attempts to cultivate multiplicity, and efforts to institutionalise freedoms and civil rights. It is hegemony that operates in the minds of

the people and manifests in how they defend what seems to be common sense, referring to it as 'our root', 'it is how we were born', it is 'our religion', or 'we are not like people in the West'. This determined yet subtly and subconsciously derived position in defending what seems to be one's identity structure is a powerful manifestation of how hegemony operates as a mechanism of control through bottom-up social reproduction. This hegemonic power is thus effective in hindering liberalised and reformist discourses from disseminating on online platforms as it becomes part of an operating *habitus* that is embodied as part of one's identity and religious devotion.

Hegemony in social media users' accounts and testimonies, as examined in four empirical thematic areas, is manifested in users' support for campaigns that jeopardise their livelihoods, if it does not interfere with their *collective beliefs*. Once it threatens the supremacy of that dominant structure, then social media users *willingly refuse to support it*, believing that the status quo is a better option. In fact, some social media users declare their wish for these movements to be 'buried' and doomed. Hence cases and campaigns that target civil and women's rights from a religious-legislative position are ideologically problematic and under-supported, as they appear to argue against collective religious beliefs. By the same token, campaigns that target corrupt governmental institutions, calling for improved wages and the freeing of prisoners of conscience gain wider consensus, especially at times of decreased online censorship. But the moment such campaigns undermine what is perceived to be a political, religious or collective safe-zone and 'when faced with a choice between security and liberty, those in the Middle East are increasingly willing to accept the former and give up the latter' (Sreberny and Khiabany: 2010, 146). The more this collective *habitus* prevails, the more likely it will continue to hinder contention and prevent progression to an effective social movement.

The genre of the arts seems to crystallise the operation of hegemony in a subtler way. The reaction it triggers is not a result of its explicit dissent but of its subversive nature, which challenges the restrictive didactic paradigm underpinning the dominant school of thought. No wonder it is challenged by the political-religious system – but being suppressed by its own social structure highlights how hegemony operates from within ordinary people who find the habit of immersing themselves in entertainment wrong and troubling. The frame associated with local entertainment production is secular, which triggers a sense of vulnerability to non-ideologically restrictive meanings.

10.1.3 Social media and the social order

This study does not suggest that social media came to shift, change, verticalize or democratise social order, but it nevertheless has an impact on the social *hierarchy* by

which symbolic meaning-production is ordered, in a didactic paradigm from the knowledgeable who preach and advise, down to the passive masses who listen and follow. This social hierarchal structure is key to the formation of the dominant narrative as it allows for a subtle dissemination and normalisation of injustices and inequalities through an indoctrinating paradigm, whereby symbolic meanings of patriotism, loyalty, social recognition and religious piety are associated with acts of submission to the dominant system.

What is witnessed in the rising social media contention is a break in this hierarchal order that allows a new, flexible, horizontally-formed social group to emerge beyond the pre-existing opposing social forces, the preaching leaders and submissive followers, the Islamists and liberals, the patriots and traitors, as well as the progressive minority and the passive majority. It is a social group that cannot be simplified or classified into either ends of the spectrum, since it belongs to a universe fuelled by *multiplicity* instead of singularity, that allows for a horizontal, multi-directional flow of speech instead of vertical, top-down order and uniformity. This multi-directional flow of (counter) discourses is observed by Sreberny and Khiabany in Iran's Blogosphere (2010) where multiple voices were 'articulated without the mediation of traditional intellectual filters, such as clergy or secular intellectuals. This is now a space of competing voices' (Lotfalian, 2011: 278).

This social group is represented by less privileged men and women who adopt a counter-discourse. Unlike the privileged who own the cultural capital that allows them to adopt and produce progressive contemporary ideas beyond those propagated by the system, this group is constituted by ordinary citizens subjected to conservative fundamental values as well as conventional forms of education, who then experience the internet. For such people, the internet is the university through which they connect with the world, activate their curious minds and transcend beyond the collective mindset. It is a space that enables them to engage in contemporary debates in relation to political Islamic thought, civil rights and women's rights, and to express their individual views freely and deliberately.

The significance of this group stems from their origin within the collective structure, which suppresses unconventional thought whilst enjoying considerable access to conservative communities, in addition to being overloaded with grievances against the system which seemingly deceived their minds and stifled their unique individual thinking. All of which makes their acts and expressions effectively more compelling and contentious. This group empirically represents a significant proportion of social media activists and producers, and a smaller proportion of general social media users who expressed engagement with counter-discourses contrary to their home, school and peer

values. These users have shown support of and engagement with progressive modes of thinking from those who have experienced and expressed their mutation, like Sheikh Salman al-Oudah, Khalawi and others who managed to gather a significant fanbase and followers on various social media outlets, thus indicating the extent to which multiplicity is superseding hierarchal didacticism and therefore changing what used to be a strictly monolithic social structure.

10.2 Reflection on the literature

This study ambitiously brings together social media, social movements framings and a 'modified version of Gramsci's concept of hegemony' (Chalcraft, 2016: 32) with the study of Saudi Arabian online dissent to argue that what cools contention in social media platforms is a deep internalisation and reproduction of the dominant ideology on a popular level, which eventually withholds people from active civil engagement and effective social change.

The empirical analysis seems to suggest that the *significance* of contentious discourses, on the one hand, lies in enabling a public sphere that serves as a civil society or as a 'grassroots parliament' as described by its initiators. In addition, this public sphere reformulates the social order and brings about social cohesion that does not use existing tribal collective affiliations as its base but rather connects people based on their individuality, like-mindedness and interest in civic engagement and progressive change.

The *implications* of these counter-discourses, on the other hand, lie in the ways in which hegemony operates. This thesis posits that counter-discourses, initiated by civil actors and grass-roots framings and campaigns, are limited by the same social structures to which they belong. What hinders dissent from taking effect – as it appears in the challenges expressed by social media actors and general users – is power from within.

This theoretically informed, heavily empirical study adds a fresh scope to literature in the field of social movements in the internet age, with a specific insight into how contention and counter-discourses operate and challenge the ruling system in Saudi Arabia. The following section highlights how this study differs from, and what it adds to, the relevant literature in the field.

10.2.1 Social media and social movements literature

While considering contentious discourses on social media, the study avoids engagement with the contradictory, technologically-focused arguments in the literature, whether they underline (Shirky, 2008; Shirky, 2010; Castells 2009) or underestimate (Morozov, 2011;

Fuchs, 2014) the role of the internet in democratising societies. Instead the study strives to highlight how contentious discourses disseminate in a conservative society, how far they resonate within the social structure, and what encourages or hinders different social groups from engaging with dissent. In other words, exploring the underlying incentives from the producers' perspective as well as the social media users' receptive/interactive perspective, in an effort to understand how control and resistance operate on a societal level.

What this research adds to the literature that explicitly (Bayat, 2007; Chalcraft, 2016; Nordenson, 2017) or implicitly (Ayubi, 1995; Wheeler, 2017) employs the Gramscian hegemony in the study of Middle Eastern movements is a fresh reading of such social movements with a detailed focus on the rise of dissent in Saudi Arabia and how it is contested in a conservative society. It pays close attention to how hegemony operates to suppress dissent – as part of the state's machinery of control – and how people navigate their growing demands and rights in a tightly controlled society, one which is governed by its strict collective and religious norms consistent with an authoritarian regime.

This study also enriches literature on social media movements and protests in different regional contexts that questions the role of the internet in facilitating a public sphere, establishing counter-framings and instigating movements in Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes. It does so by adding a particular focus on the role of social media in facilitating a public sphere and mobilising dissent in the Saudi Arabian context.

10.2.2 Locating the study in the Saudi context

This study builds on scholarly work drawing on Saudi Arabia's political, religious and mass media historical backgrounds (al-Rasheed, 2008; Sakr, 1999 and 2003; Hammond, 2008; Yamani, 2003 and 2008), some of which detail the reforms that were debated (Kéchichian, 2013), while others consider the dominant religious discourse (Lacroix, 2011; al-Khidr, 2011) and the ways in which it justifies the regime's legitimacy through 'the management of truth' (Shahi, 2013: 1). This study also extends from specific studies on Saudi Arabia (al-Rasheed, 2015b; al-Ghathami, 2016; al-Oudah, 2012; al-Saggaf and Simmons, 2015; and Hertog, 2015a), arguing that social media along with the atmosphere of the Arab Spring, has shaped wide political consciousness and brought Saudi society to a post-Sahwa era, an era of intellectual freedom, global connectedness and civil engagement.

This thesis also draws on the emerging atypical religious discourse that adopts a modernist democratic rhetoric (Lacroix, 2004 and 2014; al-Rasheed, 2015b and 2016),

subsequently challenging the traditional intellectual binary of Islamists versus secular-liberals into traditionalists versus progressive reformists (Hertog, 2015a).

Despite the importance of these accounts in emphasising the role of alternative emerging voices that demand reform in contemporary Saudi Arabia, their focus concerns political and religious discourse rather than social media activism and entertainment production. This study hence contributes by shedding light on the wider discourse around civil engagement, reform and change proliferating on social media platforms.

Moreover, the aforementioned studies concerning Saudi Arabian political economy from a foreign policy perspective (Ehteshami and Wright, 2007; Gallarotti and Yahia, 2013; Lawson, 2011; Lucas, 2004; Niblock, 2004) predominantly emphasise the role of the state's machinery of control in combatting dissent, while also underscoring economic and symbolic resources that underpin the state's stability and ensures the continuation of its hegemonic rule. This study differs by providing a bottom-up angle to the way in which control operates, emphasising how consent is constructed and reproduced from below. So as Saudi youth show different forms of resistance to oppression through grassroots reform initiatives and campaigns for social change, forms of resistance to their activism from within the social structure are also actively present.

Finally, this study acknowledges recent reports on Saudi Arabia's increased censorship measures from mid-2016 that coincided the announcement of vision 2030, the appointment of Muhammad bin Salman as Crown Prince, a major cabinet reshuffle and mass detentions of dissident voices and major religious and economic power holders (Jones, 2018a and 2018b). However, their scope falls outside the documented period, hence this study provides opportunities for further research in this area.

10.3 Final remarks

The *timing* of this study is of particular significance. It reflects Saudi Arabia's moment of hope and aspiration for change and reform at times of rapid change and openness to the world, assisted by the newness of social media, which served as a platform to raise the public voice and bring about alternative opinions – before it became regulated and censored by the state. The first few years of social media activism in Saudi Arabia, until the year in which fieldwork was conducted (2014), mark chaotic times in which the political leadership was compelled to respond to public demands raised on social media platforms to secure its sovereign power against growing regional unrests. Consequently, a dialogue was allowed to emerge and a public opinion was formed.

This study documents a distinctive moment in Saudi Arabian history and politics that cannot be continued or repeated, especially after the mass crackdowns on activists, religious leaders outside the religious establishment, feminists, and many other social media public figures that followed the transition in power to the second generation of the House of Saud. With the majority of interviewees behind bars at the time of writing, it is sensible to argue that the passionate, bold accounts they have given will remain exclusive to the period, telling the story of the short-lived Saudi freedom and hope for change. Yet a question remains: is there the possibility for a Saudi social movement to build should the political opportunity arise? This is what future studies in the field can reveal.

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