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**Saudi Women Influential Entrepreneurs in the Fashion Industry on Social
Media: Exploring Agency, Intercultural Communication, and Feminist
Expressions**

Nadine Naser Jitan Zuaiter

A Doctoral Thesis

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PhD in Audiovisual Communication and Advertising

Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

2025

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ABSTRACT

The rise of Saudi women influencers is a recent phenomenon, particularly in the post-Vision 2030 era, where the fashion industry plays a central role in cultural transformation. This study examines how Saudi influential entrepreneurs navigate and express cultural identity, agency, and feminist engagement within this evolving landscape. Focusing on entrepreneurs in fashion-related fields—public relations, marketing, design, cultural consulting, fashion styling, and entrepreneurship—it explores how they negotiate globalization, digital branding, and shifting gender norms while maintaining cultural identity.

Using a case study approach, this research analyzes Instagram content from six influential Saudi women entrepreneurs between 2018 and 2023, examining how they construct online identities through images, videos, captions, and hashtags. In-depth interviews provide further insight into their self-perceptions and strategies for online identity construction, particularly regarding cultural identity and feminism. Rather than covering multiple social media platforms, this study focuses on Instagram as a strategic tool for branding, self-representation, and entrepreneurship. Drawing on Structuration Theory Giddens' and Bourdieu's concept of Habitus, the study explores how these women navigate gender norms while preserving cultural authenticity. It introduces "Glocalized Habitus," expanding on Robertson's concept of Glocalization, to describe how they blend global influences with local traditions, forming hybrid identities. Giddens' concept of time-space distanciation further explains how digital platforms redefine women's roles beyond localized constraints. The study also investigates Saudi women influencers' role in intercultural communication, balancing cultural heritage with global marketing practices. Their engagement in feminist discourse is examined through commodity feminism, where empowerment is linked to entrepreneurial success, branding, and

digital influence rather than collective activism. Aligned with Vision 2030 and economic reforms, these women exemplify Gill's concept of "gendered neoliberalism," where empowerment is framed as economic self-sufficiency and professional success. The findings highlight a shift from private identity to public self-representation, where Saudi women balance collective national identity and individual agency. Fashion emerges as a medium for cultural transformation, as these women engage with global brands and social media, reshaping their economic and social roles while maintaining cultural affiliations. Their agency has evolved from "quiet encroachment" Bayat' to visible leadership in business, fashion, and digital influence, positioning them as key players in Saudi Arabia's modernization and global cultural exchange.

Keywords: Saudi Influential Entrepreneurs, Fashion Industry, Instagram, Agency, Intercultural communication, Feminism, Women, Saudi Arabia, Social media, Identity, Branding

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Women in Saudi Arabia are currently experiencing what can be described as their "Golden Era." They are leading social transformation as change agents and innovators. This exceptional phase results from significant political and economic changes that have dramatically improved women's status in society (Havril, 2024). Today, many Saudi women are recognized as leaders in various social spheres, occupying positions in universities, ministries, and institutions dedicated to enabling and rehabilitating women within the labor community (SPA, 2020). Recent historical reforms have been enacted to activate and empower women's economic participation, which had long been overlooked. Recently, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman introduced new regulations that transformed the landscape under Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, a national strategy to diversify the Kingdom's economy and reduce its dependence on oil (Al-Qahtani et al., 2020). A central tenet of Vision 2030 is to increase women's participation across all facets of the Kingdom's social and economic spheres. Additionally, the National Transition 2020 program outlines 36 strategic objectives supporting Saudi women's empowerment, independence, and self-reliance (Al Najjar, 2019).

However, this political and economic transformation necessitates cultural development, which evolves gradually. Visitors to Saudi Arabia today may perceive a rapid compression of time due to the profound changes that are now evident. Northam and Tanis (2018) discussed that "Saudis are living a culture shock within their own country, much of what was forbidden in Saudi Arabia—cinema, music, theater, women driving—is suddenly acceptable" (p. 5). Hence, several Saudi nationals observe that their traditional societal norms and religious beliefs are being upended.

Under the mission of Vision 2030, the authorities recognize that culture and entertainment are essential for maintaining a high quality of life. Thus, the Saudi Arabian leadership has identified pathways through which culture and entertainment can contribute to long-term economic growth and yield comprehensive civil benefits (Tawfik et al., 2020). In this view, Ignatius (2017) outlined that the Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Saudi

Arabia General Entertainment Authority, Mr. Ahmed al-Khatib, stated, “We want to change the culture,” with a target of creating six public entertainment options every weekend for Saudis, his larger goal is "spreading happiness" in what has often been a somber country. A vital step towards facilitating a genuine cultural shift was the establishment of the first Ministry of Culture, formally launched on March 27, 2019. This ministry has a clear cultural vision that plays a crucial role in delivering Saudi Arabia's ambitious transformation program. The aspirations of the ministry include promoting culture as a way of life, enabling culture to contribute to economic growth, and creating opportunities for international cultural exchange.

Reflecting on personal experiences, such as moving from Amman, Jordan, to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in 2014, reveals the stark contrast between the past and the present. At that time, women faced significant restrictions: driving was prohibited, wearing a closed abaya was mandatory, and dependence on male family members was a necessity for daily activities. Public cinemas, live music, and parties were virtually nonexistent, and dining establishments without "family sections" were inaccessible to women (Hammond, 2004). The religious police in Saudi Arabia strictly enforced dress codes and restricted interactions between unrelated men and women. Agerschou-Madsen & Malmvig (2024) note that public spaces were gender-segregated, and activities like music and comedy were restricted. Youths defying these norms by laughing or enjoying themselves publicly risked reprimand. Today, those restrictions have given way to a vastly different reality. Agerschou-Madsen & Malmvig (2024) illustrate this shift through the perspective of a Saudi woman: “If I narrated my life to my 10–12-year-old self, I would never believe it. I am doing everything on the forbidden list, and it feels great! I am not wearing an abaya, I am driving my car, I can rent my place, and parallel to that, I have all the music” (p.1).

Researcher Deborah Wheeler (2020) highlights the previous stresses of gender separation, noting that "taking a taxi as a single female was risky and culturally frowned upon. Traveling to meetings with men without a male family member's accompaniment often caused discomfort." (p.99). One CEO told her, "You know you are the first woman to set foot in this building; I hope you don't need a restroom because there isn't one here for women" (p. 22). In just five years, social change has fostered a culture where men and women collaborate in malls and businesses. Women increasingly occupy roles as the sole employees in many stores across the mega malls throughout the Kingdom (Algumzi, 2022). By 2018, the dress code had

evolved significantly; women began wearing a broader array of colors in their abayas, and it became common for them to wear their abayas open, revealing clothing underneath, with many choosing not to wear a hijab even in conservative Riyadh (Wheeler, 2020).

As a lecturer at the Jeddah College of Advertising (female campus), I have witnessed the transformation in advertising. While teaching copywriting and media production courses, I often addressed the ethical restrictions surrounding commercials targeting women, which typically avoided depicting women's bodies. Historically, students aimed to symbolize women to convey their ideas. However, the announcement and relaxation of policies for women bring a significant shift, leading to the rise of "femvertising" in Saudi Arabia. Several advertising campaigns focused on empowering women, working to change the stereotypical images that had long prevailed (Alharbi & Boling, 2022).

Additionally, starting in 2021, the private university where I work began to allow mixed-gender classes, which is not common in Saudi Arabia, as until now, most universities have separate campuses for males and females. In 2016, while attending the Dubai Lynx Festival, I observed a shortlisted and awarded campaign under the "Use of Digital Media in Direct Marketing." The "Step Forward for Always" campaign aimed to empower Saudi women (Turnbull, 2017). One remark from the agency noted, "We tried to show women's feet instead of their faces since Saudi Arabia is a conservative market; we can't show women's faces and bodies, plus most women don't share their real identities online." Women contributed footage of their steps toward a better future. While this campaign received significant praise, it sparked discomfort among my students at the Jeddah College of Advertising, who felt insulted. Nonetheless, it marked the beginning of noticeable change on the ground. Many Saudi women and influencers began becoming more active on social media platforms, showcasing their identities in their ways.

This brings us to a critical issue concerning online identities for Saudi women. Living in this country, I've observed that many Saudi women maintain dual identities—one for public consumption and another in private, where they can express themselves more freely. Even on social media, this challenge persists. However, recent changes spurred by Vision 2030 and its reforms are fostering a noticeable online and offline transformation. My former students have become notable figures on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, achieving micro-

celebrity status across various fields. Overall, social media platforms produce and empower women entrepreneurs and influencers in Saudi Arabia. Social media platforms have provided a space for these women to showcase their achievements and progress even before the activation of Vision 2030. However, their earlier freedom was limited, lacking support from the government and society (Mesfer Alqahtani, 2020). The rapid growth of social media platforms, particularly Instagram, has reshaped the dynamics of the fashion industry in Saudi Arabia, allowing influential women entrepreneurs to craft distinctive cultural narratives. Women use social media platforms to assert their agency, promote intercultural communication, and foster a feminist culture within the cultural transition in Saudi society.

1.1 Research framework

As Saudi Arabia experiences rapid modernization, exploring cultural change through women's experiences becomes especially significant. Practically, Vision 2030 policies, alongside the impact of social media and the rise of female influencers, are reshaping the sociocultural landscape (look at Chapter 2). Legal reforms and increased social flexibility have empowered Saudi women to navigate these shifts, selectively embracing transformations and asserting their autonomy within evolving social norms. However, a sustained balance between cultural authenticity and modernization has led to societal debates and internal tensions (Al Altuwayjiri, 2019; Eid, 2023; Lary, 2023). This study adds to this conversation by examining the experiences of Saudi women's influential entrepreneurs in the fashion industry, shedding light on how they respond to these ongoing changes.

Initially, this study aimed to examine the image of Saudi women in advertising and explore the cultural shift in society and its impact on the portrayal of women in the advertising and marketing fields. Practically focusing on femvertising and the portrayal of women in the advertising industry. However, considering the current theoretical and practical gaps, this study explores the cultural identity of Saudi influencers and their role in the feminist cultural transition in Saudi Arabia. While femvertising remains a component of the research, the focus has broadened. This study has evolved from a general emphasis on Saudi influencers on social media to a more specific examination of “Influential Entrepreneur” in the fashion industry. Notably, it focuses on women who owned businesses and worked in fashion before gaining recognition online as influencers. Guíñez-Cabrera and Aqueveque (2021) distinguish two types

of social media influencers (SMIs); the first type, the “Entrepreneurial Influencer,” includes individuals who began as content creators, such as students or employed professionals, who eventually accumulated enough followers to become “Potential SMIs.” The second type relevant to this study is the “Influential Entrepreneur”—an individual who was already an entrepreneur or independent professional but gained substantial followings through social network management, positioning them as appealing partners for brands. For such social media influencers, social media not only transformed their business promotion strategies but also opened new opportunities in influencer marketing. All participants in this study align with the “Influential Entrepreneur” type, each involved in different facets of the fashion industry. Initially, this study aimed to include “Entrepreneurial Influencers”—those who transitioned to entrepreneurship after gaining significant followings—but recruitment challenges limited participation to established entrepreneurs. Consequently, the research focuses solely on these influential Entrepreneur figures, examining how their Instagram presence contributes to Saudi Arabia’s evolving cultural landscape. In conclusion, this study adds to this conversation by examining the experiences of Saudi women's influential entrepreneurs in the fashion industry, shedding light on how they respond to these ongoing changes.

Digital marketing has revolutionized the global fashion industry, transforming how brands interact with consumers, market their products, boost sales, and leverage social media influencers (Ihzaturrahma & Kusumawati, 2021). The growing popularity of social media platforms has empowered influencer marketing, enabling fashion brands to adopt innovative digital strategies to remain competitive and relevant in an evolving market. These strategies have significantly shaped consumer intentions and loyalty, particularly toward fashion brands while solidifying their dominance in the e-commerce sector. Advertising through digital platforms allows fashion brands to effectively target younger demographics, especially millennials and Gen Z (Pham et al., 2021). Statista reported that the global online fashion market was valued at \$1 trillion in 2023, with projections estimating it will reach \$1.5 trillion by 2028 (Statista, 2023). McKinsey’s “The State of Fashion Report” further underscores the importance of digital interactions, stating that nearly 60% of global fashion sales in 2023 were influenced by social media engagement, online advertising, digital content marketing and, additionally 45% of fashion consumers rely on online platforms to discover new products, compared to only 28% who turn to physical stores. (McKinsey, 2023)

In addition to e-commerce growth, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become integral to fashion marketing. Instagram, for example, boasts over 3 billion monthly active users, with 130 million engaging with shopping posts each month (Hootsuite, 2023). Influencer marketing is vital in enhancing brand visibility, with the industry valued at \$10 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2023). A survey by Influencer Marketing Hub revealed that 67% of fashion brands utilize influencer marketing as a core component of their digital strategy, with 89% reporting higher returns on investment than other channels. The global fashion industry generated \$770.90 billion in revenue in 2024, with projections reaching \$1,183.00 billion by 2029 (Statista, 2024).

Beyond enhancing brand visibility, influencers also play a pivotal role in cultural exchange through influencer marketing, serving as key representatives of global brands in diverse markets. According to a recent Vogue Business report, major fashion houses are increasingly leveraging regional influencers to bridge cultural gaps and strengthen their brand presence. For example, Dior launched the *Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams* exhibition at the Saudi National Museum in Riyadh during *Riyadh Season 2024*. The event, attended by notable figures such as Faisal Bafarat (CEO of the Saudi General Entertainment Authority) and Patrick Maisonnave (French ambassador to Saudi Arabia), featured prominent fashion influencers, including Karen Wazen, Yara Al Namah, and Leenah AlBakr. This strategic collaboration underscores how influencer representation fosters cultural exchange, enhances brand positioning, and highlights both the evolving role of influencer marketing in the global fashion industry and the localization strategies that global brands are adopting (Vogue Business, 2024).

This growing influence of influencer marketing is particularly evident in emerging markets such as Saudi Arabia, which has become a key player in the global fashion industry, contributing \$12.5 billion in 2023, while international brands added \$7.3 billion to the market (Fast Company, 2024). The country has also demonstrated leadership in venture capital investments within the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa), with \$239.9 million invested in fashion ventures during the first quarter of 2024, representing 65% of the market share (Fast Company, 2024). As the Saudi fashion industry continues to grow—valued at \$770.90 billion in 2024 and expected to reach \$1,183 billion by 2029 (Statista, 2024)—brands are increasingly collaborating with Saudi influencers who review products across social media

platforms (Alhomaid, 2023).

1.2 Research Scope

This study adopts a case study approach, focusing on six influential Saudi women entrepreneurs in the fashion industry and analyzing their Instagram content from 2018 to 2023. Instead of examining multiple social media platforms, this research provides a detailed analysis exclusively on Instagram, deconstructing each post's elements—including images, videos, captions, and hashtags—to offer a nuanced understanding of how these entrepreneurs express their agency. Instagram is a pivotal platform for exploring how Saudi women in fashion negotiate their cultural identities and advocate for feminist ideals while connecting with local and global audiences. With 20.49 million users, Instagram is the second most popular social media platform in Saudi Arabia, making it a powerful tool for reaching a broad audience. The platform's visually driven, image-sharing format makes it ideal for fashion-related activities, supporting personal branding and public engagement (Choufan, 2022). Furthermore, Instagram is a central space for feminist expression, reflecting and shaping contemporary social dynamics (Savolainen et al., 2022). Instagram provides women entrepreneurs the resources to make informed decisions and independently control their professional trajectories (Dewi, 2020). For Saudi women, Instagram builds confidence and offers a means of actively shaping personal and professional identities. The six entrepreneurs selected through purposive sampling (explained in Chapter 4) reflect this empowered usage of the platform.

1.3 The Research Aims and Questions

This study explores how influential Saudi entrepreneurs, particularly women in the fashion industry, navigate and express their cultural identity amid the nation's cultural transformation. It examines how these influencers articulate their identities, leveraging platforms like Instagram to shape their online presence and influence. In addition, this study also investigates the role of these entrepreneurs in intercultural communication, analyzing how they balance their cultural heritage with global marketing practices to foster intercultural dialogue. Additionally, it delves into the contributions of Saudi women influencers to feminist culture in the Kingdom, assessing how they use digital media to advocate for gender equality, challenge societal norms, and drive social and cultural change. The primary research questions that arise from the aims of this study are:

- **Cultural Identity and Agency**

How do influential Saudi entrepreneurs comprehend and articulate their cultural identities amid Saudi Arabia's ongoing cultural transformation, particularly concerning shifts impacting women?

In what ways do these influencers/entrepreneurs exercise agency to shape and express their cultural identities within the evolving social landscape of Saudi Arabia?

- **Online Identity Construction on Instagram**

What content and presentation styles do these influencers adopt on Instagram to portray their culture and career?

- **Contribution to Feminist Culture and Social Transformation**

- In what ways do these influencers contribute to the broader feminist culture and ongoing social transformations within the country?

- **Intercultural Communication and Global Integration**

How do global marketing practices impact their cultural identity, and how do these influencers balance their cultural roots with global commercial trends?

Overall, the abovementioned research questions are designed to guide an in-depth exploration of the social media influencers' roles in cultural identity expression, online identity construction, intercultural communication, and feminist advocacy.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The present study has significant theoretical and practical implications, as stated below.

1.4.1 Theoretical Significance

To highlight the theoretical significance of the present study, it's essential to build upon the existing scholarship while addressing the specific cultural context of Saudi women influencers. A previous empirical study by Vear (2020) applied and investigated the application of structuration theory to social media, focusing on how YouTube influencers navigate their agency within the digital environment's constraints. In addition, the author acknowledges a persistent gap between the abstract concepts of structuration theory and their empirical

application. To bridge this gap, Vear (2020) suggested and adopted a social constructivist paradigm to understand how influencers perceive and manage their digital identities and the complexities influencers face, like audience expectations, platform features, and sponsorship demands, to construct their online personas.

Building on this theoretical foundation, this study seeks to translate structuration theory into measurable concepts by adopting an interpretivist epistemological approach. This choice aligns with the study's focus on Saudi women influencers and their engagement with cultural identity, feminist contributions, and intercultural communication during the cultural transition in Saudi Arabia. Structuration theory, which examines the dynamic interplay between structure (the rules and resources governing behavior) and agency (individual actions), resonates with interpretivism's focus on understanding social realities from the participants' perspectives. Through this lens, I will explore how Saudi influencers express and construct their cultural identities on social media, particularly Instagram, as they navigate the balance between traditional norms and modern influences. Notably, the sample contains 6 case studies. A total of 25 posts were chosen for each case study, amounting to 150 posts across all cases. Out of these, 36 posts were incorporated into the discussion chapters for detailed analysis. Additionally, qualitative methods like interviews and observation under a case study approach will offer insights into these influencers' contributions to feminist culture and agency.

The analysis extends to intercultural communication, where these influencers negotiate local and global expectations while collaborating with international brands. Giddens' concept of time-space distinction, which describes the detachment of social interactions from localized settings and their re-embedding in global contexts, is particularly relevant to this study. The interpretive framework will thus facilitate a nuanced understanding of how Saudi women influencers both mirror and mold evolving cultural narratives, offering an empirical examination of structuration theory within the unique social fabric of Saudi Arabia.

In this context, the present study integrated global and local perspectives to investigate how Saudi women entrepreneurs are influencing feminist cultural transitions through the lenses of post-feminism, popular feminism, and commodity feminism. As Dosekun (2015) states, "If post-feminism as culture has 'gone global,' our critical feminist conceptualizations and analyses of it must, too" (p. 993). In addition, Dosekun's (2015) transnational perspective suggests that

post-feminism—anchored in media, consumerism, and commodification—effortlessly crosses borders, facilitated by today’s expansive and swift global media and consumer networks. The same media narratives, consumer goods, and practices that feminist scholars link to post-feminism in Western settings are equally present and impactful in non-Western contexts, driven by globalization's influence. My research aligns with this perspective by contextualizing post-feminist theory within Saudi Arabia. Recently, Lary (2023) demonstrated that Saudi women microcelebrities’ self-(re) presentations on Instagram reflect new ideals of femininity that incorporate aspects of Gill’s (2007b, 2017) postfeminist sensibilities. She emphasized the distinctions between Western and Saudi interpretations of post-feminist media by employing the concept of 'post-feminist sensibility' to examine the Instagram content of these Saudi microcelebrities. Notably, this study uses the term 'feminist culture' to describe the agency of Saudi influencers, acknowledging that while their expressions might not fully align with Western feminism, they still engage with a broader feminist discourse.

This research underscores how Saudi women influencers are actively participating in post-feminism. Instagram, in particular, serves as a platform that empowers women to gain confidence and navigate the digital landscape—whether sharing fashion styles, endorsing products, offering guidance, or supporting various causes. Their engagement often revolves around lifestyle, consumption, and self-expression. The rise of commodity feminism among Saudi influencers signifies a shift in agency, reflecting Saudi Arabia's ongoing social and cultural transformation. Instagram enables them to present diverse feminine identities, embracing neoliberal qualities such as independence and self-confidence. Aligned with Saudi Vision 2030 and recent economic reforms, Saudi women are practicing a form of 'gendered neoliberalism.' As Gill (2017) describes, post-feminism operates as a form of 'gendered neoliberalism,' where women are "empowered" and "free" to engage in traditionally feminine activities while embodying the entrepreneurial self (p. 611). This evolution of feminism demonstrates that it is not a homogeneous concept but varies according to cultural contexts, blending modern aspirations with traditional values in Saudi society.

1.4.2 Practical Significance

In recent years, studies have increasingly examined Saudi women’s online presence as influencers and microcelebrities, especially in how they shape consumer behavior across

industries such as food, beauty, fashion, and health. Research has consistently shown that influencer marketing has become a powerful tool that extends beyond traditional advertising, significantly impacting purchasing behaviors in Saudi Arabia (Alhomaid, 2023; Al-Nasser & Mahomed, 2020; Mabkhot et al., 2022; Alwafi et al., 2022; Alshahrani, 2024). Influencer credibility, authenticity, and alignment with cultural expectations are critical factors that drive Saudi consumers' responses, with visual presentation and perceived trustworthiness on platforms like Instagram playing essential roles in purchase decisions (Al Jaed & Badghish, 2021; Alyahya, 2021; Alotaibi et al., 2019; Alomair, 2022). This body of research highlights the transformative role of social media in shaping consumer dynamics as digital platforms become integral to Saudi Arabia's evolving consumer landscape (Trad & Al Dabbagh, 2020; Alghonaim et al., 2019). However, there remains a research gap in studies that examine Saudi women influencers, specifically from a digital media and cultural perspective. Saudi women's microcelebrities, a relatively new phenomenon, navigate sociocultural norms surrounding female visibility, attracting considerable media and public attention (N. Altuwayjiri, 2019). While some view them as controversial, others regard them as embodying a new ideal in Saudi Arabia's modernization. Altuwayjiri (2019) also noted that Saudi women's active engagement with social media challenges traditional values and norms, positioning them at the forefront of reshaping the national image of Saudi women today. While Hurley (2019a, 2021a, 2021b, 2022) has contributed recent work examining Gulf-Arab women microcelebrities collectively, few studies focus exclusively on Saudi women or explore the nuances of their content production and self-representation.

Previous empirical studies focused on the Instagram content of Saudi microcelebrities to explore how these women consciously shape the messages they convey, whether reinforcing, replicating, or challenging traditional femininity (Lary, 2023). In contrast, the present study adopts a case study approach to focus specifically on influential Saudi women entrepreneurs in the fashion industry. By selecting entrepreneurs across diverse roles within the industry, this research delves into their cultural identity, intercultural communication practices, and engagement with feminist culture, offering a distinct and detailed perspective on how they negotiate cultural norms and boundaries. This approach enables a more focused analysis, emphasizing content, the entrepreneurial agency, and the broader impact of these influencers on Saudi cultural identity. This study contributes empirically to the emerging and expanding global scholarship on Gulf and Saudi women, particularly by exploring the agency of Saudi

women in cultural transitions through their work in the fashion industry and their online presence and influence. The present study paves the way for further studies on Saudi influencers' culture and online identity and intercultural communication studies, mainly through influencers' collaborations with local and global marketing and advertising practices online. Additionally, the research opens new avenues for studying the evolution of dress styles and their reflection on the changing roles and empowerment of women and the role of fashion in the cultural transition in Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, one of the significant contributions of this study is the application of a case study approach to analyze social media influencers within the specific context of Saudi Arabia, treating each influencer as an individual case. Initially, after conducting interviews with three Saudi entrepreneurial influencers from various sectors within the fashion industry, it became clear that a case-based analysis would yield more profound insights than a broader, quantitative approach. This shift to a case study methodology allows an in-depth exploration of each influencer's unique background, narrative, and digital strategy, providing a nuanced understanding of their personal experiences and professional journeys. To further enhance and validate the data from these interviews, I integrated an analysis of selected Instagram posts and conducted observational research. This approach offers a well-rounded perspective by corroborating interview insights with direct examples of their online content and interactions, thus offering a comprehensive view of their agency, cultural engagement, and influence within the rapidly evolving social landscape of Saudi Arabia.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis comprises eight main chapters, each contributing to an in-depth exploration of how influential Saudi women entrepreneurs are shaping and navigating sociocultural change in Saudi Arabia through their digital presence on Instagram. The chapters are structured to develop a comprehensive theoretical, contextual, and analytical framework to understand these influencers' evolving agency within the fashion industry. Chapter 2 gives information about the Saudi context and chapter 3 establish the theoretical foundation and explore the literature framing this study. Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach, including the philosophical basis, research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques applied in the study. The core findings are presented across Chapters 5 through 7, each addressing

different aspects of the influencers' experiences and insights gathered through analysis. Finally, Chapter 8 serves as the concluding chapter, synthesizing the main findings and reflecting on the theoretical and practical implications.

CHAPTER 2

CONTEXTUALIZING POLICIES, INTERNET, AND WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA

2.1.New political projects for the future of Saudi Arabia: Culture Saudi Vision 2030 strategy

2.1.1. Saudi Vision 2030 blends modernization with traditionalism

Over more than a century, Saudi Arabia has undergone a profound evolution, transitioning from a tribal union to a modernized monarchy. This transformation has been shaped by many factors, including governance reforms to enhance efficiency and economic welfare, the distribution of oil wealth, demographic shifts, and increased engagement with the global business community. Both internal demands for change and external pressures driven by globalization have played pivotal roles in this progression (Quamar, 2015; Awwad & Hamdan, 2023). Rizvi and Hussain (2022) point out that Saudi Arabian society has undergone significant transformations across various areas, including notable progress in women's status. Quamar (2015) adds that these changes are accompanied by advancements in education, shifts in the role of religion and religious authorities, and adaptations to traditional norms and values. These developments reflect broader social and cultural changes, marked by an increasing focus on women's empowerment, promoting cultural diversity, and enhancing social inclusivity (Klingmann, 2021).

As a result of these transformations, Saudi Arabia, at the turn of the twenty-first century, differs substantially from its counterpart a century ago. The envisioned concept of an Islamized modern or modernized Islamic sociopolitical entity, characterized by peaceful coexistence, individual liberties, and scientific advancements, has become increasingly plausible, if not already realized, in the form of contemporary Saudi Arabia (Quamar, 2015).

During the reign of Prince Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS), Saudi Arabia witnessed significant political changes that impacted the traditional and conservative values of the kingdom. The Vision 2030 project, announced in 2016, is the cornerstone of these changes, which seeks to strike a delicate balance between modernization, including economic reforms, privatization, and cultural initiatives, and preserving Islamic and authoritarian political

principles (Grabowski, 2021). It also made Mohammad bin Salman one of the key people of the royal family with the label of “modernizer” and representative of a young generation of princes who had a different point of view on many political, social, and economic issues in the country (Ozarowski, 2022). Before being named Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman spearheaded initiatives driving Saudi Arabia's economic and social transformation. In 2016, he unveiled Vision 2030, a comprehensive plan with goals grouped into three categories: social development, economic transition, and ambitious national progress.

This reform agenda, spearheaded by Prince (MBS), challenges the conservative nature of the Saudi state by promoting modernization initiatives. Recognizing the need for economic growth, he has taken steps to revise the religious and social order, including reducing the powers of the religious police, lifting the ban on female drivers, weakening the male guardianship system, easing gender segregation, and enhancing women's participation in the public sphere. (Grabowski, 2021).

Saudi Arabia still has a considerable distance to travel, disentangling the state from religion (Grabowski, 2021). However, it's essential to recognize that the hybrid model adopted by the kingdom, which blends modernization with traditionalism, diverges from the approach taken by Western nations centuries ago. Unlike the Western narrative that positioned modernity and traditionalism as opposing forces, Saudi Arabia has pursued a twofold strategy: modernized infrastructure and services while preserving Wahhabism and the monarchical system as bastions of tradition (Grabowski, 2021). This nuanced approach allows societies to embrace modernization while safeguarding tradition. In Saudi Arabia, modernization efforts extend to religion, as evidenced by the Vision 2030 reform program (Grabowski, 2021).

While Mohammed bin Salman emphasizes the importance of Islam in Saudi society and politics through Vision 2030, he advocates for a shift toward moderate Islam as the path forward (Ozarowski, 2022). Vision 2030 is an all-encompassing plan addressing social, cultural, religious, and economic dimensions. The rapid pace of change raises concerns about preserving local identities—whether Saudi, Arab, Islamic, tribal, or sect-specific—amid globalization. Acknowledging these challenges, the plan envisions a "thriving economy" and a society deeply rooted in its traditions. However, debates are inevitable regarding the definition of local identity in a society with diverse views on culture, family, religion, and

faith—diversity often overshadowed by the simplistic portrayal of Saudi Arabia as uniformly conservative and devout (Kinninmont, 2017).

The kingdom proudly acknowledges its Islamic heritage and Islamic principles, which serve as the guiding force behind Vision 2030's implementation. Vision 2030 recognized Saudi society's untapped potential, which had been constrained by reliance on oil revenue, limiting the development of diverse skills. Key social goals included cultural promotion and expansion, increasing Umrah visitors from 8 million to 30 million annually, and doubling the number of UNESCO-listed Saudi heritage sites. Additionally, the plan aimed to rank Saudi cities among the world's top 100 while preserving the environment. Another target was to boost household spending on culture and entertainment from 2.9% to 6%, supported by establishing dedicated cultural and entertainment venues (Ożarowski, 2022).

For instance, ensuring the smooth organization of the mandatory Islamic pilgrimage, the Hajj reflects the state's responsibility to provide pilgrims with unfettered access to essential services like airports, subways, railroads, restaurants, and hotels (Owaidah et al., 2023). The inclusion of statements such as "if God wills, we will build a brighter future based on the foundations of Islamic principles" in the Vision 2030 program underscores the role of religion as the legitimizing force behind future modernization endeavors. This demonstrates that, for Saudi Arabia, religion remains integral to the process of modernization (Grabowski, 2021).

According to Grabowski (2021), discussing the influence of modernization theory involves prominent thinkers such as Marx, Durkheim, Lerner, Bell, Weber, and Huntington. While some proponents argue that modernization leads to a diminishing role of religion in society, others, like Weber, posit that religion remains deeply entrenched, impacting economic development and cultural change in varied ways across different cultures. Grabowski (2021) suggests that traditional societies can transition towards modernity by adopting contemporary practices. This clash is evident at the social level, highlighting a stark divide within Saudi society between progressive and conservative factions. MBS appears aware of these divisions and thus cannot adopt solely reformist or traditionalist stances. Instead, he seeks to integrate both approaches to address the demands of citizens seeking change while respecting the significance of religion and tradition for others. This approach is geared towards consolidating power, legitimizing authority, and solidifying its position, characteristic of many authoritarian

regimes (Grabowski, 2021).

The Western lifestyle's influence, propelled by globalization, significantly impacts Saudi identity and culture. As Saudi society increasingly interacts with global cultures due to globalization, there is a notable shift in social patterns, religious attitudes, and cultural norms. According to Mulhem et al. (2020), these ongoing interactions between traditional and modern societies have introduced diverse cultural influences that reshape local customs and perspectives. Furthermore, Grabowski (2021) highlights how these changes manifest in daily life, influencing various behaviors from consumer habits to social interactions, reflecting a broader trend of cultural amalgamation and adaptation within the Kingdom. This impact is particularly evident in the spread of the Arabic language, which increasingly incorporates English elements in education, and through the proliferation of Arabic satellite channels airing Western media content, including movies and TV series that promote Western ideologies and values (Hammond, 2020). Additionally, consumer culture, the widespread use of the internet and mobile phones, modern technology such as cars and computers, and the influence of Western fashion contribute to reshaping Arab lives, challenging traditional identities, and weakening religious convictions (Grabowski, 2021).

Saudi youth perceive modernity as a cultural process characterized by self-renewal and social transformation across various aspects of life, diverging from the materialistic portrayal often depicted in literature (Alhumood, 2023). They actively engage in secular modernization by selectively embracing aspects of Western culture while maintaining awareness of their unique religious and national contexts, striving to define their version of modernity (Alhumood, 2023). Regarding social progress, government initiatives predominantly drive the narrative of modernity in Saudi Arabia, leading to a conservative stance among the current youth population towards societal changes and progress. Due to limited involvement in decision-making processes, Saudi youth, mainly women, are reluctant to foster change actively and prefer to wait for cultural acceptance before embracing new social norms (Baker, 2016). Their perception of social progress revolves around altering social etiquettes and traditions rather than advocating for structural transformations. However, they demonstrate greater openness than previous generations in accepting technological advancements, material changes, and scientific progress (Alhumood, 2023).

Saudi Arabia has recently embarked on efforts to foster a sense of national identity within the kingdom, which has historically been overshadowed by a pan-Islamic identity. The promotion of "moderate Islam" primarily aims to cultivate a positive perception in the Western world while also reducing the influence wielded by religious authorities. Concurrently, the rise of hyper-nationalism has facilitated this transition by filling the void left by the declining authority of religious clerics. Saudi Arabia is undergoing a shift in its national narrative, moving away from promoting a broad "pan-Islamic transnational identity" towards prioritizing a more distinct and robust "local Saudi identity" (Alhussein, 2023). The cultural framework of Vision 2030, referred to as "Culture Saudi Vision 2030," is designed to preserve Saudi Arabia's rich heritage while promoting intellectual and artistic development. Within this broader modernization agenda, Vision 2030 emphasizes "Saudi First" nationalism, redirecting the focus from a Wahhabi-rooted religious identity to one centered on the nation's unique cultural and national characteristics. This approach seeks to unite the younger generation by overcoming tribal, regional, and sectarian divisions, fostering a more cohesive and inclusive national identity (Eum, 2019).

In addition to cultural transformation, Vision 2030 seeks to enhance public engagement in socio-economic development. Sirri (2024) notes that these reforms challenge the kingdom's entrenched rentier social contract, encouraging citizens to participate in national development initiatives actively. By redefining the state-citizen relationship, the reforms aim to align Saudi Arabia's societal structure with the broader objectives of modernization and inclusivity. Unlike many nations where modernization has been driven by secular nationalism or anti-colonial struggles, Saudi Arabia's reforms are rooted in a unique framework that draws legitimacy from Islamic shari'a. However, as Almuthaybiri (2024) observes, this approach integrates shari'a principles with the progressive goals of Vision 2030, effectively balancing tradition with contemporary socio-economic imperatives. The reforms emphasize moving beyond religious nationalism to prioritize a national identity that unites all Saudis under a standard banner, as supported by the findings of the Saudi Social Cohesion survey (Eum, 2019). Ultimately, Vision 2030 represents a bold reimagining of Saudi Arabia's national identity. By de-emphasizing pan-Islamic and tribal affiliations, the strategy fosters a more unified and robust national character. The reforms promote socio-economic transformation, encourage citizen engagement, and redefine the kingdom's place in the modern world while preserving its cultural heritage.

2.1.2. Women and Modernization in Saudi Arabia

“Women’s empowerment is central to the nation’s agenda: economically, socially, and publicly. Following the launch of the Vision, Saudi Arabia has actively championed women as entrepreneurs, leaders, and employees, spurring a wave of reforms that have introduced new opportunities. From the rights to drive, travel, and divorce to unimpeded access to official documents, the status of women has been profoundly altered for the better, sowing the seeds for a united and inclusive future” (Saudi Vision 2030, p.14).

However, cultural changes are closely intertwined with social shifts, necessitating a collective shift in mindset for successful transformation. While legal reforms and increased social flexibility play a role, Saudi women actively navigate these changes, choosing which transformations to embrace and how to assert their autonomy within evolving social norms. Nevertheless, defining the balance between cultural authenticity and modernization has sparked societal discussions and internal conflicts. Incorporating the modernization theory into her analysis, Kedan (2023) has examined the role of women in the 2030 reforms in Saudi Arabia in the broader context of the country's development and modernization endeavors. Recognizing women as pivotal actors in this process is crucial, as their empowerment and engagement are instrumental in driving societal advancement and modernization.

Recently, Saudi Arabia has undergone a noticeable cultural shift (Montagu, 2024). This transformation has played a significant role, along with mass media, in shaping the cultural identities of Saudi women, and my study primarily focuses on influential Saudi female entrepreneurs. The cultural identity of Saudi women is reflected in their contributions to society and their online presence on social media. Kedan (2023) highlights the need to view Saudi women through a new lens that acknowledges the progress made toward their empowerment while recognizing the remaining challenges. It means moving away from simplistic and stereotypical depictions of Saudi women as either oppressed victims or as exotic and wealthy. This requires moving away from simplistic portrayals of Saudi women and embracing the diversity and complexity of their experiences. It also involves understanding the cultural and historical context that shapes their lives, considering the dynamic nature of culture and tradition (Kedan, 2023). Additionally, Alsaaidi (2020) underscores the potential of digital platforms in women's experiences, emphasizing how online media activities have contributed to the recent

loosening of restrictions on women's rights in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government's focus on marketing strategies, particularly on social media, as part of the Vision 2030 initiative marks a significant turning point in the country's political, social, cultural, and economic spheres (Alsaaidi., 2020).

On the other hand, Altuwayjiri (2019) discussed in her study how “the notion of modern and modernity” in Saudi society is dissimilar from the Anglo-Western setting. In an Anglo-Western understanding, ‘modernity’ and ‘modern’/‘late modern’ relate to the post-war period. For example, modernization in Saudi Arabia is an endeavor to replace traditions and practices (Clarke, 2007). The recognition of “Individualization” is the process of changing some of these traditions and customs. As a result, Saudi Arabia is rapidly modernizing. The Saudi Vision 2030 strategy promotes digital culture parallel to digital economic development. The digital economy allows us to examine the possibilities of digital platforms to transform women's lived experiences (Gadi, 2022). The Kingdom aims to increase women’s participation in the labor force and reinforce their role in achieving its digital economy aspirations (Topal, 2019). “The Kingdom strives to empower the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises and entrepreneurs in digital by actively removing obstacles and facilitating access to funding and favorable regulation” (Digital Saudi, 2023, p.4). This rapid transformation is evident in how Saudis engage with one another and the rest of the world through Internet Communication Technologies. Sirri (2024) discusses how women's equality in Saudi Arabia is framed as a symbol of modernity, attracting international praise. However, grassroots feminist movements are more inclusive, challenging male and state dominance while empowering women and resisting everyday gender inequalities (Alkhaled, 2021). Recent pro-women reforms align closely with the broader economic liberalization efforts (Topal, 2019). The Vision 2030 reforms, spearheaded by the Crown Prince, signify the regime's commitment to making "cultural sacrifices" to integrate into global markets. These reforms include significant changes in cultural and fashion norms, reflecting a strategic alignment with international trends to reshape and modernize Saudi society. The Crown Prince is leveraging women's empowerment as a strategic term to enhance the country's investment appeal. Using the concept of "women's empowerment" at this stage bolsters Saudi Arabia's position on the global stage (Topal, 2019).

Although the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), including Saudi Arabia, has advanced women's rights in modernization and image-building efforts, these state-led reforms have been

criticized for failing to address deeper gender power imbalances (Kanchana, 2024). Saudi Arabia's official narrative presents the state as a paternalistic supporter of women, offering welfare in health, education, and employment. Salhi (2024) highlights that women in Saudi Arabia have made substantial progress in feminist political consciousness. Despite facing entrenched conservative ideologies, they have secured key human rights victories. These achievements reflect a shift in societal norms and a growing momentum toward gender equality, signaling a broader movement for women's empowerment in the kingdom.

Thus, change for gender equality continues to blow in Saudi Arabia. Women can now work as co-pilots and cabin staff. Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman is said to be serious about reverting Saudi Arabia to "Moderate Islam." Men and women are driving themselves to work in Saudi Arabia (Soekarba, 2019). Women in Saudi Arabia are also seeking better education and job prospects abroad. Many Saudi women have risen to the top of administrations traditionally dominated by males, asserting their subjectivity and exercising their agency. For example, in 2013, 30 Saudi women were elected to the Shura Council (equivalent to the US Congress); in 2015, 20 Saudi women won local elections. Though no women found a position in King Salman's cabinet, women have been employed in various strategic positions inside and outside the Kingdom. This is in line with Vision 2030. The Saudi government is committed to appointing women in favorable diplomatic positions and vigorously doing so. For example, Princess Reema bint Bandar Al-Saud has been appointed as Saudi Arabia's first female ambassador to the United States. Although, upon looking at the larger picture, these changes might not have had any impact, upon closer inspection, we see that Saudi Arabia is gradually progressing with incremental changes (Mittal, 2023).

2.1.3. Establishing the ministry of culture and the fashion commission

The establishment of the Ministry of Culture in March 2019 was a significant step toward implementing the strategic goals of Saudi Vision 2030 (Konopka & Strykhotyski, 2021). The Ministry is instrumental in achieving the three pillars of Vision 2030: creating a vibrant society, fostering a thriving economy, and building an ambitious nation. The Ministry's specialized commissions focus on specific cultural domains, such as fashion, cinema, museums, and culinary arts. As highlighted by Konopka & Strykhotyski (2021), the Ministry's initial document, "Our Cultural Vision," emphasizes "creating opportunities for culture to

contribute to the country's economy" and "facilitating global cultural exchange." These changes have targeted economic development and driven liberalization reforms that support human rights and increased freedoms, empowering civil society while maintaining the existing political framework. The cultural reforms outlined in Vision 2030 are central to Saudi Arabia's ambition to develop a digital economy. Culture is increasingly seen as a strategic asset in regional and international diplomacy, with digital tools playing a vital role in showcasing Saudi heritage. The Ministry's strategy incorporates new Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to advance cultural diplomacy, allowing greater exploration of the Kingdom's cultural landscape. The Ministry of Culture supports the cultural sector and empowers various stakeholders, from individuals to public and private institutions. This study specifically focuses on women entrepreneurs in the fashion industry, as fashion is a crucial area under the Ministry's oversight. The Fashion Commission, one of the Ministry's central entities, is committed "to evolve the Kingdom's fashion industry through culture, amplifying Saudi heritage and identity, while responding to global needs and impacting the national economy (The Fashion Commission, 2024 p.1)." Its mission is "to enable the development of a thriving Saudi fashion industry—sustainable, inclusive, and integrated along the value chain—maximizing local talent, experiences, and competencies (The Fashion Commission, 2024 p.1)." The Fashion Commission's CEO, Burak Çakmak, captured the cultural importance of fashion, stating that "Fashion is a reflection of our society and part of our culture; through enabling and supporting creatives and business leaders of the fashion industry, we will advance our culture in alignment with the values of our times (Alblowi et al., 2022, p.101)." The Commission's objectives focus on honoring Saudi traditions while fostering fashion innovation nationwide and nurturing creativity within the fashion community. One key goal is to empower local talent and position them as leaders in the global fashion arena, entirely in line with Vision 2030's transformative vision.

Saudi Arabia's fashion industry has rapidly transformed recently, catalyzed by Vision 2030 and the Fashion Commission's efforts (Alosaimi, 2022). A significant moment occurred in 2018 when Saudi Arabia hosted its first Arab Fashion Week in Riyadh. This historic event featured women-only shows with strict camera restrictions, balancing Saudi culture's traditional and modern aspects. Lebanese designer Naja Saade, who participated, expressed his pride: "I'm very proud to participate in this first edition of Arab Fashion Week in Saudi Arabia because it's part of the revolution of the women in this country" (Dadouch, 2018) This

landmark event coincided with broader social reforms initiated by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, including curbing the influence of religious police, allowing public concerts, lifting bans on cinemas, and granting women the right to drive. Yet, limitations remain, as shown by the restrictions on visibility and participation during these events. Traditionally, Saudi women have worn abayas—long, loose garments symbolizing modesty. However, recent reforms have seen more colorful and embellished abayas, or left open to reveal modern attire, becoming a common sight.

The transformation of Saudi fashion continued to accelerate, reaching a notable peak in 2024 with Saudi Arabia's first swimsuit fashion show during Red Sea Fashion Week. This bold showcase, set against a poolside backdrop, marked a significant shift for a country known for its conservative dress codes. At the same time, young Saudis increasingly embrace streetwear, creating a vibrant fashion subculture that fuses modern trends with traditional elements (Hindustan Times, 2024). The Fashion Commission's 2024 annual report underlined this transformation, noting that the fashion sector is now a key player in promoting local culture and economic growth (Fashion Future Commission, 2024). "This evolution positions the nation on the verge of a USD 33 billion opportunity in the Saudi Fashion and Luxury market, reinforcing its status as a regional leader" (Fashion Future Commission, 2024, p.3). The Commission is committed to supporting local designers and brands across the entire fashion value chain, offering educational programs and mentorships to nurture emerging talent from the ground up.

In addition to educational initiatives, the Fashion Commission connects local entrepreneurs with investors and funding bodies, including the Ministry of Investment for Saudi Arabia (MISA) and the Cultural Development Fund (CDF). "We empower local entrepreneurs by enhancing their business strategies and operations while offering platforms such as Riyadh Fashion Week, Red Sea Fashion Week, and yearly Saudi 100 brands showrooms in Paris to showcase their talents on local, regional, and international stages" (Fashion Future Commission, 2024 p.3). These initiatives aim to create a more self-sufficient and competitive fashion industry capable of thriving globally. The Commission emphasizes the fusion of traditional and modern styles, offering diverse fashion choices that resonate with local and international audiences. The contemporary Saudi fashion scene uniquely blends tradition and modernity. According to the first fashion application for Middle Eastern brands

(Sareai, 2024), the kingdom is redefining modest fashion, with designers updating traditional garments like the abaya to include modern textures and embellishments. Fashion has also become a platform for empowerment, especially for women designers who challenge stereotypes and assert independence. Saudi designers are gaining international recognition, collaborating with global brands, and participating in renowned fashion events, enriching the industry with diverse perspectives (Alblowi et al., 2023). “This cross-cultural exchange is not only propelling Saudi fashion onto the global stage but also enriching the industry by blending diverse perspectives and aesthetics” (Sareai, 2024, p.1). As Saudi Arabia continues to modernize while honoring its cultural roots, the Ministry of Culture and the Fashion Commission are critical drivers of this transformation. They are promoting local culture and positioning the Kingdom as a significant player in the global fashion industry. The emphasis on supporting women entrepreneurs, integrating traditional and modern styles, and fostering creative talent aligns closely with the goals of Vision 2030, marking a new era for Saudi fashion that merges heritage with contemporary expression.

2.2. Saudi Women Embrace New Online Experiences

Utilizing interconnected, digitalized, fast-paced, and globalized social media has rapidly changed the landscape of different societies; however, society's culture needs to be addressed as a component that affects how individuals show themselves online (Haniyah, 2022). A sociocultural theory of new media explained by Kim & McKay-Semmler (2018) connects cultural values and social uses of new media. Specifically, it proposes that cultural values influence when, how, and who uses ICT. Apply this idea to how communicators use new media platforms, including mobile phones, laptops, blogs, and multiplayer online games. Interestingly, according to the sociocultural theory of new media, ICTs can challenge and even change cultural values. Hence, self-identity is considered a continuous, consistent narrative that one delivers throughout one's lifetime and in all circumstances. Thus, online identities can be authentic or inauthentic compared to real-life identities. Consequently, the new mediums offer new ways to develop and express oneself (Haslett, 2021).

Most importantly, online elements like culture and religion can influence social media adoption. Astonishingly, no studies have been found to illustrate how non-Western cultures use Western-style social networking. Saudi Arabia is a fascinating country to research because

of the strong and intricate cultural and religious ties that influence daily life and behavior (Stanger et al., 2017). Moreover, since Vision 2030 launched in 2016, a shift occurred in favor of women. Saudi Arabian culture has long been influenced by Arab and Islamic culture. Saudi Arabia is a Middle Eastern country recognized as the Islamic hub. It is a developing country with a tribal system and patriarchal framework that provides women a secondary role in a conservative, traditional, and family-oriented society. Alkhaled (2021) states that many attitudes and customs date back centuries, originating in Arab and Islamic cultures. Notably, the relationship between social media and Saudi society is non-linear, meaning that although the Internet in general and Social Media Platforms (SMP) practices have affected Saudi culture in several ways, especially regarding Saudi women due to restrictions imposed on them, such as the driving ban limited public sphere presence.

Moreover, Aljuwaiser (2018) found that participants' culturally pre-established ideas and values interact with their online behaviors in a dynamic, negotiated, and reciprocal way. Religious, community, familial, and tribal expectations, as well as proper levels of modesty and obedience as young people within these social systems, are continually negotiated by young Saudi social media users. These pressures shape their engagement — and, perhaps more importantly, non-engagement. Stanger et al. (2017) conversely, Saudi women's online lives constantly challenge offline cultural and social norms. In its place, online spaces enabled women to develop free and open connections with the opposite sex, which proved to be an Internet culture shock for Saudi women. With Web 2.0 and social media came veiling, the means of social media provides a visual image for rising numbers of Saudi women who do not wear the hijab or niqab online. The online Saudi community is becoming more tolerant of witnessing a Saudi lady without the veil (Aljuwaiser, 2018). As Guta and Karolak noted, “The Internet gave Saudi women a space to negotiate the constraints imposed by cultural and societal standards” (2015, p. 11).

Another point to consider is that Saudi women's cultural identities used to be enmeshed in rituals and traditions but also restricted. In contrast, social media platforms gave women a voice and loosened social identity restrictions (Almesahri et al., 2023). Notably, there was a disconnect between online and offline identities, especially for women. Amazingly, the impact of modern media on intercultural communication allowed Saudi women to venture outside their society. At first, the links between online and offline practices, given that the Internet has

allowed Saudi women additional chances to express themselves, discuss issues, start enterprises, and become bloggers and writers. According to Aljuwaiser (2018), Saudi women's online identities are multifaceted, characterized by shifts across different social media platforms (SMPs) as they adapt to local norms and traditions. This adaptation reflects both their family and gender identities. Her study also highlights varying perceptions of privacy among participants, ranging from public (Facebook) to semi-public (Instagram, Path) and private (Snapchat), illustrating the diverse online environments where Saudi women's identities and representations vary. Additionally, the research suggests that in specific contexts, cultural standards regarding veiling (niqab or hijab) are becoming more relaxed.

Inevitably, modern culture allows for self-expression, which means Saudi Arabia has long been classed as a collective society; on the contrary, it wields immense power both in the Gulf and beyond. This evident legal power in Saudi Arabia is reflected in prior users' early online experiences and identities. The cultural norms influence social media adoption among Saudi youth (Altawayjiri, 2019). Understandably, natural cultures give rise to societal conventions and cultures. For that reason, those natural cultures are established by rules, values, and social conventions, and each element has distinct characteristics that influence social media adaptation, particularly in Saudi Arabia. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) outlined that power usually lies with authority figures in collective cultures like Saudi Arabia, while in individualist cultures like the US, it doesn't. In the Arab world, power is often linked to land ownership. This affects social hierarchy and group dynamics. Saudi Arabia, like many Islamic countries, values collective identity over individualism. Cultural values are closely connected and hard to separate. Religion is significant in Saudi Arabian culture, shaping people's beliefs, actions, and how they see life. Saudis are cautious on social media, sharing selectively to avoid conflicts and stick to cultural norms (Askool, 2013). Until now, religion and culture have shaped Saudi Arabian citizens' views, practices, behaviors, and perceptions of their lives. Saudi users work around platform features or participate in “minimal and tactical social sharing behavior” (Stanger, Alnaghaimshi & Pearson, 2017). Religious teachings influence gender roles, but some behaviors are more about cultural traditions than religious teachings.

According to Abokhodair & Vieweg (2016), traditional cultural norms, such as veiling and restrictions on inter-gender communication offline, strongly influenced how participants presented themselves online. Privacy concerns were a significant factor shaping their behaviors

on Social Media Platforms (SMPs), which were deeply influenced by cultural context. Despite being well-educated and having lived abroad for some time, one participant hesitated to use her photo as a profile picture, citing fears of potential blackmail or bringing dishonor to her family. In addition, Alsaggaf (2019) revealed a strong inclination among participants to maintain anonymity on social media platforms, even when their accounts were private. Their interactions divulged minimal information about their identities, personalities, or achievements. While they accepted strangers as followers, most participants expressed wariness towards forming new relationships online and were cautious about self-disclosure (Alharbi, 2021). Interestingly, many were comfortable with adopting a false identity if needed. Many female participants reluctantly used only their first names, while some opted for pseudonyms. They were open to using pseudonyms to interact with unrelated individuals. Notably, their public profile photos predominantly featured images of flowers and landscapes rather than their faces (Al-Nasser & Mahomed, 2020).

In a subsequent study conducted by Abokhodair et al. (2017), titled *Photo Sharing in the Arab Gulf*, a Saudi Arabian participant expressed the societal pressure for privacy in the country. The study emphasized that this pressure is not merely an individual preference but rather a societal norm shaped by religious, cultural, and social factors. This finding highlights a prevalent trend among Saudi women, who prioritize projecting a collective identity over emphasizing personal autonomy on social photo-sharing platforms. Abokhodair et al. (2017) also noted that Saudi women tend to adhere to conservative digital behaviors, reflecting the established cultural expectations in Saudi Arabia. Regardless of gender, most interviewees in the study expressed a reluctance to be publicly recognized and a strong preference for maintaining personal privacy. This aligns with the findings of Alsaggaf (2019), who examined Saudi women's self-presentation strategies on Facebook. Alsaggaf (2019) found that Saudi women are acutely aware of their audience and meticulously manage their online self-representation. Participants engage in self-monitoring and employ "defensive practices" to control how others perceive them, despite constraints imposed by gender roles and cultural norms. Moreover, Facebook—now alongside Instagram and Snapchat—serves as a platform for constructing and negotiating identities. Saudi women strategically navigate gender expectations while simultaneously expanding their social circles and digital presence.

Guta & Karolak (2015) conducted a study on Saudi women's usage of social media for

identity negotiation and expression, mainly focusing on how Internet usage among Saudi women is impacted by societal standards, particularly the concept that a woman represents not only herself but her entire family and extended family. Guta & Karolak (2015) state that a Saudi woman's behavior reflects on the family. In early 2000, it was reported in Saudi Arabia that women face significant hurdles in obtaining equality at home, in the workplace, and in educational, health, and leadership positions. Undoubtedly, the concept of women's freedom in Saudi society is complicated by male guardianship, which inhibits women's prospects of obtaining a high degree of education in another country, for example. Women's independence means accomplishing personal and communal growth that allows them to break free from male dependency and have control over their own lives, both socially and financially. An empirical study by Bourdeloie et al. (2017) revealed that everyday life's social norms are mirrored in the online realm, particularly concerning photography and its dissemination on social media platforms. Interviews with Saudi women illustrated their ongoing efforts to balance the role of photographs on social networks and adherence to Saudi customs and traditions regarding picture-taking, sharing, and visibility. Saudi women frequently capture pictures of themselves, often in private and intimate settings without the traditional headscarf, showcasing well-groomed appearances (Bourdeloie et al., 2017). These pictures are shared online to inform female friends and family members about their activities. While these women exhibit a strong desire for self-expression through photography, they face a pivotal decision regarding whether or not to post these images online.

2.3. A Shift is Underway: The pivotal role of social media in empowering Saudi women

In contrast, this is no longer the case; a significant transition is occurring in Saudi society, undoubtedly impacting their online cultural identity. Not only was new media affecting Saudis' social identities, but a culture shift occurred in 2018 that transformed the entire manner of life to represent the cultural identity. Thus, even Saudis' offline identities are changing, which opens the door for women to establish and retain their identities following the modernization that is taking place and to pave the way for the new media and what it offers women. As a result, the cultural change has moved from the internet to the offline world.

Recently, Basabain et al. (2021) findings underscored the benefits of Instagram for

Saudi businesswomen, who were able to overcome various challenges such as advertising products, managing customer interactions, navigating governmental processes, increasing income, addressing cultural and religious obstacles, surmounting educational barriers, mitigating difficulties in the private sector, and fostering strong customer relationships. Similarly, Alhomaïd (2023) indicates that social media is a platform for Saudi women to observe and engage with the social environment, giving them a sense of importance when their posts and interactions garner significant engagement. Moreover, respondents in Alhomaïd's (2023) study expressed their interest in using social media to advocate for women's independence from male influence and to raise awareness about women's rights to autonomy. Overall, the findings of Alhomaïd (2023) suggest that social media emerges as a tool for Saudi women to assert their rights, challenge societal norms, and advocate for greater independence and freedom. In this view, Altuwayjiri (2019) recounted her surprise upon returning to Saudi Arabia after studying in the UK, where she observed significant changes in societal norms, particularly regarding the visibility of young Saudi women on social media, while expressed a curiosity about the evolution of the traditional Saudi garment, the Abaya, and sought to understand the reasons behind these cultural shifts. She conducted seven focus group discussions involving women-only and mixed-gender groups with varying numbers of participants.

Overall, the above empirical discussion and arguments reflect the duality of her character, wherein she adapts to different situations and audiences without intending to deceive or demonstrate double standards. This phenomenon highlights the impact of social media in shaping Saudi women's identities, often resulting in an online persona that differs from their offline selves. The participant's experience underscores the tension between traditional and modern values in Saudi society, especially as women encounter individualistic ideals from Western cultures. It's crucial to understand that Saudi women's identities, both online and offline, are not always sharply divided. Altuwayjiri's (2019) research reveals that while older Saudi women tend to perceive a disparity between their online and offline selves, younger single Saudi women are increasingly bridging this gap. These younger women show less concern about potential humiliation or criticism as they assert their independence and express beliefs and standards that may differ from societal norms. Saudi women's use of social media is reshaping their traditional image and identity. For instance, a growing acceptance of male-female friendships among younger generations indicates evolving social dynamics

(Altuwayjiri, 2019). Additionally, the acknowledgment of prominent Saudi women advocating for societal change underscores the importance of their role despite some participants' preference for privacy. However, the enduring taboo surrounding fame for Saudi women persists due to concerns about familial reputation and potential disapproval from male relatives. These findings emphasize the complex interplay between tradition and modernity in Saudi women's lives, as reflected in their online and offline experiences.

The online identities of Saudi women have undergone significant transformations over the years. Initially, cultural norms and traditions dominated their digital presence, with many women hesitant to challenge societal expectations. However, as Guta and Karolak (2015) note, social media platforms have given Saudi women unprecedented freedom to express themselves and break societal taboos, circumventing physical constraints and traditional gatekeepers. As highlighted in their study, “the new public sphere comes as no surprise that CNN has called Arab women bloggers ‘agents of change’ in their societies” (Guta & Karolak, 2015, p.116). Participants in their research described social media as a means of escape, allowing them to portray themselves and explore different facets of their identities authentically. Furthermore, recent regulatory changes in Saudi Arabia have narrowed the gap between the ideal of contemporary femininity and the reality of women’s lived experiences. Altuwayjiri (2019) emphasizes that these reforms have enabled young Saudi women to bridge this divide, facilitating a more dynamic interplay between cultural aspirations and societal realities; as she said, “Recent changes in Saudi regulations regarding women have helped to bridge further the gap between the contemporary femininity that young Saudi women strive to achieve and the reality that they live in” (p.112). Building on this, Lary (2023) explores the rise of Saudi microcelebrities, noting that they exhibit varying levels of visibility in their self-presentation. These microcelebrities negotiate or conform to cultural expectations concerning women’s visibility, particularly in public attire, through deliberate self-adjustment.

Similarly, Albawardi and Jones (2023) examine the representation of Saudi women’s appearances and their use of photo-sharing platforms, particularly after the lifted driving ban. Their findings highlight how images of Saudi women quickly gained traction online after the ban was removed. However, they also underscore the superficial and often simplistic portrayal of gender dynamics and broader societal changes in the Kingdom through these visuals. According to Albogami (2024), the trend toward openness and transparency is particularly

evident among Saudi women's public figures on Instagram. This shift challenges longstanding norms that have traditionally restricted women's visibility in public spheres. Albogami's study reveals that approximately 90% of the women analyzed use their full names on their Instagram profiles, signaling a commitment to authenticity and fostering deeper connections with their audiences. By adopting their real names, these women aim to garner recognition for their achievements and establish a credible public persona. Additionally, all ten women in the study shared personal photos, reinforcing their online identities and contributing to a narrative of openness and active participation in public life.

The literature underscores the pivotal role of social media in empowering Saudi women and elevating their status within the context of societal reforms. By amplifying the achievements and experiences of women who have benefitted from Vision 2030's initiatives, social media platforms inspire others and contribute to normalizing evolving roles and opportunities for women in Saudi Arabia (Albogami, 2024). Initially, Saudi women's online identities oscillated between conforming to societal norms and adhering to collective identity on the one hand and defying social taboos to create spaces for self-expression and freedom on the other. Once prominent, this disparity between online and offline identities has been significantly narrowed due to recent reforms in Saudi Arabia. With these changes, Saudi women are increasingly bridging the gap between their online and offline selves, engaging in authentic self-presentations that reflect their ambitions, work, lifestyle, and other aspects of their lives.

2.4. The Rise of Female Influencers In Saudi Arabia: Transforming Marketing, culture, and Entrepreneurship

Social media platforms have revolutionized global communication, transforming how people collaborate, socialize, and connect (Edosomwan et al., 2011). From the early platforms like "GeoCities" and "SixDegrees.com" in the late 1990s to today's giants such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, social media users have surged from 970 million in 2010 to 5.17 billion in 2024 (BackLinko, 2024). These platforms have introduced a new marketing tool: social media influencers (SMIs), who shape users' attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions through their credibility, trustworthiness, and engaging content (Vrontis et al., 2021; Sánchez-Fernández & Jiménez-Castillo, 2021). Globally, brands increasingly rely on influencers to connect with

younger generations, who find them more relatable and trustworthy than traditional advertising methods (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Shen et al., 2024).

The decline of traditional advertising effectiveness and the rise of peer-recommended content have driven the growth of influencer marketing. Research highlights that influencers foster trust through direct engagement with their followers, often sharing authentic product recommendations that increase purchase intentions (Tsen & Cheng, 2021; Pham et al., 2021). Social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have also implemented monetization strategies, enabling influencers to generate revenue through brand endorsements, affiliate marketing, and personal product lines, further boosting their prominence in the global digital economy (Winzer et al., 2022).

In Saudi Arabia, social media influencers have become a significant marketing force due to the country's high social media penetration rate—99% of its population are active users—and the rapid adoption of social commerce (Alotaibi & Aloud, 2023). Similarly, a report published by Statista confirmed that 52.1 percent of individuals buy using online platforms mainly posted by SMIs (Statista, 2023). Further, it is estimated that brands in Saudi Arabia spend 430.3 million, growing by 7.6% on social media marketing (NT Technology, 2024). According to the Datareportal report, Saudi Arabia is the leading social media user (29.10 million) among the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) (Datareportal, 2023). Social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube have emerged as critical tools for businesses to reach and engage their audiences (Alotaibi et al., 2019). Research shows that 70% of Saudi social media users follow influencers, with 57% making purchases based on influencer recommendations (Brightery, 2023). Instagram, in particular, is pivotal in the Saudi market, allowing businesses to connect with consumers directly (Al-Nasser & Mahomed, 2020).

The rise of Saudi female influencers is noteworthy, reflecting shifting societal norms. Female influencers, often called microcelebrities and public figures, use platforms such as Instagram to represent cultural and gender values while fostering discussions on societal changes (Lary, 2023; Albogami, 2024). These influencers skillfully navigate sociocultural expectations, blending modern branding with cultural relevance to resonate with local

audiences. Balelah (2020) noted that there is a growing phenomenon of Saudi women who publicly present themselves as models and makeup artists on their social media accounts. Interestingly, these Saudi women are not categorized under a specific age range, education level, or even marital status. Instead, they are from various ages, backgrounds, and regions. Similarly, Albeshry et al. (2024) found that fashion influencers, many Saudis, resonate with local audiences by combining style tips with culturally meaningful advice. These influencers not only provide practical insights but also represent aspirational lifestyles aligned with the sociocultural context of Saudi Arabia. While global studies on influencer impact offer valuable perspectives, the unique cultural, social, and economic dimensions of Saudi Arabia demand localized approaches to understand their influence fully (Albeshry et al., 2024). Social media influencers (SMIs) have been dominant in global marketing for the past years, but their emergence as a significant phenomenon in Saudi Arabia is relatively recent. Several factors have contributed to this shift. A primary driver is the ability of SMIs to attract and engage their followers while extending their reach to broader audiences (Mabkhot et al., 2022).

In this environment, SMIs have become integral to social media's dynamic and engaging nature, helping brands strategically connect with customers and potential audiences. The increasing reliance on influencers as communication channels has solidified their role as key players in delivering brand messages (Alibrahim, 2024). In light of this evolution, the rise of Saudi influencers has played a vital role in strengthening national identity and promoting Saudi culture, traditions, and values. These individuals have served as cultural ambassadors through their fame and influence, connecting Saudi Arabia to the global community. They have effectively highlighted the richness and uniqueness of the country, attracting tourists, challenging stereotypes, and nurturing a sense of shared identity among Saudis. The outlook for Saudi influencers remains promising as they continue to impact both national and international spheres significantly (Araboost, 2023).

In addition to cultural representation, their rise has positively influenced the economy, as many Saudi influencers have become successful entrepreneurs, launching their brands and businesses. This entrepreneurial spirit has stimulated economic growth and generated employment opportunities, directly contributing to the country's development. For example, Roberti (2022) highlights how female SMIs link fashion with cultural values, leveraging their platforms to promote products and services in culturally significant markets like the GCC.

Additionally, Almesahri et al. (2023) emphasize that fashion brands in Saudi Arabia prefer female influencers for their ability to connect with target audiences effectively and at lower costs. Additionally, female social media influencers collaborate to promote paid products and/or services of reputed fashion brands in GCC countries, mainly in Saudi Arabia, where cultural and religious norms are a high priority (Leung et al., 2022).

Entrepreneurship is another dimension of this rise. Female influencers have increasingly launched their brands and businesses, creating a vibrant and dynamic ecosystem of female entrepreneurs. This entrepreneurial spirit has stimulated economic growth and generated employment opportunities in Saudi Arabia (Al Eid, 2023). Trad & Al Dabbagh (2020) highlight how digital platforms have opened new marketing channels for female entrepreneurs, enhancing their communication with retailers and consumers. Similarly, Alhomaïd (2023) asserts that influencer endorsements play a dynamic role in developing brand awareness, engagement, and loyalty on social media.

However, despite the growth of influencer marketing in Saudi Arabia, some challenges remain. Konstantopoulou et al. (2019) found that several brands struggle to reach their target audiences due to reliance on outdated marketing techniques. Abed (2020) also notes that many Saudi companies lack experience in modern marketing practices, hindering their ability to capitalize on social media's potential fully. Nevertheless, companies are increasingly paying attention to developing modern marketing approaches to influence consumer buying decisions (Al Hamli & Sobaih, 2023). From the above discussion, the rise of social media influencers in Saudi Arabia has redefined marketing practices by leveraging their digital presence to shape opinions, drive purchasing decisions, and connect with audiences in culturally relevant ways. Female influencers, in particular, are at the forefront of this transformation, using their platforms to influence consumer behavior, promote cultural values, and drive entrepreneurship. These developments underscore the growing importance of influencers in shaping Saudi Arabia's evolving social and economic fabric, blending tradition with modernity and fostering a dynamic ecosystem of innovation and growth.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INTERCULTURALITY, DIGITAL MARKETING AND FEMINISM

3.1.Introduction

This chapter provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing and understanding the cultural identity of influential Saudi entrepreneurs within the fashion industry, relying on structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) as a central lens. By examining the critical relationship between the Saudi Arabian cultural and social media influencers, this study highlights how state structures are shaped by individual actions, aligning with Giddens' Structuration Theory. In Saudi Arabia, influencers operate within a framework of state regulations that outline permissible new media activities. Yet, these same structures have allowed expanded new media spaces that support creative expression within the fashion industry. This dual influence illustrates Giddens' assertion that structures can both enable and constrain agency, while individuals' actions, in turn, impact these structures.

As part of Vision 2030, influencers in Saudi Arabia and the state are collaboratively advancing a modernized Saudi cultural identity, particularly in the fashion industry. This study explores how global trends are adapted within local practices, shedding light on the evolving nature of Saudi identity and influential social media entrepreneurs. Following Georgantzas et al. (2009), this research extends Giddens' globalization theory by incorporating structuration theory to navigate the complexities and potential of globalization within the context of cultural feminism and social media influencers. Through this approach, the study examines how influential Saudi women entrepreneurs assert their agency, negotiating and adapting cultural identity within a context of rapid societal change.

Moreover, this study highlights the evolving intersection of feminism, entrepreneurship, and digital influence in Saudi Arabia. As Saudi women entrepreneurs redefine their roles within a shifting socio-cultural landscape, they engage with diverse feminist frameworks, including post- feminism, popular feminism, and commodity feminism.

Leveraging social media and fashion branding, they navigate traditional gender norms while incorporating elements of feminist discourse, asserting their agency in both economic and cultural domains. By examining how feminist narratives are integrated into Saudi women's digital entrepreneurship, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the interplay between gender, culture, and market forces, offering insights into the transformation of feminist expression in contemporary Saudi society.

This chapter begins by examining the cultural identity of Saudi women in the digital age, followed by an analysis of the convergence of modernity, tradition, and global influence. It then focuses on digital marketing and the role of social media influencers, exploring the evolution of fashion concerning Saudi women. Subsequently, the chapter applies Structuration Theory to these dynamics and concludes by examining the intersection of feminism and entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia. These discussions provide insight into the agency of Saudi women within the transformative framework of Vision 2030, highlighting the impact of social media and globalization on their evolving roles and opportunities.

3.2. Saudi women and cultural identity in the digital age

3.2.1. Identities and its transformation

In examining cultural identity in this digital age, this study uses multiple theoretical perspectives to frame the evolving nature of self-concept in a globalized world. From psychology, Erikson (1959) provides a foundation for understanding identity formation as a crucial developmental process that links individual experiences from childhood to adulthood. In addition, the author added that identity serves as a bridge between personal and cultural dimensions, enabling individuals to integrate their past, present, and future experiences into a cohesive self-concept. This process establishes a stable identity that aligns personal traits with broader cultural values. Bhatia (2007) emphasizes the importance of cultural identity in framing the reciprocal influence between individuals and their social environments, highlighting the importance of examining this dynamic relationship from a social-psychological perspective.

As noted by Schwartz et al. (2008), cultural identity encompasses an individual's connection to their heritage group—nationality, culture, or religion—and the larger society

they inhabit. This identity is shaped by practices aligning with one's heritage culture, the broader societal context, or a fusion of both, thereby balancing personal and collective identity. Like a life story, a cultural group's identity unfolds over time, preserved through traditions, religious beliefs, geographic influences, philosophical values, and shared narratives, including myths and histories, conveyed through a common language (Dien, 2000). Cultural identity functions as an intermediary concept, positioned between individual-focused personal identity and the group-oriented collective identity, which indicates group affiliations (Ashmore et al., 2004).

Empirically, Collier (2000; 2009) outlined a perspective on cultural identity as a construct shaped and negotiated through intercultural relationships within sociohistorical contexts. Cultural identity is dynamic and multifaceted, encompassing affective, cognitive, and behavioral levels. Identities evolve, spanning individual, relational, and communal levels, and are marked by complexity and paradox. According to Collier (2002), internal (avowal) and external (ascription) influences, including communication, impact cultural identity. Thus, the interplay between individual self-perception and group ascription posits that identity emerges through social interactions and fluctuates depending on context.

Cultural identity is thus tied to an individual's sense of belonging within an ethnic or cultural group, encompassing that group's distinctive behaviors, values, and customs (Phinney, 1996). According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), social identity includes "those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he [sic] perceives himself as belonging" (p. 16), incorporating both awareness and emotional significance tied to group affiliations. Furthermore, Tajfel (1978) elaborates that social identity forms a significant part of an individual's self-concept, anchored in their knowledge of group membership and associated value and emotional meaning. While ethnic identity, while closely related, focuses on group membership within an ethnic group, cultural identity extends beyond, connecting individuals with distinct cultural features.

Kimmerling & Moore (1997) recognize Giddens' significant contributions to understanding cultural production and maintenance within various social levels and the link between individuals and the broader social system. According to Giddens's (1984) structuration theory, individuals—agents within a loop structure—shape, and are shaped by, social

structures. Kimmerling and Moore (1997) emphasized that identities are inherently social and shared, forming a foundational framework for social boundaries within collectives. Theories of identity further indicate that self-concept incorporates personal identity (unique individual traits) and collective identity (group affiliations) (Turner, 1985; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social behaviors emerge from the interplay between these attributes and social group affiliations (Turner, 1984; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), illustrating how individual identity and social structure coexist within a socially organized framework and social context.

The personal identity of Saudi women has historically been shaped by societal norms, national identity, and religion, which positioned their identity as private and hidden. These societal norms perpetuated the idea that identity was externally imposed rather than self-constructed, with women frequently remaining anonymous in public spaces (Altorki, 1986; Thompson, 2015). Traditionally, their roles were tied to preserving family traditions, Islamic values, and morality, with expectations rooted firmly in domestic responsibilities (Doumato, 1992; Mernissi, 1996; Altuwayjiri, 2019). These roles aligned with the ideal of the "Islamic woman," emphasizing gender segregation, veiling, and minimal public interaction, thereby forming a distinct cultural and national identity for Saudi women (Doumato, 1992).

In addition, Aloufi's (2017) analysis highlights the significant role that the coordinated actions of the government, religious authorities, and societal norms have played in shaping the image, lifestyles, and rights of Saudi women. With its jurisdiction over economic and legal matters, the government has played a central role in shaping these dynamics. Through legal measures, gender segregation has been institutionalized, limiting women's participation in mixed public spaces. This segregation, reinforced by religious and societal values, has contributed to the creation of a standardized, uniform image of Saudi women, aligning them with conservative Islamic values.

Furthermore, Aloufi (2017) argues that national identity has intersected with religious and societal expectations, shaping women's identities within this framework. Clerics and conservative societal elements have traditionally emphasized women's roles as preservers of cultural traditions, reinforcing a narrative focused on religious piety and cultural conservatism. However, contemporary shifts reveal an evolving reality: women increasingly advocate for personal freedoms and actively engage in public life while operating within an Islamic

framework. Aloufi (2017) underscores the duality of this transformation as women navigate societal constraints while pursuing greater autonomy and agency.

A significant factor in this framework is tribal affiliation, which is foundational in shaping Saudi women's cultural identity. Tribes act as essential social institutions, fostering loyalty, kinship, and a sense of belonging. Al-Yousef (2021) highlights how tribal identity, known as "Qaba'ila," provides access to resources, networks, and support, influencing significant aspects of life such as education, marriage, and traditions. This tribal framework extends beyond individual experiences, linking women to collective identities through familial connections and shared practices. Women's names, for instance, serve as public markers of tribal and familial networks, embedding them within a framework that shapes both opportunities and constraints.

Moreover, geographical regions and social class complicate Saudi women's identities. Regional diversity introduces unique cultural practices and expectations, shaping women's experiences differently across the country. Simultaneously, class stratification intersects with tribal and familial affiliations, influencing women's access to education, professional opportunities, and social influence. Al-Khamri (2019) identifies distinct class divisions in Saudi Arabia, ranging from the royal elite to economically disadvantaged groups. For women from elite backgrounds, social class often provides a platform to challenge traditional roles and engage with broader cultural narratives, while others may experience constraints that reinforce traditional frameworks. Furthermore, Saudi women differ significantly in class, education levels, age, cultural backgrounds, and perspectives on advocacy for liberation. Thus, social workers and policymakers must understand the individual differences and the intersectionality of these influences, particularly the role of religious and cultural factors in shaping these women's identities (Alhajri & Pierce, 2023). Saudi women's experiences are influenced by social class, family status, and other aspects of individual identity. Women from privileged backgrounds may leverage their resources to navigate systemic restrictions more effectively than those from less privileged classes (Syed et al., 2018). Similarly, Aloufi (2017) emphasized that women's experiences in Saudi Arabia differ significantly based on social class, necessitating a distinct analysis of the female elite. Unlike non-elite women, elite women are more actively involved in education, media, business, science, and politics. However, their engagement in these spheres also highlights the challenges and limitations imposed by Saudi

policies toward women.

Above all, the collectivist nature of Saudi culture has significantly influenced how women perceive their identities. This culture emphasizes relational, interdependent identities over autonomous, individualistic ones; as highlighted by Haslett (2018), she underscores the fundamental differences between Eastern and Western cultures in their conceptualization of self, emphasizing that Western cultures foster autonomous, individualistic identities. These identities are centered on independence, self-expression, and personal achievement. In contrast, Eastern cultures prioritize relational and interdependent identities, where connections to others and the surrounding social context shape the self. The collective identity of Saudi women is shaped by a complex interplay of family traditions, societal expectations, and gender roles. This process of identity formation often involves negotiation, particularly given the blurred lines between personal, religious, and national identities. The negotiation of these identities is further complicated by the authoritarian social structure in Saudi Arabia, which intensifies the tension between collective societal norms and individual self-expression (Bernebring Journiette, 2014).

In recent years, significant sociocultural shifts have challenged these traditional norms, profoundly influencing Saudi women's identity. Factors such as studying abroad, social media platforms, and increasing opportunities in education and work have enabled Saudi women to redefine their roles and identities. Within a collectivist society, these shifts involve balancing familial, societal, and personal aspirations. For example, (Syed et al., 2018), highlight how Saudi women navigate these tensions, negotiating their identities to align with traditional values and modern aspirations. Furthermore, Al Eid et al. (2023) describe this process as "thinking individually and collaborating," while Le Renard (2014) refers to it as the "quiet encroachment of the ordinary," underscoring women's resilience and adaptability in embracing change.

Also, social media has emerged as a powerful mechanism for identity negotiation and self-expression. These platforms provide Saudi women spaces to maintain ties to cultural norms while simultaneously exploring new dimensions of identity. For instance, Guta and Karolak (2015) observe that women frequently adopt pseudonyms to navigate societal boundaries and engage in discussions on sensitive topics, such as veiling and the abaya.

However, these discussions often remain confined to virtual realms without significantly impacting broader societal conventions (Guta & Karolak, 2015; Aljuwaiser, 2018). On the other hand, practices like posting revealing photos online challenge established norms and reflect a growing sense of autonomy and self-expression (Bernebring Journiette, 2014). Similarly, Al-Natour (2024) emphasizes that digital media enables Saudi women to foster flexible identities and assert self-authority in an era of revolutions and quests for freedom.

In addition, the role of education, particularly studying abroad, has further transformed Saudi women's identity. For example, Alfurayh and Burns (2020) note that exposure to individualistic cultures reshaped Saudi women's perceptions of gender roles and personal identity. Although influenced by these new cultural experiences, many women retained strong ties to their Islamic values, allowing them to embrace modern roles without abandoning traditional expectations. Furthermore, Profanter et al. (2014) describe higher education as a bridge between conventional and global demands, equipping women with the tools to "assert greater agency in their personal and professional lives" while maintaining cultural and religious roots. Consequently, education enables women to balance the competing demands of tradition and modernity, fostering identity transformation and personal growth (Alshoaibi, 2018).

Likewise, the impact of Saudi Vision 2030 has been instrumental in reshaping women's identity. Vision 2030 has empowered women to transition from private to public identities by promoting individualistic values and modernizing societal structures. Specifically, Altuwayjiri (2019) highlights how social media has allowed women to redefine gender norms, normalize diverse veiling practices, and challenge homogenous beauty standards. For example, Saudi microcelebrities exemplify this shift by showcasing individuality while adhering to collective cultural frameworks (Lary, 2023). Additionally, Al Eid et al. (2023) note that women leverage online platforms to balance traditional expectations with professional aspirations, reflecting a dynamic interplay between modernity and tradition. Also, Al Eid et al. (2023) highlight that Saudi women are seen as a "national brand" of change-makers, embodying this collective identity while simultaneously navigating the demands of modernity.

In summary, policy reforms under Vision 2030 have eased societal restrictions, granting Saudi women greater freedoms in the labor market and education. Elliott and DeFrank-Cole (2018) emphasize that these changes represent a broader transition from

conservatism to moderate Islam and modernized cultural values. As a result, such reforms enable women to redefine their roles in physical and virtual spaces, challenging traditional notions of identity while embracing a rapidly modernizing society (Reed, 2016; Al Derham, 2023). Topal (2019) adds that the cultural framework that historically subordinated women is gradually shifting to recognize their contributions as economic and social participants. Ultimately, Saudi women's cultural identity reflects the intersection of historical traditions, collective societal norms, and modern aspirations. These transformative influences—social media, education, work, and policy reforms—allow Saudi Arabian women to redefine their roles, balancing tradition with autonomy actively. Furthermore, recent studies illustrate that young Saudi women increasingly prioritize individualism, focusing on personal emotions, career aspirations, and independent decision-making over collective considerations. This shift marks a significant departure from the traditional collectivist framework, where conformity once prevailed (Alhumood, 2023; Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Through resilience and adaptability, Saudi women are shaping their identities within a dynamic and evolving societal landscape.

3.2.2. The digital age shapes and transforms culture and identity

The digital age and new media have significantly challenged the notion of fixed identity. In an era of continuous connectivity, individuals exist in virtual spaces alongside countless others, raising questions about whether traditional perspectives on identity formation are adequate for understanding the development and maintenance of cultural identity in the 21st century (Shuter, 2017). Furthermore, Haslett (2018) posits that Giddens' structuration theory enhances our understanding of the global and local processes influencing identity and their interactions. By offering exposure to diverse cultures and experiences, new media compresses time and space, making cultural identity more fluid and adaptive (Chen & Dai, 2014; Giddens, 1990; Haslett, 2013a, 2013b). Modernity and globalization further enhance global interconnectedness, and Giddens' structuration theory clarifies how transportation and telecommunications support modern economies and drive political, cultural, and social transformations (Haslett, 2018). This theory emphasizes the critical role of communication in shaping, maintaining, and transforming cultural identities. Haslett (2018) underscores that culture, communication, and identity are interlinked processes, each influenced by new media. As cultures evolve through communication, they, in turn, shape communicative styles, creating an ongoing interplay between these elements.

As communication and culture evolve, so too does identity. Access to diverse lifestyles, music, and cultural insights has expanded personal choices, enabling individuals to construct, negotiate, and express their identities online (Bennett & Hodkinson, 2000). Social media allows people to connect, adapt, and reshape ideas, blurring the boundaries between offline and online personas (Bradley & McDonald, 2011; Haslett, 2021). Hence, mediated communication enables individuals to detach from their immediate realities, explore other identities, and develop new self-concepts, though these digital identities are influenced by platform design and limitations (Haslett, 2018). Chen and Dai (2012) argue that there is a reciprocal influence between new media and intercultural communication; cultural factors shape media development, and new media, in turn, influence cultural and social identities and intercultural exchanges. The internet has fostered a global community alongside diverse, interconnected virtual communities, where “new media simultaneously shape globalization into a process of differentiation and homogenization” (Chen & Dai, 2014, p. 124). Moreover, media foster a dense interaction between individuals and society, with globalization and new media jointly promoting cultural identity and hybridity. Intercultural identity is a psychological bridge connecting individuals to their immediate biological or social communities and multiple cultural spheres (Kim, 1994). This identity formation extends beyond one's social group to embrace other cultural perspectives, encouraging a more inclusive worldview.

In the context of globalization, traditional national boundaries become less distinct, compelling individuals—particularly those in traditionally majority groups—to recognize their identities as culturally constructed. Consequently, the need to examine personal and cultural identities becomes apparent as people increasingly shape their self-definitions within global and local contexts (Berry, 1986). The spread of Western cultural influences also necessitates agency and personal choice in identity formation, as individuals across various cultures simultaneously define themselves within local traditions and a global cultural framework. Jensen et al. (2011) explore how globalization affects young people's identity development, drawing on Berry's (1997) acculturation theory. They identify four acculturation patterns: assimilation, where individuals adopt a new culture entirely; separation, where they cling to their original culture; integration, which balances original and new cultural elements; and marginalization, where individuals feel disconnected. These patterns provide insight into how individuals, especially in a globalized world, reconcile multiple cultural influences to form a dynamic, bicultural identity that accommodates local traditions and global experiences.

In the digital age, identity formation extends beyond face-to-face interactions, allowing individuals to construct and express identities in online spaces. Levin and Mamlok (2021) examine how digital society fosters an environment where cultural expression becomes collective, with personal identities enriched by diverse cultural exchanges. This phenomenon significantly alters perceptions of identity, as online spaces allow for continuity and evolution in cultural expression. Haslett (2018) argues that the digital world enables individuals to explore various lifestyles, ultimately allowing for flexible identity construction through direct engagement, adaptation, and rejection of other influences. Online, the distinction between personal and social identity is increasingly blurred as individuals maintain virtual and real-world identities. Globalization and digital platforms challenge the traditional concept of culture as homogeneous and bounded. Instead, identity is dynamic and shaped by continuous exposure to diverse global influences, creating fluid, hybrid cultural identities (Chen & Dai, 2014; Hermans & Kempen, 1998). Kaul (2017) highlights the impact of national culture on digital media and its reciprocal influence on cultural and social identities, noting that intercultural interactions have shifted as social media enables real-time cultural exchange, leading to a blend of local and global elements.

More specifically, the digital age has fundamentally reshaped how identities are constructed and expressed, particularly for Saudi women, where the traditional boundaries of cultural and personal identity are increasingly fluid. Social media platforms offer vast spaces for expression, allowing Saudi women to explore and create multiple identities not confined by societal expectations. As Aloufi (2017) and al-Natour (2024) explain, these digital spaces are not idealized but critical markers of the digital era—an era characterized by revolutions and movements advocating for social justice and freedom. In this context, digital spaces enable women to navigate local and global contexts, sharing narratives that resonate across societal boundaries. By engaging with diverse audiences, these platforms provide opportunities to reshape and expand identities, offering counter-narratives that defy oppression and advocate for broader inclusion and equity.

Additionally, the interplay between economic globalization and local cultural transformations further shapes the identities of Saudi women. Ali et al. (2024) highlight the influence of global capitalism on Saudi Arabia's cultural and professional dynamics, noting that the cultural openness experienced in recent decades has allowed women to assert their

presence in the workplace and access new economic opportunities. This cultural shift, driven by globalization, has gradually diminished some rigid cultural traditions, allowing Saudi women to engage in more individualized identity formation. This transformation has implications for daily life, where the intersection of global economic systems and cultural practices is reflected in the choices and behaviors of individuals (Ali et al., 2024).

Albogami (2024) argues that social media has become a key platform for personal expression, self-exploration, and connection. It offers a space where individuals, especially Saudi women, can voice their concerns and aspirations, signaling a paradigm shift in how they view themselves. By utilizing digital media, Saudi women present themselves as determined individuals who seek to break free from restrictive norms while advocating for equality and empowerment. This shift reflects a growing desire to define their identities in ways not solely influenced by traditional societal structures. Similarly, Altuwayjiri (2019) highlights that Saudi women, particularly younger generations active on social media, are developing distinct personal feminine identities within their collectivist society. These women are transitioning toward individualistic values, norms, and social connections emphasizing autonomy and agency.

In parallel, social media influencers, particularly Saudi female influencers, also play a pivotal role in shaping the identities of their followers. Balelah (2020) notes that by adopting more open and self-affirmed forms of self-presentation, these influencers encourage others to challenge traditional boundaries and adopt more progressive identities. However, as Lary (2023) points out, these influencers often maintain dual identities—one private and authentic, and another public persona shaped by societal expectations. This duality demonstrates that while social media provides space for self-expression, it also imposes constraints due to cultural expectations. The awareness of the public gaze, both offline and online, influences how these influencers present themselves, often curbing their ability to express their authentic selves fully.

Moreover, Al Eid et al. (2023) explore how Saudi women navigate traditional cultural expectations and the desire for modern, self-expressive identities. Digital platforms allow them to experiment with various expressions of self, balancing societal constraints with opportunities for personal empowerment. Al Eid et al. (2023) suggest that this dynamic process of identity

construction allows Saudi women to redefine their roles within both traditional and contemporary contexts, signaling a shift toward more individualized forms of identity. Alsaggaf (2017) study addressed the use of social media and women in Saudi Arabia to highlight the positive impact of social media platforms on Saudi women's economic empowerment through increased access to job opportunities, networking, and business promotion.

Notably, the economic interests driving global businesses and cultural homogenization place pressure on traditional cultural identities. Martell (2007) suggests that nation-states have ceded significant cultural and economic influence to globalization forces, creating a cultural shift now visible in evolving social structures. Globalization, state policy, and social media convergence in Saudi Arabia have led to substantial social reforms. As Al-Yousef (2021) highlighted, Saudi society is transforming, moving away from its tribal, rural identity, and evolving into a modern state influenced by globalization. This shift guides Saudi society toward more excellent global connectivity, with women playing an increasingly influential role in shaping this change. According to Sarungu (2021), a framework of state readiness and media adaptation is crucial for integrating local identities into the global context, with mass media serving as a vital force in symbol formation.

This perspective aligns with Giddens' Structuration Theory (1983, 1984), which asserts that individuals function as agents within broader social structures and actively shape cultural identities through media. All of the women in Bernebring Journiette's (2014) study argued that their cultural context was changing due to globalization. Traditional and new media have changed how they communicate, not only with each other but also with the world. As one of the participants in her study said, "Media brought the cultures together in different ways" (p.50).

3.3. Modernity, Tradition, and Global influence

3.3.1. Global and Local Intercultural Interactions: Hybridization or homogenization

The Internet has been the essence of modeling productivity, cultural identity, and intercultural communication in the Information Age (Coffman & Odlyzko, 2002). Diversities

and an increase in information have been the primary resources for networking. Seemingly, due to the invention of the internet, the need for communication and networking when using internet services has increased, and the world has become more connected (Castells, 2014). The expansion of the use of online is not merely restricted to practice communication and networking; instead, it is both a paradigm changer and a dominant factor in shaping intercultural communication, and as a result, it retransforms the cultural identity under the name of globalization (Gajić et al., 2016). After the rise of internet utilization, researchers have been concerned about the forceful contact of new media on cultural identity, which affects intercultural communication. It is essential to recognize the changes in the cultural identity before the new media. These cultural identity changes are not a production of historical temporary improvement and demographic need changes; instead, cultural identity is a production of a more elastic, dynamic, and relativized that goes parallel with the changes of the austere challenges of the new media. (Kaul, 2017).

This study examines the relationship between culture and social media content by analyzing the online communication practices of influential Saudi entrepreneurs on Instagram. Specifically, it focuses on their involvement in local and global advertisements, brand partnerships, and follower interactions. This research explores how Saudi women influencers express and present their cultural identity on their platforms, how they blend their cultural roots with global commercial trends to influence their audiences, and to what extent these online activities empower Saudi women from a feminist perspective. The development of an increasingly integrated global economy marked especially by free trade, free flow of capital, and the tapping of cheaper foreign labor markets. Globalization is an agent that promotes global cultural values and products (Jensen et al., 2011). Globalization has been a people-based global connection; thus, globalization can be viewed from a macro perspective vs. a micro perspective. Microglobalization investigates “patterns of social behaviors, attitudes, and perceptual changes in people-based transnational actions and global connections as the fundamental mechanism of globalization with individual persons as its unit of observation” (Sun, 2021, p.27).

Globalization, as an ever-evolving process, is deeply intertwined with technological advances and the media’s role in bridging geographical and cultural gaps. It represents a dynamic shift in how individuals and corporations connect locally and globally, with

significant implications for cultural exchange. Globalization is not merely the economic integration of countries but an intricate web of interpersonal, cultural, and media connections that transcend national borders. Collins (1981) highlights how globalization, through the growth of transnational corporate power, reshapes cultural and social landscapes by connecting people on a micro level with macro consequences. These micro-global experiences, amplified by the internet and digital platforms, create new forms of social interaction, connecting individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Sun (2021) elaborates that globalization entails “binding or bridging social ties and spatial closeness over national boundaries,” emphasizing how global connections are not just abstract notions but tangible, lived experiences that influence local cultures.

Micro-globalization is central to understanding this phenomenon, which focuses on the more minor, everyday interactions that lead to global transformation. These micro-level interactions, often mediated through social media and digital platforms, offer a fresh perspective on globalization. Sun (2021) argues that these intensified connections redefine social spaces, reshaping local societies. The widespread use of social media further facilitates this shift, allowing individuals to access global conversations and partake in transnational cultural exchanges. However, Sarungu (2021) points out that the relationship between media and globalization is two-fold. On one hand, mass media communication through technology continues to play a critical role in connecting people globally. On the other hand, it also underscores the active participation of audiences in shaping the content, creating a more interactive and participatory form of global communication. Castells (2004) famously described globalization as the “death of distance,” a statement that resonates deeply in the context of digital technology’s role in dissolving geographical constraints. As Castells notes, new technologies are “space-defying, boundary-crossing, and ubiquitously linking” (p. 133), creating opportunities for continuous communication and cultural exchanges across borders. This “death of distance” is a technological advancement and a profound societal change, where virtual spaces become the new arenas for social, political, and cultural interactions.

Furthermore, as globalization intersects with the rise of technology and science, the acceleration of knowledge exchange through digital platforms becomes more pronounced. Kaul (2017) discusses how technology plays a pivotal role in the global dissemination of information, mainly through mass media, which has transformed how we communicate and

perceive cultural identities. This transformation is not just a unidirectional process; globalization is a reciprocal force where local cultures are actively reshaped through these technological exchanges. In this sense, globalization does not merely dissolve cultures into a homogeneous whole but encourages hybrid identities shaped by global influences and local adaptations. This interplay between technology, media, and globalization challenges the traditional notion of cultural homogenization; rather than leading to cultural erasure, globalization, driven by digital technologies, fosters hybrid identities and local adaptations. It creates new forms of cultural expression locally and globally, encouraging a constant negotiation between the international and the local. As De Mooij (2021) notes, the internet has reinforced converging habits but also reveals diverging behaviors, indicating the complex ways global and local cultures interact and influence each other.

In brief, understanding globalization requires an analysis of its economic or technological dimensions and an exploration of how it reshapes social and cultural landscapes through micro-global experiences facilitated by digital media. The role of technology and media in this process cannot be overstated, as they are tools of global connectivity and powerful forces in transforming local societies. As globalization continues to evolve, it is imperative to study these shifts through the lens of micro-globalization, considering both the challenges and opportunities they present for cultural exchange and identity formation. Meanwhile, the second perspective is based on the viewpoint of an active audience. Chuencharoen (2021) points out that technology has been rapidly evolving in recent years, contributing significantly to the dramatic increase in globalization. Wilkinson (2021) explains that globalization is not just an economic or political process but also a force of worldwide social change, with far-reaching implications for societal structures, cultures, social institutions, human agency, and religion. Half a century ago, McLuhan envisioned a global village that, in today's context, ironically carries both utopian and dystopian connotations. De Mooij (2021) interprets that while the internet has not fundamentally changed human behavior, it has reinforced converging habits, which tend to diverge based on cultural contexts.

Additionally, cultural analyses of globalization explore how universal and local cultures shape the world. There are shared global expressions of food, music, fashion, and technology on digital platforms, yet the market industry—driven by globalization—has often obliterated local cultures. Interestingly, Deng (2005) asserts that cultural identity is provoked

by external questions that compel individuals to construct their identities through culture, leading them to defend and preserve them. In this sense, globalization brings a heightened awareness of cultural identity. As Jensen et al. (2011) argue, globalization enhances cultural identity by raising audiences' concerns about the uniqueness and particularity of their own cultures. Cultural identity, therefore, provides global significance to local knowledge and fosters a sense of self, community, and nation.

In this context, debates continue regarding the nature of globalization's impact on local cultures. Some theories suggest that globalization is a benign force, offering opportunities for mutual enrichment, while others view it as a dangerous force that undermines local traditions and identities. The role of new media in these processes remains central to this debate. It is crucial to consider whether globalization is genuinely dominant or exists in a more nuanced relationship with local cultural identity, particularly in the age of digital media, where global connectivity often meets local resistance.

Prior studies claim that globalization is the dominant catalyst; for instance, Shuter (2017) mentions that a globalized society represents a state of competition and co-existence among different cultures. Not only has globalization forced a new definition of community to change into a more inclusive and collective meaning of identity, but it has also collapsed barriers of traditional communities. Boosting transformation to take place, extension, and expansion have been implemented from local to global level. The acceleration and intensification in the international flows of capital-labor and information influence and homogenize local cultures. Although various new opportunities have been provided, in the phase integration of societies, it has also been the cause of a loss of uniqueness of local culture, which in turn can lead to loss of identity, exclusion, and even conflict. This is especially true for traditional societies and communities, which are exposed to rapid 'modernization' based on models imported from outside and not adapted to their context. In the 21st century, this transformation has generated new "opportunities and challenges for learning how to co-exist and develop an ideal future world harmoniously." (Kaul, 2017, p.13) Distinctively, new media features have driven "Human society to a highly interconnected and complex level." Yet, it challenges human communication significantly concerning tradition, mainly speaking, form, the content of information and communication have been influenced by new media to the extent it affected the comprehension during the process of communication " , especially for those from

different cultural or ethnic groups,” (Chen, 2012, p.3). Globalization obtains advantages and disadvantages for each local community and culture and vice versa, representing local culture to the global surface. Creating diversity in an international place to exchange ideas around massive cultures fosters both influences and obstacles regarding community and local cultures. Methods of thinking, attitudes, and cultural artifacts in any local community merely reflect influences. Therefore, it emphasizes that “the cultural identity of each local community will be tested by global cultural exposure” (Sarungu, 2021, p. 103).

On the other hand, globalization has a distinct local cultural identity, and researchers reveal that constructing a cultural identity is more of a hybridization than a homogenization of culture (Dryland and Syed, 2011; Yagi and Kleinberg, 2011). Sarungu (2021) found that individuals negotiate their cultural identity when dealing with global corporate culture. In contrast, Sarungu (2021) emphasizes that an immediate abandonment of identity is not in human nature, especially when multicultural or diversified companies have hired them. Instead of a global village, it is apparent that internet users are moving towards mass production of customized cottages. While there is an oligopolistic concentration of multimedia groups around the world, there is, at the same time, market segmentation and increasing interaction by and among individuals that break up the uniformity of a mass audience. These processes induce the formation of a culture of real visibility. It is so, and not virtual reality, because when our symbolic environment is, by and large, structured in this inclusive, flexible, diversified hypertext, in which it is navigated every day, the virtuality of this text becomes a reality, the symbols from which we live and communicate (Castells, 1997).

In addition, modernity is simply replicated elsewhere and highlights that globalization is a much longer process. Modern Western systems become something else in different cultural contexts. However, his most significant contribution is understanding the world as a single culture. Humans everywhere see or experience the world the same way, but rather that there are competing visions of the world as a single place, including those that embrace world order and those that reject it. There is an invisible line that differentiates between losing local culture and adapting local culture to global standardization. Culture is a dynamic force for change rather than a rigid set of forms or parameters that must be strictly adhered to. According to the World Commission on Culture and Development (WCCD/UNESCO), a society’s culture is neither static nor unchanging. Instead, it is constantly in flux, influencing and being influenced

by other worldviews and expressive forms of the United Nations. Seemingly, cultural identities have been demolished by globalization, yet these cultural identities can be revived with the existing circumstances (Sarungu, 2021).

The advantage of Western modernity has dominated other cultural identities- many studies have claimed- concerning cultural hybridization, yet Chen and Dai (2014) indicate that Western modernity dominance created digital advantages. Hybridization seems to challenge non-Western communities in two aspects: identity and change. Chen and Dai (2014) realized that hybridization is “to incorporate modern Western ideas that denote both empowerment and marginalization” (Chen & Dai, 2014, p.130). The authors added that hybridization is not a “power-free space.” This means that local cultures are more adaptable, and the chance to retain their local identity is lower in non-western countries when interwoven and collaborated. The global digital division conducts an unbalanced flow of information, which frequently disadvantages less developed countries (Dahlman et al., 2016). As a result, to facilitate growth, it is notable that as much as alienation and resistance occur when increasing interactions accelerate across cultures (Haslett, 2018).

Furthermore, Appadurai (1990) argues that globalization is not merely cultural homogenization but “globalization involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization (armaments, advertising techniques, language hegemonies, and clothing styles” (p.596). Homogeneous media texts will be absorbed into the politics and economy of local culture. Later, the results of contextualizing global culture with local values and structures will be produced and repatriated in the form of different cultural products (Appadurai, 1990).

Nevertheless, Kurniawati & Pawito (2010) mention media consumption as one of the most essential factors. He explains that cultural products brought by mass media will challenge national and local identities. Observing the local community's responses to mass media content and outlets is interesting. Sarungu (2021) argues that consuming media should be utilized with different methods regarding the inhabitance, local audiences have their process of adapting to global cultural values, for “Mass media tends to carry cultural homogenization in their outlets” (p.106). Local culture audiences seem to combine the homogeneous cultural values “into local culture and make it an Indigenous culture” (Sarungu, 2021, p.107). In addition, Haslett (2018) stated, “ New media continue to provide new information that challenges how we view culture

and our own identities” (p.97).

Indeed, a dramatic conflict often occurs when an interaction between globalization and cultural identity is encouraged. There are conflicting views on globalization and cultural identity. On the one hand, globalization means homogenizing culture to impose Western cultural identity and values onto other local cultural identities. Eventually, “cultural imperialism” obliterates the local community’s identity and values. On the other hand, globalization is a creative hub to diversify various “fragmented and unpredictable cultures accompanied by many cultural hybridizations (western and non-western, non-western with non-western) that have emerged because of the globalization process” (Sarungu, 2021, p.104). The audiences have their communication behavior in accepting global cultural treats that are displayed in mass media outlets. In addition, Sarungu (2021) states that the outcome that results from the combination of globalization, which is mediated by the state, and the mass media with local communities will lead to the construction of cultural identity and the influence and synthesis of many different factors such as media, namely history, culture, ethnicity, language, religion, nationalism, and geographical conditions construct cultural identity. The outcome of this identity construction will later become a distinctive and different character of any community. “Worldwide globalization, cultures are experiencing continual change, particularly from the increased flow of information, the emergence of transitional cultures, and both divergence and hybridization across cultures” (Haslett, 2018, p.98).

Moreover, local knowledge is of global significance. Accordingly, these two dimensions can have a positive relationship. They believe globalization and localization are so intertwined that they need to coin a new term, “glocal,” which means “both global and local” (Wang, 2007), while glocalization was first defined by Roland Robertson (1992; 1994) as global forces mitigated by local circumstances. The essence of glocalization not only implies that the globe is becoming more diversified and cosmopolitan, but it is also the core of adapting practices- mass media and technology- to local conditions and vice versa. Glocalization can be defined as the interpenetration of global and local, resulting in unique, hybrid outcomes. Cook & Ryan (2016) found that glocalization, a fundamentally new phenomenon of global and local outcomes, emerged. It is a mixing of the two, rather than the imposition of the global on the local or the opposition of the local to the global. The consistent intertwining of global and local interactions encourages a business global-local nexus based on hybridity, variety, and diversity

to emerge as a new phenomenon. “On the level of consumption, commodities and the media are not seen as imposing uniformity, but rather as providing means by which local realities can self-selectively create and refashion identities and communities. It is a generally positive view of globalization, particularly concerning consumption” (Cook & Ryan, 2016, p.1). Glocalization is rooted in the postmodern notions of hybridity, diversity, plurality, and pastiche. It is also a term coined for a product or service that tends to be more likely to succeed when it is adapted efficiently to a local market. In the Oxford Dictionary of New Words, the term "glocalization" derives from the Japanese notion of *Dochakuka*, which Elliott & Knowles (1997) indicate the origin of an agricultural principle of adapting farming techniques to local conditions.

Combining globalization and localization suggests that globalization processes are directly integrated into local contexts. Roland Robertson’s third major globalization theory (1992, 2001, 2007) addresses world culture issues, emphasizing how cultural practices travel across time and space and are contextualized in specific localities. This idea of "glocalization" highlights the balance between the sameness and difference in global culture. For example, global brands like Sony and McDonald's are recognizable worldwide but vary according to local preferences and cultural nuances. Glocalization suggests that globalization is not a unidirectional or imperialistic force but a relational and contingent process. For example, consumption, commodities, and media are tools through which local cultures selectively build and refashion identities rather than being forced into uniformity.

On the other hand, globalization in science and technology has not been passively accepted but actively shaped by cultural factors at three levels. First, individuals are free to choose and establish their cultural practices. Second, as science and technology make the world more interconnected, globalization fosters deeper cultural identity connections. Finally, as individuals interact with global influences, they become more concerned with preserving their cultural identity. The more they engage with international culture, the more they seek to protect their cultural roots, ultimately strengthening their cultural identity. Thus, globalization provides knowledge of other cultures and supports the growth and reinforcement of local cultures (Robertson, 1992, 2001, 2007).

The initial attempts at glocalization primarily took place on a corporate level, with

companies adapting their global offerings to local markets. For instance, McDonald's in Hong Kong introduced Chinese rice and noodles to appeal to local tastes. At the same time, Yahoo's international success was driven by its glocalization strategy, which involved hiring local teams to curate content for each Yahoo site launched outside the United States (Spiegler, 2000; Sun, 2021). As Sun (2021) observes, effective glocalization requires local management, with native teams involved in all aspects of the business, from TV shows to local periodicals, ensuring that content resonates with the local audience. This illustrates how cultural globalization fuses corporate and consumer cultures globally while simultaneously promoting national cultures internationally. However, the proliferation of global cultural phenomena may alter or even replace national cultural practices.

3.3.2. Digital marketing, the fashion industry, and social influencers

3.3.2.1. The Global-Local Paradox in Fashion Marketing: The Role of Social Media Influencers

A significant challenge in global marketing lies in balancing standardized global strategies with tailored local approaches. While global brands strive for universal appeal or niche segment targeting, local adjustments often enhance relevance. Cultural globalization blends global and local consumer cultures; however, global trends can sometimes overshadow local identities. Despite technological advances fostering global connections, consumer motivations remain deeply rooted in local cultural values. According to De Mooij (2021), marketing success depends on understanding local subcultures, as motivations for purchasing brands are not universally shared. The "global-local paradox" reveals that awareness of other cultures can strengthen local identities, sometimes fueling nationalism. Therefore, while global marketing knowledge is widely disseminated, its application often favors localization to ensure effectiveness. This underscores the necessity for tailored strategies that align with specific cultural values.

Building on this, the dynamic relationship between global fashion brands and local consumers is increasingly influenced by social media (Ihzaturrahma & Kusumawati, 2021), which acts as a bridge between international markets and local cultures. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook enable global fashion brands to engage with local

consumers in real-time, offering personalized content that resonates with diverse cultural preferences (Winzer et al., 2022). This way, digital interaction allows global brands to transcend geographical boundaries and access new markets more efficiently. Zhou et al. (2021) suggest that international fashion brands must adopt local values, trends, and cultural sensitivities to connect with regional consumers effectively. In particular, female social media influencers are crucial in facilitating engagement between global brands and local markets. By leveraging these influencers, international brands can create culturally relevant content and tailor product offerings to regional tastes.

At the same time, Choufan (2022) argues that cultural industry theory needs to be reconsidered in an era of globalization where borders are increasingly fluid. In today's hyper-globalized world, characterized by simultaneity and speed, social media connects users globally in real-time. This immediacy allows shared cultural objects to travel freely and be consumed simultaneously. In fashion, this rapid circulation of trends and styles is especially significant. Expanding on these insights, globalization fosters closer connections among people and nations through trade, information technology, travel, cultural exchanges, mass media, and entertainment. It is commonly categorized into economic, cultural, and political dimensions. Hay and Marsh (2000) argue that culture and economy in globalization are profoundly interconnected and cannot be analyzed as separate entities. Instead, they should be examined through an interdisciplinary lens. From a cultural globalization perspective, this interconnection emerges from the commercialization of culture and the expansion of capitalism. Economically, globalization is driven by individuals and entities with vested interests in its discourse. Moreover, digitalization is expected to reshape both market competition and society. The transformative impact of digital technologies on business operations is significant, with marketing increasingly dependent on technology, thereby altering the nature of international marketplaces (Gillpatrick, 2019).

Building on this, a fundamental challenge in global marketing is determining whether to adopt a standardized global branding strategy or adapt marketing efforts to align with regional cultural values. De Mooij (2021) posits that brands can target broad global consumer needs or focus on specific niche markets using standardized, adapted, or hybrid approaches. The key issue is recognizing that markets consist of people, not just products. As businesses expand globally, they often become product-driven, prioritizing market penetration over

consumer engagement. Although global products exist, local subcultures and values shape consumer motivations for purchasing them. Therefore, advertisers must tailor their messaging to align with these cultural nuances, mainly when targeting diverse demographic groups, such as youth culture or varying national identities (De Mooij, 2021). The "global-local paradox" underscores how exposure to other cultures can reinforce local identities and even fuel nationalism. Despite globalization's expanding influence, it does not homogenize global consumer culture. Instead, it highlights the importance of prioritizing localization over uniformity in marketing strategies. The advancement of digital technologies has not resulted in uniform consumer preferences, challenging the assumption that globalization fosters identical product demands worldwide. (De Mooij, 2021).

Expanding on this point, social media influencers have become instrumental in the global fashion industry, driving trends, shaping consumer preferences, and enhancing brand visibility while remaining attuned to cultural norms. Local influencers, in particular, create meaningful engagement between global fashion brands and culturally diverse consumers (Peters et al., 2021). Choufan (2022) highlights the importance of sharing fashion via social media, where clothing, accessories, campaigns, and fashion shows are mediated and made publicly accessible in real-time. Digital sharing is critical in commercial and personal contexts, influencing audience perceptions and fostering active participation in fashion discourse.

For instance, global luxury brands such as Dolce & Gabbana, Louis Vuitton, Prada, and Gucci have successfully entered the Saudi Arabian market, gaining substantial traction, mainly through endorsements from female social media influencers (Jumriani et al., 2021). Consequently, these endorsements boost consumer engagement and contribute to Saudi Arabia's economic development. Social media platforms have emerged as key drivers of fashion trends, with influencer endorsements significantly increasing the visibility and popularity of luxury brands (Jumriani et al., 2021). Thus, as global fashion brands experience heightened demand, they face intensified market competition (Mohiuddin Babu et al., 2022). Moreover, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have made fashion brands more accessible and affordable for users in Saudi Arabia. According to a recent report by Fiber2Fashion, the fashion industry in Saudi Arabia generated \$30 billion in 2023 and is expected to reach \$42 billion by 2028, representing 2.5% of Saudi Arabia's GDP (Fibre2Fashion, 2024). Additionally, the number of users in the fashion segment is expected to

reach 19.0 million by 2025, with user penetration increasing from 42.5% in 2022 to 51.1% by 2025. The average revenue per user (ARPU) is expected to amount to \$255.10 (Statista, 2024).

In light of these trends, this study investigates the role of influential Saudi entrepreneurs in bridging the gap between international brands and Saudi consumers by leveraging their deep understanding of local culture. Specifically, it examines how these influential entrepreneurs facilitate the entry of global brands into the Saudi market while simultaneously showcasing and promoting Saudi fashion and culture on the global stage. Furthermore, the research explores whether they adapt their local identity to align with global brand expectations or if they influence global brands to incorporate and respect local cultural elements. In addition, the study assesses whether these influencers merge their cultural roots with the worldwide market's culture, creating a unique blend that reflects both worlds. Ultimately, this examination provides valuable insights into the interplay between global influence and local identity. Lipovetsky (2002) highlights the globalization of fashion as a phenomenon that merges local and global identities. He argues that the global fashion industry creates a shared aesthetic vocabulary while allowing regional adaptations.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the Saudi context, where global brands engage local consumers by incorporating Saudi cultural values through collaborations with local influencers and adaptations in product offerings and we are going to study in depth how it works from the point of view of influential entrepreneurs. Almesahri et al. (2023) noted, local influencers play a crucial role in bridging the cultural divide between foreign brands and local audiences. Similarly, Alatawy (2022) observes that markets like Saudi Arabia may be more receptive to third-party endorsements from trusted influencers. Given this trend, many global fashion brands have shifted their focus to developing marketing strategies that leverage local influencers, expanding their reach to a broader consumer base (Almesahri et al., 2023).

3.3.2.2. Fashion as Culture: Evolving Dress Codes and Identity in Saudi Arabia

This section delves into how Saudi Arabia's fashion culture is evolving. Specifically, it focuses on the changing dress code of women in Saudi Arabia, highlighting how social media and influencers are shaping these transformations. The interplay between tradition and modernity in fashion choices is increasingly visible on these platforms, where global trends are

embraced and adapted to local cultural identities.

Saudi women's fashion choices and public visibility have long been shaped by deep-rooted societal restrictions, underscored by cultural, religious, and patriarchal norms (Rabolt & Forney, 1989). Historically, dress codes like the abaya and hijab served as both markers of modesty and communications of cultural identity, embodying Mary Douglas's (1973; 1984) notion of the 'two bodies'—the physical body and the social body. The social body, governed by societal norms, heavily influences perceptions of the physical body, dictating specific ways of being and dressing. This framework helps to explain how the veiled female body communicated a discourse of religion, tradition, and privacy, reinforcing the social structure of gender-based power hierarchies in Saudi Arabia. Entwistle's (2000) analysis of the body as a constrained medium of expression is heavily influenced by cultural mediation and reflecting social pressures. Furthermore, Saudi women's identities were historically hidden within these boundaries. Their public fashion choices were not merely personal but intensely mediated by cultural and social pressures.

Over time, however, as education, employment, and socioeconomic status began to influence women's lives, subtle shifts in private fashion choices emerged. Women traveling abroad or working outside traditional domains increasingly expressed individuality in their attire, even if it remained concealed beneath the abaya. Factors such as travel, work, education, and age significantly influenced their preferences, as observed by Rabolt & Forney (1989), who highlighted how Saudi women with higher socioeconomic status wore less traditional clothing privately and influenced clothing preferences and the sources of market information and acquisition. Meanwhile, Yamani (2000) noted how, during the 1950s to 1980s, Western luxury brands and Egyptian films influenced women's private attire beneath the abaya. By the 1980s, however, the Islamic revival movement reasserted conservative dress, emphasizing modesty and Islamic identity.

Despite these shifts, fashion continued to serve as an essential medium of self-expression for Saudi women, albeit within carefully defined boundaries. Gonçalves (2018) highlights that fashion is an interplay of identity, communication, context, and culture. This perspective resonates strongly with Saudi women's evolving dress practices. Over time, fashion emerged as a medium of self-expression, enabling women to balance authenticity,

cultural expectations, and individuality. Tawfiq and Ogle (2013) found that Saudi women navigated private settings to articulate their identities through clothing, reflecting personal and societal values. Modesty remained a core principle, but its interpretations varied widely—ranging from conservative Islamic principles to liberal expressions. In this context, dress served as a key link between individual identity and the body, as Mary Douglas (1973; 1984) and Goffman (1971) described, portraying the body as an individual and social property.

Nevertheless, the question of choice in dressing remained complex and, in most cases, constrained by broader societal expectations. As Quamar (2016) mentioned, it depends on individuals to choose their dressing style. Still, in most circumstances, it is unlikely for a young Saudi woman, married or unmarried, to step out of her house without veiling. Later, Quamar (2016) noted that although many Saudi women would choose not to veil if given the option, many would continue to do so based on family circumstances, education, career, and economic factors. Despite adherence to traditional dress codes like the black abaya and hijab, veiling practices have become increasingly diverse. For some, the niqab is seen as burdensome, whereas others embrace it as an integral part of their cultural or personal identity. Ultimately, Quamar concludes that while veiling cannot yet be characterized as a personal choice, socioeconomic progress has allowed for greater individual autonomy, particularly regarding the niqab. Nab (2019) further highlights the role of social contexts in shaping Saudi women's fashion. In professional and academic settings, where diverse groups and uniform policies promote egalitarianism, women navigate their clothing choices carefully to avoid criticism. Expressive items like designer handbags offer subtle individuality within these frameworks. In female-only settings, however, fashion becomes an outlet for creativity, blending Arabian culture with Western modernity. Dresses for special occasions reflect this fusion, as Gulf-produced styles integrate cultural heritage with global trends.

The abaya, a cornerstone of Saudi women's cultural identity, has significantly transformed in recent years. Traditionally symbolizing modesty and national identity, the abaya has evolved to include various designs, styles, fabrics, and colors, reflecting the influence of globalization and the adoption of Western lifestyles. These shifts have been facilitated by social media platforms and increased exposure to international cultures through tourism and education (Alamri, 2023). Despite these changes, Alamri (2023) notes significant resistance, particularly from the older generation shaped by the Sahwa era, who view these

transformations as a concession to Westernization. For them, changes in the hijab or abandoning it entirely represent a departure from the authentic Saudi identity, particularly among those from tribal backgrounds. Conversely, younger and more diverse demographics increasingly embrace these changes as a positive development. This group views the repeal of mandatory hijab laws as an opportunity to address longstanding criticisms of women's rights in Saudi Arabia, fostering self-reflection on cultural and religious beliefs. These reforms allow women to align their clothing choices with Islamic principles while respecting individual convictions. Resistance to the evolving styles of the abaya reflects deeply ingrained societal norms that continue to govern women's public expression of individuality. Traditional cultural values of modesty and chastity remain dominant, restricting significant changes in public attire. Adjustments to hijab styles are seen as acts of individuality but are carefully navigated to avoid potential criticism. This reflects Entwistle's (2000) perspective that dress is a socially mediated link between individual and cultural identity, while societal expectations constrain personal expression. Similarly, Beck (1992), Altuwayjiri (2019), and Entwistle (2000) highlight how these societal norms reinforce conformity and suppress individuality in public spaces.

In recent years, social media and globalization have emerged as powerful catalysts for change, providing Saudi women with platforms to explore and assert their fashion identities beyond traditional constraints. Social media fosters a sense of liberation from restrictive cultural norms, allowing women to experiment with different styles. Lipovetsky (2002) captures this duality, emphasizing how modern fashion simultaneously promotes individuality and adherence to collective trends. Lary (2023) observed this dynamic among Saudi microcelebrities on Instagram, whose sartorial choices range from traditional modest attire with hijab to modern, trendy outfits, including those without hijab. These microcelebrities skillfully curate content that balances audience expectations with cultural boundaries. As Lary (2023) notes, many promote ideals of beauty and fashionable femininity similar to Western influencers, showcasing glamorous lifestyles while remaining culturally relevant. Albogami (2024) further illustrates this transformation by analyzing how ten Saudi public figures use their platforms to blend traditional attire like the abaya and hijab with modern global styles such as athletic and business wear, thereby expanding norms of public expression while preserving cultural heritage. Moreover, (Balelah, 2020) discussed that Saudi women carefully evaluate social media trends based on specific criteria before adopting them; some women reject trends that conflict with their values, while others may slightly adjust their modesty

standards to align with trends, particularly if other Saudi women embrace those trends on social media.

The interplay of digital platforms and evolving cultural expectations has profoundly reshaped Saudi women's visible identities. Within online mixed-gender spaces, women construct identities with greater autonomy, often challenging traditional norms. Some women adopt styles that eschew traditional coverings like the abaya or hijab, while others incorporate unconventional choices such as cropped clothing or revealing arms. These shifts, as Balelah (2020) observed, are often seen as threats to Saudi women's national and Islamic identity by traditionalists. However, for many, they represent a chance to redefine modesty in ways that align with their beliefs rather than adhering to rigid cultural expectations. Balelah (2020) highlights how women navigate these transformations, emphasizing that digital platforms have become critical arenas for renegotiating identity and cultural norms.

Significant changes in Saudi women's fashion have also been driven by Vision 2030 reforms, which aim to expand women's economic and social freedoms. Al Derham (2023) explains that although Saudi women had been using social media since 2001 and had long been exposed to global fashion, meaningful changes in public attire—such as the diversification of abaya colors and designs—only emerged following Vision 2030. These reforms, tied to economic changes like declining oil revenues, encouraged greater female workforce participation and facilitated the development of new material identities for Saudi women. The relaxation of dress code restrictions under Vision 2030 has allowed women to explore individual styles, fostering greater freedom of expression in physical and virtual spaces. Balelah (2020) explores how mixed-gender spaces influence visible identities, noting that Saudi women consider not only the abaya's style but also how the clothing beneath it complements their appearance. Some abayas are designed to reveal underlying outfits, reflecting a cohesive identity. Over time, shifts in visible identities within these spaces signal a trend toward liberal expression. Balelah (2020) also observed significant changes in Saudi women's fashion during his PhD research, noting a gradual shift from conservative to more liberal visible identities in mixed-gender spaces.

Tawfiq and Ogle (2022) examine the impact of these relaxed dress code laws on Saudi women's public identity, noting that many women welcomed the opportunity to develop

personal styles beyond the traditional black abaya. These changes also fostered mutual respect in gender interactions, contributing to a broader cultural shift. However, Tawfiq and Ogle (2022) emphasize balancing these newfound freedoms with cultural values and modesty. While women embraced the ability to express individuality, some voiced concerns about losing traditional identity and the cultural symbolism of the abaya. This reflects the tension between modernity and tradition as Saudi women navigate the evolving cultural landscape.

In conclusion, the transition in Saudi women's fashion reflects a broader societal transformation shaped by globalization, social media, and Vision 2030 reforms. From the initial resistance to change driven by traditional norms to the growing acceptance of individuality and diversity in dress styles, Saudi women are redefining their identities in dress style both in offline and virtual spaces. This transformation illustrates the complex interplay between cultural heritage, modernity, and individual expression, highlighting the evolving role of fashion as a medium for negotiating identity and cultural belonging. This study will analyze the evolving fashion choices of Saudi women through the experiences of influential entrepreneurs in the fashion industry as women in Saudi Arabia are no longer limited to wearing open or colored abayas; instead, they collaborate with global and local fashion brands, participate in advertisements, and express their individuality through their lifestyles and work in the fashion sector.

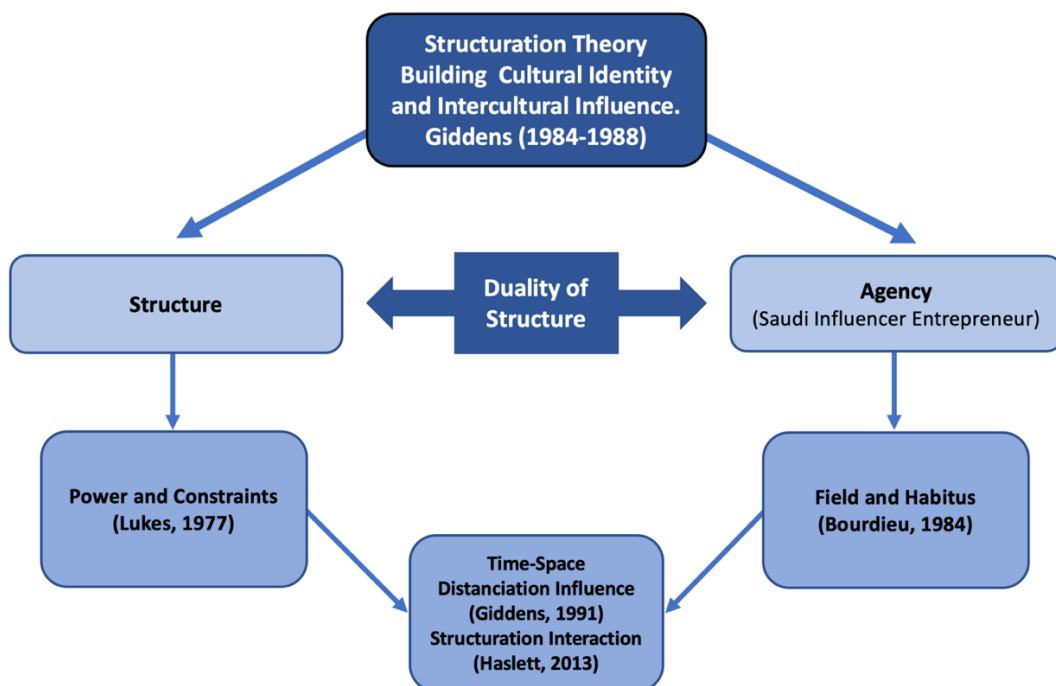
3.4. Structuration Theory and the role of Saudi women influencers related to intercultural interaction

This section introduces Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, a foundational framework that explores the dynamic interplay between individual agency and social structures (Dyck & Kearns, 2006). Specifically, structuration theory provides a valuable lens for understanding how influential entrepreneurs navigate and influence Saudi Arabia's evolving cultural and social norms during its transition period. To structure the discussion effectively, this section is organized around key concepts from Giddens' work, each of which offers insight into the role of influencers within Saudi society. At the core of Giddens' theory is the duality of structure, which posits that social structures not only shape individual behavior but are also continuously produced and transformed through social action. In other words, while structures guide behavior, individuals simultaneously reshape these very structures through their actions.

This duality provides a framework to explore the influential entrepreneurs’ agency in balancing traditional social norms with their personal and professional aspirations.

To enrich the analysis, the study incorporates Bourdieu’s concepts of field and habitus, which expand on structuration by considering how specific “habitus” and “fields”—such as the fashion industry—have their own rules and hierarchies (Ancelovici, 2021). Here, habitus represents the internalized cultural dispositions that guide individuals’ actions within these fields. For Saudi women influencers, habitus reflects their unique backgrounds and experiences, which they adapt and express through social media, blending local and global fashion aesthetics. The chapter further integrates Lukes’s (1977) perspective on power and structural constraints, emphasizing how power operates within social structures and affects the agency of individuals. This concept highlights how influencers encounter enabling and constraining forces in their industry and culture. Additionally, Haslett’s focus on communication and Giddens’ (1991) concept of time-space underscore the global reach of digital platforms like Instagram, through which influencers engage with a worldwide audience and contribute to Saudi Arabia’s cultural transition.

Figure 1 Theoretical Framework for Saudi women influential entrepreneurs agency and cultural identity



Source: own demonstration

In combining these perspectives, this chapter establishes a theoretical foundation to examine how Saudi women influential entrepreneurs navigate social expectations and exercise agency in ways that reshape cultural identity within a rapidly modernizing society. The theoretical framework, as illustrated in Figure 1, provides a structured understanding of the complex relationship between individual agency, social structures, and the evolving cultural landscape in Saudi Arabia.

3.4.1. Agency and the intersection of religious, socialcultural, economic, and political factors

The agency of Saudi women has historically operated within the boundaries of Islamic teachings and social norms, challenging the notion that they lacked agency before Vision 2030. Their identities have been shaped by a globally mediated lens that often portrays them as “subjects without agency,” perpetuating assumptions of victimization and control. However, many Saudi women reject this characterization, emphasizing that “compliance and agency are not contradictory” (Mustafa & Troudi, 2019, p. 136). Abu-Lughod (1990) critiques this interpretation of agency, warning against the “tendency to romanticize resistance,” which assumes that all forms of defiance signify the inefficacy of power structures and the triumph of individual will (p. 42). This perspective aligns with the concept of a compliant agency, where Saudi women navigate societal and religious frameworks through conscious conformity and strategic resistance, balancing adherence to norms with opportunities for empowerment. By leveraging compliant agencies, Saudi women have expanded their autonomy while preserving cultural and religious integrity (Al-Hwiesh et al., 2013; Mahmood, 2001, 2005; Mustafa & Troudi, 2019).

Expanding on this, Mustafa's (2017) study introduced the concept of agency maneuvers, whereby women conformed to societal expectations while strategically resisting them to align with societal norms and Shari'a guidelines. Mustafa and Troudi (2019) explored various forms of agency among Saudi women, including nonliteral pious agency, where women conform to religious ideals to become virtuous Muslim subjects, thereby challenging Western feminist assumptions. They also examined compliant agency, where women engage with religious traditions while navigating marginalization, and confinement agency, where women critically engage with religious traditions to improve themselves and move beyond

domestic constraints. Similarly, Syed et al. (2018) found that societal norms, organizational settings, and personal experiences shape Saudi women's identities. While the male guardianship system and workplace barriers influence their agency, their resilience and strategic maneuvering through these challenges demonstrate the dynamic nature of their evolving identities. These findings highlight how Saudi women balance tradition, modern aspirations, and systemic constraints while asserting their agency.

In parallel, Aloufi (2017) found that religious interpretations have provided women with a foundation for agency, enabling them to navigate cultural constraints while remaining consistent with Islamic principles. This dual role of religion, acting as both a restrictive and enabling force, illustrates its complex influence on shaping Saudi women's identities and agency (Song, 2019). These perspectives align with broader sociopolitical changes in Saudi Arabia, where religious traditions remain integral but are increasingly interpreted in ways that allow for women's active participation in public life.

Beyond religious influences, Saudi women's agency is not confined to their roles as wives and mothers but extends to higher education and professional opportunities (Alharbi, 2018). These advancements mark a significant evolution in their societal roles, as demonstrated by key political milestones, including the appointment of 30 women to the Shura Council in 2013, Saudi Arabia's formal consultative body. The Shura Council was established as "an apparatus to directly involve the citizen in the administration of the country's politics, planning for it, and following up the performance of its institutions" (The Shura Council Publications, A Brief History, 2015, p. 8). Additionally, the election of 20 women in municipal elections in 2015 and the appointment of women to leadership roles in 2017, such as Princess Rima heading the Multi-Sport Federation and Fatima Baeshen becoming the spokesperson for the Saudi embassy in Washington, D.C., further underscore these shifts (Al-Yousef, 2021). These milestones collectively demonstrate Saudi women's growing capacity to assert their agency in public and professional spheres.

As these transformations unfold, the broader cultural implications of integrating women into public and professional life become increasingly evident. By stepping into economic and societal roles, Saudi women are reshaping traditional gender dynamics. They are not merely participants in economic activities but active agents of cultural evolution. This integration

signals a gradual shift toward a more inclusive societal model that recognizes and values women's contributions beyond the domestic sphere. The transformative nature of these changes reflects an evolving cultural identity where women are acknowledged as vital contributors to the nation's progress and development (Alshoaibi, 2018). Political reforms in Saudi Arabia have further amplified women's agency, reshaping their identities in response to evolving social norms and interpretations of Islam (Al Derham, 2023). These reforms have reduced male dominance and increased women's rights, exemplifying how power within structures directly influences individual agency.

Another critical factor influencing Saudi women's agency is globalization and education, both of which have expanded their access to opportunities previously unavailable. Policies promoting education and scholarships have enabled women to navigate new roles while maintaining cultural integrity. Bernebring Journiette (2014) applied Bourdieu's (1990, 1998) theory to examine these shifts, suggesting that globalization and education create new avenues for self-empowerment while reinforcing local traditions. Furthermore, the rise of digital platforms has amplified women's ability to assert their identities in both physical and virtual spaces, as Al-Natour (2024) explores how the digital age has transformed women's identities, allowing them to transcend traditional gender roles and societal constraints. Through digital platforms, women challenge local paradigms, expressing new perspectives on life and fostering a growing awareness of their agency. Moreover, Bernebring Journiette (2014) observes many Saudi women envision themselves as active agents, contributing to a changing society and imagining futures in which they participate in shaping new realities. However, education has played a transformative role in empowering Saudi women by fostering confidence, resilience, and self-respect. Furthermore, Aloufi (2017) explores the evolving agency of Saudi women, highlighting their persistent efforts to challenge societal restrictions and assert their rights. Despite enduring limitations in professional and educational opportunities, Saudi women actively seek ways to express themselves and claim their freedoms. The study emphasizes that structural barriers, such as gender-segregated education and deeply ingrained social norms, reinforce traditional expectations that confine women primarily to domestic roles. However, education has played a transformative role in empowering Saudi women by fostering confidence, resilience, and self-respect. It has contributed to a shift in family dynamics, enabling women to gain greater recognition and respect, particularly from their husbands, who increasingly perceive them as equals rather than

subordinates. Aloufi's analysis underscores how education is a critical tool for enhancing women's agency, allowing them to navigate societal expectations while asserting their identities.

Despite significant advancements, family structures continue to serve as both an enabler and a constraint on women's agency. Family responsibilities deeply influence women's participation in the labor market, as some struggle to assert influential roles within family dynamics (Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023). While family expectations can create barriers, they also shape women's strategic approaches to navigating societal roles. This underscores the need to address localized societal pressures alongside government-led empowerment initiatives. In the Islamic context, women's social participation and education are not mutually exclusive. Rather than conflicting with religious values, women's education aligns with Islamic principles of chastity, modesty, and dignity (Hamdan, 2005). Similarly, the family remains a central pillar in Saudi women's lives, providing both support and structure for their participation in education and employment (Alharbi, 2015). Even with the expansion of women's rights through state reforms, family and cultural expectations continue to mediate women's decisions, particularly in private spaces (O'Hara, 2019). To better understand how women exercise agency within restrictive social structures, Mahmood's (2005) conceptualization of agency offers a useful framework. She defines agency not merely as resistance but as the capacity for action that emerges within relations of subordination. For Saudi women, this means they can inhabit cultural and religious norms while simultaneously asserting their agency in creative ways, particularly in public domains such as social media and entrepreneurship (Bernebring Journiette, 2014).

Saudi women's agency emerges from the intersection of sociocultural, economic, and political factors. Their empowerment cannot be fully understood through religious discourses alone, as education, financial necessity, and sociopolitical reforms have played equally critical roles in expanding their agency beyond traditional boundaries. Through strategies such as compliant agency and agency maneuvers, Saudi women continue to balance cultural expectations with creative reinterpretations that foster empowerment. These strategies allow them to navigate societal and religious frameworks while redefining traditional roles, preserving cultural integrity, and pursuing independence. As Vision 2030 unfolds, the dynamic evolution of Saudi women's agency reflects a transformative intersection of modernity,

tradition, and global influence. This evolution signifies fundamental shifts in both individual identity and societal structure.

3.4.2. The influence of the state of Saudi Arabia on women's agency as both enabler and regulator

Building upon the previous discussion of Saudi women's agency, examining the duality of structure and the role of the state as a social structure in shaping women's identities and agency is essential. To further explore this relationship, it is necessary to understand how the state influences cultural norms, religious interpretations, and legal frameworks, which collectively impact women's participation in society. Historically, women's agency in Saudi Arabia has been constrained by state policies, religious doctrines, and cultural traditions (Baroni, 2007). However, recent state-led reforms have introduced significant shifts in these structural constraints, amplifying women's agency in various ways. The state's influence is vital in Saudi Arabia, where it governs legal structures and shapes societal and religious norms that define women's roles and opportunities (Sirri, 2024; Al Derham, 2023).

This dynamic interaction between agency and structure aligns with Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration, which asserts that while social structures shape individual actions, these structures also provide constraints and resources that influence agency. This perspective is further complemented by Steven Lukes' (1977) analysis of power, which suggests that agency is not solely about resistance but also how power structures shape and are shaped by individual actions. Similarly, Hatem (1999) characterizes the state as an agent of social change, emphasizing its ability to instigate reforms from above. Lukes (1977) contends that power is not merely about domination but also about the capacity to influence, expressed in diverse and context-specific ways (Lamsal, 2012). Applying this framework to Saudi Arabia allows for a deeper understanding of how women exercise agency within the structural constraints imposed by the state, religious authorities, and cultural expectations. Lukes' theory highlights that social action is context-sensitive, demonstrating that individuals' ability to negotiate power is contingent upon their specific societal and political environments (Baber, 1991).

The state's role as a catalyst for change is particularly evident in the transformations brought about under Vision 2030. Scholars such as Eum et al. (2019) and Al-Rasheed (2018)

emphasize how Vision 2030 has redefined women's roles, shifting them from private and invisible to active and visible participants in public life. This transformation is not superficial but represents a genuine shift in societal roles and opportunities driven by state policies that actively reshape cultural attitudes. The Saudi state has strategically promoted an image of the "new woman" who is economically active, empowered, and a defender of the nation, thereby amplifying women's agency within the national vision (Al Derham, 2023; Reed, 2016). Eum (2019) positions the state as the primary instigator of change, asserting that reforms in Saudi Arabia have historically been driven from above. Meanwhile, Al-Rasheed (2018) argues that the primary obstacle to social change in Saudi Arabia is not a conflict between traditionalist and modernist factions regarding women's agency but rather the state's role in controlling the pace and scope of these changes.

While Vision 2030 has undoubtedly opened new opportunities for women, it reflects the state's dual role as both an enabler and a regulator of women's agency. As noted by Sirri (2024), the state plays a key role in promoting gender equality while simultaneously maintaining control over the parameters within which women can exercise their agency. The structural constraints imposed by the state—through legal frameworks, cultural policies, and religious institutions—continue to shape women's societal roles. Despite the opportunities created under Vision 2030, state policies ensure that women's agency aligns with national objectives and cultural expectations, demonstrating the persistent influence of state power over women's identities and societal participation.

A crucial aspect of this transformation has been expanding women's digital presence and agency. Before Vision 2030, Saudi women's online participation was restricted due to cultural and legal limitations. However, the broader sociopolitical changes initiated by Vision 2030 have enabled more expansive and confident engagement in digital spaces, providing platforms for women to express themselves and gain visibility (Alshehri, Kirkham, Dombrowski, & Olivier, 2022; Altuwayjiri, 2019). This shift reflects a broader reconfiguration of social norms, where women can increasingly assert their agency beyond traditional boundaries.

Similarly, Mustafa & Troudi (2019) emphasize that women's agency is not simply driven by a desire to resist dominant powers but is also shaped by their personal aspirations,

desires, and social expectations. Therefore, women's agency is often expressed in culturally significant ways deeply embedded within local traditions. While some scholars highlight the expanding opportunities for women under state-led reforms, Eum (2019) cautions that despite these external transformations, the internal social dynamics remain rooted in patriarchal values. In many Middle Eastern states, whether monarchies or republics, neopatriarchal structures persist, ensuring that the dominance of the male figure extends from the household to the state, reinforcing the central role of state power in shaping women's agency.

This shift in women's agency is significant because it reflects broader societal changes prompted by state policies. As Al Derham (2023) asserts, the state must initiate and support any meaningful transformation in Saudi Arabia to have a lasting impact. The reforms under Vision 2030 have catalyzed broader shifts in societal attitudes, marking a cultural and economic evolution. These changes in social norms are not merely about women's rights; they represent a fundamental transformation of Saudi society, where women's participation has become central to the country's economic and cultural future. Doumato (1992) previously emphasized how the state's promotion of an "ideal woman," primarily defined by her role within the family, has been a key element in reinforcing national identity. However, the recent transformation of women's roles in Saudi Arabia signals a break from this traditional ideal, marking a shift in both state policies and societal expectations.

By examining the duality of structure concerning Saudi women's agency, it becomes evident that the state remains the dominant force in shaping the scope, visibility, and limitations of women's roles. While Vision 2030 has significantly expanded opportunities, it continues to operate within a structured framework where state policies define the acceptable boundaries of women's empowerment. This interplay between agency and structure, tradition and reform, and individual autonomy and state regulation reflects the complex and evolving nature of women's agency in Saudi Arabia.

3.4.3. Duality Structures Guide Individual Behaviors and Behaviors Reproduce Structure

Following the discussion on the agency of Saudi women and the influence of the state on their agency, it is essential to analyze this dynamic relationship through the lens of

structuration theory. Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration offers a framework for understanding the mutually constitutive nature of agency and structure, emphasizing that social structures are both the product and medium of human actions. According to Giddens (1984), structures provide the rules and resources that shape and guide individual behaviors, but these behaviors, in turn, reproduce or transform the structures themselves. This interdependent relationship allows for both continuity and change in social life.

The debate surrounding Giddens' structuration theory revolves around ontological dualism, which posits that structure and agency are interdependent in shaping social reality. Unlike traditional structuralist or functionalist perspectives, which view structures as external constraints imposed upon individuals, Giddens (1984, 1988) argues that structures consist of rules and resources individuals draw upon and reproduce through their actions. This process, which he terms structuration, highlights the fluid and dynamic interaction between social structures and human agency. The duality of structure thus refers to this interplay: individuals are shaped by structures but have the agency to reproduce or alter them through everyday practices. Giddens (1984) further explains that social structure operates through three dimensions: signification, domination, and legitimation. Signification involves generating meaning through communication; domination pertains to exercising and distributing power, while legitimation establishes and reinforces norms and values (Galliers & Currie, 2011). These dimensions interact with human actions, demonstrating that while structures shape behavior, individuals also actively participate in the reproduction and transformation of these structures.

Despite its widespread acceptance, structuration theory has faced critiques. Callinicos (1985) and Thompson (1989) argue that Giddens overemphasizes individual agency at the expense of recognizing the objective reality of structures. Callinicos (1985) suggests that while individuals do reproduce structures, structures also exist independently of individual action, requiring a balance between structure and agency in social theory. Similarly, Thompson (1989) contends that structural constraints can sometimes severely limit agency, restricting individuals' ability to act freely. Nonetheless, both theorists maintain a dualistic ontology similar to Giddens, acknowledging the necessity of understanding the interaction between structure and agency.

Other scholars, including Bourdieu (1984), engage with this structure-agency dualism differently. Bourdieu (1984) introduces the concepts of habitus and field, which suggest that ingrained dispositions shaped by past experiences condition social behavior but are also subject to adaptation and transformation. In contrast, Block (2013) discusses Beck's (2014) argument that traditional industrial structures have eroded, leading to a society characterized by institutionalized individualism. In this modern context, individuals are responsible for shaping their trajectories and navigating personal choices rather than adhering to fixed social structures. Beck's perspective underscores the increasing significance of agency in a world where individuals are self-organizing and self-defining within evolving social systems.

Further critiques of structuration theory come from Baber (1991) and Lukes (1977), who highlight social action's historical and contextual dimensions. While Giddens emphasizes the duality of structure, Lukes (1977) argues that this relationship is fluid rather than fixed and should be understood as a dialectical process influenced by historical and social conditions. Baber (1991) suggests that Lukes's perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of social action, considering multiple potential outcomes rather than a predetermined interplay between structure and agency. Lukes' view is particularly relevant in context-sensitive analyses, such as those examining the evolution of women's roles within shifting societal and political frameworks. Adding to this critique, Lamsal (2012) contends that agency is not fully autonomous, as it operates within societal constraints that limit and provide resources for action. The degree of agency an individual possesses is highly context-dependent, shaped by historical, social, and economic factors. Nevertheless, the agency retains the potential to transform structures, mainly when individuals engage in social and policy reforms (Lamsal, 2012). This ongoing debate underscores the complexity of reconciling structural constraints with individual autonomy in contemporary social theory.

In the context of Saudi women entrepreneurs, structuration theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing how women navigate cultural norms and societal expectations while simultaneously contributing to cultural change through their entrepreneurial activities and digital presence, particularly on platforms such as Instagram. Historically, agency in Saudi Arabia was primarily confined by religious and social norms. However, as examined in previous sections, ongoing modernization efforts and Vision 2030 reforms have significantly expanded the scope of agency available to Saudi women. These state-led transformations have

relaxed social restrictions and fostered a more accepting attitude toward evolving gender roles. According to structuration theory, the relationship between human agency and social structure is dynamic. Human agents draw upon structural properties, such as signification, domination, and legitimation, while simultaneously producing and reproducing these structures through their actions. The evolving agency of Saudi women entrepreneurs exemplifies this process. While cultural and social norms influence their actions, they also contribute to transforming these norms through entrepreneurial initiatives and digital influence.

As this study suggests, the agency of Saudi women holds even more significant potential in the context of state empowerment and reform. These reforms have provided access to education and professional opportunities and created an environment where women's agency is increasingly expressed through modernized roles and activities. The active participation of women in industries such as fashion and their presence on digital platforms illustrate how agency is now shaped by tradition and modernity, allowing women to redefine cultural identities and contribute to societal transformation. Building upon the previous discussion, structuration theory emphasizes that structure is inherently tied to all social interactions, as it is constructed through rules and resources. Socially routinized activities and interactions play a central role in this process, as they interweave human agency, context, and interconnected dynamics to enable structuration. Giddens (1984) characterizes humans as purposive agents who consciously reflect on the consequences of their actions. This reflective monitoring of actions, guided by established routines, provides ontological security, ensuring that individuals within a social group can navigate daily practices with stability (O'Reilly, 2012).

Thus, social structures emerge through the reciprocal relationship between routinized activities and human agency, a relationship deeply embedded in context. In structuration theory, context is not a passive backdrop or static entity but rather a dynamic element that co-evolves with social interactions. It incorporates time, space, local settings, and the presence of other agents, all of which shape social interactions and contribute to the maintenance and evolution of structures. This conceptualization aligns with the agency of Saudi women's influential entrepreneurs, whose actions in the fashion industry and digital spaces illustrate how they navigate and reshape societal norms while driving structural change. Ultimately, structuration theory challenges rigid structuralist and functionalist perspectives, advocating for

a dynamic social ontology where structure is both the medium and outcome of human actions. In doing so, it highlights how Saudi women entrepreneurs operate within established norms and actively redefine them through their practices, playing a pivotal role in shaping cultural and social transformations in contemporary Saudi Arabia.

3.4.4. Habitus and Field in the Context of Saudi Women's Agency

In this study, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field are applied to explain the interplay between structure and agency within Saudi women's social and cultural context. This theoretical approach is crucial, as previous sections have highlighted the dual role of family structures in enabling and constraining women's agency (Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023). Family structures and societal expectations remain profoundly influential in shaping women's behavior in Saudi Arabia. As noted by O'Hara (2019), even with the expansion of women's rights through state reforms, the family remains a key force in determining how women navigate their agency.

Bourdieu (1984) argues that social-class structures are complex, consisting of cultural systems that define taste and lifestyle for different classes. He suggests that individuals shape their self-conceptions based on their position within the social hierarchy. In this framework, habitus is conceptually linked to social class, as people draw on past experiences to form their perceptions of themselves and their surroundings. It represents an "internalized" social structure that influences thought and behavior but is not deterministic, as individuals can modify or adapt their habitus over time. For instance, a woman raised in a middle-class or upper-class family with access to higher education may develop a habitus that shapes her communication style, decision-making processes, and social interactions in ways distinct from those of someone from a different socioeconomic background. This habitus also reflects itself in lifestyle choices, including fashion preferences and shopping behaviors, further illustrating how individual agency is shaped by cultural and economic capital. On the other hand, field refers to the external social spaces in which individuals interact, compete for status, and navigate resources using their economic, cultural, and social capital. These fields are dynamic, with evolving rules and hierarchies, and individuals can either reproduce or transform these structures through their actions. Together, habitus and field highlight how behaviors are shaped by both individual agency and the broader social structures that individuals navigate (Bourdieu,

1977).

The fashion industry in Saudi Arabia serves as an example of a structured field where influencers, brands, and audiences interact and are continuously evolving, as discussed in previous sections. By applying Bourdieu's concept of habitus and field, this study explores how Saudi women influential entrepreneurs in the fashion industry utilize their social, cultural, and economic capital to influence cultural change. Habitus, as a key concept, reveals how these women's backgrounds, values, and experiences inform their understanding of modesty, fashion, entrepreneurship, and gender roles. Traditional Saudi norms shape their initial dispositions, but exposure to global fashion trends and evolving societal expectations allows for adaptation and transformation of their habitus. This evolution is evident in their ability to balance cultural authenticity with globalized fashion norms, demonstrating that habitus is not static but dynamic and responsive to structural shifts.

As participants in a field marked by unique cultural expectations, this study predicts that these women skillfully navigate traditional values while embracing modern aspirations. Their success lies in leveraging cultural knowledge and social networks to align their branding with local and global audiences. By blending modesty with contemporary styles, they present a redefined image of Saudi femininity that resonates with Vision 2030's goals of increasing women's visibility and economic participation. These influential entrepreneurs act as agents of cultural change, illustrating how habitus and field interact to redefine individual and collective identities. Building on Bernebring Journiette's (2014) application of habitus, this study extends her exploration of Saudi women's agency by focusing on the digital and entrepreneurial activities of influential fashion entrepreneurs in the post-Vision 2030 era. While Bernebring Journiette's research examined Saudi women at a time when many avoided revealing their entire identities online—often using anonymous accounts or posting revealing photos as acts of resistance to cultural constraints—the present study investigates a transformed landscape. With the implementation of Vision 2030 reforms, societal expectations have shifted, granting women greater visibility and agency in public and digital spaces. These women are redefining cultural boundaries through their entrepreneurial endeavors and digital presence, creating a “glocalized” habitus that seamlessly blends local values with global ideals.

3.4.5. Communication and Culture Interconnections in Social Media

The rise of digital media has reshaped how individuals engage in social and economic interactions, extending them beyond traditional, place-based contexts. Anthony Giddens' (1991) theory of time-space distancing provides a key framework for understanding this shift, emphasizing how modernity enables the disembedding of social and economic relations from localized settings and their reembedding into global networks. Technological advancements, particularly social media platforms, compress time and space, allowing individuals to interact across vast distances and maintain digital identities that continuously evolve (Tomlinson, 1994).

Social media exemplifies this transformation by creating a virtual co-presence, where interactions transcend geographic and cultural boundaries (Shuter, 2012). Giddens (1991) argues that these digital interactions blur the lines between local and global realities, forming hybridized spaces where traditional norms coexist with emerging global influences. Platforms like Instagram facilitate real-time engagement while also curating and storing content, enabling individuals—particularly Saudi women influencers—to continuously reshape their digital identities. Saudi women's increasing participation in digital marketing and entrepreneurship underscores the agency they exercise in navigating social constraints. While their public engagement was historically shaped by cultural and geographic limitations, the digital sphere has redefined their agency, enabling them to influence cultural trends and actively participate in the global economy (Giddens, 1991). This aligns with Haslett's (2013) Structural Interaction (SI) Theory, which extends Giddens' (1984) structuration theory by incorporating Goffman's (1959, 1967) micro-level analysis of interaction. SI emphasizes how communication both reflects and shapes social structures, highlighting the interplay between agency, institutional norms, and communicative practices.

The role of cultural context in shaping social media engagement is particularly significant. Albogami (2024) argues that platforms like Instagram are not neutral, universal spaces but are interpreted and utilized within societal values, gender norms, and cultural expectations. By examining Saudi women public figures, her research highlights how digital engagement is deeply intertwined with cultural identity and gender roles. Additionally, she notes that the global visibility of Saudi women on Instagram contributes to the perception of social progress, reinforcing Saudi Arabia's commitment to gender equality and women's

empowerment. However, globalization presents challenges to identity formation. Giddens (1991, 1995b) contends that while digital interactions foster greater global connectivity, they may also create tensions between local traditions and global influences. Individuals in late modern societies must reflexively construct their self-identities, making conscious choices about their roles rather than relying on traditional social scripts. This perspective aligns with Saudi women entrepreneurs, who leverage social media as a tool for economic participation and gender norm redefinition. Their strategic use of digital branding and self-representation positions them as key actors in the global digital economy, influencing both local and international audiences.

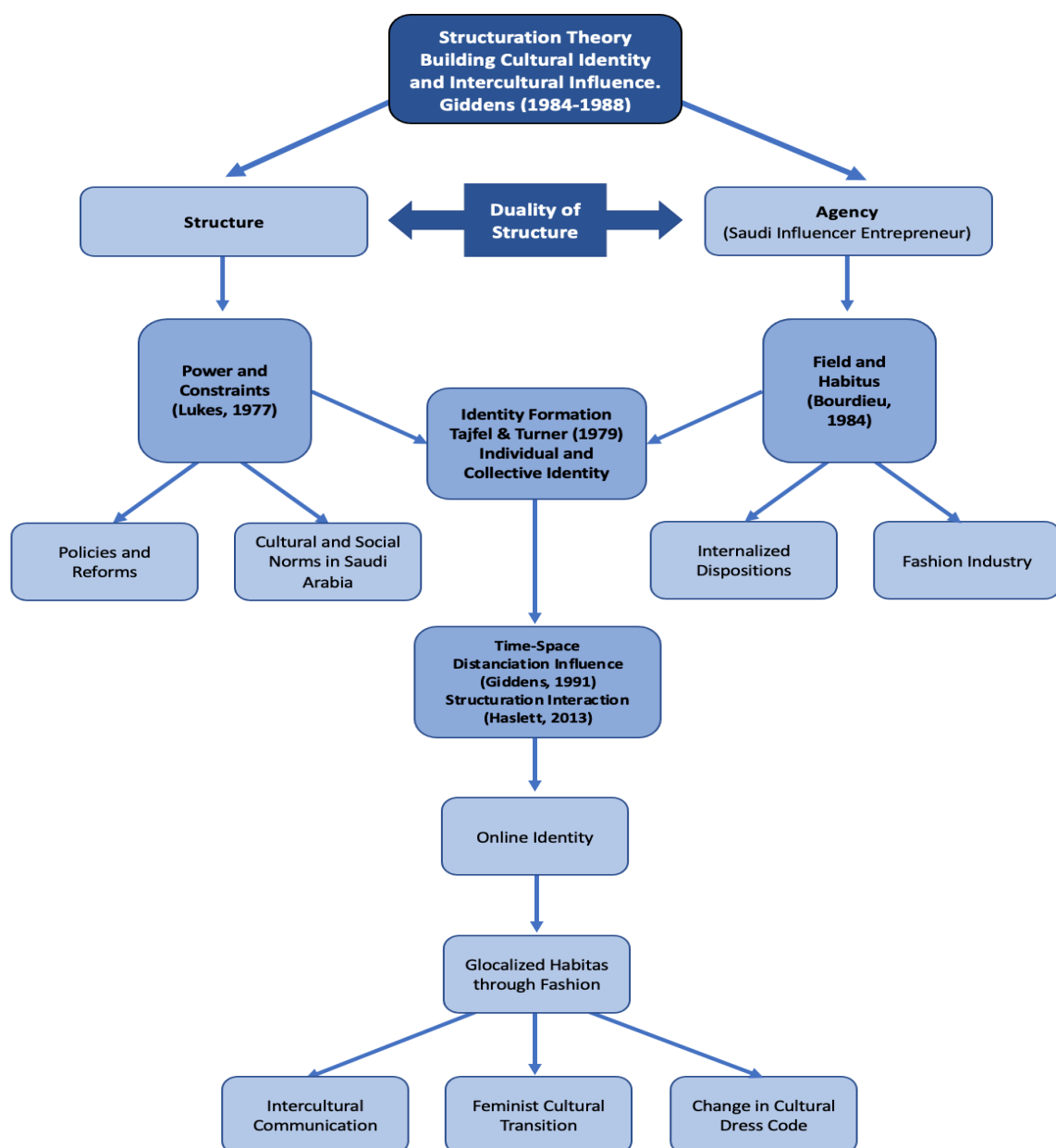
Social media also serves as a site of both resistance and conformity. While Saudi women influencers engage with global fashion and beauty trends, they also retain elements of modesty and cultural authenticity, embodying Giddens' (1984) duality of structure, where individuals act within social constraints while simultaneously transforming them. Haslett (2013) emphasizes that social interactions cannot be separated from their surrounding milieu, meaning that Saudi women's digital agency both shapes and is shaped by the digital structures they navigate. Moreover, SI Theory highlights how social media platforms function as dynamic spaces where interactional orders are continuously negotiated. Bauman (2001) argues that digital communication fosters both cultural convergence and divergence, as individuals interact with multiple knowledge sources and socio-cultural expectations.

Finally, Haslett's (2013) discussion of *interaction orders* and *frame theory* is particularly relevant when social media influencers operate within multiple overlapping frames—personal branding, cultural representation, and commercial engagement—shaping their communicative practices. How they frame their content influences audience reception and interaction, reinforcing or challenging dominant narratives about Saudi women's societal roles. Moreover, applying SI to Saudi women's influential entrepreneurs highlights the transformative power of digital communication in redefining gendered social positions. The visibility afforded by social media enables these women to extend their influence beyond local audiences, positioning them as active agents within the global digital economy. This supports Haslett's (2013) assertion that structuration is an ongoing, interactive process wherein communicative practices are central to the maintenance and evolution of social structures. In this context, the intersections of communication, culture, and digital agency highlight how Saudi women influencers utilize social media to navigate identity across time and space. While

their agency remains influenced by local norms, digital platforms provide them with opportunities for self-expression, economic participation, and cross-cultural interaction. The theories of Giddens (1991, 1995b) and Haslett (2013) collectively illustrate how social structures and agency co-evolve, enabling Saudi women to redefine cultural expectations through digital engagement.

3.4.6. Conclusion: a creation of a conceptual map

Figure 2 A conceptual map for understanding the agency and cultural identity of Saudi women influential entrepreneurs through structuration Theory



Source: own demonstration

Figure 2 presents a conceptual framework for analyzing the agency of Saudi women entrepreneurs in the fashion industry. It integrates multiple theoretical perspectives, including structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1984), time-space distancing (Giddens, 1991), Lukes' (1977) perspective on power and structural constraints, and Haslett's (2013) Structural Interaction (SI) Theory. This framework visually maps the key theoretical components and their interconnections, illustrating how structure and agency interact within cultural, social, and digital contexts.

At the framework's core is the duality of structure (Giddens, 1984), which emphasizes that social structures shape individual behaviors, but individuals simultaneously reproduce and transform these structures through their actions. This is particularly relevant to Saudi women entrepreneurs, who navigate institutional, cultural, and digital structures to assert their agency.

The left side of the figure focuses on the structure, highlighting the cultural and social norms in Saudi Arabia, the power dynamics and constraints (Lukes, 1977), and state policies and reforms that influence women's opportunities. These elements provide the institutional framework within which women operate, shaping their agency and the possibilities for transformation.

The right side of the figure explores Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field, which explain how internalized dispositions and industry-specific norms (such as the fashion industry) shape agency. This theory helps contextualize how Saudi women entrepreneurs engage with traditional expectations while adapting to evolving social and economic environments. Additionally, identity formation (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) plays a key role as these women navigate individual, collective, and cultural identities in their entrepreneurial pursuits.

The middle section of the figure integrates time-space distancing (Giddens, 1991) and Structural Interaction Theory (Haslett, 2013) to explain the role of digital platforms and global marketing in reshaping women's agency. Communication and social media act as mediating forces that connect Saudi women entrepreneurs to international markets while allowing them to maintain cultural authenticity.

The bottom section highlights key transformations in global marketing and fashion, emphasizing changes in dress styles, feminist cultural transitions, and intercultural communication. This illustrates how Saudi women entrepreneurs leverage social media to merge their cultural roots with global marketing practices, enabling them to expand their influence while shaping evolving perceptions of Saudi femininity and empowerment.

Thus, this conceptual framework demonstrates how structuration theory, habitus and field, identity formation, and digital communication intersect to shape Saudi women's entrepreneurial agency in the fashion industry. By navigating state regulations, cultural expectations, and digital globalization, these women act as social and economic transformation agents, redefining traditional gender norms while integrating into global markets. The figure captures these multi-layered interactions and highlights the ongoing negotiation between tradition, modernity, and global engagement.

3.5. Feminism In Saudi Context

3.5.1. The evolution of women's Activism and Digital Empowerment

3.5.1.1. Women's historical movement

The historical context of Saudi Arabian feminism is rooted in the Kingdom's conservative sociopolitical and religiosity framework, shaped by patriarchal and tribal norms that limited women's empowerment and public presence (Hoza, 2019). Until the 21st century, women in Saudi Arabia faced several societal restrictions on education, employment, and mobility, with the guardianship system enforcing male oversight (Sirri, 2024). Women's activism in Saudi Arabia is contingent upon factors of religiosity and Saudi Arabian governance. Though this division of power has been detrimental to women's growth, it has also provided women spaces for empowerment. Saudi Arabia and its feminisms are unlike other Middle Eastern regimes where several women avoid calling themselves feminists (Mittal (2023) and Tschirhart, (2014). Through the modernization of the Saudi Arabian monarchy's gradual reforms of women's rights and empowerment under Vision 2030—mainly since the 2010s, the reforms include the removal of driving restrictions, gender discrimination, equal job opportunities in government and private organizations, and reduced guardianship restrictions (Alsaadoun et al., 2023). In this view, Alsaadoun et al. (2023) highlight that women are more empowered and participate in significant positions in government and private organizations.

Initially, the first feminist action by Saudi Arabian women took place on 6 November 1990, during the Gulf War, when 47 Saudi women went to the streets in a privately coordinated and unprecedented driving protest in the country's capital city, Riyadh (Salhi, 2024). As a result, the government imposed one-year travel restrictions on the protesting women and their spouses. Later, in 2008, a well-known Saudi activist, Al-Huwaider, drove to Riyadh and recorded it on YouTube (Yes2WomenDriving, 2008). On behalf of Saudi women's freedom to drive, she and another activist delivered King Abdullah a petition with 1,100 signatures (Agarwal et al., 2012). As a result, to raise awareness of the driving restriction, female activists in Saudi Arabia began a project called "We the Women" in 2009; where they printed and distributed stickers with statements such as "To drive or not to drive, that is the question" and "I don't like the backseat" (Mackay & O'Sullivan, 1999). Thereby, inspired by the Arab Spring in neighboring countries, an informal network of activists planned a protest day on 17 June 2011, where they drove in contravention of the law across several cities of Saudi Arabia. Despite widespread plaudits for lifting the ban on 24 June 2018, several women activists remain imprisoned or on trial (Alkhaled, 2021).

However, Al-Huwaider's campaign mainly focused on women's rights in Saudi Arabia, which aimed to explore the role of women in Arab society, criticizing human rights violations and violence against women (Agarwal et al., 2011). Accordingly, Lim (2018) outlined that Saudi women's demand for freedom of movement has evolved beyond driving to cycling. With focusing on women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia, Haifaa al-Mansour, a famous film director and writer, launched "Wadjda" in 2012, which aims to raise awareness of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia (Al-Mansour, 2014). In the movie, an eleven-year-old girl character named Wadjda dreams of owning a bicycle from the reward money she participated in and won from the school competition of Quran recitation (Harrod, 2013).

Lim (2018) studies Saudi women's movements to highlight women's actions, choices, and independence. She underscores the importance of women's agency while also pointing out how various social and political discussions influence, reshape and sometimes reinforce the development and direction of Saudi feminism. Furthermore, the author stated that "technological lenses tend to obscure historical circumstances and render human activity invisible" (p.475). However, Saudi women are actively shaping their society and challenging repressive structures from within their own culture and norms. Similarly, women in Saudi

Arabia didn't have a lot of choices before 2019's liberal movement (AlTaher, 2021).

Theoretically, several studies have suggested different theories to examine the concept of feminism within context. For instance, Hoza (2019) suggests that feminist theory is not the only approach that can solve oppressive institutions in non-Western civilizations. Saudi women are changing society by developing their notions of equality. Many non-Western thinkers recognized these limits and worked to challenge inequities outside of orthodox feminism. Thus, recently, various types of feminism have been discussed, such as intersectional feminism, postcolonial feminism, Islamic feminism, and womanism (Al-Humaidi, 2019). These schools of thought seek to integrate feminist views with other parts of life, such as religion and culture. Women are responding to the limitations of classic (western) feminism by developing more inclusive movements. Despite their historical roots, Saudi feminist movements are not a product of one source of information. Saudi feminist knowledge is diverse and interwoven. So, there is no standard feminism. Diverse means of learning and engaging with gender and women's concerns and social and political trends influence Saudi feminism (Lim, 2018).

Nevertheless, the “general terrain for autonomous action is severely restricted and regulated” in Saudi Arabia; this view (Al-Dabbagh, 2015) discusses how Saudi women are trying to alter their country. Female political participation is liberal, rights-based, Islamist feminist, and conservative. Even though these groups have diverse viewpoints on defining and promoting social change agendas, they nonetheless have social change objectives. To strengthen the rights of inmates, the rights-based organization works with liberal groups to increase the role of women in public life. In their revisionist interpretations of Islamic literature, Islamist feminists strive to change Islamic teachings on women's concerns from the inside. Abu-Lughod says women should be educated before interpreting the Holy Qur'an (AlTaher, 2021). Women must be given the suitable space and resources to develop and prosper in this harsh environment that uses religion as an excuse. The economic and theological narratives will be driven by women, which can only benefit Saudi Arabia and Islam. According to Amina Wadud-Muhsin, a gender and Islamic interpretation expert, the Quranic evidence emphasizes the importance of each to the other (Soekarba, 2019).

A feminist or entirely feminist agenda is not the norm, argues Al-Dabbagh (2015), it is not generally used nor agreed upon among women working on women's issues. Many Saudi

women prefer the word womanist or female (nis'iyya), echoing the American womanism movement. This avoidance shows that Saudi women dislike Western feminism. Nevertheless, they comprehend themselves and their fate by putting themselves inside their own time. Their recurring activity patterns can lead to macro-level inference when communicating with and actively engaging bigger audiences.

Since Saudi Arabia prohibits many movements and demonstrations, many women's movements are inadvertent acts of transgression, empowerment, or other individual actions. While these movements may not always result in legislative reforms, they impact women's social position and duties. More significantly, it reinterprets Saudi society, culture, and laws. One example is how women conceive their empowerment. Even though they don't employ Western ideals or vocabulary, there are fascinating connections between Western feminism and Saudi women's groups. (Hoza, 2019) Consequently, Saudi women practice feminism in various ways, including Islamic feminism, Postcolonial feminism, Postfeminism, and Everyday Transgression. Women activists in media, art, journalism, music, and sports are trying to create a new symbolic and cultural discourse through their creative work. This creative discourse forms a particular part of the Saudi economic and historical narrative, thus becoming political in its appeal. It often directs what Bayat (2018) calls 'Social non-movements referring to the collective actions of non-collective actors.' Through their activism, women have been able to demand more rights, greater freedom, and more openness.

However, in Saudi Arabia, regardless of how these efforts of transgression are thought of, they are leading to actual consequences, as recently evidenced by the easing of the driving prohibition on women (Hoza, 2019). Specifically, young Saudi women exhibit their independence by defying clothing regulations while adhering to Islamic laws. The shoulder abaya, flexible, embroidered, occasionally embellished with sequins, becomes a sensual fashion item. These minor infractions cause significant changes over time; especially, women at universities notice that "their constant appearance in public, in front of the authorities, leads to a disarray of the latter's rule" (Le Renard, 2013). This subtle activism has given Saudi women agency by blending modern clothes and traditional Islamic values. They are building new places of activity for women through unauthorized channels, demonstrating their autonomy within Saudi society. While these may appear to be individual methods, they are, in fact, collaborative. As more women seek empowerment independently, violation becomes more

prevalent and less punishable. Le Renard (2013) argues that these transgressions possess a public dimension, making them transformative as they are tacitly coordinated, repeated, and shared among young women. However, the impact of these acts should not be solely interpreted as resistance, as they are influenced by changing power dynamics within the context of societal reform. Le Renard (2013) also highlights how these transgressions have lasting effects on social groupings, identities, and exclusions, with certain consumerist self-presentations becoming normative among urban women seeking acceptance within their social circles. This notion aligns with the concept of “quiet encroachment of ordinary” (Bayat, 2013, p. 15). In this context, women's activism for gender equality often manifests as a form of non-movement, where they consistently articulate gender-related claims through various means, including publications fashion. A lack of political involvement may also be viewed negatively since it fragments women's movements and leads to little development. Not in Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, transgressions in attire and non-political movements frequently cause the most dramatic change. (Hoza, 2019). Lately, as outlined in Chapter 2, Section 2.1.2, women in Saudi Arabia are experiencing notable advancements in their rights, driven by state-led reforms that are integral to the country's broader modernization and image-building efforts.

To conclude the discussion on the history of feminism in Saudi Arabia, the following sections will explore the evolution of digital feminist activism in the country. Unlike (Tschirhart, 2014), who outlined that other feminist movements base their demands on Christian virtues, Saudi feminist efforts have faced opposition from religious and political authorities. These authorities have frequently labeled strong feminist ideologies as anti-Islamic and disruptive to societal order. However, this has not prevented Saudi women from making significant contributions to advancing their rights and asserting their agency (Ammar, 2018). Over the years, women activists across different fields have expressed their identities and challenged the fragmented structures of patriarchy and state conservatism. This has gradually pushed the state's reformist narrative on culture and society toward more liberal and cosmopolitan directions (Mittal, 2023).

3.5.1.2.Digital Activism

According to Al-Humaidi (2019), Digital feminism is a contemporary movement that leverages digital tools and online platforms to advocate for gender equality and challenge

traditional gender norms. Alkhatabi (2024) defined digital feminism as rooted in the intersection of technology and feminist activism, empowering individuals by amplifying marginalized activities. Furthermore, digital feminism addresses critical societal issues like gender inequality and systemic bias in the natural and digital world, mainly in developing countries. In this era of social media modernization, digital feminism activities are getting more attention from folks by raising their voice on different social media platforms (Altuwayjiri, 2019).

Practically, digital feminism has significantly transformed feminist advocacy in developing countries like Saudi Arabia. Previously, women were restricted in Saudi Arabia (Alkhatabi, 2024). Hence, the social media revolution empowers women to utilize different social media channels, such as Twitter and Facebook, to participate in the movement despite their limited physical mobility (Tamimi, 2010). However, the success of internet activism during the Arab Spring demonstrated the potential of digital platforms, prompting Saudi women to continue their online advocacy efforts to demand rights and challenge patriarchal norms imposed by the state (Tønnessen, 2016). Notably, hashtags such as #women2drive and #EndGuardianship gained traction and influenced the state's decision to approve their demands in 2018 (Al-Humaidi, 2019). In July 2016, leading Saudi women activists formally launched the 'I Am My Own Guardian' campaign via a hashtag and media outreach to end the guardianship system (Doaiji, 2017). During that social media campaign, women demanded legal representation from the state through full citizenship and governmental responsiveness to their demands as citizens. Along with this, they also called for social recognition and economic redistribution (Salhi, 2024).

However, sub-campaigns emerged like the "inside-out" Abaya, where women publicly protested the country's dress code, and the #ResistanceByWalking trend, which aimed to address the challenges the driving ban posed (al Shehri & Nasir, 2019). The advent of digital technology has provided Saudi women with unprecedented opportunities to exchange ideas and mobilize. The internet offers a space where women's physical presence is absent, allowing for a focus on ideas rather than gendered perceptions (Hoza, 2019). Guta & Karolak (2015) highlight how social media platforms enable Saudi women to engage in public discourse in impossible ways in traditional settings, where they are often seen as subordinate.

In addition, Saudi Arabia has not experienced large-scale, coordinated feminist movements historically, yet social media has become a significant platform for women's liberation efforts. Social media enables cross-border communication, allowing Saudi women from diverse backgrounds to collaborate and transcend regional differences. Recent empirical studies indicate that Saudi women have leveraged social media to organize grassroots initiatives advocating for their rights (Khalil & Storie, 2021), blogs like The Saudi Woman's Weblog and campaigns like #women2drive exemplify how female bloggers have utilized the internet to challenge societal norms and improve their status within Saudi society (Bourdaloie et al., 2017). The online environment has facilitated a unique form of activism where Saudi women can confront gender segregation and injustice more freely. Prior research has been reaffirmed, indicating that social media platforms can effectively support activism and mobilization efforts (Khalil & Storie, 2021). Specifically, in the case of the Saudi women's movement for the right to drive, social media helped revive a dormant cause by harnessing internal and external support. However, the study also underscored that various contextual factors influence such initiatives' outcomes. While online spaces are not free from conflict, there is a notable emphasis on respectful discourse and establishing rules to handle disagreements. This approach allows women to express themselves, resist societal constraints, and forge new identities in ways that would be difficult in offline settings. Thus, digital platforms have become crucial for Saudi women's ongoing struggle for empowerment and visibility (Alotaibi, 2021).

Additionally, Saudi women leverage cyberactivism and cyberfeminism through social media to drive socio-political change, amplifying their voices, advocating for rights, and fostering leadership (Khamis, 2022). The study highlights the opportunities and challenges of using digital tools to advance women's rights in Saudi Arabia's evolving landscape. Similarly, Altuwayjiri (2019) examines the influence of social media figures in challenging traditional views of femininity. Influencers are recognized for promoting autonomy and diverse perspectives, encouraging cultural acceptance, and empowering women. While their efforts have not directly resulted in policy changes, they have played a significant role in fostering cultural development and advancing societal progress. In an era marked by substantial cultural and societal changes in Saudi Arabia, examining the evolution of feminism and the influence of digital media on public discourse provides a fascinating narrative. Alkhatabi (2024) thesis investigates the transformative path of feminism in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the research

highlights the significant role of digital media in amplifying women's voices and fostering creative expression. Ultimately, this study aims to uncover how these dynamic factors influence Saudi culture's current landscape and future trajectory.

3.5.1.3. Instagram Creating Empowerment for Saudi Arabian Women

With its extensive user base exceeding 2 billion active users (Statista, 2023), Instagram has become a significant arena for feminist expression and activism. This social media platform allows users to engage in virtual communities, fostering self-efficacy and challenging traditional gender norms. Research indicates that Instagram positively influences psychological empowerment by enabling self-expression and challenging established norms (Riquelme et al., 2018). Another study by Brown (2022) highlights Instagram's role in resisting patriarchal standards of beauty and perfectionism while supporting offline mobilization for feminist causes. Despite its potential, Instagram's feminist content often intersects with post-feminist ideas, blending elements of fashion, beauty, and empowerment. Pervou (2022) notes that social media platforms like Instagram promote gender equality through individual engagement and institutional use. For instance, the #metoo campaign illustrates the global impact of horizontal digital activism, exposing gender disparities and prompting legal and social changes (Gill & Orgad, 2018).

However, Instagram's quest for visibility and engagement often involves strategic self-presentation and filtering. Savolanien et al. (2020) discuss how feminist users negotiate their visibility through filtering strategies, balancing compliance with self-expression while managing the competitive pressures of social media. Despite the empowering potential of Instagram, feminist users may face challenges related to the emotional and aesthetic labor of self-branding. The tension between maintaining an aspirational self and engaging in genuine feminist discourse highlights the complex interplay between femininity and feminism on the platform. Overall, Instagram is a multifaceted platform supporting feminist activism and entrepreneurial endeavors, reflecting contemporary digital culture's opportunities and constraints. Women in Saudi Arabia realize that Instagram is not only a recreational tool for sharing pictures and communicating with friends. It is also a powerful marketing and digital advertising tool. Historically, Saudi Arabia has been a highly conservative state, with stringent religious and government laws inhibiting women's growth in the region (Al-harbi, 2020).

Nevertheless, Instagram encourages women to gain confidence and develop the capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce attainments they value, whether posting on fashion, promoting products or services, offering advice, supporting ideas, or anything else on the platform.

Moreover, Instagram platforms allow women to show their experiences, emotions, and viewpoints on various topics of interest, allowing them to obtain a sense of determination and control (Bauer, 2020). Instagram posts (photos, videos, captions, etc.) generate a sense of psychological empowerment because women describe who they are and who they are at their best, a construction of how they want to be seen by others (Rettberg, 2014). A hashtag such as #thepowerofmakeup is an example of how a photograph can develop a perception of empowerment. However, Instagram advertising seems to be gaining much popularity, including in the female minority population. Lary (2023) stated that Instagram has provided an ideal opportunity to influence a large audience of Saudi women positively. Saudi Arabia has one of the highest numbers of Instagram users of any country, some of whom are very influential in setting agendas and contributing to disseminating ideas (Lary, 2023). Those opinion leaders, both individuals and organizations, influential in the new media environment have the potential to raise awareness of the importance of women's empowerment (Cheng et al., 2024). Saudi women are reaching their ambitions, leading her to be part of the culture transition as Instagram can influence real-life cultures. Besides, Instagram facilitates active participation in a virtual community through the user's posts and allows women to express themselves, sometimes even challenging their cultural constraints (van Gogh et al., 2024). In this sense, Instagram helps develop self-efficacy, particularly in a cultural context where women are restricted in their roles because of their gender (Riquelme et al., 2018).

Lastly, the growth and awareness of Instagram among women in the region have facilitated the development of entrepreneurship culture in the country, especially among young women. Such practices led to the conclusion that Instagram had a profound effect on the young women of Saudi Arabia (Altwayjiri, 2019), which positively impacts women's empowerment and contributes to the population's involvement in economic change and development. Moreover, Alghanim (2022) advocated that global brands now target the Saudi market through their influencers; their participation is changing their stereotypical image and empowering them and their audiences. Instagram is more than just a social media platform; it has become

an icon that has altered the understanding of visual social media cultures. Researchers recently focused on aspects of Instagram, such as aesthetics, cultures, ecologies, and economics, supported by real-life examples and cases (Leaver et al., 2020).

3.5.2. Feminist theories and its interconnection

3.5.2.1. Feminist theories: Islamic feminist and Western-centric perspectives

The theoretical framework of feminism explores women's fundamental rights within the specific religious and socio-cultural landscape of Saudi Arabia. Critical theoretical frameworks include Islamic feminism, which predicates gender equality through Islamic principles, arguing for women's rights within the Sharia framework (Tschirhart, 2014). Al-Humaidi (2019) suggested that this feminist approach challenges patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts, advocating for equal opportunities in employment, education, and societal rights. On the other hand, social feminism adds another layer, focusing on societal and structural changes to empower women, tackling issues like guardianship laws and limited mobility. Together, these frameworks drive the evolving discourse on gender equality in Saudi Arabia.

Hence, research on feminism in Saudi Arabia has highlighted the importance of employing significant frameworks that recognize local contexts and cultural distinctions. A recent study by Almuthaybiri (2024) outlined the value of feminist theoretical approaches to analyze the challenges faced by women in Arab culture, particularly in Saudi Arabia. This involves acknowledging the unique experiences of these women while avoiding the pitfalls of universalization and essentialism, thus enhancing the understanding of Saudi women's rights and representation in literature. Accordingly, Sirri (2024) points out that Islamic feminist scholars critique Western-centric perspectives, which often fail to capture the cultural, political, and legal influences on women's work experiences in the Middle East. These scholars advocate for engaging with more egalitarian and feminist interpretations of Islam, moving beyond individualistic Western views of equality in various domains, such as religion, business, and culture. They emphasize that resisting patriarchal dominance does not necessarily require the adoption of secular or Western feminist ideals in her examination of feminist academic activism in Saudi Arabia. Sirri (2024) stressed Hatoon al-Fassi, a Saudi Arabian historian who contributed to mobilizing Muslim feminism within ethical and political frameworks. Furthermore, the authors critique neo-orientalist scholarship that misrepresents Saudi women's

experiences and underscores the need to consider the moral and political contexts shaping their theoretical understandings.

However, Aldossari and Chaudhry (2024) emphasize the significance of Islamic feminism as a culturally sensitive framework for empowering Saudi women and fostering gender equity in the workplace. They argue that accurate gender equity involves policy reforms and a mindset transformation, enabling women to challenge patriarchal norms. This approach facilitates the reinterpretation of traditional gender roles while remaining connected to Saudi Arabia's cultural and religious context. In this view, Tschirhart (2014) highlights the emergence of a Saudi-Islamic feminist perspective as a counter-narrative to Western feminist frameworks, advocating for a distinctly Islamic approach to women's rights, education, and equitable treatment in the public sphere. This perspective integrates themes such as *iman* (faith), the role of the *ulamā* (scholarly class), and a nuanced understanding of Saudi history to support the empowerment of Saudi women while affirming their cultural and religious identities.

Furthermore, Hurley (2021) explores how the feminist post-digital framework can transform the understanding of Arab women's empowerment and disempowerment within the post-digital landscape, particularly on social media platforms. Such framework offers transnational insights into Instagram practices, treating women entrepreneurs as tertiary artifacts within Global contexts. Also, analyzes the self-presentations of Arab women, categorizing them into material, symbolic, conceptual, affective, and imaginative practices, focusing on the varied visual expressions of five influencers (Hurley, 2021). In contrast, findings emphasize the importance of moving beyond ethnocentric and universal definitions of empowerment to fully comprehend the experiences of Arab women in the post-digital era. Additionally, a critical examination of social media artifacts from a decolonial perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of various platforms and agencies. Furthermore, as technology becomes increasingly woven into individual identities, there is an urgent need for innovative theoretical frameworks that address the intricate power dynamics of social media, which encompass both empowerment and disempowerment (Hurley, 2021).

Consequently, Western definitions of feminism and post-feminism in the Saudi context are problematic, as Saudi women have not experienced feminist movements like their Western counterparts (Altawayjiri, 2019). Instead, they have demonstrated empowerment and

independence by negotiating their unique cultural expectations, even without a formal movement. The term "post-feminism" refers to a specific era in Western society that does not align with Saudi women's experiences. Furthermore, Altuwayjiri (2019) highlights that Saudi women utilize digital platforms to enhance their circumstances rather than engage in sexual exhibition, emphasizing social and cultural representation through visibility. While she notes, "But I don't call it feminism. Not because they are not feminist in the conventional sense, but because they do not act politically explicitly" (p. 43). Therefore, it is essential to recognize that these women retain certain conventional feminine traits that may contradict traditional feminist ideals.

The ongoing focus on consumer goods and the emphasis on beauty, fashion, and makeup products are evident in their activities and habits, raising questions about the liberation of these new feminine identities in Saudi Arabia. These attitudes and representations of Saudi women can be seen as part of a marketing and sales strategy, suggesting that they are substituting one set of cultural connections for another commercial imperative (Hogue & Mills, 2019). Nonetheless, it is asserted that these young women are developing contemporary conceptions of femininity by asserting their online and offline identities. In today's networked culture, images and videos have taken precedence over text, becoming essential to self-presentation (Altuwayjiri, 2019). Saudi women are gaining agency and self-confidence through cultural and social visibility online (Alkhaled, 2021). This shift towards atypical modern identities within Saudi Arabia's strict cultural framework may foster self-actualization and empowerment.

On the contrary, Lary (2023) adopts theoretical insights from postfeminist Western representations in digital media while considering cultural variations between Western and Saudi contexts. She observes that many postfeminist scholars note a shift in feminine representation within Western digital media, where traits such as entrepreneurial skills and independence are celebrated. While she identifies similarities in the representations of Saudi microcelebrities, she emphasizes that the context differs in the degree and manner of visibility. Consequently, Lary (2032) opts not to use the terms "feminism" or "feminist" in her thesis regarding the performances and representations of microcelebrities on Instagram. She argues that these performances do not align with organized feminist movements and may reinforce traditional femininity, contradicting feminist ideologies as understood in a Western context.

Nonetheless, prior studies stated that “postfeminist sensibility” may be applied to explore and understand how Saudi women seriously engage with social media platforms, as it encompasses a complex array of ideas that are not strictly confined to epistemological or historical definitions. For example, the diverse ways in which women in GCC countries present themselves on different social media have been examined by Altuwayjiri (2019) and Hurley (2021)

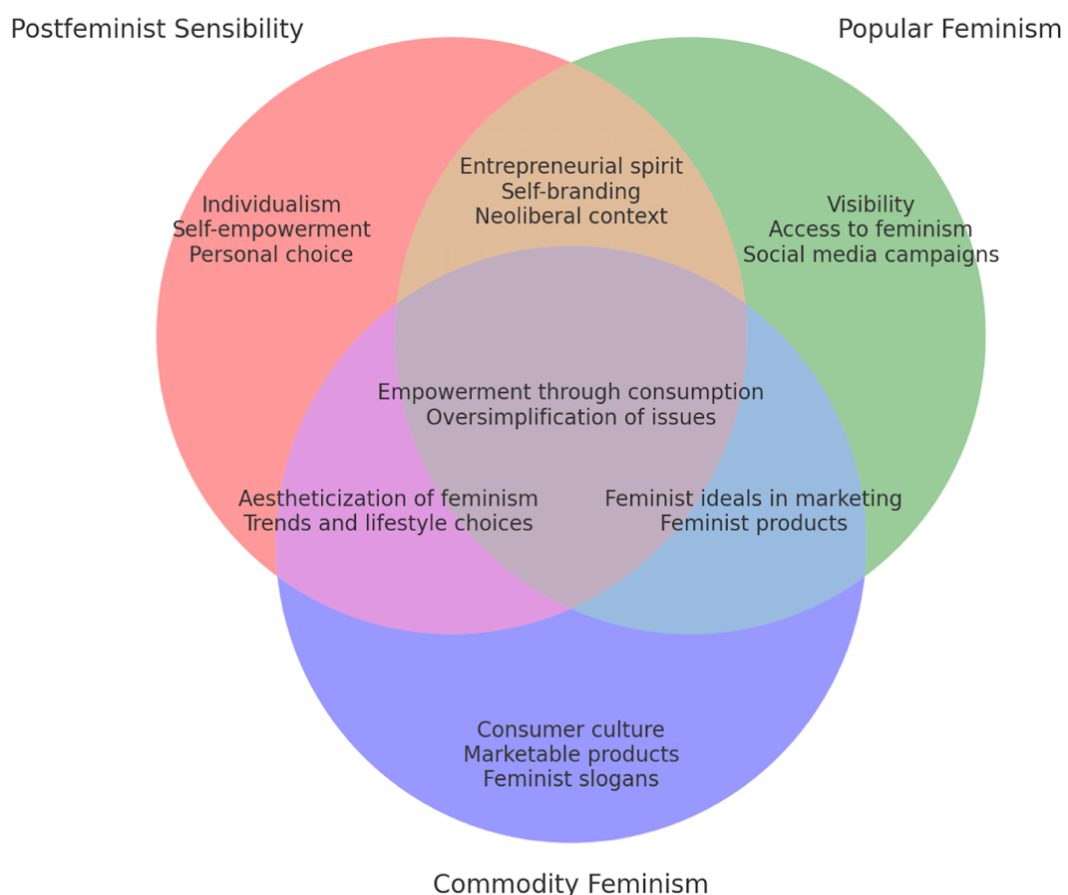
Commodity feminism plays a vital role in this context, as influential fashion entrepreneurs strategically present feminism in a manner that is more palatable and less threatening to the status quo. Mastrangelo (2021) highlights that fashion influencers frequently integrate feminist slogans, imagery, and products that reflect feminist ideals into their branding strategies, effectively blending consumerism with empowerment narratives. Moreover, the commercialization of feminist discourse through fashion suggests that empowerment can be achieved through consumption rather than collective political action, reinforcing individualized empowerment over structural feminist change (Petersson McIntyre, 2021). This aligns with broader trends in neoliberalism and consumer culture, where feminism is commodified to prioritize personal choice, self-branding, and market participation over collective feminist movements and political engagement (Murray, 2021; Goldman et al., 1991).

At the same time, popular feminism expands the accessibility of feminist messages, utilizing social media, hashtags, and advertising campaigns to amplify feminist discourse (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In Saudi Arabia, this digital visibility has been instrumental in amplifying women's voices, as social media platforms provide an avenue for self-expression, entrepreneurship, and gender advocacy (Guta & Karolak, 2015). The intersection of commodity feminism and popular feminism is particularly evident in the work of Saudi fashion entrepreneurs, who leverage digital platforms not only for commercial success but also to subtly challenge traditional gender norms through fashion, beauty, and branding strategies.

Moreover, this study will examine how Saudi fashion entrepreneurs engage with commodity feminism by incorporating feminist imagery and empowerment themes into their digital branding strategies, mirroring global trends in femvertising and popular feminism. Research on Swedish feminist activists by Lauri and Lauri (2023) reveals findings that resonate with the experiences of Saudi women, who navigate similar landscapes of popular and

commodity feminism. Practically, women in Saudi Arabia actively engage with social media platforms to promote feminist ideals, leveraging their visibility to challenge traditional norms. Just as Swedish activists articulate their commitment to feminism through the commercialization of feminist products, Saudi women similarly use platforms like Instagram to express their identities and advocate for their rights, often through fashion and beauty, which may carry feminist messages. Similarly, Elomäki and Kantola (2017) analyze feminist trends in Finland, examining how feminist and gender equality agencies collaborate with feminist movements to shape public and market responses. Furthermore, Ylöstalo and Lamberg (2024) suggest that commodified state feminism encompasses cultural, economic, and political dimensions, illustrating how changes in state feminism align with broader financial and societal shifts, including media cultures.

Figure 3 Interconnection of Feminist Theories



Source: own demonstration

The present study highlights the increasingly blurred boundaries between market dynamics and cultural norms, arguing that commodified feminism is a significant feature of contemporary cultural contexts. Despite its growing relevance, this concept remains underexplored in theoretical frameworks, particularly in Saudi Arabia. To address this gap, the study integrates three key feminist theories—post-feminism, popular feminism, and commodity feminism—to examine the role of femvertising and entrepreneurship in women's empowerment, particularly in relation to the experiences of Saudi women influential entrepreneurs. By analyzing the formation of feminist expressions through Saudi women's entrepreneurial endeavors, this study explores how these entrepreneurs influence societal and cultural perceptions. Globally, women engage with feminism through entrepreneurship, advertising, and the frameworks of neoliberalism and popular post-feminism.

3.5.2.2. Entrepreneurship, and Neoliberal Post-Feminism landscape in Saudi Arabia

Entrepreneurship has emerged as a key driver of economic and social transformation, particularly in Saudi Arabia, where Vision 2030 emphasizes women's economic participation and empowerment. Economic growth is deeply intertwined with entrepreneurial ventures, fostering innovation, exports, and diversification (Shmailan, 2016; Zamberi Ahmad, 2011). Recognizing this, Saudi Arabia's leadership introduced the National Transformation Plan (NTP) to restructure the economy through circular economic indicators, guiding the country toward its Vision 2030 goals (Saudi Council of Economic and Development Affairs, 2016). Among these objectives, female workforce participation is set to increase from 22% to 30%, with unemployment rates targeted to drop from 12.6% to 7% (Saudi Arabia Vision 2030). The recent expansion of women-owned businesses across industries, including fashion, beauty, consulting, and marketing, illustrates the intersection of entrepreneurship and feminist culture (Arab News, 2015; Nieva, 2015).

These developments suggest that economic agency fosters broader social change, yet they remain largely aligned with economic liberalization rather than a commitment to gender equality (Topal, 2019). While entrepreneurship provides Saudi women with greater visibility and autonomy, these reforms primarily function within state-led economic agendas that prioritize financial progress over feminist activism (Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018). Saudi women have used their businesses as platforms for societal change, practically contextualized

within Saudi Arabia's socioeconomic, cultural, and gender framework (Tlaiss, 2022). Notably, many women entrepreneurs have not only created jobs for themselves but also for other women, fostering an ecosystem of female-led businesses and contributing to employment opportunities for young Saudi women (Tlaiss, 2022). This aligns with research by Anggadwita et al. (2015), who suggest that Islam allows women equal opportunities to engage in entrepreneurial activities, reinforcing their agency in both economic and social spheres.

Women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia have leveraged their ventures to challenge societal norms and gain economic independence, positioning themselves as agents of change (Alattas, 2016). Alkhaled (2021) highlights how Saudi women entrepreneurs transition from economic actors to political advocates, pushing for workplace gender equality. However, research by Alkhaled & Berglund (2018) suggests that many women entrepreneurs actively support other women while distancing themselves from explicit feminist labels. This reflects a broader discourse on feminist entrepreneurship, where economic participation becomes a tool for social and political transformation without necessarily adopting the language of Western feminism.

Existing scholarship underscores the complex interplay between cultural traditions and women's agency in business. Despite legal advancements, cultural and societal norms continue to restrict women's entrepreneurial aspirations (Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023). Entrepreneurship serves as a mechanism for women to navigate these limitations, gradually shifting perceptions of female leadership and economic participation (Guelich et al., 2021). Some scholars argue that women entrepreneurs actively reshape socio-cultural norms through self-determination and strategic negotiation of gendered expectations (Javadian & Singh, 2012).

At the same time, the emergence of post-feminism and neoliberalism has reshaped contemporary feminist discourse, particularly in the realm of entrepreneurship and digital agency. Post-feminism emerged in the early 1990s as a response to Western second-wave feminism, shifting the focus from collective activism to individual empowerment (Gillis et al., 2004; Kulcsár, 2011). Unlike traditional feminist movements, post-feminism is intertwined with neoliberal ideologies, which construct individuals as self-reliant agents responsible for their own success (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Yang, 2023). McRobbie (2004, 2009) conceptualizes post-feminism as a cultural and economic space where feminist values are commodified and

integrated into consumerism. Prior empirical studies demonstrated that post-feminism is a set of strategies, ideologies, and practices that marshal “liberal feminist” discourses such as choice, freedom, and independence and incorporate them into a broad range of media and perceptions of consumers (Poutiainen, 2023). The “post” in “feminism” addresses not only a temporality, as in “after” feminism, or a backlash against feminism, but also a sensibility in that concept (McNay, 2010). This shift frames economic success and self-branding as markers of empowerment, while structural gender inequalities remain largely unchallenged (Gill, 2007). In neoliberal contexts, women’s agency is primarily understood through individual ambition and market-driven success, sidelining collective feminist efforts (Shingla & Singh, 2015). Henderson & Taylor (2020) caution that post-feminism often reinforces traditional gender roles, framing conservative femininity as an empowered choice rather than a structural limitation. Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 agenda reflects aspects of neoliberal post-feminism, positioning female entrepreneurship as a tool for economic development while maintaining traditional gender roles (Alsaadoun et al., 2023). This aligns with Lewis et al. (2017), who argue that post-feminism simultaneously celebrates femininity and traditional gender roles while framing them as empowered choices, creating a tension between advocating for women’s rights and reinforcing societal norms regarding gender. While women now have greater access to financial resources and economic opportunities, these reforms remain largely aligned with state interests in economic growth rather than comprehensive feminist change (Topal, 2019).

Digital platforms have further reshaped women’s entrepreneurial agency, providing Saudi women with alternative spaces to engage in business, self-representation, and brand-building. Social media, particularly Instagram and e-commerce platforms, has created new avenues for female entrepreneurs to bypass traditional barriers (Alzamel, 2024). Olanrewaju et al. (2020) and McAdam et al. (2020) argue that social media acts as an external enabler, allowing women to operate businesses while simultaneously redefining gender norms. However, while digital entrepreneurship offers newfound agency, it also reflects post-feminist contradictions. Women are encouraged to embrace economic empowerment, yet structural inequalities remain intact (Gill, 2017). Saudi female entrepreneurs navigate this space by strategically balancing cultural expectations with economic independence, demonstrating a hybridized form of agency that aligns with both neoliberal values and local traditions (Lary, 2023). Research by Secundo et al. (2020) emphasizes that there is a significant gap in empirical studies examining how social media maximizes opportunities for women entrepreneurs.

Additionally, studies highlight how social media platforms empower women to pursue business possibilities beyond traditional boundaries, transforming their lived realities (Hogue & Mills, 2019; Abdullah & Rasheed, 2014). Post-feminism, particularly in digital spaces, has been closely associated with self-branding and the commodification of identity (Pruchniewska, 2017). Digital feminist activities are often intertwined with the branding culture of social media, reinforcing both feminist and post-feminist ideals. This self-branding is particularly evident on platforms like Instagram, where personal identity, entrepreneurship, and feminist expressions intersect (Stevens, 2021; Neri, 2022). Moreover, lifestyle blogging—an essential component of post-feminist culture—illustrates the rise of "entrepreneurial labor," characterized by flexible, risk-taking work practices facilitated by the Web 2.0 revolution (Neff et al., 2005). Scholars such as Archer (2019) argue that social media culture should not merely be analyzed as a digital extension of feminism but rather as a crucial space for contemporary feminist identity formation. This dynamic highlights the ongoing negotiation between feminist activism, individual branding, and neoliberal self-promotion.

In conclusion, the interplay between entrepreneurship, feminist culture, and post-feminism in Saudi Arabia highlights a complex negotiation of agency, economic participation, and cultural constraints. While Vision 2030 promotes greater female workforce integration, it does so within a neoliberal framework that prioritizes economic growth over structural feminist reforms. Saudi female entrepreneurs exemplify a new form of feminist agency, leveraging economic participation and digital platforms to redefine societal expectations while operating within traditional and religious frameworks. This study contributes to the broader understanding of neoliberal post-feminism, illustrating how Saudi women engage in entrepreneurship as both an economic strategy and a form of socio-political negotiation. Their experiences reflect both the opportunities and constraints presented by state-led economic reforms, highlighting the ongoing transformation of gender roles in contemporary Saudi society.

3.5.2.3. Popular Feminism: visibility in the digital age

Popular feminism, as articulated by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018), focuses on how media and cultural factors enable specific versions of feminism to gain prominence. It operates within a visibility economy, where achieving and maintaining visibility is essential and challenging.

The current media environment, including social media platforms like Instagram, is crucial in disseminating and receiving feminist ideas (Crepax, 2020). Social media platforms have become a critical arena for feminist activism, with hashtags such as #metoo and #solidarityisforwhitewomen highlighting various feminist concerns (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This visibility often intersects with neoliberal capitalism, as digital platforms enable feminists to produce content, build brands, and engage with broader audiences.

Furthermore, Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that while popular feminism benefits from neoliberal commodity activism, it raises questions about its impact and authenticity. However, the rise of popular feminism reflects a shift from post-feminist dominance, signaling a renewed focus on collective feminist action. Retallack et al. (2016) suggest a need to evaluate which forms of feminism gain visibility and why critically. Accordingly, Dejmanee (2018) points out that while popular feminism represents a departure from post-feminism, it continues to grapple with consumerist and cultural politics. Thus, the popularity of digital media culture among young women has led to the emergence of feminism as a fashionable self-identification (Favaro and Gill, 2018). Popular feminism is characteristically individualized, as it calls for a subject who identifies as a feminist and is aware of current gender inequalities but accepts responsibility for overcoming them (Rottenberg 2018).

However, the popular feminism concept is placed in a circular economy of visibility, where slogans and feminist commodities circulate widely (Griffin, 2015). Such feminist visibility is likely highlighted in digital and social media platforms, where aestheticized and mediatized versions of feminism have become popular (Abdullah & Rasheed, 2014). Popular feminism has been mainly criticized for stopping with failing and visibility to challenge structural channel feminist aesthetics into activism in a meaningful approach (Banet-Weiser 2018). Popular feminism supports capturing the dynamics of commodified feminism, including how feminist practices, from hashtag and marches activism to feminist commodities, become accessible to the broader public. In addition, Ylöstalo & Lamberg (2024) stated that popular feminism is also linked with a distinct affective register, which also struggles for gender equality and social justice might be seen as stemming from anger and frustration with unequal societal structures. Popular feminism avoids provoking negative feelings and emphasizes happy, upbeat feminism, making popular feminism lucrative for corporations seeking to enhance sales (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Therefore, the present study employs the concept of

popular feminism to explore and understand changing state feminism in the broader cultural context, in which feminism circulates in a visible, happy, and non-threatening form the traditional societies likely in Saudi Arabia.

3.5.2.4. Commodity Feminism: Feminism as a symbolic value

The term commodity feminism was first coined by scholars Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath, and Sharon L. Smith in their 1991 paper, *From 'Political' to 'Consumer': The Transformation of Feminism in the Marketplace* (Goldman et al., 1991). Their study examines how feminist messages have been appropriated by the culture industry and transformed into commercial products. The culture industry reframes feminism into manipulable symbols, such as confidence and attitude, which are marketed as signs of individual freedom and independence. At first glance, commodity feminism appears to empower women by making these ideals more accessible, yet it simultaneously reinforces capitalist and patriarchal structures (McLaughlin, 2004). The term commodity feminism describes this harnessing of feminist messages in consumer culture, leading to what some scholars call the "aesthetic depoliticization" of feminism (Goldman et al., 1991).

While contemporary commodity feminism legitimizes women's access to money, work, and power, it also presents a paradox: the female body becomes a critical link between femininity and feminism, navigating both the domestic and professional spheres. As commodity feminism promotes the notion that self-control and ownership over one's body enhance personal and professional value, corporate marketers have seized this perceived freedom as essential for capital accumulation. This shift has led to feminist ideals being repackaged to serve commercial interests rather than genuine empowerment (Griffin, 2015). Goldman et al. (1991) argue that this process shifts feminism from a political movement into a marketable aesthetic, distorting its original objectives.

Building on this argument, scholars have examined how female entrepreneurs, particularly in advertising, market feminism as empowerment through consumption (Dowsett, 2014). This aligns with commodity activism, which demonstrates how the feminist movement has become intertwined with ethical consumption discourses. Parkins & Findlay (2021) introduce the concept of "feminist commodity activism", where consumption replaces

activism, entrepreneurialism replaces feminist organizations, and commercial success becomes the marker of women's empowerment. As feminist discourse becomes increasingly embedded in commercial practices, commodity feminism has also influenced empowerment narratives in marketing, where goods and consumption are portrayed as inherently feminist. This process has played a key role in shaping neoliberal feminism, which constructs the modern feminist subject as a self-sufficient economic actor and consumer/entrepreneur. Repo (2020) further explores the intersections of feminist commodity activism, neoliberalism, and consumer culture, arguing that feminist protest aesthetics are often mimicked in advertising to market empowerment as a commodity.

This transformation of feminism from activism to consumerism is particularly evident in beauty, fashion, and personal expression, where feminism is increasingly framed as trendy and aspirational rather than political. This is paradoxical, given that the fashion industry has historically reinforced unattainable beauty standards and racial bias (Jha, 2016). Unlike traditional feminist movements, which emphasize community, solidarity, and structural change, contemporary feminism is often presented as an individual lifestyle choice, encouraging women to express empowerment through their consumer choices rather than through collective action. This commodification of feminism is reflected in the branding of feminist products, which range from "Empowered" crop tops at H&M to Christian Dior's \$710 "We Should All Be Feminists" t-shirts. Similarly, feminist slogans such as "Smash the Patriarchy" and "Women Power" now appear on mugs, tote bags, and accessories, turning feminism into a symbolic commodity rather than a movement for structural change. Banet-Weiser et al. (2020) argue that this shift is a marketing strategy that capitalizes on women's buying power, reinforcing the idea that economic participation equates to empowerment. This aligns with commodity activism, where feminism is rebranded to maintain market appeal while avoiding direct political confrontation. Instead of challenging patriarchal systems, it embraces conventional femininity and beauty standards to make feminism more marketable (Favaro, 2015).

This rebranding of feminism, however, has led to significant debate over its political potential, as many scholars argue that turning feminist discourse into a lifestyle brand dilutes its ability to enact real social change. Repo (2020) critically examines how advertisers depoliticize feminism by transforming it into a marketable product, referring to this as the

"cultural force of feminism." By embedding feminist identity into consumer goods, feminism becomes a symbolic value rather than a movement for political transformation. Despite the critiques of commodity feminism, it cannot be entirely dismissed, as it has played a role in shifting gender representations in advertising and media. Historically, women were depicted in passive, domestic roles, reinforcing traditional gender norms. Becker-Herby (2016) notes that in advertising, women were often accessories to male characters, caretakers, or passive observers, representations that did not reflect the realities of women's societal roles. However, as feminist movements gained momentum, advertising adapted to reflect changing gender norms, resulting in more diverse and empowering portrayals of women in media (Grau & Zotos, 2016).

As media and advertising reflect and influence social norms, the dynamic between advertising and feminism has become an ongoing negotiation. McDonald et al. (2021) suggest that advertising is not only a reflection of societal change but also a driver of cultural transformation. Although advertising does not create new social movements, it often mirrors existing feminist discourses, either by reinforcing traditional roles or adapting to emerging gender values (Akestam et al., 2017). The increasing use of femvertising, or advertising that promotes women's empowerment, illustrates how brands have attempted to align themselves with feminist values. Case (2019) argues that femvertising positions corporations as feminist allies, integrating empowerment narratives into marketing campaigns to attract socially conscious consumers. This shift has prompted brands to challenge outdated gender stereotypes, resulting in progressive representations of women in advertising (Slak Valek & Picherit-Duthler, 2020).

The debate over the role of advertising in shaping feminist discourse continues, as scholars examine whether advertising serves as a genuine force for social change or merely a tool for corporate profit. Stewart (2013) suggests that media representations evolve over time, often reflecting and shaping societal attitudes toward gender equality. Similarly, Leiss et al. (2013) emphasize that advertising not only describes social changes but also has the potential to lead them by shaping consumer attitudes. Thus, while commodity feminism and femvertising often serve commercial interests, they also contribute to shaping public perceptions of feminism and gender equality. Whether this represents genuine progress or merely a market-driven adaptation remains an ongoing debate, but it is undeniable that

advertising has become a critical space for feminist discourse and representation.

3.5.3. Femvertising in Saudi Arabia

Samantha Skey, SheKnows Media's chief sales and marketing officer, first introduced the term *femvertising* at Advertising Week in 2014, defining it as "advertising that employs pro-female talent, words, and pictures to inspire women and girls" (Skey, 2014; Davidson, 2015). However, the origins of femvertising are often traced back to Dove's groundbreaking *Real Beauty* campaign in 2004, which promoted body confidence and challenged conventional beauty standards (Davidson, 2015). Becker-Herby (2016) further refined the concept of femvertising, describing it as "the use of diverse female talent, messaging that is inherently pro-female, pushing gender-norm boundaries/stereotypes; challenging perceptions of what a woman/girl should be, downplaying of sexuality; sexuality that does not cater to the male gaze, and portraying women authentically" (pp. 18–19). As a form of socially conscious advertising, femvertising explicitly addresses gender injustices and, in many cases, positions products as solutions to social issues or as calls to action for gender equality and empowerment. Moreover, femvertising has grown to include female-targeted advertising that supports female empowerment, feminism, female activism, or female leadership and equality (Perez and Gutiérrez, 2017).

Femvertising, is a growing trend among women influencers in Saudi Arabia, where brands strategically adopt messages of female empowerment to raise concerns among modern, socially aware consumers (Elhajjar, 2022). With modern reforms enhancing women's participation and rights in the workforce, brands often portray women in roles that challenge traditional gender norms (Alharbi & Boling, 2022). However, this approach has sparked debate over "commodity feminism"—the commercialization of feminist ideals for profit. Chatti (2020) argues that femvertising can dilute genuine feminist goals by prioritizing brand image over real societal progress. Hence, when done thoughtfully, femvertising in Saudi Arabia has the potential to foster significant changes in cultural norms. Cultural norms utilized by influencers support shaping and enhancing current cultural meanings and advocating the reform of artistic categories and ideals (Victoria, 2011).

An empirical study by Chatti (2020) highlights that the femvertising in the "Saudi Arabia" setting is a big deal because, for years, women's representation in the media was depicted as faulty and forbidden in Islam. Until recent developments, the situation altered, and women's image in advertising and media evolved, where changes in cultural norms are deeply encouraging. Women used to be discriminated against in advertisements and stereotypical roles (Plakoyiannaki & Zotos, 2009). As previously outlined by Zotos & Tsihla (2014), female depictions in advertising have changed in lockstep with society. Additionally, El-Sheikh (2023) stated that femvertising, a new form of female representation in advertising, has emerged in Saudi Arabia due to significant social developments. Previously, Saudi women's portrayal in commercials differed from that in Western media. For example, Becker-Herby (2016) pointed out that women were not allowed to promote a sexual tool in advertising. They were either hidden or covered with a black cloak or niqab.

Women in the advertising industry are still a severe problem in the context of Saudi Arabia. Thus, portraying women in Saudi advertising has been extremely difficult due to Islam's interpretation (Al-Humaidi, 2019). The evidence shows that women must be clothed suitably, and gender roles must align with Islamic teachings (Cader, 2015). A woman dressed modestly, displaying just her hands and face within the home, must be shown in Saudi Arabian Islamic advertising standards. Women outside the house had to wear the Abaya and not mix with unrelated males or do forbidden vocations for women, like driving or field engineering (Balelah, 2020).

However, the adaptation of overseas commercials depicting women must be used lawfully throughout Saudi media. To comply with religious traditions, foreign print advertising may need to be adjusted by adding long gowns or darkening the models' legs (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2014). For instance, cosmetics advertising in Saudi Arabia seldom features sensual females; instead, a pleasant-looking lady with a robe and a headpiece is shown (Tawfiq, 2019). In such cases, brands present women's personalities using comic characters often portray women in commercials because they are less likely to breach Islamic regulations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Notably, the ratio of women in all advertising efforts has been conspicuously low in Saudi Arabia. As women are often left out of society, it is crucial to remember that women are less represented in Saudi advertising than males. For many conservative Muslims, seeing an Arab lady in advertising is a sin. While it blurs the lines between public and private,

preserving and protecting society as a whole. With such a belief system, it's simple to comprehend religious conservatives' seemingly illogical behaviors toward women's images. (Al Jenaibi, 2011).

Women's engagement in all aspects of the country's social and economic realms is critical to Vision 2030. Initially, women influencers used Major automaker Twitter to produce unique femvertising commercials that graphically express the female-empowering mantra 'driving is feminine.' In response to the new rule enabling women to drive, a worldwide media and marketing campaign. For example, Arab News printed a full-page wrap-around cover drawn by French cartoonist Malika Favre with the simple phrase, ladies, "Start your engines." "Creates a nice and joyous cover image to celebrate that key day" (Wheeler, 2020).

For this reason, many manufacturers have halted their marketing initiatives aimed at female consumers. Advertisers used visual rhetoric to feminize driving without undermining Saudi auto culture's gendered character (Alharbi & Boling, 2022). Thus, the need to account for cultural and gender boundaries is even more acute when addressing female consumers in countries like Saudi Arabia, where nudity is a crime (Hurley, 2022). In this setting, creative advertising may help by encouraging marketers to use feminine aesthetics rather than a sexualized, masculine-biased story. Automobile advertising has to change the gendered approach that frequently proclaims the male domination of vehicle culture in favor of a feminine perspective. Automakers have used visual language to define automobility within the boundaries of femininity without appealing to sexuality. Using visual metonymy, a rhetorical technique that artistically instantiates the dynamic interplay between metonymy and metaphor in the visual arena, allows marketers to better appeal to female consumers while simultaneously promoting good social change. Automobility has long been associated with freedom and fulfillment in vehicle commercials (Parkin 2017). This identical story has been used to promote female driving in Saudi Arabia. Advertisers portrayed driving as a dreamy escape from male supervision and a potent indicator of female contentment.

Nevertheless, brand femvertising conveys female empowerment and increasingly works with social media influencers. Authenticity, however, is required for social media influencers' communication and advertising to flourish (Chatti, 2020). Thus, Varghese & Kumar (2022) discussed that feminism and advertising may seem inappropriate. For Saudi

women, the ability to appear in ads was restricted; thus, accessing the Saudi market with her photographs and supporting companies was a success. A fashionista's page is usually flooded with pictures of brand products, expensive vacations, and sponsored posts from cosmetics and fashion companies. All of this portrays these fashionistas as consumers. In the emerging economy, fashionistas and most female social media influencers rely on glamour to attract followers (Davenport & Beck, 2001). For the new entrepreneurial digital firm, specific photos of 'candidness' are less artistically produced, seeking to provide a sensation of 'authenticity' and 'realness.'

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1.Introduction

The chapter presents the current research philosophy and design rooted-research discussion on qualitative research methods. The chapter also describes the research problems and questions discussed in previous chapters. Several phases are applied in the research methodology, as described in the following headings. The first phase determines the “research paradigm, design, purpose, and approach” rooted in this study. The second phase determines the “research strategies and method protocols” used for this study. The third phase covers the data collection methods, targeted population, sampling and validity, study setting protocols, and rational considerations. The fourth phase is based on describing the data analysis techniques and concludes the summary of this chapter.

According to Hancock and Algozzine (2006), academic research endeavors to initiate research questions and objectives to make a strong foundation for the study. Based on the current research questions and purposes, the researcher presents the research philosophy, research designs, protocols, methodological paradigms, targeted population, sampling, data collection technique, data analysis formations, and verification processes. This research study explores how women influential entrepreneurs express and shape their cultural identities, particularly within the framework of the ongoing cultural transformation in Saudi Arabia, and explores their use of Instagram as a platform for identity construction, intercultural communication, and interpretations of empowerment concerning the evolving status of women in Arab society in Saudi Arabia.

4.2.Research questions

All the questions are related to the activities of influential Saudi women entrepreneurs in the fashion industry (previously presented in Chapter 1). Overall, the abovementioned research questions are designed to guide an in-depth exploration of the social media

influencers' roles in cultural identity expression, online identity construction, intercultural communication, and feminist advocacy.

- **Cultural Identity and Agency**

How do influential Saudi entrepreneurs comprehend and articulate their cultural identities amid Saudi Arabia's ongoing cultural transformation, particularly concerning shifts impacting women?

In what ways do these influencers/entrepreneurs exercise agency to shape and express their cultural identities within the evolving social landscape of Saudi Arabia?

- **Online Identity Construction on Instagram**

What content and presentation styles do these influencers adopt on Instagram to portray their culture and career?

- **Contribution to Feminist Culture and Social Transformation**

- In what ways do these influencers contribute to the broader feminist culture and ongoing social transformations within the country?

- **Intercultural Communication and Global Integration**

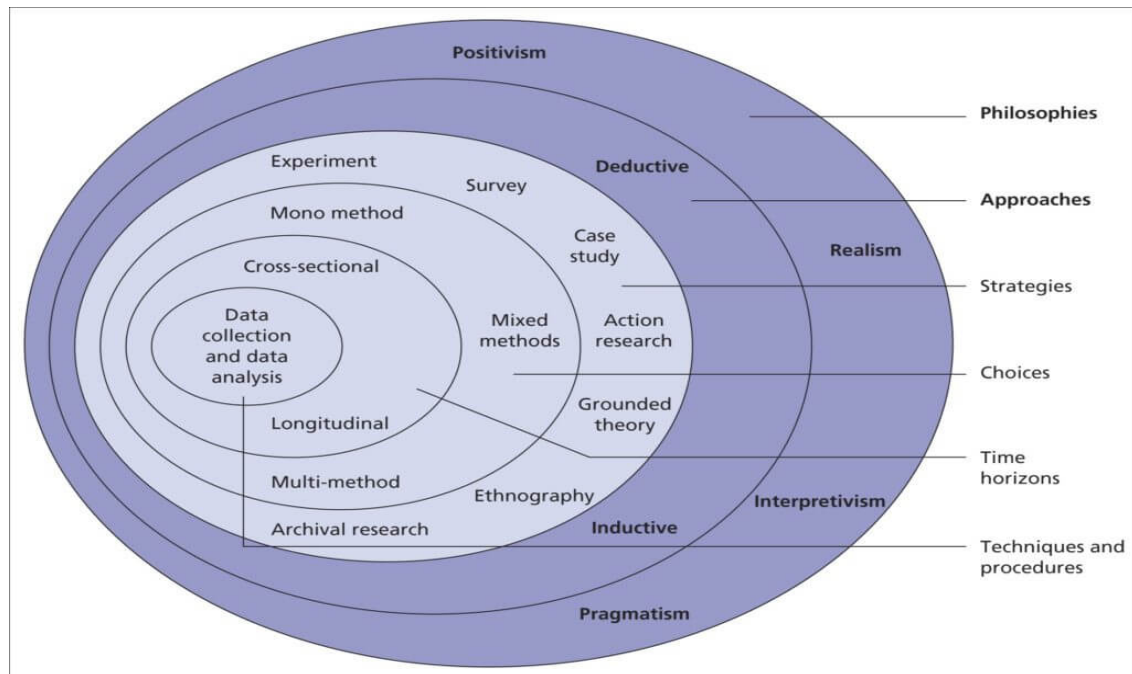
How do global marketing practices impact their cultural identity, and how do these influencers balance their cultural roots with global commercial trends?

4.3. Research Philosophy

Philosophies in research make a clear focus for the researcher, specifically regarding ontological positions, epistemological undertakings, and methodological approaches. Saunders et al. (2015) introduced a 'research onion' model that enables developing social and business researchers to understand research design and process flow. The authors show different layers of the model and highlight research philosophy as the cover of the entire research study. The research onion has six components: 1. Research philosophies 2. Research approaches 3. Methodological choices 4. Research strategies 5. Time horizons 6. Research techniques and procedures. In addition, Figure 4 illustrates the Research Onion model, and Table 1 presents

detailed differences between research philosophies.

Figure 4 Research Onion



Source: Saunders et al. (2015)

Saunders et al. (2015) argue that interpretivism and positivism are the two most chosen philosophies by social and business researchers. The selection of either interpretivist or positivist epistemological views depends on how this study understands social reality and processes the knowledge flow in the research, from the production of knowledge up to the usability of the knowledge. The research struggles to provide observable and credible data through objectivist deductive techniques to generalize findings using the positivist approach. In this view, the research mainly focuses on exploring details of the critical subject to provide context-specific social meanings using the interpretive approach. This study attempts to explore and understand how female social media influential entrepreneurs express and shape their cultural identities, particularly within the framework of the ongoing cultural transformation in Saudi Arabia, and to explore their use of Instagram as a platform for identity construction, intercultural communication, and interpretations of empowerment concerning the evolving status of women in Arab society in Saudi Arabia. For this purpose, the epistemological philosophy of ‘interpretivism’ matches the aim of the present study.

Epistemological undertakings of interpretivism enable current study to broadly acquire, understand, use, and develop knowledge about the phenomenon of cultural identities from real female social media influencers in the context of Instagram platforms. As an interpretivist worldview person, this study firmly believes that reality is internal to humans as their understanding of the world and that there are differences between us humans as social actors in our respective fields (Saunders et al., 2015).

Accordingly, there are two primary forms of interpretation. First, the phenomenon within the research study must be interpreted. Present study has developed a preliminary understanding of the cultural identities of social media influencer entrepreneurs' roles as social actors in this area and developed meanings and explore their use of Instagram as a platform for identity construction, intercultural communication, and interpretations of empowerment about the evolving status of female in Saudi Arabian society through existing empirical studies. Secondly, there are interpretations of social actors within the boundaries of the present research context. Research participants have meanings about the cultural identities of female social media influencer entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabian society. The existing challenge here is to enter into the social circle of research participants and comprehensively understand their perception from their point of view to develop the final combination of interpretations. The ontological position in the present study reflect is subjectivism, opposite to the objectivism worldview (Saunders et al., 2015). The logic of the objectivist worldview is that it asserts that social entities exist in reality externally and independently of those social actors who deal with their existence, which stands against the aim of this current study. Researchers of objectivist worldviews use fact-based theoretical analysis and follow quantitative methods to create measurable outcomes.

On the other hand, subjectivism asserts that entities are created from perceptions and the consequent actions of those social actors responsible for their creation. Researchers of the subjectivism worldview create social meanings based on preliminary knowledge and conduct in-depth investigations of the people and their actions within the research context. Therefore, this advantage of subjectivism supports the purpose of this study. Ontological positions also fine-tune the methodological paradigms of this study. According to Archer (1995), "An ontology without a methodology is deaf and dumb; a methodology without an ontology is blind" (p.28). The present study considers these suggestions essential and attempts to use the

most relevant approaches to explore the subject based on required and detailed positions. Research approaches begin with studying concepts of cultural identities of female social media influencer entrepreneurs within the framework of the ongoing cultural transformation in Saudi Arabia and to explore and understand their use of Instagram as a platform for identity construction, intercultural communication, and interpretations of empowerment concerning the evolving status of female in Saudi society. Present study then provides theoretical underpinnings (i.e., structuration theory) to develop an evolving framework. Since this study believes that the core knowledge about the phenomenon resides within the subject of the study, structural relationships between these concepts were constructed in the literature review chapter, and methodological paradigms are developed based on the requirements of this study to explore the specified phenomenon of female social media influencers in the fashion industry. Having established the philosophical stances, the following section elaborates on research design. Then, it discusses qualitative research methodology with a specific data collection strategy used in this study.

4.4. Research Design

In this section of the research design, the study explains the procedures of conducting the research methods used for data collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2013). The construction of a plan of action is based on research problems and gaps identified by this study in existing literature, and the research methodology is designed accordingly (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Research methods are practically based on the type of inquiry intended to discover or solve problems through the most relevant method. For instance, Bloomfield and Fisher (2019) identified that if a research problem is inquiring about the number of factors influencing the outcome, understanding, and/or effectiveness of interventions of the best predictors of outcome by testing variables statistically, then the best alternative methodology is quantitative research. In this view, qualitative research is a suitable methodology if the research problem is to understand, explore a concept, or provide an in-depth description of discovered facts relating to the phenomenon of interest (Maxwell, 2013). Therefore, the research design is also based on the type of research question documented by Creswell and Poth, (2016). For instance, a research question inquiring about ‘how’ or ‘what’ about the phenomenon tends to follow qualitative research design, while research questions containing numerical inquiries of ‘how many’ or ‘how often’ typically follow quantitative research methods. In addition, the

qualitative researcher uses a relatively small and selected number of participants (respondents) based on interpretive procedures that require the subject (i.e., research participants) to provide contextual explanations and justification through the conversation process (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006). Accordingly, Bloomfield and Fisher (2019) discussed that the quantitative researcher, on the other hand, selects participants based on variables and the scope of the research to quantify values and generalize findings within the specific research context.

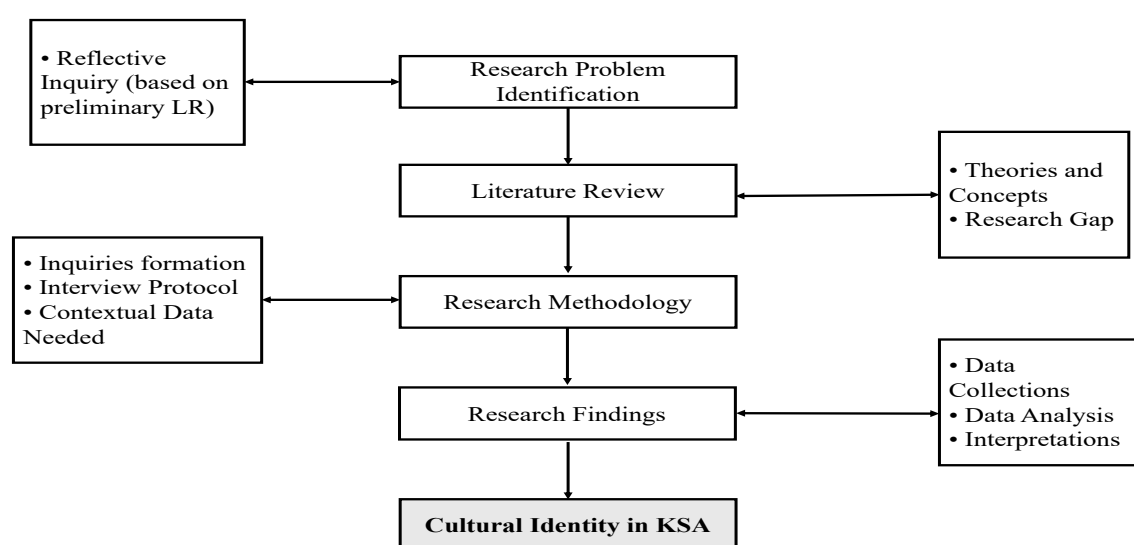
However, the literature review chapter of this study highlights a need to explore further the concept and understanding of how female social media influential entrepreneurs express and share their cultural identities, particularly within the framework of the ongoing cultural transformation in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, showing its uniqueness, the present study attempts to fill the gaps in the existing literature by establishing a new line of thinking and understanding of the specified phenomenon. Mahajan (2018) suggests that empirical studies concerning social problems or issues that build theoretical foundations with less identified guidelines and procedures use a qualitative research approach. Since the nature of the present research emphasizes an in-depth understanding and exploration of concepts of cultural identities of female social media influential entrepreneurs using Instagram as a platform for identifying construction, intercultural communication, and interpretations of empowerment concerning the evolving status of females in Saudi Arabian society, the suitable methodology is qualitative research.

Qualitative research methodology also matches the requirements of this study for some apparent reasons. First, the study is exploratory in nature, inductive in structure, and requires an understanding of Saudi Arabian female influencers to understand and explore their experiences and viewpoints about their content concerning cultural identity feminism in this transformative time in Saudi Arabia. Second, the study identifies the research problem and employs questions about ‘how’ and ‘what,’ not ‘how many’ or ‘what numbers’ about the content female influencers post on Instagram showing cultural identification. Third, the study has developed a preliminary framework that requires exploration of artifacts available in the real world, specifically by the subject (i.e., participants) who share relevant knowledge they envisage. This step is followed by processing the descriptive data, developing interpretations and observations, and properly documenting the acquired data. Finally, qualitative methods are mainly used in numerous studies on social media influencers (De Veirman et al., 2020; Cho et

al., 2022; Le and Aydin, 2023).

Therefore, since this study understands and explores their experiences and viewpoints about their content concerning cultural identity and feminism in this transformative time, it supports the selection of qualitative research methods. The phenomenon of the present study now centers on the cultural identity dynamics of these influential Saudi entrepreneurs, their online identity, and their experiences on Instagram. It explores how these entrepreneurs engage with feminist culture, identify with feminism, and contribute to empowering Saudi females through their digital presence. The research examines their collaborations and initiatives, showcasing their commitment to feminist causes and participation in advertisements that promote empowerment. Additionally, the study highlights their role in intercultural communication, investigating how they work with global brands and express their cultural identity in marketing collaborations. Therefore, the evolving framework of cultural identity presented in Figure 5 identifies preliminary components in the process from relevant literature review and theoretical underpinnings. This study uses an exploratory case study strategy to explore the actual process of the collaboration. It selects female social media influencer entrepreneurs' experiences and constructs their reality uniquely based on their personal, social, and cultural contexts in Saudi Arabia.

Figure 5 Research Flow Diagram



Source: own demonstration

The figure 5 presents a structured flow diagram for a research process focusing on cultural identity in Saudi Arabia (KSA). It starts with a reflective inquiry based on a preliminary literature review (LR), which helps identify the research problem. This leads to a more detailed literature review to consolidate theories and concepts and identify research gaps. The methodology section follows, outlining the steps for data collection and analysis. Key inputs like inquiry formation and interview protocols are looped back from methodology to the initial stages, ensuring a cohesive research design. Ultimately, the process culminates in research findings that deepen understanding of Saudi Arabia's influential entrepreneurs agency and cultural identity.

4.4.1. Qualitative Research

According to Maxwell (2013), qualitative research has roots in cultural anthropology and sociology. That is why qualitative research techniques are intended to inquire about the meaning and understanding of social and human problems and concerns in the real-life environment. This characteristic of qualitative research favors the objectives of this study of exploring social actors' (i.e., female social media influencer entrepreneurs) point-of-view relating to the phenomenon (cultural identity and agency) and at their actual workplace and/or social life. Qualitative methods mainly deal with exploring, interpreting, describing, and building theories from human interactions within the boundaries of a particular phenomenon (Le and Aydin, 2023). Qualitative researchers provide valuable insights into the selected population and detail participants' doings, values, opinions, and behaviors in a real social context to explain relevant and contrasting factors based on research objectives. However, findings from the qualitative study are not usually intended to be generalized at all ends; instead, this study explores specific courses of action of social actors in certain natural settings. The collective construal of details of this study shows that the qualitative research approach, specifically case-study based, is a suitable strategy for this study because the purpose is to develop in-depth descriptions and analysis of ongoing Saudi Arabian cultural transformation, which explore Instagram as a platform for identity construction, intercultural communication, and interpretations of empowerment concerning the evolving status of women (Le and Aydin, 2023).

4.4.2. Case-Study Research

According to McLaughlin et al. (2021), a case study research strategy is used when the researcher intends to precisely study an entity in a specific context and its natural setting, using either quantitative or qualitative research. A case study research strategy enables an in-depth investigation of functions, individuals, and entities with thorough attention to each detail relevant to the phenomenon of the study (Kallio et al., 2016). Because of this advantage of highly focused attention, this study utilizes a case study strategy to comprehensively identify the concept and activities of an in-depth examination of the Saudi female influencers' real-life setting, considering multiple perspectives and accounting for various contextual factors that may influence the research problem. Thereby, McLaughlin et al. (2021) suggest that researchers of qualitative and case study research methods are required to have prior information about the phenomenon and particular case before starting the actual investigation. Accordingly, this study collected prior information from the literature and social media channels (Instagram) of selected female social media influencers to gather preliminary details before actual data collection. Similarly, Khalil and Storie (2021) adopted a case study approach to explore the use of digital media in the Saudi women's movement, highlighting the method's effectiveness in examining contemporary events within complex cultural, political, and religious contexts. Utilizing multiple data sources provided a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics shaping the movement, aligning with the broader value of prior contextual awareness in qualitative research.

Thus, this idea of desk research enabled this study to understand whether the female influencers fit into the criteria to achieve the objectives of the present study. The present study is precisely an instrumental case study, as it provides an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (i.e., cultural identification of female social media influencers and relative stakeholders) in a particular context (i.e., status of females in Saudi Arabian society) by undertaking detailed analysis to build the foundation of the phenomenon that offers possible adaptability (Altuwayjiri, 2019).

4.5.Data Collection Design

4.5.1. Sampling Criteria: Selecting Female Social Media Influential Entrepreneurs

Selecting a sample of cases is one of the most critical steps (Roberti, 2022). While selecting cases, this study needs to choose a similar subject matter or context (i.e., the case

itself) following the disciplinary perspective of the investigation. In addition, the selection of cases should be based on the similarity of scope or area of investigation (i.e., the phenomenon). Based on the objectives, the present study selects female social media entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia as the research context, and the phenomenon of interest is the exploration of cultural and feminism identification and relative factors. No source confirms the total number of female social media influencer entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia. Tetnowski (2015) outlined that a single case study is a vulnerable research endeavor. Similarly, Snyder (2012) argues that researchers usually select no more than four case studies. Based on these suggestions, to obtain the objectives of the present study, we contacted 22 female social media influencers, and from them, only six agreed to participate in the present study.

The present study focused on females who do not label themselves as influencers, content creators, or fashionista. The present study did not target individuals who simply shared their purchases, products, plastic surgeries, travel experiences, or daily family lives. Instead, the present study's objective was to identify entrepreneurs and influential females in the fashion industry who have significant local and global collaborations as part of their marketing strategies and play a crucial role in shaping the Saudi progressive scene. I conducted extensive research to identify and study the most influential females in Saudi Arabia who fit this profile. Unfortunately, “Entrepreneurial influencers” with mega followers were complicated to reach. Thus, female Instagram influential entrepreneurs are listed in Table 1

Table 1 List of Saudi female Influential entrepreneurs

| Influencer’s Name (age) | Number of Followers (Instagram) | Cultural Identity | Fashion industry (Business Type) |
|--|---|--|--|
| Marriam Mossalli Around the age of 40 | 85.500 checked in (2024) <u>Instagram</u> | Saudi based in Jeddah. Her mother is from LA, United States, and her father is from Mecca, Saudi Arabia. She resides in Jeddah but was born in Sri Lanka, lived in Korea and Malaysia, then went to boarding school in Switzerland, and ended up at a | Fashion Marketing Marriam is a Saudi lifestyle editor/journalist and the founder of Niche Arabia, the Kingdom's premier luxury communications agency. |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| | | university in Washington, DC. And then Jeddah | A self-made female entrepreneur. |
| Alaa Balkhy Around the age of 30 | 194,000 checked in (2024) <u>Instagram</u> | Saudi Arabia is currently between Jeddah and New York. She grew up in Montréal, Canada, and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. She resided in Brooklyn, New York, after her marriage in 2016. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in graphic design from Dar Al Hekma University in 2011 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. She later obtained her M.P.S. in design management from Brooklyn's Pratt Institute. | Fashion blogging/ influencing and fashion designing and Consulting Alaa Balkhy is a cultural consultant and contributing editor at Harper's Bazaar Arabia. She is the creator of the pop culture art brand Fyunka and a blog bearing her name. |
| Rawan Kattoa Around the age of 30 | 31,600 checked in (2024) <u>Instagram</u> | Saudi Arabia is currently between Riyadh and Geneva. Born and raised in Saudi Arabia, and moved after marriage to Switzerland. She graduated from King Saud University with a bachelor's in business advertising. Recently, she got a degree in creative direction and editorial styling from the University of Arts London. | Fashion Entrepreneur, Consultant, & Stylist Before making the giant leap into Fashion, Rawan started her career in the corporate world. Fashion blogging/ influencing: Content creation is wholly centered on social media. |
| Lina Malaika Around the age of 30 | 176,000 checked in (2024) <u>Instagram</u> | Saudi based in Jeddah. Born and raised in Saudi Arabia. She earned a bachelor's degree in graphic design at Dar Al Hekma University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Later, she earned a degree in Graphic Design, Fashion/Photography from Central | Cultural & Creative Consultant Entrepreneur Co-founder of clay startup modelling agency |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| | | Saint Martins & in filmmaking from the New York Film Academy in New York. | |
| Nasiba Hafiz Around the age of 40 | 45,400 checked in (2024) Instagram | Saudi based in Jeddah. Born and raised in Jeddah. She left Saudi Arabia when she was 15 to attend boarding school in Switzerland, and then afterward, she went to London to study fashion. After completing her studies at Central Saint Martins and London College of Fashion, Nasiba returned to her home country, Saudi Arabia, to create a new, hybrid style for the younger generation. The Jeddah native saw a significant gap locally and decided to launch her eponymous brand in 2012. | Fashion Designer and Sustainable Fashion |
| Arwa Al ammari Around the age of 40 | 153,000 checked in (2024) Instagram | She was born and raised in Riyadh. She is also one of three UK Alumni Awards Finalists of the Entrepreneurship Category selected from 1300 applicants (2021). Arwa was chosen by the Saudi Fashion Commission (Saudi Ministry of Culture) to be part of the Saudi100 brand program as one of the brands that represent Saudi internationally. Arwa is also a public speaker who addressed multiple regional and International events on topics mainly focusing on fashion, fashion innovation, | Arwa Alammari is a Fashion Consultant, the Ambassador of the Arab Fashion Council, a Public Speaker, and the Creative Director and Founder of the Saudi award-winning brand ArAm, a prêt-à-porte high-end women's brand. She is the Vice Chairperson of the first not-for-profit (NPO) fashion association in |

| | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| | | sustainability, Inclusivity, women empowerment, diversity, preserving culture, and more. She pursued her studies in fashion and economics abroad in the UK, Italy, and Dubai. | Saudi Arabia, established under the Saudi Ministry of Resources and Social Development at the end of 2021. |
|--|--|---|--|

The most frequently referred sampling techniques in qualitative research are (a) quota sampling, (b) snowball sampling, (c) theoretical sampling, (d) case study sampling, (e) convenience or opportunistic sampling, and (f) purposive sampling (Luborsky and Rubinstein, 1995). Out of these techniques, three types are the most common sampling methods in qualitative research: purposive sampling, quota sampling, and snowball sampling. In the present study, purposeful sampling strategies were used. This sampling supports the intention of collecting data from groups of samples: female social media influencers and entrepreneurs who regularly post on (e.g., feminism, empowerment, cultural transition). Purposeful sampling differs from convenience and random sampling strategies, primarily used in quantitative research studies. Inconvenience and random sampling, the participants are selected based on criteria of ease and readily available sources of data (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006). While conducting qualitative research, these strategies will likely produce a certain degree of bias and unwanted data. However, the purposeful sampling strategy supports the research study in acquiring the most relevant and rich data from particular sources that help answering the research questions and achieve research objectives (Small, 2021). A purposeful sampling strategy enabled this study to identify and select female social media influencers with relevant knowledge and characteristics of positing feminism, empowerment, and cultural transition on Instagram.

Additionally, the case studies were selected based on specified demographic characteristics of female social media influencer entrepreneurs (e.g., should be Saudi Arabian, should be female age between 25 -40 years old, Instagram influencer, and should work in the fashion industry field, share a cultural, national, and feminist culture content). In this way, the study acquires knowledge to complete the process of learning that supports understanding the current cultural identity of female social media influencer entrepreneurs.

4.5.2. In-depth interviews and Instagram content Analysis

This study employs a multi-method data collection approach, incorporating in-depth interviews with female social media influential entrepreneurs and content analysis of their Instagram posts. Prior to these primary data collection methods, secondary sources—including research papers, online journal entries, and social media channels—were reviewed to develop a foundational understanding of the cultural identification of female influencers in Saudi Arabia. Interviews provided rich, in-depth insights into the experiences of influencers, helping to explore themes related to cultural identity, empowerment, and professional agency within the Saudi fashion industry. Meanwhile, Instagram content analysis allowed for an examination of how influencers represent themselves digitally, engage in brand collaborations, and participate in feminist discourse within the evolving cultural landscape of Saudi Arabia.

An interview protocol was designed to collect data from female social media influencer entrepreneurs. The protocol included open-ended and semi-structured questions, ensuring flexibility in participants' responses without imposing limitations on their answers or the interview structure (Kallio et al., 2016). It allowed participants flexibility and comfort while responding to questions asked. In addition, qualitative data will be gathered through Instagram content analysis and observation from their online activities. Semi-structured interview protocol aligns proceeding questions following the interviewee's answers to the current question, and thus, it also grasps the interest of research participants. In this way, interviewees can openly and freely express their opinions on the question being asked.

There were a few other factors that supported the data collection. Firstly, qualitative case study research allowed this study to deal directly with the participants to gain their views and perceptions on the central phenomenon. Second, open-ended questions in the interview protocol allowed us to acquire and discuss the information needed efficiently. Thirdly, face-to-face interaction with participants encouraged them to get data informally (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006). Using in-depth investigation through interviews, we were able to develop a deeper understanding and interpret the views of participants in the natural setting of each selected social media influencer. I learned from the collected data and described a vivid picture of the phenomenon. Questions of inquiry are related to construction, intercultural communication, and interpretations of empowerment concerning the evolving status of females

in Saudi Arabian society, linking with female influencers. The influential female social media entrepreneurs interviewed are listed in Table 2.

The interview protocols for different participants have similar questions, the questions of inquiry are related to the cultural identities of female social media influencer entrepreneurs and their use of Instagram as a platform for identity construction, their experiences while working with local and international brands, and interpretations of empowerment about the evolving status of females in Saudi Arabian society. Drawing from the literature, study inquiries develop from the relevant empirical studies. Table 2 presents the interview questions.

Table 2 Development of inquiries supporting the interview questions

| Cultural background /Themes | Questions |
|--|---|
| <p>1. Cultural Heritage and Historical Narratives: understand a culture's past, including significant events, heroes, and shared memories contributing to the collective identity.</p> <p>2. Gender Roles and Identity: Analyzing gender roles, norms, and expressions within a culture provides insights into constructing gender identity, societal expectations, and power dynamics.</p> <p>3. Global Influences and Interactions: Considering the impact of globalization, migration, and cross-cultural interactions is crucial for understanding how cultures evolve and adapt over time. Analyzing the incorporation of external influences provides insights into cultural hybridity and identity negotiation.</p> <p>4. Symbols and Flags: Symbols, flags, and other visual representations are robust cultural identifiers. Analyzing these symbols can reveal</p> | <p>- Can you briefly present or express yourself?</p> <p>- What makes you who you are today? (to know about her family, parents, culture, religion, country)</p> <p>- What about family support, the main problems of the beginning, and how social?</p> <p>- What do you think about the life of women nowadays?</p> <p>- Do you think that the life of Saudi Arabian women has changed?</p> |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>historical events, national pride, political ideologies, and collective memory.</p> <p>5. Dress: is an essential aspect of cultural identity, clothing and fashion choices can be indicative of cultural norms, historical trends, and social identities.</p> <p>6. Language and Communication: Language is a fundamental aspect of culture and plays a vital role in shaping identity. Analyzing language usage, dialects, slang, and unique expressions can provide insights into cultural values, social structures, and historical influences.</p> | |
| Online identity and experiences / Themes | Questions |
| /Visual and linguistic Codes | |
| <p>Visual Codes:</p> <p>1. Fashion and appearance: Examining the influencers' fashion choices, personal style, grooming, and overall visual presentation.</p> <p>2. Branding and logo: Investigating the presence and use of logos, watermarks, and visual branding elements representing the influencers' brand.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why and when did you decide to be a professional/fashion entrepreneur? - Can you define your public? - Can you describe your evolution as an influencer? - Have you ever had a problem because of any shared content? Explain - How do you, as an influencer, convey messages, categorize your content, or align with specific topics or communities? - Which digital social networks do you have a profile? Or how many profiles do you have? - Do you use all of them in the same way? |
| <p>Linguistic Codes:</p> <p>1. Language and tone: Analyzing the influencers' choice of language, writing style, and tone in captions, comments, and interactions with their audience.</p> | |

| <p>2. Hashtags and keywords: Examining the hashtags and keywords used by</p> | <p>- About Instagram: What do you think about it? Is it useful for you as an influencer? Why?</p> |
|--|---|
| <p>1. Collaborations and partnerships: Investigating the influencers' collaborations with brands, other influencers, or organizations and how these collaborations are showcased in their content.</p> <p>2. Community involvement: Examining the influencers' participation in online communities, including engagement with followers, responding to comments, or hosting discussions related to their niche.</p> | <p>- When did you start to use Instagram? Why?</p> <p>-How do you want to be identified?</p> <p>- In which way do you want to influence your public? And specifically women?</p> <p>- How do you define your relationship with your followers, especially women?</p> <p>-Considering your entire career, have you changed your online identity?</p> <p>- Do you think that you have achieved your identity? (Or perhaps it is not essential to you)</p> <p>- Do you want to be identified as Saudi women?</p> |
| Intercultural communication / Themes | Questions |
| <p>Cultural Representation Codes</p> <p>1. Cultural symbols and references: Analyzing the use of cultural symbols, icons, or references associated with specific cultures or communities.</p> <p>2. Cultural practices and traditions: Examining how influencers incorporate cultural practices, traditions, or rituals into their content, showcasing cultural diversity and fostering intercultural understanding.</p> | <p>Collaboration with brands</p> <p>-Do you agree with that sentence (why)?</p> <p>a) It is better to work with influencers that work with international brands than with local brands</p> <p>b) international brands require more changes than local brands (they are more demanding)</p> <p>c) I like to work with international brands because they let me arrive worldwide.</p> |
| <p>Collaboration and Partnership Codes</p> | |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>1. Cross-cultural collaborations: Analyzing influencers' collaborations with individuals or brands from different cultural backgrounds, promoting cross-cultural understanding and dialogue.</p> <p>2. Intercultural exchange initiatives: Examining influencers' initiatives or campaigns that foster intercultural dialogue, understanding, or appreciation.</p> | <p>d) I like to work with local brands because it makes me feel my cultural roots.</p> <p>e) I think our work contributes to breaking cultural roots: we work with all kinds of brands, and anybody, anywhere and anytime, can watch our Instagram.</p> <p>f) I like to wear or work with local brands because they help deliver Saudi culture to international markets and communities.</p> |
| <p>1. Cross-cultural themes: Investigating the inclusion of cross-cultural themes or topics that resonate with diverse audiences, promoting cultural exchange and appreciation.</p> <p>2. Cultural storytelling: Analyzing influencers' narratives and techniques highlighting different cultures, experiences, or perspectives.</p> | <p>g) I like to work with international brands because it introduces Saudi women's talents to the world, shows her progression, shedding light on Saudi Arabia as a country as most of the shoots take place in historical, tourist places</p> <p>- Why do you think that international brands work with Saudi women influencers?</p> <p>Can fashion be adapted to global markets to represent one country's culture?</p> <p>Is using English and Arabic in my account and posts necessary? Why?</p> <p>Do you think Saudi influencers have changed the Saudi women stereotype image in advertisements?</p> <p>Can you take advantage of your work to show our cultural roots inside and outside /all over the world?</p> <p>Do you think it is not easy to show modern women if you work on fashion, beauty, and lifestyle because of traditional values?</p> |

| Influencers' engagement with feminist culture / Themes | Questions |
|---|---|
| <p>Feminist Ideology Codes</p> <p>1. Feminist themes and topics: Analyzing influencers' content that addresses feminist issues, such as gender equality, women's rights, intersectionality, body positivity, or reproductive rights.</p> <p>2. Feminist terminology and discourse: Identifying feminist language, concepts, and theories in influencers' captions, comments, or conversations with followers.</p> | <p>- Do you think that you help Saudi women to be feminists, to get empowered?</p> <p>- Do you think that it still relies on a critique of gender structures and inequalities, and it is impossible to talk about feminism (it is not possible to express an open mind)?</p> <p>- Do you think that you represent Saudi women in your commercial content?</p> <p>- Don't you think that you represent Saudi women in your commercial content (because you have a particular identity)?</p> <p>-Is it essential to show feminist values in our posts because it gives authenticity and guarantees success? Do you agree? Why?</p> <p>-Can you tell us more about how fashion can empower Saudi women? (From your point of view</p> <p>-You must support Saudi women's brands, specifically in the fashion and beauty field, as Saudi women's achievements are a progression for us all.</p> <p>- Do you feel that you are part of the girl empowerment? Do you agree? Why?</p> |
| <p>Representation and Empowerment Codes</p> <p>1. Positive female representation: Examining how influencers portray women in their content, promoting diverse representations, and challenging traditional gender stereotypes.</p> <p>2. Empowerment messaging: Analyzing the influencers' messages and narratives that empower women, encourage self-acceptance, or challenge societal expectations.</p> | |
| <p>Collaboration and Partnerships Codes</p> <p>1. Collaborations with feminist organizations: Investigating influencers' collaborations with feminist organizations, charities, or initiatives, highlighting their commitment to feminist causes. 2. Partnership</p> | |

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| with brands through awareness campaigns, empowerment strategies, and messages for women. They share feminist values, leveraging their collective influence to promote feminist culture. | |
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4.6. Empirical process

4.6.1. Sample of cases: Development of Interviews and Ethical Conditions

4.6.1.1. *Contact and Development of Interviews*

For the purpose of this study, we first contacted each selected female social media influencer entrepreneur in the fashion industry through emails and met potential interview participants in person with a request for an interview appointment (Erpe and Kotnik, 2022). I requested the targeted participants to support this academic research study and scheduled the first face-to-face and Zoom meetings for data collection. During interview sessions, participants were first informed about the study's objectives, interview process, knowledge (data) required of participants in this study. The participants were also informed about audio conversation recordings, for which few were initially uncomfortable. However, I requested the participants and explained the importance of audio recording for the accuracy of the information shared (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006). The participants agreed to have their voices recorded. I developed an interview protocol containing specific inquiry questions and a tablet computer to record the conversation. I initially contacted 22 female influencers entrepreneurs, resulting in a 20% response rate, with eight influencers agreeing to participate. However, over time, two of the initially interested influencers withdrew—one cited a busy schedule and requested a concise version of the questions but ultimately declined, while another, despite initial engagement via email, Instagram, and Snapchat, later apologized for being unable to provide responses. Additionally, three influencers explicitly declined participation, and the remaining contacts did not respond to any communication attempts. Ultimately, six influencers entrepreneurs completed the interviews and were included in this study.

However, in developing the interview guides, I used Kallio et al. (2016) recommendations for creating practical interview questions, including: “A semi-structured

interview guide consisted of two levels of questions: main themes and follow-up questions. The main themes covered the main content of the research subject, and within them, participants were encouraged to speak freely about their perceptions and experiences. Follow-up questions could be pre-designed or spontaneous based on the participant's answers (Kallio, 2016). This can then be followed by a 'prompt' question that repeats the key concept. 'Prompt' questions are crucial to the interview process because they help the interviewer gain more information, especially if the participant does not provide detailed replies. It is useful to list 'prompt' questions before the interview and read and understand these to ensure familiarity. In addition, 'prompt' questions can ensure the key issues are addressed and the interview flow is maintained. The planned order of the 'prompt' questions does not need to be strictly adhered to because it is not appropriate for this style of interviewing. Consideration should be given to the phrasing of 'prompt' questions to avoid leading the participant. This is crucial because the interviewer's expectations can affect the participant's response (Huffcutt and Woehr, 1999). While the 'prompt' questions give a sense of security if the interviewer has planned appropriately, they are only an aide-mémoire.

Proposing too long a period can prompt an outright refusal. Conversely, if an unrealistically short period is requested, respondents may depart after the allotted time, even if crucial agenda items are far from finished; the interviewer also risks appearing to have been deceptive, foolish, or both. So here are a few ideas to consider. Pretesting the interview should yield a rough idea of how long the questions will take. You can initially mention that time ("It shouldn't take much longer than . . ."). Then, if things are going well but slowly during the interview, ask permission for "just a few more questions" to finish the core questions and perhaps cover some of the second-tier topics. A late afternoon session may have the advantage of not running up against another meeting. Regardless of the time and place, the most essential element—aside from respondents' consenting to be interviewed—is the content of those interviews. Developing appropriate and well-crafted interview guides is essential (Adams, 2015).

However, I played the role of an interviewer, generating and analyzing data through interviews conducted with the influencers. By working with the interview transcripts and incorporating our observations thoroughly analyzed the data generated during these interviews. Moreover, I embraced the role of a reflexive researcher, continuously evaluating and

acknowledging my biases and potential influence on the study. This involved critically reflecting on each step of the research process and actively working towards mitigating any biases that could affect the integrity of the findings. Throughout the study, I found great satisfaction in witnessing the change and development of the influencers as they navigated their online presence. This further enhanced my understanding of their experiences and added depth to the study's findings. Each interview session took approximately 40 -90 minutes. I utilized available business email addresses and contacted influencers through direct messages on Instagram and Snapchat.

Instagram messages and official email contacts proved to be the most effective means of communication for securing interviews. WhatsApp was used to share details before or after the interviews. While in-person interviews were initially planned, only one was conducted face-to-face. Meanwhile, two influencers suggested either an in-person or Zoom interview; ultimately, a Zoom meeting was chosen for convenience. Due to geographical constraints, two other interviews were conducted via Zoom—one with an influencer based in Switzerland and another in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, at the time of the scheduled interview. Additionally, one interview was conducted via email, as the influencer declined both in-person and Zoom meeting options. Table 3 presents the empirical process for interviews.

Table 3 Empirical process: Applying interviews

| Name | Date interview | Duration | Online/offline | Observations |
|--------------|----------------|----------|----------------|--|
| Nasiba Hafiz | 24/1/2023 | 90 min | Offline | She was exceptionally approachable and readily agreed to participate in the interview. Her distinctive style and personality are evident, particularly when browsing her Instagram account, where her designs stand out. Proudly Saudi, she embodies the modern Saudi woman, and it is |

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|---------------|--|--------|------------------------------|--|
| | | | | clear that her upbringing has significantly influenced her personality and career trajectory as a designer |
| Alaa Balky | 1/2/2023 We contacted again in 6/6/2023 | 40 min | Online /zoom WhatsApp | She has a noteworthy, unique approach to her career; she simultaneously engaged in offline and online work when it was uncommon and not yet a widespread trend to be an influencer. She began her journey with Twitter. She has focused on self-made Saudi women, a concept that has gained prominence in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, her perspective on her followers is distinct; she sets clear goals for herself and prefers not to be categorized. |
| Rawan Kattooa | 2/2/2023 | 70 min | Online/Zoom | Rawan transitioned from the corporate world to the fashion industry following the boom in this sector after the implementation of Vision 2030. She is approachable and easy to engage with, reflecting a |

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|--------------|------------------------|---|--|--|
| | | | | <p>down-to-earth demeanor. Originally from Riyadh, Rawan currently resides in Switzerland. She emphasizes the importance of quality over quantity, particularly concerning her followers, targeting local and global audiences within the fashion industry. She considers her Instagram account a professional portfolio showcasing her work. While she occasionally shares personal posts, the overall tone of her account remains consistent with her modest character and personality, both online and offline.</p> |
| Lina malaika | 25/3/2023 15/1/2024 | - | By email, then by Instagram messages as she requested. | <p>Although Lina was quite busy, she remained responsive via email and promptly replied to my messages, offering assistance whenever I needed further clarification on some of her answers through Instagram. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to meet her in person.</p> |

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|------------------|-----------|--------|--------------|--|
| | | | | |
| Marriam Mossalli | 10/4/2023 | 60 min | Online /zoom | <p>She profoundly understands the Saudi fashion market, having started over 12 years ago in Dubai. Throughout her career, she has worked on numerous public and private projects with local and global brands and is considered a pioneer in women's empowerment. She was helpful and provided detailed responses without repeating questions. She facilitated my connection with Arwa Al Ammari. She is an open and confident individual, speaking with authority and clarity. Her Instagram account reflects her offline identity, staying true to her personal beliefs.</p> |

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|---------------|-----------|--------|--------------|---|
| Arwa Alammari | 7/12/2013 | 60 min | Online /zoom | Having entered the fashion industry 12 years ago, she has experienced significant career growth, mainly as a result of the recent reforms in the country. She was supportive, and it is clear that her work and brand are central to her life and accomplishments. She places her brand name on Instagram before her own, using the platform as a space for empowerment and professionalism. Even when sharing personal posts, she does so to showcase Saudi women's culture and reflect her interests in cultures. |
|---------------|-----------|--------|--------------|---|

Source: Own elaborataion

Therefore, I tried to remain open to all relevant answers the participants gave to explore new possible ideas and data. Participants were asked to relate the conversation with the question asked when the discussion was diverting to subjects other than the data needed. I tried to create a friendly environment to enable ease of discussion and knowledge sharing by the female influencers. Some challenges were encountered during the entire phase of data collection. Besides, data collection continued purposely until we got answers to all research questions and reached the point of data saturation (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006). Given its qualitative nature, the data is predominantly descriptive, necessitating additional steps for collection, compilation, and organization before analysis.

4.6.1.2. *Ethical Conditions*

Ethical considerations were taken into account, covering subjects such as approval from the research institution, the development of proper interview protocols and procedures, participant consent for data collection, confidentiality of research participants, transparency in reporting, and the protection of research materials (Saunders et al., 2015). These ethical principles served as guidelines throughout data collection, analysis, and the reporting of findings. Before conducting interviews, I contacted potential participants via professional emails that included details about the college where I study and work, ensuring they were informed that the interviews were being conducted for academic research purposes. This step aimed to develop prior understanding, encourage participation, and secure informed consent. Upon agreeing to participate, interviewees received the interview protocol via email along with a request to schedule a suitable date, time, and venue based on their convenience. Upon their approval, their names and interview question responses were shared to support this research purpose. Additionally, they were asked whether any of the shared data should remain confidential for their convenience. Participants were allowed to refuse to answer or withdraw from the interview anytime they felt uncomfortable.

Participants were informed that the conversation would be voice-recorded, with all recorded audio files securely stored on a password-protected device. They were assured that the audio files would be permanently deleted upon the completion of this thesis. During the interviews, an interactive and receptive approach was maintained to encourage participants to respond openly and comfortably (Creswell et al., 2006). Participants voluntarily contributed to this study to expand knowledge on the phenomenon of cultural and feminist identity in the fashion industry. However, irrelevant and extraneous information was omitted to refine the data and avoid excessive descriptiveness. Throughout the thesis-writing process, research materials have been securely protected, and findings are presented with the highest level of transparency.

4.6.2. Sample of posts: Selecting Content from influencers Instagram page

This section outlines the methodology for purposive sampling of Instagram posts used in this research. The selection process specifically focused on posts that align with the

key themes of this study, including cultural representation, empowerment, feminist topics, femvertising, and collaborations with global and local brands. These themes were examined to understand how Saudi female influencers construct their personal and cultural identities through digital platforms, particularly Instagram, while engaging in broader societal conversations.

The sampling period spanned from 2018 to the end of 2023, a historically significant timeframe in Saudi Arabia. This period marks major social transformations, beginning with the lifting of the driving ban, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated digital engagement, and more recent years that reflect a shift in social narratives and influencer engagement under Vision 2030. By capturing this evolving digital landscape, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of how Saudi influencers navigate cultural and professional spaces in the fashion industry.

A total of 150 posts were selected across multiple case studies, with each influencer contributing 25 posts. From this dataset, 37 posts were analyzed in detail within the discussion chapters, offering deeper insights into the strategic use of social media for branding, professional networking, and cultural expressions. The selection process followed a structured chronological approach: Posts from 2018 were chosen to capture initial reactions to policy reforms, particularly the lifting of the driving ban, and to examine how influencers engaged with discussions on women's rights and feminist culture. Posts from 2020–2021 focused on influencers' online identity construction, their narratives surrounding cultural and professional empowerment. This phase explored how feminist themes were integrated into their branding strategies and content. Posts from 2022–2023 provided a broader perspective on the maturity of influencer collaborations with international and local brands, highlighting their role in shaping Saudi Arabia's global fashion industry presence while balancing traditional values with modern entrepreneurship.

These selected posts reflect the influencers' professional engagements, branding strategies, and cultural positioning, offering valuable insights into how their content aligns with evolving gender roles, social expectations, and digital entrepreneurship.

4.7.Data Coding and Analytical Process

4.7.1. Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns and themes within a dataset. It allows researchers to uncover key concepts, recurring issues, and underlying narratives while providing a structured approach to organizing qualitative data and drawing insightful conclusions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was chosen to analyze the collected interview data and content from Instagram posts, helping to identify and organize emerging themes and patterns in relation to the research questions. The flexibility and practicality of thematic analysis have made it widely applicable in qualitative research (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, which describes thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns [themes] within data" (p. 79). This process produced comprehensive and detailed interpretations of the data. Specifically, the themes and patterns identified from the interviews and Instagram posts of Saudi women influential entrepreneurs were examined to reflect their agency, cultural identity, and experiences in empowering Saudi women within the context of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

For instance, interviews helped identify themes related to cultural identity formation, their experiences in empowering Saudi women through professional initiatives, and their participation in femvertising advertisements. Additionally, the analysis revealed their agency within the broader cultural shift, particularly through their contributions to the fashion industry. Meanwhile, Instagram post analysis highlighted their cultural and feminist identity expressions and transformations, particularly through brand collaborations, lifestyle content, shared achievements, and self-presentation via fashion, work, or personal content shared with their followers. Thematic analysis can be applied within both realist and constructivist research paradigms, making it adaptable for various qualitative approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this study, the social constructivist perspective was used to explore how participants' lived experiences, expressions, and digital self-representations are shaped by larger social transitions, particularly the effects of Vision 2030 reforms, globalization, and digital platforms like Instagram (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81).

Two principal schemes can be applied in thematic analysis for identifying patterns: inductive and deductive approaches. For this research, an inductive approach within an

interpretivist paradigm was selected. The interpretivist paradigm is grounded in the view that reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants' subjective meanings and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 2009). The inductive process allowed this study to derive patterns and themes directly from the data rather than testing predefined theories. Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight that an inductive thematic approach does not require the construction of new theories but can be used to enhance or complement existing perspectives. Similarly, Patton (2015) notes that inductive qualitative analysis often focuses on interpreting lived experiences, cultural practices, and social interactions without the necessity of formal theory development.

An interpretivist inductive approach was appropriate for this research due to its reliance on in-depth interviews and qualitative content analysis. This approach provided a contextual and nuanced understanding of how Saudi women influential entrepreneurs express empowerment and agency through social media while contributing to broader cultural shifts in Saudi Arabia's evolving fashion industry. By focusing on participants' personal meanings, social experiences, and self-representations, this study explored cultural identity, intercultural communication, and feminist expressions. This method is particularly suitable for examining the complexities of gender, empowerment, and digital influence in rapidly evolving socio-cultural contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 2015).

4.7.2. Analysing Interviews Using the Gioia method and MAXQDA

This study employs a structured approach to analyze the experiences of influential entrepreneurs. To ensure a thorough and reliable analysis, it integrates the Gioia Method with thematic analysis, both of which are well-established techniques for interpreting qualitative data. The Gioia Method is particularly effective in capturing participants' descriptions of their experiences and organizing their insights into meaningful categories (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). This approach follows a three-stage process: first, first-order analysis, where participant-centered descriptions are preserved to maintain data fidelity, meaning that participants' own words are recorded and retained to ensure accuracy and authenticity. Second, in second-order analysis, patterns and relationships are identified across coded categories, enabling the development of emerging themes. Finally, in the aggregated dimensions stage, these themes are refined into broader theoretical insights related to entrepreneurial agency,

cultural identity, digital marketing, collaborations with global and local brands, and cultural and feminist identity in Saudi Arabia (Magnani & Gioia, 2023).

The integration of thematic analysis further strengthens this research by allowing for the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through transcription, coding, and iterative revisitation, this method provides a structured yet flexible approach to data categorization, ensuring that key themes and narratives emerge organically. The process of coding and analysis was facilitated using MAXQDA software, which streamlined data management and visualization. By combining these analytical techniques, this study ensures systematic data organization and retrieval, enhancing the depth and credibility of its findings.

During the interviews, several patterns emerged. For instance, when asked to introduce themselves, all participants first identified as Saudi women before or after mentioning their professional roles (see Chapter 5). Additionally, most entrepreneurs avoided explicitly identifying as feminists, with one exception—though she later clarified her perspective in a way that aligned with the views of the other participants. The continuous review of interviews, including transcription, and coding, helped ensure that the data was analyzed in a thorough and reflective manner.

Once the interviews were transcribed, an individual case-by-case analysis was conducted, with initial open coding assigned to participant responses. The refinement of codes was revisited multiple times, both before and during the analysis, until the final themes emerged that were directly relevant to the research questions. This was followed by a cross-case analysis, which further refined the codes by comparing and contrasting responses across multiple participants, allowing for a deeper understanding of shared and unique experiences among the entrepreneurs. The iterative nature of this process ensured that themes relevant to the research questions were systematically identified and further explored in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

This multi-layered approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how Saudi women influential entrepreneurs shape their online identities, engage in branding and digital marketing with global and local brands, and influence cultural change in Saudi Arabia through

their work in fashion industry. By integrating thematic analysis, the Gioia Method, and cross-case comparison, this study offers a robust and reliable framework for examining how Saudi women entrepreneurs use social media to express cultural identity, digital influence, and empowerment.

4.7.3. Analysing Instagram posts Using content analysis and an observation guide

A content analysis approach was employed as the initial step in examining influencers' Instagram posts. Content analysis is a systematic method used to identify, categorize, and interpret recurring themes, topics, and patterns within textual and visual data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Kohlbacher, 2006). By analyzing the textual, visual, and contextual elements of influencers' posts, this method provides valuable insights into how influencers construct and communicate their identities, values, and messages to their audience. In qualitative research, content analysis is widely recognized for its ability to capture underlying meanings and social representations within media and communication studies (Mayring, 2014).

To ensure a structured and reliable analysis, an observation guide was developed to establish clear criteria and variables aligned with the study's research objectives. The data collection period spanned from 2020 to 2023, during which influencer content was systematically gathered from their social media profiles, primarily Instagram. Various forms of content—including posts, videos, captions, and stories—were documented to ensure a comprehensive and representative sample. The observation process followed a structured framework, ensuring consistency and reliability in data collection. Each influencer's content was evaluated systematically, with detailed notes recorded to capture relevant information, patterns, and key insights.

The analysis covered several key dimensions. Content relevance was assessed by examining topics covered, particularly those related to feminism, empowerment, and cultural transition, as well as advertising collaborations with local and global brands. Additionally, storytelling techniques, language style, tone, and visual presentation—including image and video quality—were analyzed to understand how influencers craft their narratives, whether strategically or spontaneously (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). Another critical focus was on

examining the frequency and nature of partnerships and their connection to influencers' dress styles, fashion choices, and designs.

Furthermore, content evolution and consistency were examined to track shifts in messaging over time, particularly in response to societal or cultural changes under Vision 2030. This included evaluating the consistency of influencer collaborations, values, and modifications in content strategy across the study period. Finally, By employing this structured observation guide and thematic content analysis, this study ensured a comprehensive and systematic examination of influencer content within the context of cultural identity, empowerment, and digital branding. This method provided rich insights into how Saudi women influencers navigate digital spaces, construct professional identities, and engage with feminist and cultural discourses in their online strategies.

CHAPTER 5

THE CULTURAL IDENTITY DYNAMICS OF SAUDI INFLUENTIAL ENTREPRENEURS

5.1.Introduction

I commence the analysis by scrutinizing how influential Saudi entrepreneurs characterize themselves culturally. This investigation evaluates the influence of national culture, which is presently transforming modernization, and external factors such as mass media, mainly social media platforms such as Instagram. Concurrently, internal variables like background, education, financial status, and job position also shape their cultural identity. The complex interplay of these elements collectively contributes to developing their cultural and online identity. This chapter delves into the results of the first and second main research questions, focusing on how these individuals shape their cultural identities and navigate online spaces, particularly Instagram, to express their agency. The data, primarily collected through case study interviews, sheds light on the cultural backgrounds of these individuals and their paths to becoming influential entrepreneurs.

I identify a common thread among all the entrepreneur influencers: their middle- to high-income backgrounds. They all share a strong educational foundation, with some pursuing their initial education abroad, such as Marriam Mossalli and Nasiba Hafiz. Others have obtained higher education in prominent international hubs like London and the United States, as seen in the cases of Lina Malaika, Alaa Balkhy, and Arwa Al Ammari. Notably, Rawan Kattoa, while born, raised, and educated in Saudi Arabia, now divides her time between Switzerland and Riyadh. Family, particularly their parents, stands out as a significant source of inspiration and unwavering support for these entrepreneurs.

5.2.Perspective on their cultural identity: The dynamic Interplay of Social, Collective and Personal Factors

In examining the cultural identities of influential entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia, the initial inquiry during interviews consistently centers around the question "Who are you?" and

the influential factors shaping their present identity. It is vital to acknowledge the cultural concept's dynamic nature, as Haslett Beth (2018) and Giddens (2014) emphasized, they highlight the transformative evolution of cultural identity over time. While individuals still maintain ties to their nation-states, the impact of globalization, immigration, migration, and advancements in telecommunications has blurred the conventional link between cultural identity and nation-states. Consequently, scholars, as mentioned in (chapter 3, Section 3.2) are now delving into how individuals define their cultural identities and evaluating the strengths of these identifications. All the influential entrepreneurs in my study have been exposed to diverse cultural influences, whether raised outside of Saudi Arabia, from multi-rooted families, or having experiences such as studying abroad or extensive travel.

Marriam Mossalli, who received her education outside Saudi Arabia and hails from a multi-rooted family with American and Saudi heritage, identifies herself primarily as Saudi. She reflects on her journey during the interview, stating:

"Yes, I was born outside of Saudi. I was born in Sri Lanka, moved to Korea, and moved to Malaysia. I wanted to find something that was a true identity. Growing up, I didn't fit in with the West because I had a more worldly perspective with my Arab heritage. I didn't fit conventional identities that were considered Western or Eastern. Because of that, as I got older, I wanted to choose one, and Saudi became the natural thing." (Marriam Mossalli)

Conversely, Alaa Balky says, *"I'm multicultural,"* due to her upbringing in Montreal and subsequent move to Saudi Arabia. She emphasizes her diverse cultural experiences, saying,

"I think because I grew up in Montréal and then came to Saudi Arabia, I think that's how I see different cultures. I'm a graphic designer by degree and, right now, a creative and cultural consultant. I'm based between Jeddah and New York, and that's been happening for ten years; it made me different because it's a unique situation for someone not to be in Saudi for so long if they are not studying or working. I'm here because of my husband." (Alaa Balky)

In addition, she replied to the questions about whether she wanted to be identified as a Saudi woman first.

"Yeah, this is who I am. It's part of my identity. Everyone has their identity, and I achieved it. My position is unique as I live between two cities and grew up in Montreal. I've always been very different, including in, but I stand out as a type of girl." (Alaa Balky)

Arwa Al Amari, a fashion entrepreneur, consultant, and designer, draws inspiration from art and culture. She expresses her love for exploring different cultures, stating,

"Yes, I was born and raised in Riyadh. But I was trying to say that I love cultures. For example, I love to travel to discover the cultures of the country I visit, such as food, music, clothing, theater, and history. However, as Saudis, we have a diverse and significant culture that fundamentally influenced my personality and how we are perceived globally," she adds, "I have a unique background – my mother is from Al-Madinah (Saudi Arabia). My father is from Qassim (Saudi Arabia); additionally, my maternal grandmother is from Makkah, Saudi Arabia. My paternal grandmother is from Syria. My grandfather used to travel through the 'Aqilat Road, a trade route to Syria. This trade route had a significant cultural impact, influencing my upbringing and personality. When we look at Saudi Arabia, the Northern region is different from the Southern, Eastern, Western, and Central regions, and each region has uniqueness in everything. I mean, if you want to talk about customs, traditions, food, and even dialects, they vary from one place to another. So, Saudi Arabia, to some extent, is a perfect example of an environment that greatly influences because it contains a lot of cultures". (Arwa Al Amari)

Arwa believes that the diversity of Saudi culture has affected her identity and interest in other cultures. Thus, their descriptions explicitly identify Lina Malaika and Rawan Katto as Saudis. For instance, Rawan Katto states, *"So my name is Rawan Katto. I would say I'm a Saudi fashion entrepreneur,"*

while Lina affirms, "I'm a creative and cultural consultant & filmmaker & entrepreneur from Saudi Arabia; yes. I do want to be identified as a Saudi woman. Because that is my identity". (Lina Malaika)

Collective identity involves individuals recognizing and affiliating with the groups and social classifications they are part of. It encompasses the significance of these social groups, the meanings assigned to them, and the emotions, beliefs, and attitudes stemming from this cultural and social association. In this view, Vignoles, Schwartz & Luyckx (2011) suggest that the collective identity can refer to membership in any social group or category, including nationality. In my case studies, all participants strongly emphasize that their Saudi identity is a core element of who they are, profoundly influencing their sense of self and professional endeavors. The narratives from the case studies reveal a dynamic interaction between personal and social identities, which is distinctly reflected in the participants' work experiences and Instagram content. As discussed in (Chapter 3, Section 3.2), cultural identity is an intermediary concept bridging individual and collective identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dien, 2000; Schwartz et al., 2008; Bhatia, 2007). This dynamic showcases how these influential entrepreneurs skillfully navigate the complexities of their individual and collective identities, creating a unique synthesis that shapes their agency through both professional and creative endeavors.

In the discussion, Marriam emphasized a crucial aspect regarding the portrayal of Saudi identity on Instagram bios, noting that identifying oneself as a Saudi woman has become a prevailing trend, particularly following Vision 2030. Proudly asserting her Saudi identity, she remarked,

"And this is before it was trendy before you had influencers writing on their bio on Instagram saying they're Saudi. This was before that". Marriam attributed the trendiness of being Saudi to economic and global factors, stating, "I think that what's happening is with the economy and COVID hit higher world globally, and what was so that every citizen felt confident in their leaders."

She further explained, "I think confidence in our leaders, and I think the trend to be Saudi is because people want to go where things are happening and people are happy and people are having that success financially." (Marriam Mossalli)

Additionally, she highlighted the significance of reinvesting money from the government sector into the private sector as a driving force behind this trend:

"then the second thing was inserting money back into our county from the government sector into the private sector."

In my case studies, it became evident through interviews that Saudi women, with identities rooted in the broader context of Eastern countries, collectively identify themselves based on social group memberships, such as nationality, ethnicity, or other collective affiliations. Their pride in being Saudi has become more pronounced in light of economic and cultural transitions. Social categorization plays a crucial role in this dynamic, as individuals define themselves as individuals and members of specific social categories. Interactions with others from diverse categories continually refine these social categories, subsequently influencing behavior (Trepte & Loy, 2017).

This observation underscores the significance of personal identity in shaping how influential Saudi women entrepreneurs interpret and express their Saudi identity and how it reflects on their agency within the broader social structure. Their expressions of Saudi identity are influenced by various factors, such as their geographical location, professional endeavors, personal beliefs, and family backgrounds. While they all share a sense of pride in being Saudi, the diversity in their identities manifests in how they interpret and embody the role of Saudi women. Their expressions of Saudi identity reflect the intricate interplay between personal identity and collective social categories. The analysis draws upon Social Identity Theory (SIT), as introduced by Tajfel (1978), to gain a deeper understanding of their cultural identity. SIT sheds light on how social groups shape individuals' self-perceptions, roles within these groups, and interactions with other groups. The framework provided by SIT aids in comprehending the nuanced relationships between individual and collective identities within various social contexts, as further developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). Later, the Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) by Turner (1999) differentiated social and personal identity. Social identity is contingent on an individual's group memberships, while personal identity is more or less independent of group memberships. SCT posits that an individual's behavior is driven by either social or personal identity processes based on the relative salience or importance of a particular situation for social or personal identity. Both identities can be salient simultaneously, triggering behavior motivated by a dynamic interplay of both. These theories differ in their views on social and personal identity, with SIT suggesting a continuum of interpersonal versus intergroup behavior. In contrast, SCT indicates that social and personal identity processes may

operate simultaneously (Trepte & Loy, 2017).

Within the context of my case studies, it is evident that Saudi women entrepreneurs skillfully navigate their roles and expressions of identity through a sophisticated interplay of social and personal factors. The individual identity of each woman, shaped by her distinct experiences, beliefs, and background, dynamically interacts with her social identity as a Saudi woman. The diverse contexts in which they reside, work, and engage contribute to the simultaneous salience of social and personal identities. For instance, geographical location is a significant factor shaping personal identity, as highlighted by Alaa Balky's experience of living between Montréal and Jeddah during her childhood and residing in New York for a decade. Professional experiences and work play a crucial role in categorizing the identity of these influential entrepreneurs, with Lina Malaika emphasizing her multifaceted role within the creative industry and her ability to integrate culture and heritage into her work. Lina also emphasizes the importance of authenticity in her creative pursuits, stating,

"I believe in remaining authentic and following my creative intuition. I don't follow anyone or anything. I get inspired by art, history, and life experiences, so I'm a collective of all my travels, the people I met, the books I read, the movies I watched, and the real-life experiences make me who I am, and through that, I get inspired and create". (Lina Malaika)

Expanding on Belay's (2018) insights concerning the role of shared geographic spaces in upholding cultural identity, Marriam Mossalli's remarkable journey illuminates authenticity's pivotal role in shaping her cultural identity. Despite being granted admission into Boston University's esteemed film program, Marriam returned to Saudi Arabia, taking down the enticing opportunity to pursue her film studies abroad. Her reasoning was rooted in a profound desire for authentic storytelling. She explained,

"It was important for me to do film not out of Saudi because I wanted to have authentic storytelling, and how to have that is to stay in one place." (Marriam Mossalli)

Marriam's choice to forego studying and producing a film about Saudi culture from abroad demonstrates her unwavering commitment to authenticity. She recognized that to

capture the true essence of Saudi culture, she needed to be embedded within it, living and working in her homeland. In doing so, she sought to ensure that her work in the field of fashion would reflect the genuine spirit and cultural nuances of Saudi Arabia. Marriam Mossalli's decision to return to her roots exemplifies her dedication to preserving and representing the authenticity of her cultural identity, a testament to the importance of remaining grounded in one's cultural heritage when telling its stories.

On the other hand, Arwa Al Ammari identifies herself primarily as a *"fashion entrepreneur, consultant, and designer,"* highlighting the inspiration she draws from art and culture, with her personality reflected in her brand. Similarly, Rawan Katoa and Lina Malaika initially define their work positions as fashion entrepreneurs and Lina as a *"creative and cultural consultant & filmmaker & entrepreneur."* On the individual beliefs level, Nasiba Hafiz emphasizes purpose and distinctiveness in her personal and professional endeavors, as she said,

"Nasiba is a sister, a daughter, mother, and I always like to do things with a purpose. So I don't like to just add on to things or like things to be different. My brand aims to support women worldwide, to support culture, and to keep our culture recognized internationally as Arabs, Saudis, and women." (Nasiba Hafiz)

Moreover, family backgrounds play a crucial role in shaping the personalities of these entrepreneurs. For example, Arwa Al Ammari emphasizes the supportive environment within her family, where education is essential. She mentions,

"I come from a family that supports, whether it's my grandmother, mother, or my entire family, and education is essential. Women have their place, appreciation, and voice at home in the family. This is how we were raised, without differentiating between a girl or a boy." (Arwa Al Ammari)

Arwa highlights the impact of her mother being among the first to study abroad, shaping the personalities of Arwa and her sisters. Additionally, Nasiba Hafiz and Rawan Kattoa underscore how their parents, particularly their mothers, influenced their interest in fashion. Nasiba Hafiz shares, *"I was always into fashion and influenced by my parents. Both of them were very fashionable and had their style."* She further emphasizes the influence of her parents'

upbringing in Al-Madinah al-Munawwarah, Saudi Arabia, instilling family values and a strong connection to their roots. Rawan Kattoa echoes this sentiment, recalling her childhood fascination with dressing up and playing with her mother's wardrobe. She notes, *"Since I was eight years old, I was a kid who was always into dressing up and playing dress-up in my mother's wardrobe."* Rawan attributes her passion for art and fashion to her mother, who considers her an artistic icon, an interior designer, and a tailor.

These accounts show how these women shape, interpret, and embody their cultural identity. Concurrently, their shared social identity as Saudi women roots them within a collective cultural framework. The dynamic interplay between these identities is evident in the distinct expressions of Saudi womanhood, reflecting individual nuances within the broader cultural context. Acknowledging the simultaneous salience of both social and personal identities makes it evident that their identities encompass both social and individual dimensions, with significance attributed to both. Individual or personal identity, in this context, encompasses aspects of self-definition at the individual level, including goals, values, and beliefs. (Vignoles et al., 2011) This analysis draws on Giddens' structuration theory, which underscores the duality of structure—the concept that social structures shape and are shaped by human agency. This reciprocal relationship illustrates how individuals navigate and influence social systems, fostering societal continuity and transformation. Bourdieu's concept of habitus builds upon this framework by exploring how personal identities, formed through individual experiences, beliefs, and values, interact with and impact social structures. Together, these theories offer a cohesive perspective for understanding the dynamic interplay between agency and structure, which actively shape cultural identities as outlined in (Chapter 3, Section 3.4.4).

The case studies highlight this dynamic, particularly in the pre-Vision 2030 era, where the participants' agency was influenced mainly by structural constraints and shaped by their personal identities, family backgrounds, and life experiences. However, as Saudi Arabia underwent structural transitions post-Vision 2030, their agency evolved to a new level, which shows the impact of power and structure role in defining the agency of individuals here in the study the agency of Saudi women (see chapter 3 section 3.4.2), profoundly influencing their cultural identities. This progression reflects how changes in social structures also reshape individual and collective identities, a theme that will be further explored in the following

sections.

5.3.Saudi Arabia's Social Identities moved from Pain Tolerance and Stereotype Threat to Self-Esteem.

5.3.1. Self-esteem, social identities, Role-identity salience, and their influence on agency

Expanding on the preceding discussion regarding "Self-Categorization and the Trend of Saudi Women Embracing Their National Identity," it is imperative to delve into the intricate connection between self-esteem, social identities, and role identity salience. In the context of Saudi women experiencing this transition and expressing pride in their Saudi identity, their Social Identities moved from Pain Tolerance and Stereotype Threat to Self-Esteem. The link between self-esteem and social identities is significant. Social identities play an important role in shaping self-esteem, with individuals deriving their sense of worth from group affiliations. Positive identities boost self-esteem, while negative ones often lead to competition or strategies to enhance the in-group image (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, the experiences of influential Saudi women entrepreneurs show that, before Vision 2030, their self-esteem was drawn from various habitus such as family background, education, travel, and life experiences rather than their social identity (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2). Despite the limited space for agency, these women exercised agency, striving to create change. Doumato (1992) highlights the traditional perception of Saudi women as lacking agency, often portraying them as victims. However, Saudi women demonstrated different kinds of agency (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.1), navigating within the constraints imposed on them.

Marriam Mossalli expressed her pride in being a Saudi woman "before it becomes a trend," highlighting the negative stereotypes and portrayals often associated with Saudi women. She views her role as a responsibility to serve as a public relations representative for Saudi Arabia, working to reshape the media narrative. Mossalli aims to control how Saudi women are represented and ultimately seeks to promote Saudi culture globally. She also underscores the government's recent supportive role in accelerating these changes, emphasizing its impact on shifting perceptions. Mossalli said in her words

"Exporting culture is my ultimate goal, as well as public relations and exporting. So when we start exporting our culture, that's the focus, and I think that's what you're

slowly starting to see now with our strategies coming from a governmental point."
(Marriam Mossalli)

Mossalli underscores the importance of Saudis owning their narrative through initiatives like two of her projects she mentioned, "Under the abaya book"¹ and the "Saudi style council"², expressing pride in fulfilling her ambition of being the Public relations for Saudi Arabia over the past twelve years. She further mentioned, *"Everything was from the West and being validated and returning to Saudi. Even our fashion designers like Mohammed Ash and all these big names went abroad, got validated, and then returned to town. Nowadays this new generation doesn't give a shit about the abroad. Really. What's good about them is that they are so confident and proud of their country that they don't need the validation from the West"*.
(Marriam Mossalli)

Arwa Al Ammari shares a similar perspective, recounting experiences from a time when Saudi Arabia was perceived as closed, and the media portrayed women as having no rights to express their thoughts on social media platforms. Arwa Al Ammari mentioned

"Even in the years when they considered Saudi Arabia to be closed, and the media portrayed that women didn't have any rights, we didn't experience that. I, for example, was in one of the first batches to study for my master's in America. Similarly, my sister studied in America. Our family environment shaped us. As a Saudi, we went through different stages, but maybe the environment I was in was different from others, and not everyone had the same opportunities". (Arwa Al Ammari)

These potentials they had before the vision gave them an agency for change as a negative social identity could lead to cognitive strategies to improve the image of the in-group. In other words, Saudi entrepreneurs seek a positive perception of their social group. When faced with a negative identity, they employ various strategies to enhance it, fostering a more

¹For more information, visit the official instagram account https://www.instagram.com/under_the_abaya/

²For more information, visit the official instagram account <https://www.instagram.com/saudistylecouncil/?hl=en>

positive collective image. As Arwa al Ammari mentioned,

"When I went to the program "Fashion Stars,"³ I aimed to represent Saudi women correctly. Because there was always this idea about us that we are closed and cannot express our opinions or that Saudi women cannot dress in specific ways. So, my goal in the program was to show an actual image of Saudi women. However, something else happened during the program. In each episode, I did very well in terms of how I conveyed my culture through fashion. This caught the attention of the BBC, and when they noticed this, they decided, first of all, to categorize me as one of the most creative minds in the world. Secondly, because Saudi Arabia has always been stereotyped in the media, the media used to talk about Saudi Arabia in a certain way, always portraying it as an area that is not understood and not emphasizing its crucial role in my country in the world. It mattered to them to know what was happening or how these people, especially Saudi women, think". (Arwa al Ammari)

Al Ammari shared that even while studying abroad in Britain, she always felt a profound responsibility to represent her Saudi culture and country. This illustrates the strong sense of pride and connection Saudi women feel toward their nation, which becomes a key part of their identity. She remarked, *"When I went to study in Britain, I was thinking how to guide myself. Every move I make is calculated because there is an idea about us, I'm representing not just myself, I'm representing my culture, my country, my religion, my Arab identity."* The representation of Saudi women in the media has traditionally been limited and often framed negatively. Bashatah (2017) emphasized that most academic research on Saudi women's media coverage reveals a stereotypical portrayal, depicting them as weak and oppressed. However, Lina Malaika highlights the role of social media in challenging and transforming this stereotype. She states, *"I do believe that there's a stereotype for Saudi women in the world, and that narrative was always frustrating for me, I'm glad that the truth can be finally told, and social media helped with that."* Through social media, Lina Malaika and others have been able to present Saudi women in a more diverse and empowered light.

³ Agencies, 2016, April11, "Saudi designer wins fashion star", Arab news
<https://www.arabnews.com/offbeat/news/908846>

Role identity salience is connected to an individual's desire for a specific role and their involvement in anticipatory role behaviors. Put simply, a more prominent role identity makes it more probable for an individual to pursue and engage in behaviors associated with that role actively. Social groups that hold greater importance in one's self-concept tend to generate more salient role identities (Losh & Nzekwe, 2017). For instance, someone valuing their nationality may take on political roles emphasizing their national origin (Serpe & Stryker (1987). In the context of my case studies involving Marriam Mossalli and Arwa Al Ammari, these influential entrepreneurs adopt roles as Saudi women and corporate leaders, contributing to the development of role identities that represent social positions within their respective social groups. This contrasts with broader social identities that emerge from categorizing oneself within a group. Additionally, structurational interaction refers to the dynamic interplay between social structures and individual agency during social interactions, recognizing that social structures provide a framework and resources for social actions. In contrast, individual agency influences and sustains those structures through everyday interactions (Haslett, 2013).

Not all Saudi women adopted the negative, pain-tolerant identity without agency, education, the influence of digital platforms, and studying abroad. As discussed above about the concept of habitus, these factors inspired many women to practice agency and challenge their social structure constraints, even before Vision 2030. Alhareth, and Dighrir (2015) highlight the presence of educated women living in major cities such as Riyadh, Jeddah, and the Eastern region. Many of these women, often with degrees earned abroad, expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo of women's rights in Saudi society. Motivated to improve their circumstances, they occasionally pressured the government, advocating for changes to elevate their status. A key example of this activism was their demand for women to be allowed to drive, challenging existing societal norms (see Chapter 3, Section 3.5.1). This reflects the ongoing transformations within Saudi women's communities, preparing them to advance new reforms and fully adopt the changes by Vision 2030 (see Chapter 2, Section 2.1).

5.3.2. Saudi Women's Evolving Social Identity and Agency in the Fashion Field

The transformations in Saudi society within Vision 2030 (check Chapter 2, section 2.1) have not only shifted the categorization of Saudi women from experiences rooted in pain tolerance and stereotype threat but have also redefined social identities as sources of self-

esteem. Arwa Al Ammari reflects on the changes in Saudi Arabia, stating, *"I have been supported for a long time before Vision 2030 in the Kingdom."* However, she acknowledges that the role of women in leadership positions and the ability to drive have significantly transformed women's lives in the country. Specifically, she notes that she now receives substantial support in the fashion industry as she said, "Now, for example, in the field of fashion, we receive a lot of support." Reflecting on her journey, she shares that despite coming from the medical field and later studying economics and politics, she has always had an entrepreneurial spirit and a passion for art. As a child, she participated in drawing competitions, with creativity being a family trait, even though they all worked in medicine. It took her some time to find a way to combine her love for art with entrepreneurship. She continues, *"I started in 2014 when fashion wasn't highly appreciated, and many didn't see it as a serious profession. However, things have changed, especially after Vision 2030 focused on culture and made fashion a key component. Fashion has received much support, transforming from 2014 to 2024."* Through these statements, she emphasizes the significant shift in societal attitudes toward fashion and how Vision 2030 has played a pivotal role in establishing fashion as a respected and supported industry.

Alaa Balky adds another layer to this narrative, highlighting the personal choices women now have in embracing cultural changes. Despite acknowledging Saudi Arabia's familial and tribal orientation, Balky notes,

"Change is happening. Women are driving. That's an obvious change. Women are CEOs and ministers; women are in (majles al shura)⁴; change is happening, obviously, but not everyone has the same family rules or ways of doing things. You can't judge; it's personal at this point. As for the country or society, change is happening, and no one can deny that. I think everything is empowering Saudi women; definitely, fashion is empowering Saudi women". (Alaa Balky)

The ongoing transformations in Saudi society, particularly in women's empowerment

⁴ For more information, visit official website

<https://shura.gov.sa/wps/wcm/connect/ShuraEn/internet/Historical+BG/>

and agency, resonate with Marriam Mossalli's perspective. She underscores the enduring activism of Saudi women, emphasizing, *"Saudi women were always active, always active. We just weren't in the public light."* Her company, established in 2011, predates the global awareness of Saudi women's endeavors, and Mossalli credits inspirational figures like Rima Bint Bandar ⁵and Al Joharah Bint Talal⁶, who, despite not being in the public eye, played influential roles.

According to Mossalli, the significant shift lies in Saudi women's newfound ability to assert themselves publicly. She notes, *"What shifted was our ability to go out and say, my name is Marriam Mossalli. I'm no longer unfollowed. You know me as Marriam Mossalli, my full name. This is my faith, which I'm doing very well. It's the ownership of our careers and our ambition."* This shift extends beyond individual recognition, encompassing a broader change in workplace dynamics. Marriam delves into the challenges of working in an integrated environment with male colleagues while navigating cultural restrictions. However, she observes a positive trajectory, with the evolving work environment now welcoming young girls from within the system. As Marriam Mossalli advocated,

"But what's interesting is that you have young girls from within the system. So that's what's exciting. I think that, again, as women in Saudi, a lot of opportunities are afforded to us, and it's just up to us. And I mean, you're seeing that these are not just media things. You're seeing Haifa as the EU ambassador. I think you'll see the other Haifa from the Ministry of Tourism. You're seeing Adwa Raifi General Sports Authority. These are proper, real women that are in so many levels" (Marriam Mossalli)

Building upon these narratives, Rawan Kattoo aligns with the overarching theme of positive shifts and empowerment for Saudi women, reinforcing the multifaceted nature of this

⁵Her Royal Highness Princess Reema Bandar Al-Saud, The embassy of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/ambassador>

⁶Al Joharah Bint Talal Al Saud, Gems of Arabia <https://authenticite.me/gems-of-arabia/hrh-al-joharah-bint-talal-al-saud/>

societal transformation. Rawan emphasizes the tangible progress, citing new regulations that address gender equality in the workplace, including equalizing salaries and safeguarding women's rights through harassment laws. Her optimism shines through as she envisions a bright future for Saudi women, asserting, *"So today I see the future is bright for the Saudi woman. It is the place to be."* Despite being physically distant, Rawan actively contributes to this transformation, expressing her commitment: *"I keep traveling, and I want to support this huge transformation in the field, I would say a successful vision that we can see the progress year after year happening."* Rawan's speech reflects how Vision 2030 has created new opportunities for women, as she mentions, *"Saudi women now we have so many opportunities to take in so many industries. Not only the fashion."* She also highlights the growing fashion industry's role in motivating her to start her own business, stating, *"The fashion industry started to grow in Saudi. So that encouraged me to push to start my thing and start doing my work as a fashion entrepreneur."*

As discussed in (Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2) regarding agency, power, and structural constraints, the social norms and societal acceptance in Saudi Arabia would not have shifted without the state's power and its influence. The narrative in my case study supports this view, as it highlights the efforts of Saudi women to assert agency and gain empowerment. However, their increased visibility, as mentioned by Mariam Mossalli, was crucial in making the contributions of Saudi women more widely recognized. During the interview, Nasiba Hafiz highlighted a significant change: *"I think everything has changed to just normalizing, a normal, active lifestyle that supports women. We have always been this way, but now it's just more freedom to do it with a lot of courage. We know that the whole country is supporting us."* The recent state reforms have given Saudi women the courage to express their identity as a standard right. They no longer fear social acceptance as they once did because of state support and modernization policies.

Furthermore, Arwa Al Ammari, Alaa Balkhy, and Rawan Katto also noted the shift toward the fashion industry following Vision 2030. Arwa emphasized the importance of the Ministry of Culture's support for local fashion, stating:

"The Ministry of Culture is involved in supporting local fashion. Fashion is becoming part of the cultural movement aligned with Vision 2030. It's not just one thing; multiple

things work together towards one goal. Fashion is now part of the cultural identity, whether traditional or non-traditional. Many use fashion to promote culture, whether they take inspiration from culture or not. It's all part of supporting that." Her statement reflects the growing importance of fashion as part of the broader cultural movement in Saudi Arabia, aligned with the vision for change under Vision 2030. (Arwa Al Ammari)

5.3.3. Saudi Arabia women's dress style moved from social identity material to personal identity while minimizing social constraints

Saudi women's dress style has shifted from a material representation of social identity to a reflection of personal identity with fewer social constraints. As Entwistle (2023) explains, we must examine how individuals interpret and embody fashion within their social contexts to understand clothing. Fashion is expressed in individual bodies and is not merely an external layer but a significant part of daily routines. This highlights how social, cultural, and personal influences impact how people choose fashionable garments. This section of the discussion focuses on the changing social constraints around women's dress styles, viewing them now as part of personal identity rather than a social identity, which has recently shifted due to modernization.

However, the abaya was seen as a material identity that held the image of Saudi Arabia's Islamic culture, as explained in (Chapter 3, Section 3.2.2). However, the case studies' experiences demonstrate how this identity has shifted. Nasiba Hafiz, for example, described how fashion plays a role in self-expression, stating, *"It's a way of showing, as I said as well, fashion is a way of expressing who you are without saying anything. So if you wear something that represents your culture and where you're from, you can tell people who you are by how you dress."* When asked if it is easy for a Saudi woman to wear modern fashion, Nasiba responded, *"I agree that you can be modern and be Saudi. But of course, it's not easy to show modern movement because there is traditional value."* She acknowledges the traditional values around women's dress style and reflects on the changing fashion scene in Saudi Arabia. She further adds, *"I think fashion is changing. I think it's not a necessity to wear an abaya anymore. But It's still something that we identify with."* This marks a shift towards more fluid clothing choices in Saudi Arabia, where women are moving away from strict traditional attire while maintaining respect for cultural values. On the other hand, Alaa Balkhy remarked,

“It is very empowering to choose how and what you’re going to wear without consequences from family or society.” When asked about Saudi traditional values, Alaa responded, “I think we set our tone. It doesn't affect anything, and it's just part of it. It doesn't affect we are Saudi women. We've always been interested in fashion. Beauty is essential to us, and now we're just showcasing it.” (Alaa Balkhy)

These statements reflect a shift in societal acceptance, where women can embrace modern styles while staying true to their cultural identity.

Marriam Mossalli shared her perspective on changing social norms, saying,

“I have to tell you, as a Saudi woman in my forties, I am not a fan of seeing my young child showing all of their skin. I am telling you, I don't know if you can see what I'm wearing now. I wear crop tops when I travel, and I wear shorts. It's normal. But I will not post that on my social media. I still think that there's a type of respect and standardization that this is our culture. I don't want to go against that. I'm not saying that the girl with the puma thaw and the one wearing the crop top are incorrect. No, each person is different. What I'm talking about is simply on social media, and I don't like it publicly because it doesn't connect to me.” (Marriam Mossalli)

Mariam highlights the balance between embracing modern fashion while respecting cultural norms, especially regarding social media, and representing Saudi Arabia.

Rawan Katto, from her experience as a fashion entrepreneur and stylist, expressed her view on conservative style in Saudi Arabia, saying, “We’re still conservative in terms of style. And I love this. I see that as part of our identity, but it depends on the talent. And for me, it's okay if models or fashionistas wear revealing. It's changing. However, some people still want to remain conservative. You can also see people coming from outside Saudi to events wearing modest clothes. They respect our culture. It's nice. It gives us a unique perspective, a unique artistic touch, to be still authentic and to still be ourselves.”

In the context of my research, Alaa Balky highlighted the societal expectations in Saudi Arabia, emphasizing that individuals are anticipated to comport themselves and present their attire online following their family name and social class. This implies that a particular dress

style, which might be considered scandalous for a well-known social media influencer, could be deemed ordinary for another. Alaa underscored the significance of aligning your family name with your lifestyle. When questioned about receiving negative comments due to her content and attire choices, Alaa mentioned,

"Comments weren't in a negative connotation; I never faced a scandal on social media ('fadiha'). That's a thing in social media. And sometimes what can be a 'fadiha' to certain people, to you, it would be normal, and some names get big because of scandals on social media. I think that's very interesting. It's not always negative because, for some people, it can be awful. For example, if I, as Alaa, am wearing shorts, it's cool to have a great life; it's a different perspective. I think maybe because I got married. That's why it is so interesting in Saudi Arabia; it's all about the family name when you are an influencer. So, it's normal for some influencers to act or post in a certain way because they come from a big family name. Saudi people judge based on the family name. For people to see that I'm successful without coming from a big family, there is a level of curiosity, like 'oh, she is an influencer,' then they realize how much money comes from that." (Alaa Balky)

In summary, Saudi women's identity in terms of dress style has become a personal choice, representing both the modernization of Saudi Arabia and the continued respect for conservative values. Women are now free to dress in modern ways, significantly when influenced by their family name and social class, as societal norms still evolve. In the coming sections (see Chapter 7), further exploration of the cultural evolution in Saudi fashion will be discussed.

5.4. Online Identity and Experiences of Saudi Influential Entrepreneurs on Instagram

5.4.1. The Interplay Between Personal and Professional Life on Social Media

Diverse users engage with online identity in varying ways, navigating an intricate interplay of culture, social media, and user interactions. The increasing convergence of online and offline identities raises concerns about trust and privacy, while the advent of new media compresses time and space, shaping the evolving nature of cultural identity (Chen & Dai, 2014). As communication and cultural landscapes shift, individuals gain exposure to diverse

lifestyles and perspectives, influencing how they express, negotiate, and manage their identities in digital spaces (Haslett, 2018). This study examines how the entrepreneurs in my case studies construct and sustain their online identities through Instagram. It explores their concerns about cultural representation, their engagement with followers, and how they shape their public image. The interviews reveal that Instagram remains a pivotal tool for these entrepreneurs in reaching their audiences and establishing a presence in the fashion industry.

There were notable differences in how each entrepreneur influencer regarded their online identity. Alaa Balkhy emphasized that being an influencer is a multifaceted role where personal and professional aspects intermingle. She stressed that the lines between her personal and professional life blur significantly. According to her, her work revolves around her presence.

“It’s a very personal, professional job. The lines are very blurred. You’re very professional on email and in meetings; just like on social media, you are also very personal. Your work is about you being personal. People want to know about you. I don’t think there was a time when I decided to be professional on social media; it has always been professional in a business setting, but not on Instagram, which is very personal. We can say it is a public platform. So it’s public. I wouldn’t say it’s professional. I think it’s a public platform, so there’s a certain level of professionalism”. (Alaa Balkhy)

Reflecting on her decision to become an influencer, she remarked, *“I never went for it or was like, okay, today I want to be an influencer. I had a blog, and I was sharing. I got my first work from my blog in 2012. It was a lot of money, and I was like, wow, this is so nice. This is so nice that you can get paid to do this. And I think Fyunka, my first business, helped, and I helped Fyunka. It was kind of like this vice-versa thing. It gave me an edge over someone just showing their face on social media. It was like, oh, I’m an illustrator, so it wasn’t like, oh, I’m just like a face. It’s like, okay, I do this also.”* Here, Alaa highlighted a critical aspect—displaying one’s face on Instagram or any social media platform in Saudi society in 2012 wasn’t familiar or widely accepted. However, because she wasn’t solely showcasing her face but introducing her illustration business, she carved out a distinctive online presence with her followers. She noted the significance of starting with Twitter, stating, *“100% it helped me. I think Twitter helped me a lot. I think this was before Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Instagram helped a little bit, but it was Twitter. Fyunka launched on Twitter, and I don’t have*

my Twitter account now because Twitter scares me. But I had like 90,000 followers on Twitter, which is still a lot until now. Twitter was the beginning of social media.”

Regarding the platforms she utilizes the most nowadays, Alaa expressed, *“I think Instagram is just my base because I'm a visual person. Snapchat or TikTok, it depends. I think Snapchat is interesting because it's very raw, and the fact that it disappears and there's not much information, it's very much mimicking society where there's privacy. And you can't see everything; regionally, they prefer it.”* Alaa sheds light on the distinct characteristics of each social media platform within the Saudi community. Instagram, being more global and visual, serves as her primary platform. On the other hand, Snapchat stands out for its rawness and privacy, mirroring societal norms where information disappears, and it's favored regionally. She also expressed reservations about Twitter, finding it scary and more serious. Through the observation process of various influencers and social media accounts, including those in my case study since the commencement of my thesis in 2020, I've noticed how Snapchat is used differently in Saudi Arabia. It exposes a significant amount of personal information, targeting a local audience with a raw manner in which content is presented. Notably, not all Instagram influencers utilize Snapchat and those who do often treat it as a more private space.

Balkhy stated her perspective on the concern about presenting her culture on Instagram, saying, *“No, I think everyone has the responsibility to educate themselves, and I'm not responsible for what people think about culture; I can just show my side and my personal preferences.”* However, when questioned about the cultural context in her posts, she clarified,

“No, I think, as I mentioned, because there's not a lot of Saudis that live in the diaspora, and there is no Saudi community outside because we don't immigrate. So, I think my love for Jeddah comes from that nostalgic feeling, and Saudis don't have that because they live inside the country. And I think that's why I love Jeddah so much. And I think if I lived here, I wouldn't love it as much as when I'm far away from it. For me, it's personal if people relate to it, relate to its responsibility; I don't want to make it my responsibility to post about culture because it's so much. I'm conscientious about what I post and say because I don't want retributions later”.
Alaa Balkhy

Contrarily, Rawan Kattoa holds a distinctive perspective on her online presence. To

her, it functions as a mood board or a portfolio, characterized by a meticulous approach and a high artistic consideration. She thoughtfully curates her social media content, ensuring it aligns seamlessly with her carefully crafted theme. Rawan sees her online presence as a showcase for her work, particularly in styling and editorial projects. In her own words, she describes her approach: *"I just have Instagram. It's more like, for me, a mood board. It's a portfolio, and it's a theme. It's artistic. And I think before posting, I don't post anything; I purely work. Snapchat is more for chill. It's more me as a person."* Reflecting on her Instagram journey, she shared, *"From 2016, when I started the business, I wanted to connect my business with my identity. I want the people to know who is behind this business. It's not just products. It's a woman who is successful. She's working in corporate. She has a passion for fashion. We're all Saudis. I wanted to connect the story with the products."* (Rawan Katto)

Certainly, Rawan Katto embraces the categorization of being an influencer, and she prefers the term "influencer" to "fashionista" to describe her role. She emphasizes her influence on shaping her career, adapting to the evolving industry in Saudi Arabia, and undertaking significant initiatives in the market. Rawan values the niche audience she has cultivated, focusing on quality over quantity in her content as she said, *"If you can see, I have a very niche followers. I would say niche audience. I'm not a fashionista who posts everything; anything and no. I care about quality over quantity"*. She sees her role as connecting with brands, styling talent, and showcasing her editorial work on social media.

Rawan identifies three key aspects of Instagram's significance for her: *"First, I benefit from social media by showcasing my work, opening up diverse opportunities. Second, it facilitates connections with people, including talents, producers, and brands who appreciate my work. Third, it serves as a source of inspiration."* Rawan believes in leveraging her work to showcase cultural roots domestically and internationally. When asked about her satisfaction with her online identity, she affirms, *"Very happy with my identity, yes. I know what I'm targeting. Focusing on quality differentiates me within the industry and attracts brands because they recognize my professionalism."* Rawan's approach to Instagram reflects a deliberate and professional strategy, showcasing her work purposefully on the platform.

Marriam Mossalli diverges from the conventional role of a content creator in her perspective on online identity. She sees herself not as a content creator primarily but values

authenticity and personal growth in shaping her online persona. Marriam takes pride in authentically presenting herself to her audience, sharing profound personal experiences like her son's leukemia diagnosis without self-censorship. Her approach is more akin to conversing with a close friend, resulting in candid and unfiltered content, as she said;

"I come off as authentic. I mean, recently, my son was diagnosed with leukemia, and if you look at my social media, it reflects that I can't hide that that's what's going on in my life. I'll tell you a trick. I write for myself. This is how I started my social media, and It was almost like I was writing a diary". (Marriam Mossalli)

Marriam Mossalli elucidates her social media journey, starting as a fashion journalist and providing behind-the-scenes insights into the fashion world during her early days at Arab News. She highlights the absence of influencers at that time and how, through her journalistic perspective, she naturally became an influencer. In describing her relationship with followers, Marriam emphasizes her writing style: *"I write as if I'm talking to my best friend, and it sometimes gets me in trouble, especially with my family. Sometimes they say it's too much. But it's because I don't censor myself and I'm talking, like I said, to a diary or my best friend. So that's who I have in my mind; never who's my audience, and who am I speaking?"* Marriam's authenticity and personal approach set her apart in her online interactions.

Marriam Mossalli has a distinctive approach to her social media captions, using both Arabic and English, even though she admitted, *"I don't plan that much because, again, I'm not into content creation."* Initially, she used to collaborate with a content developer who incorporated both languages into her posts. Despite having a team now, Marriam continues to include Arabic in her captions. During her discussion, Marriam emphasized that she no longer considers herself a content creator, expressing a shift in her perspective. She stated, *"I am no longer a content creator because I think that's a huge job. I pull all the people who do that job, but I don't want to be on call for anyone. I post when I want to post. I archive when I want to archive. And the thing is, people can tell me, oh, my God, you're going to lose your clout. You're going to lose your influence. You're going to lose your strategy. I also don't care. That's not my priority. I have my other businesses."*

Contrary to expectations, Marriam found that her engagement increased when she

posted what she wanted, despite concerns about losing influence. She mentioned, *"Now when I post, I have so much engagement. I think John, my assistant, can tell you also you had the media screenshot of when I was in the hospital last week with my son. I mean, I think I had 5 million views, and it was because it was authentic. And I think that's also the reason this anti-influence movement is happening. I see this happening, and people want the thought that they don't care about the scheduled post and the outfits shared."* From her perspective, Mariam's experience reflects a shift towards authenticity as she shares her genuine experiences through her online content. She has noticed that her audience engages more because they connect with her authenticity or out of curiosity as she shares more personal aspects of her life.

Nasiba also shares that her online audience resembles her best friends and family, creating a sense of closeness and familiarity in her online interactions. This underscores the significance of cultivating a community that mirrors personal connections in her approach to online identity. She expressed, *"Nasiba is a sister, a daughter, a mother, a friend, and I'm so close to my followers. I think when it comes to my brand, yes. I like to be friendly and reachable if it concerns my brand, and I am easy to reach."*

Regarding her social media platforms and usage, she explained,

"I use TikTok sometimes and work with whatever I feel more comfortable and friendly. But now, I think Instagram is my favorite and most-used app for my brand and business. But I like to adapt." Nasiba mentioned that she started with Instagram six years ago and added, *"Honestly, it was always the platform for me. Even when I started in 2014, I think it was the first time I used the platform to advertise my brand. Digital media played a major role for women here, even before the transformation. Instagram initially helped my business, and I think it helped everyone. Yeah, it helps everyone in their businesses. I think it's become a global thing."* (Nasiba Hafiz)

Nasiba highlighted the crucial role of social media platforms for entrepreneurs even before Vision 2030, supporting their businesses. She emphasized that this trend was not exclusive to Saudi women, as Instagram has evolved into a global platform for marketing. When asked if she is satisfied with her online identity, she stated, *"I think I always change and evolve. I have an identity, of course, but I think there's always room to improve. Always."* This

reflects Nasiba's dynamic approach to her online presence and a continual desire for improvement.

Lina Malaika emphasized that she exclusively utilizes Instagram to network and stay connected to the industry. She posts content that authentically represents her without concern for how her audience receives it, as she doesn't identify as an influencer. Lina explained,

"I only use social media as a platform to network, create my public CV, and share my work with the world. It's a medium to introduce me to the world and vice versa. I only have Instagram and LinkedIn, both serving the same purpose. In this digital age, it's the only tool that remains up-to-date and involved in the industry. LinkedIn is purely for business and networking; I share some articles, but it's constrained. I share more on Instagram. Instagram is beneficial; it's my connection to the world. I started using it during COVID-19, so I'm relatively new. I'm not worried about how people receive my content. I know what to share and what not to share. I also do not get distracted by what anyone thinks. I'm not trying to reach anyone or anything; I simply use these platforms to express myself creatively." This underscores Lina's intentional and strategic use of social media for professional networking and self-expression.

Arwa al Ammari, a fashion designer, emphasized the significance of social media platforms, particularly Instagram, as essential tools for businesses, especially in buying and selling. Reflecting on her use of Instagram, she stated,

"Social media platforms are essential tools because some companies rely on Instagram and Snapchat for buying and selling. The entire commerce happens through these platforms. I started using Instagram in 2015 when the competition and user numbers were lower. Now, there are more followers, and the content is stronger. Social media tools have evolved, and using them effectively is important. Instagram is a marketing platform for me; I don't use it personally. Even when I travel, if I post pictures of my family in the story, it has a purpose and a message I'm trying to convey. I don't share everything. For example, I reflect on my travels and the places I like to visit from a cultural aspect. I showcase artisans, local people, and their way of life. For instance, on my last trip to Thailand, I highlighted the local culture and art, not just what I ate

or bought. I also aim to show myself as an independent woman supported by her family and husband because that helps change the stereotypical image about Saudi women in media, which still needs refinement.” (Arwa al Ammari)

Arwa highlighted the strategic use of Instagram as a marketing platform and the purposeful sharing of personal experiences to convey meaningful messages and challenge stereotypes. Besides, she sheds light on the transformative role of social media platforms, particularly Instagram, in turning entrepreneurs into influencers.

5.4.2. Social media platforms as a soft power space to challenge social norms and traditions

Social media platforms are teeming with explicit political and social commentary alongside the more commonplace, everyday "soft" content. We contend that everything, from seemingly trivial to morally charged content, is inherently ideological and political. It is imbued with ideas and values, encompassing discourses on societal management, priorities, communication norms, and judgments about identities and actions. Various contributors delve into social media posts ranging from humorous and entertaining to mundane and profound. Despite this diversity, each analysis uncovers the ideological underpinnings of our everyday social media posts and feeds. These posts address current political and social issues, lifestyle choices, bodily functions, or food (Gwen Bouvier & Lyndon Way, 2021).

During my interviews with my case studies, all of whom predominantly share content related to the fashion industry, their personal experiences, and lifestyle on Instagram, Marriam Mossalli, Arwa al Ammari, Rawan Katto, Alaa Balky, and Lina Malaika explicitly discuss their strategic use of the platform. They utilize Instagram for everyday posts, commercialized content, and brand collaborations, considering it a soft power space to convey messages effectively. While Marriam, Arwa al Ammari, and Lina focus on challenging Saudi stereotypes through their content (a topic to be discussed later in the upcoming chapter), Alaa and Naseba go beyond this and employ Instagram to delve into sensitive issues within Saudi culture, particularly those related to women. This demonstrates that, even if not explicitly mentioned, these influencers have an underlying intention to communicate specific messages through their Instagram platforms. Over time, certain outfits they wear and personal experiences shared,

even all their work experiences internationally and locally on the platform, contribute to shaping viewpoints and inducing societal changes. Durau (2022, p. 2012) underscores the role of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) as change agents, emphasizing their "ability to shape and change their follower's behaviors with their content." In contemporary times, social networks function as potent tools for exercising "soft power," significantly impacting the political agenda, international relations, and social processes within states. Social networks have given rise to new forms of interaction between social groups and institutions, typically transcending individual state territories. In the previous century, sociologist N. Luhmann asserted that, for individuals in the 20th and 21st centuries, the media serves as a source of information and the primary tool for shaping their views. Alaa Balkhy mentioned the problem she faced while sharing any content on social media;

"I'm not a trendsetter, but I ruffle the feather regarding cultural and social issues. Whether it's the inclusivity of diversity, whether it's just posting a statement and seeing people's opinions. And for me, it's like I'm not just going to be a face who just posts products and tries to promote makeup. But let's start a conversation about difficult things for some people". (Alaa Balkhy)

In Figure 6 below, Alaa Balkhy wrote in the caption, "Trigger Warning, at that time, we couldn't discuss or talk about these things; there was an abnormal stigma, if you uttered the word 'why' it felt like an unthinkable act." I hope that's all in the past (I hope). I feel we can now share our experiences about that time. Correction: I know that things like this still happen, and I realize not everyone can say it's in the past. I understand that some individuals may still be going through similar situations now. I apologize if this post caused any harm or discomfort to anyone. I wanted it to be a source of discussion about something I felt during that time. Thank you for your understanding, and I love you all". The post addresses the challenges Saudi women faced, as depicted in the photo: using a phone, watching series or movies, listening to music, traveling without a guardian, going to mixed-gender malls, and having a driver without a guardian. Alaa addresses these taboo topics, which were restricted to women in the past decades. She encourages her followers to share their experiences, leading to numerous interactions in the comments.

Figure 6 Alaa Balky talks about taboo topics or what was forbidden for Saudi women



Source: post from Alaa's Instagram (July 21, 2020)

In Figure 7, the second post, Alaa emphasizes the importance of women telling their stories. She shares a novel, "Girls of Riyadh"⁷ (Banat Al Riyadh) by Rajaa Al Sanea, which was published and stirred controversy in Arabia. The novel narrates the lives of four young Saudi females via email exchanges in a Yahoo group. The authenticity of the lives of the novel characters remains a subject of dispute. Nonetheless, the novel brings to attention how, in a traditional society where women are confined to the private sphere, the blooming of new communication technologies brought significant changes to women's realities in these societies by providing new space for self-expression (Guta & Karolak, 2015).

⁷Rajaa Alsanea, girls of Riyadh https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1476261.Girls_of_Riyadh

Figure 7 Alaa emphasizes the importance of women to tell their stories



Source: post from Alaa's Instagram (July 27, 2020)

In a birthday post (Figure 8), Arwa Al Ammari shared a heartwarming anecdote about her father calling himself "Abu Arwa" for six years, signifying the father of Arwa showcasing the deep affection he held for her as the eldest daughter. She takes pride in how her father expressed his love, emphasizing that her name had a special place in his heart. During the interview, Arwa highlighted the equal treatment of girls and boys in her family, pointing out that there were no distinctions. In her words, "Women have their place, appreciation, and voice at home, in the family. This is how we were raised, without differentiating between a girl and a boy. We don't have such distinctions. Even when I used to hear about these things outside the house, it felt a bit strange because, in our home and family, there was none of that." Arwa's emphasis on gender equality at home challenges the prevailing cultural norm in Saudi Arabia, where boys are often favored. She seeks to counter this stereotype and illustrate that girls deserve equal appreciation and recognition within their families, and it's not always the case, as her experience was different.

Figure 8 Arwa Al Ammari shared a heartwarming anecdote about her father



Source: post from Arwa ALAmari's Instagram (August 8, 2020)

In a different context, Nasiba shared her experience pushing boundaries while collaborating with Always⁸ on an advertisement called "Not Hot." She noted, "For me, it was already really pushing the boundaries, but I don't know what boundaries and limitations they had as a brand because they're a huge brand, and they've been in the market for decades. But they came to me because they knew I knew how to push boundaries but also with certain values." In this campaign, "The Not Hot Period Wear," Nasiba designed a collection of clothes equipped with a cool and dry technology inspired by the Always Cool & Dry pad, which is here to change how you dress and feel on your period or any other day in the scorching heat. Nasiba was aiming to showcase another facet of Saudi women in this advertisement. She emphasized, "So I also ensured that we always keep to our culture, stick to certain things, not overdo it. But it resonated with me as a local brand to do this. And I'm really happy we did it together; it showed the real modern Saudi woman. Not all Saudi women are covered, and we always choose to show that we want to show a different side. We are both. So it's normal. It

⁸Always.(March 16, 2023).The Not Hot periodwear collection https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V17Cf5qt_34

doesn't mean that we are losing our traditions and culture. No, it's part of us. When you see women in so many different faces and ways of dressing and expressing themselves," Regarding the use of the word "hot" in the advertisement, she commented, "It was normal. It's the hottest country in the world, so it's the weather."

Figure 9 Saudi models wearing Nasiba Hafiz collection of cloth for Always advertisement



Source: post from Nasiba Hafiz Instagram (September 18, 2022)

Furthermore, Nasiba is challenging societal norms and pushing boundaries by sharing a post where she feeds her baby in a salon while a male hairdresser does her hair (Figure 10). These daily lifestyle posts serve as a soft power tool to address changes in societal norms. In 2018, although Vision 2030 had been announced and changes were beginning to take place regarding women's roles, it was still uncommon for such situations to occur. Typically, all hair salons for women employed only female workers. This instance underscores what Alaa Balky will elaborate on in the subsequent section of this chapter: how social class identities influence what we wear and how we present ourselves on social media. Nasiba Hafiz, coming from a well-known high-class family, exemplifies this aspect.

Figure 10 Nasiba Hafiz sharing a photo of her feeding her baby while a male hairdresser is doing her hair



Source: post from Nasiba Hafiz Instagram (Septemeber 27, 2018)

In the course of my research, discussions with colleagues and Saudi friends revealed a common perception that many influential entrepreneurs and bloggers are born into privilege, “born with a golden spoon,” associated with being part of a specific social class. This is believed to shape their online identity, influencing their dressing style, showcasing luxurious lives, and highlighting their achievements. When I questioned about this during the interview, Alaa Balky addressed the issue, stating, " I think for people to see that I’m successful without coming from a big family, there is a level of curiosity, like 'oh, she is an influencer,' then they realize how much money comes from that because we don’t have the culture of self-made, especially for women. Self-made for Saudi women is marrying rich, and it's mostly men who are self-made. Even for men, it is new and happening now, and the economy is tapping into the self-made. I can come from a normal family and open a startup business or work in the government, and people get so confused because your family name doesn’t translate to your lifestyle." Alaa also highlighted a significant cultural shift for Saudi women, noting that the traditional reliance on men for financial support is evolving, especially with the economic changes brought about by Vision 2030 and the lucrative opportunities presented by social media platforms.

5.4.3. Women Influential Entrepreneurs' Online Identity Throughout Life Stages: Navigating Motherhood, Marriage, and Aging

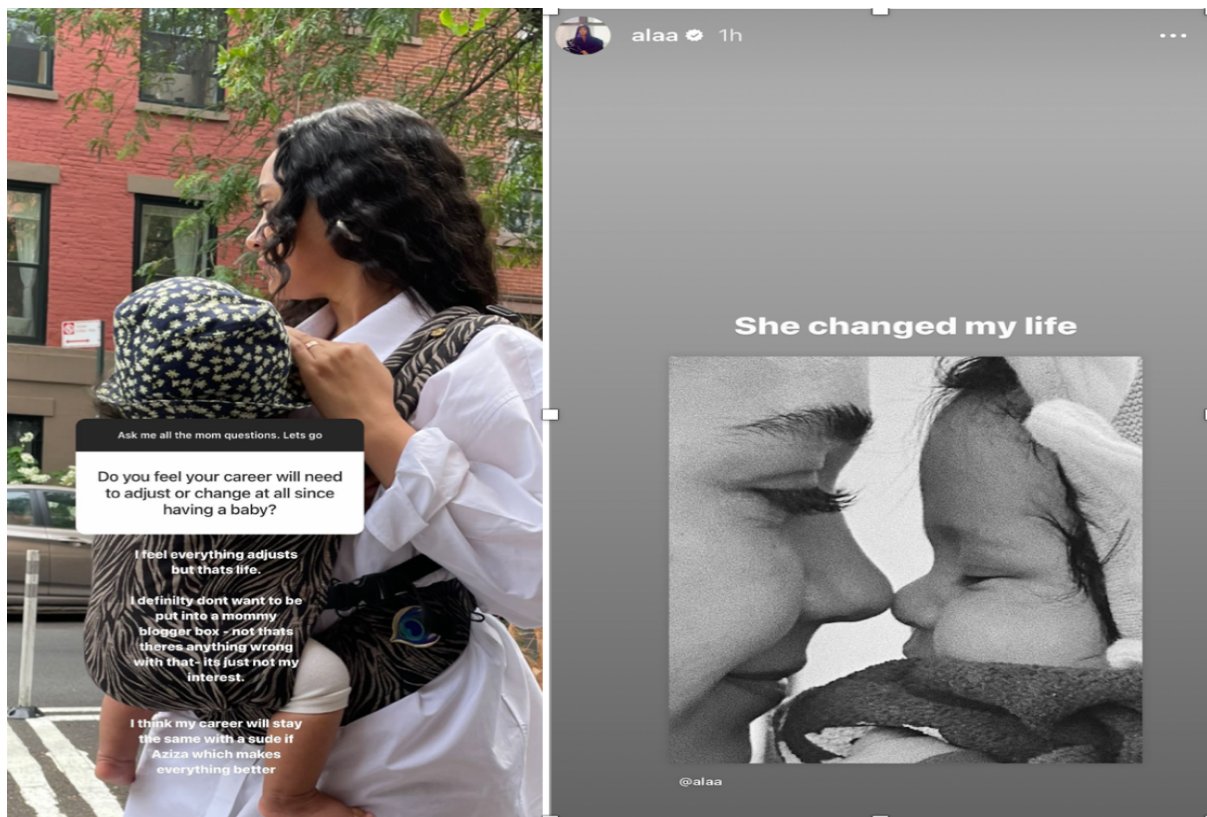
The intersection of personal life events and online identity is a dynamic and evolving aspect of the digital landscape, particularly for influential entrepreneurs. As individuals progress through various life stages, such as motherhood, marriage, and aging, their personal experiences inevitably influence their professional endeavors and their online presence. Through interviews with my case studies, such as Marriam Mossalli, Alaa Balky, Nasiba Hafiz, and Rawan Katto, it becomes evident how these life events shape their online identities.

For Marriam Mossalli, the decision to archive or delete past posts on social media reflects a shift in priorities and a desire for her online identity to evolve alongside her business growth. She said, “I think I mean, if you want to know the truth, I think I've always been stepping away from social media just because as I mature and get older, social media content for me gets younger and dumber. I just feel like the market is supersaturated. On social media, you need also to grow. I mean, just like we would grow in any group, any career. In my career now, I don't take every meeting. While I'm not in the day-to-day stuff, I've evolved from that. I hate it. Sometimes, I do have to be involved. The point is that every career path or industry should evolve and grow. So just content over and over”.

Also, Marriam Mossalli criticized influencers and their content as she said, “I have friends now that are in their 40s, injecting themselves with Botox and face tuning their pictures that you don't even recognize them in their age of 20-year, hence, they've also grown priorities. They also have children now. They also have quality of life versus just showing your unboxing and showing off, okay, wow. I got this for free from a brand or paid a percentage of it. Who cares? What's more than showing that success?”

Alaa Balky's journey into motherhood in 2022 has undoubtedly transformed her life. Yet, she remains steadfast in maintaining her online identity and will not become a mom blogger, as she mentioned in figure 11, while incorporating aspects of her new role as a mother.

Figure 11 ALaa asking her followers if they will adjust or change their jobs after becoming a mom



Source: post from Alaa Balky Hafiz's Instagram stories (JUNE 7, 2030)

Nasiba Hafiz recognizes that as she transitions into motherhood, her online identity will continue to evolve, reflecting the changes and growth she experiences personally and professionally, as she stated;

"We all evolve and change, and for example, every time I had a baby, let's say, and I grew up a little bit older, or I worked on myself recently or in COVID, I became a little bit more spiritual. So, I show that I do certain kinds of things every morning. So, I show that I have a routine, and my brand and platform are about me, my brand, and my life. So I show bits and pieces." (Nasiba Hafiz)

Moreover, Rawan Katto's marriage marked a significant turning point in her career trajectory, prompting her to embark on a new path and share her journey online.

"It was difficult for me to leave my work and position. I already have my reputation in corporate, but personnel in my life made the shift when I got engaged. My husband

found a great opportunity in his industry in Switzerland. So with my move, I got the major shift in my career.” (Rawan Kattooa)

These anecdotes underscore the intricate relationship between personal life events and online identity for influential entrepreneurs.

5.5. Final Reflections

In brief, the cultural identity of influential Saudi entrepreneurs revolves around the balance between their personal/individual identity and their collective/national identity, shaped by social identity and self-categorization theory. Their personal identity is molded by factors such as upbringing, experiences abroad, and belonging to multi-rooted families and social classes. These aspects contribute to their self-confidence and agency within Saudi national culture, predating the recent reforms under Vision 2030. Moreover, their ability to shape their role identity enables them to play an active role in transforming the perception of Saudi social identity, shifting it from a historically negative stereotype to a more empowered and positive representation.

At the same time, despite ongoing modernization efforts and the forces of globalization, influential Saudi entrepreneurs maintain a strong connection to their national and collective identity. Rather than diminishing their Saudi identity, the reforms under Vision 2030 and the growing presence of social media platforms have reinforced and redefined it. This shift in social categorization has played a crucial role in reframing their identity—moving away from perceptions of restriction and stereotype to one that embraces self-esteem and Saudi womanhood. Within this evolving landscape, individuality flourishes, allowing each entrepreneur to interpret and express their Saudi identity in a unique and personal way.

Building on this transformation, the early experiences of Saudi women in online spaces were vastly different from those observed today. As digital platforms have evolved, so too has the way Saudi women engage with them. Vision 2030 has significantly contributed to amplifying their visibility and easing certain social norms, consequently shaping their online identities and experiences (see Chapter 2, Section 2.1.4). In my case studies, it is important to highlight the diverse ways in which these women utilize social media. While some view Instagram as a professional portfolio for engaging with their audience, brands, and the global community, others integrate personal, professional, and business-related content—often

blending these categories, as exemplified by Alaa Balkhy, Mariam Mossalli, and Arwa Al Ammari.

In this regard, Instagram has served as a form of soft power for these women, even before the introduction of Vision 2030. Their online presence has pushed boundaries, influencing other women and encouraging them to speak up and embrace change. This suggests that social media has always functioned as a platform for Saudi women to express themselves, reflecting different stages of their personal and professional lives. The following section will further explore their online engagement through a feminist perspective, analyzing how their digital agency intersects with broader societal shifts.

CHAPTER 6

FEMINIST CULTURE THROUGH FASHION INFLUENTIAL ENTREPRENEURS EXPERIENCES

6.1.Introduction

This chapter delves into the third objective of our study, focusing on the notable contribution of influential Saudi women entrepreneurs to feminist culture. The investigation aims to illuminate the development of their feminist identities and how these entrepreneurs leverage digital media platforms to advocate for and contribute to social and cultural transformations, particularly in women's empowerment. A crucial facet of our analysis involves exploring Saudi women's cultural and online identities, scrutinizing how their feminist identities emerge within the context of digital media platforms. As noted by Aloufi (2017), the societal transformation for Saudi women is marked by a shift from a collective identity, referred to as the "National I," to a more personalized "Self I." In a society where conformity was historically expected, the advent of social media has played a pivotal role in reshaping individual identities. The discussion will distinguish between a woman's and her identity as part of a collective, acknowledging the evolving dynamics within Saudi culture. Building upon the analysis from the previous chapter, we observe a rise in personal identity among Saudi women, intertwining with their collective identity. Despite embracing their Saudi cultural heritage and progression, these women assert their individuality through their voices on social media and in their professional pursuits. The transition from enduring pain silently to projecting self-confidence underscores a nuanced negotiation between personal and collective identities, explicitly focusing on feminist identity.

This chapter explores various dimensions of their feminist identity, mainly through avenues such as fashion activism, driving cultural and professional empowerment through their entrepreneurial activities, and engagements in commodity feminism. These include collaborations with brands on femvertising campaigns, symbolizing their agency and positive representation. Which aligns with the post-feminism theories discussed in (chapter 3, section 3.5) Drawing from the insights of Mittal (2023), we acknowledge that these women contribute

to what Bayat (2018) terms 'Social non-movements', referring to the collective actions of non-collective actors. Embedded in a creative discourse, their activism contributes to Saudi Arabia's economic and historical narrative, fostering incremental changes toward greater rights, freedom, and openness for women. According to Pervou (2022), there are dual trajectories shaping women's empowerment in the digital age: the individual involvement of women on these platforms and the institutional utilization of media for collective empowerment.

6.2. Influential Entrepreneurs' Experiences: Unveiling their Feminist Cultural Identity

6.2.1. Feminist Self-Identification and the Online Entrepreneurial Impact on Saudi Women's Empowerment

When I inquired about my case studies about their self-identification as feminists, Marriam Mossalli, the influential entrepreneur, expressed a perspective distinct from the others. She shared,

"I've been identified as a feminist. I never labeled myself that or an activist. I think that's a byproduct of my ambition. I think that any woman who has ambition suddenly becomes, by default, a feminist, an activist, or a pioneer because we are about it. So again, I don't think that's something I aimed for or ever had in my thoughts. It was just something that was a byproduct of my career." (Marriam Mossalli)

During the interviews, when I questioned the hashtags she employs containing feminist terminology and empowerment themes, Marriam Mossalli responded,

"I think that it's beneficial just to let women know that you have someone out there for you. Under that, the main hashtag that we use is #womensupportingwomen. And so when we do our event program, it's all about networking. And that's pretty much it. I think that from our side. This is why I always try just to have things that connect women because I think once you put women together in a room, that can happen".

In Figure 12, Marriam is featured alongside Lina Malaika and three other Saudi women in Destination Jeddah Magazine's cover story for International Women's Day under Women the Horizon, sparking passion for Saudi's future. In the caption, she wrote, *"We couldn't think of a more fitting publication than #DestinationJeddah, founded by three amazing and strong women. Proud to celebrate 5 years of women empowerment with these amazing women."* The hashtags used include "#knowyourworth #selflove #selfconfidence #mindset #thankful

#changemakers #createyourreality #yougogirl #womensupportingwomen #bosslady #girlsbulisngempires #femaleempowerment #empowerment #sheconquers #femaleentrepreneur #womeninbusiness #businesswomen #womeninbiz #feminist #womenenpoweringwomen #sisters #womenwholead #warriorgoddess #createyourself."

Marriam consistently incorporates empowerment, feminism, and related terms in her captions, also the magazine shows The phrase "women on the horizon sparkling passion for Saudi's future" suggests that women are emerging as key figures in shaping the future of Saudi Arabia, bringing energy, enthusiasm, and a strong commitment to progress. It metaphorically compares these women to a spark, symbolizing their potential to ignite positive change and contribute significantly to the country's development.

Figure 12 Marriam Mossali on Destination Jeddah magazine celebrating 5 years of empowering Saudi women in Saudi Arabia



Source: post from Marriam Mossalli's Instagram page (March 14, 2022)

On the flip side, Rawan Katto articulated her perspective, stating,

"I'm not a feminist. I think I like to use women's empowerment more than feminists, but I work on women's empowerment through their style. I work on women's empowerment,

that they love themselves in a certain way, supporting them in styling. But this is not my core business. My business is different." (Rawan Katto)

While she doesn't label herself as a feminist, Rawan strongly believes in empowering Saudi women, a commitment she held even before entering the fashion industry. Reflecting on her role as a fashion entrepreneur and stylist, furthermore, Rawan explained,

"I connect with brands for consultancy, for example. So, I consult with big brands when they hold events and different activations in Saudi Arabia. I partner with these brands for their activations. So, part of it, I would say I have some woman empowerment activities, which include styling and others being like their image consumer. What I like about my work is I'm working with all categories. I work with models for photoshoots and styling events. I work with designers because I focus on styling designers and showcasing their products and designs. The third thing is social media influencers. I work with them when they want to represent themselves and image consultancy. And this is what I love about my job because I entered this industry for a purpose within an objective. When I worked in the corporate world, I worked in human resources and talent acquisition. So I shifted the same objective of empowering people and supporting others but in the fashion industry." (Rawan Katto)

Furthermore, Nasiba Hafiz shares a similar perspective, emphasizing her commitment to empowering women without necessarily adopting a specific label. She expressed;

"I don't like to be classified as anything, to be honest. But I do naturally support women around the world. And women, for me, are what keep this world alive, and our existence depends on women. You are part of girl empowerment without labeling or naming you as a feminist. And the brand that I have is a brand with a purpose. It's a brand that supports women worldwide supports culture, and keeps our culture recognized internationally as Arabs, Saudis, and women. So this is something significant for me, for my brand." (Nasiba Hafiz)

Conversely, Lina Malaika straightforwardly stated, *"I'm not a feminist,"* and did not elaborate further on this declaration. Additionally, Alaa Balky dismisses the idea of being explicitly labeled as a feminist, likening it to being asked if she is human. She clarifies,

"I don't like labels. I feel like people want to know where I stand, and I don't want people to know where I stand verbally; they can see it in my actions. My followers are allowed to think whatever they want or put a label on whatever they want. I'm just like, if someone's like, are you a human? Yes. Are you a feminist? I think people just want to know where you stand. And I don't think I owe anyone." (Alaa Balky)

In the accompanying (figure 13) images posted by Alaa Balkhy, she conveys a powerful message about the role of women and the significance of listening to them “to women.” Regarding women in the workforce, she asserts, "We are here, and we are never leaving." Alaa always posts about empowerment with different feminist messages.

Figure 13 Alaa shares some quotations about women and gender roles



Source: post from Alaa Balky Hafiz Instagram posts (July 31, 2021), (December 19, 2022)

On another front, Arwa al Ammari sheds light on how her success and work as a Saudi entrepreneur and designer empower Saudi women, with social media playing a pivotal role in connecting her with her audience. She expressed,

"I hear from them that you're a role model, whether on a business, personal, or several levels. This is also part of it, whether through social media or communication, television – what we do and how we do it, all of this affects Saudi women. But this is what I hear from them: messages; they want you to participate and contribute, whether in fashion or other fields. They ask me for advice; they send me their opinions." (Arwa al Ammari)

In Figure 14, Arwa Al Ammari reflects on the impactful women in her life, namely her grandmother and mother. She shares,

"My grandmother learned reading and writing at 35; she is the strongest woman I ever knew. And my mom is a hero; she was one of the first to go abroad for education. She went on a scholarship to study outside Saudi Arabia. She believes that women should be strong and independent, and that's how she is now raising her kids." (Arwa al Ammari)

In another image (figure 15), Arwa Al Amari announces to her followers, *"It's an honor to be listed in @forbesmiddleeast list of 50 women behind Middle Eastern brands 2 years in a row. And I am proud to be one of only four ladies from Saudi Arabia. Our region is an excellent hub for creativity and growing businesses inspired by our heritage, and fashion is one of those that speaks culture loudly and expresses our background and lifestyle in a language that everyone understands"*. Influential Saudi entrepreneurs shared personal stories to empower and inspire Saudi women. As Arwa Al Ammari's statement reflects key aspects of both popular feminism and post-feminism, demonstrating how influential Saudi entrepreneurs navigate feminist discourses within the cultural and economic landscape of Saudi Arabia. Her emphasis on personal achievement, recognition, and cultural representation aligns with the broader themes of post-feminism, which prioritizes individual success, empowerment through entrepreneurship, and self-branding (Gill, 2007). By highlighting her inclusion in *Forbes Middle East's* list of 50 women behind Middle Eastern brands, she positions herself as a role model who has attained success through ambition, creativity, and business acumen—values

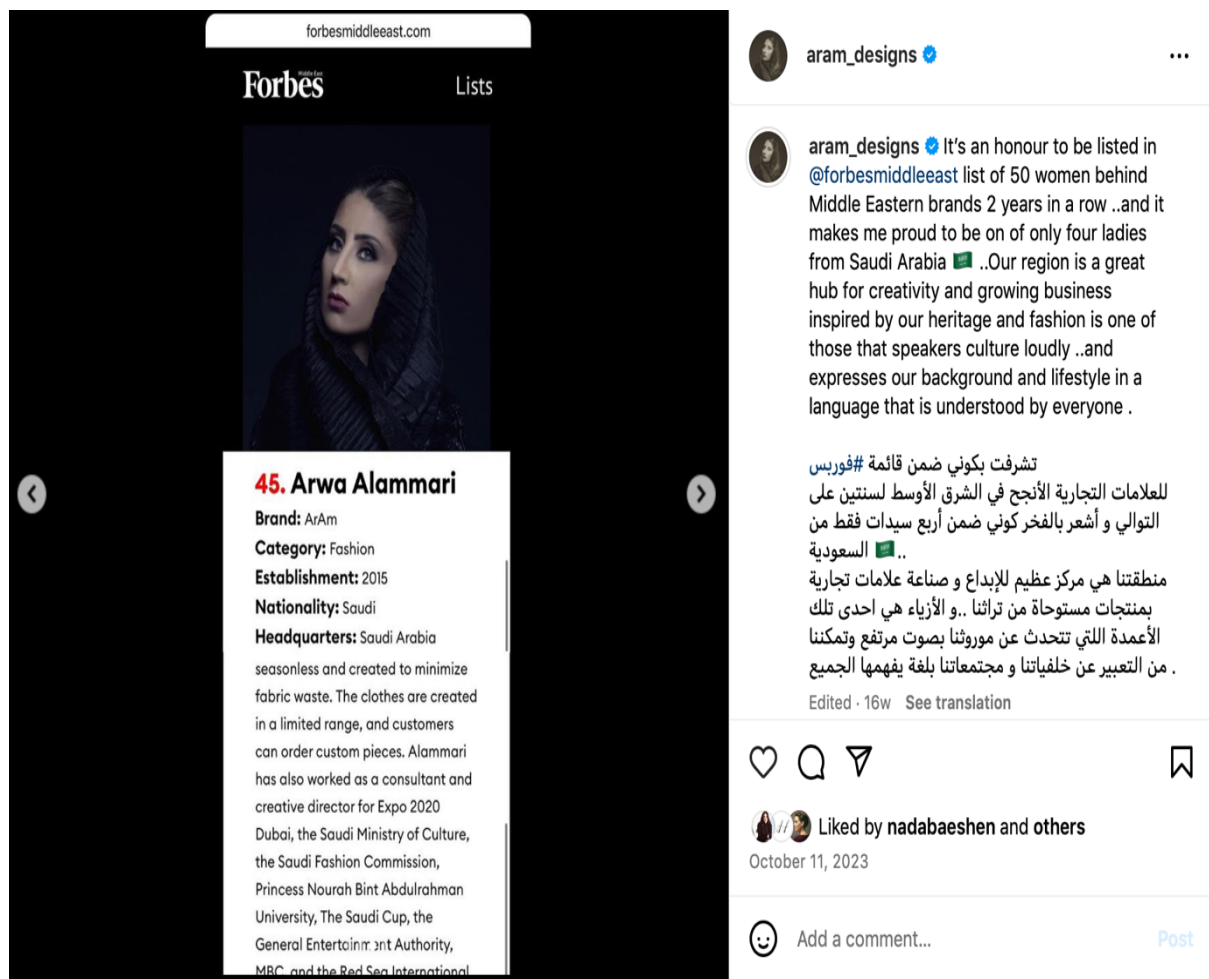
that resonate with post-feminist ideals of self-reliance, economic independence, and personal branding (McRobbie, 2009). Additionally, Al Ammari's frames fashion as a means of self-expression and cultural identity, which aligns with commodity feminism—the process through which feminist ideals are integrated into marketable, consumer-oriented narratives (Gill, 2016).

Figure 14. Arwa shares her grandmother's inspiring story



Source: Posts from Arwa Alamari Instagram (August 3, 2020)

Figure 15. Arwa sharing one of her achievements in her career as a Saudi designer



Source: Posts from Arwa Alamari Instagram (October 11, 2023)

On the other hand, Arwa Al Ammari shed light on how these platforms serve as spaces where these entrepreneurs can significantly impact women and followers. Arwa underscores the influence of her designs, work, and personal life on her audience, recognizing the responsibility of being a role model. She carefully curates the content she shares on social media, understanding that her audience perceives her as an influencer. Despite unintentionally assuming the role of an influencer, Arwa clarifies,

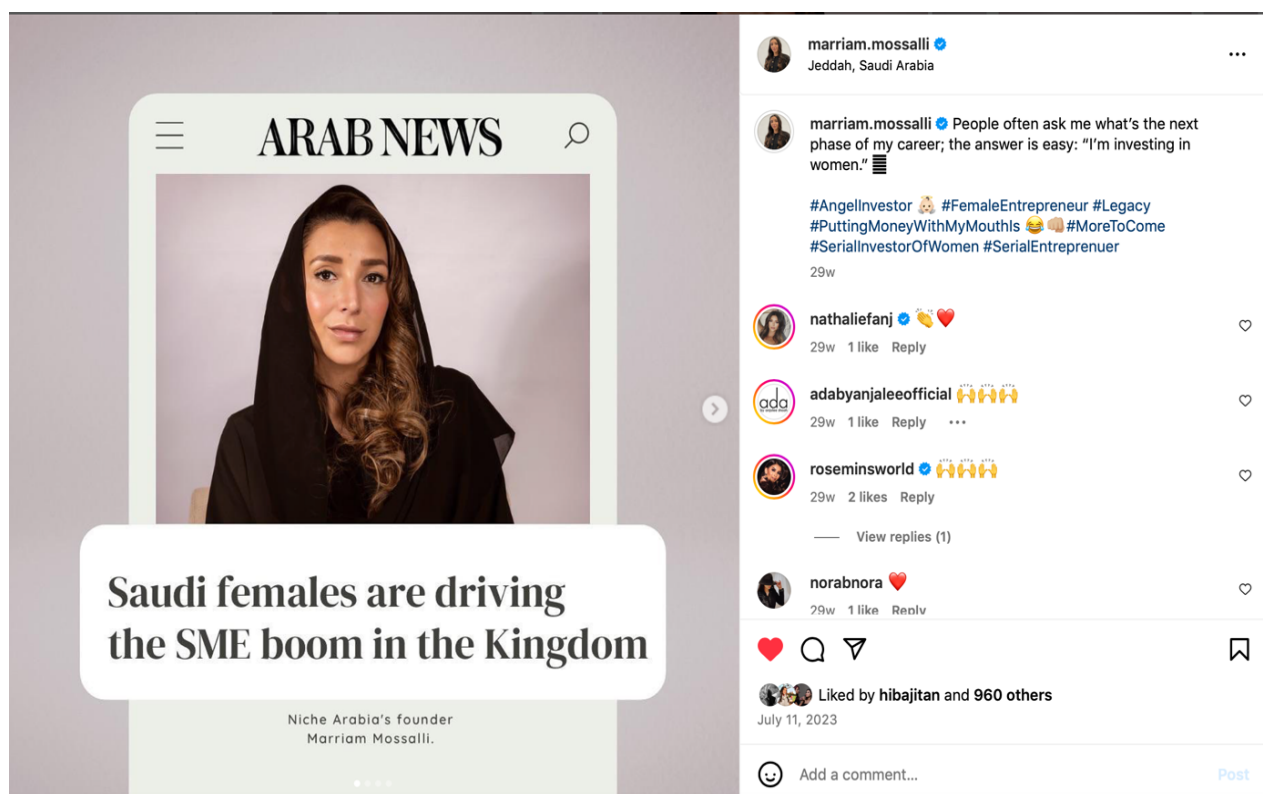
"I have become an influencer through my work and social media, but that's not my goal. To the extent that many companies come and offer commercial partnerships or work, and I decline them because my platforms are not primarily advertising for many companies." (Arwa al Ammari)

On the flip side, Marriam emphasizes the utility of social media, particularly Instagram, as a powerful tool for networking and connecting women. She expressed,

"I always try to have things that connect women." (Marriam Mossalli)

Additionally, Marriam highlights her commitment to sponsoring two young girls, one Saudi and one Kuwaiti, embarking on a continuous six-month hiking journey from Mexico to Canada. She shared, *"We're sponsoring their trip, which is super cool and inspiring. I hope to do my part to be their champion and cheerleader, talking about them increasingly on social media because I know I have a global audience."* This underscores Marriam's importance in showcasing women's achievements on social media and leveraging her global reach to promote their endeavors. A post from Marriam Mossalli shares part of an article where she was interviewed about how Saudi females are driving the SME (Small and Medium Enterprises) boom in the Kingdom (figure 16). In her caption, she articulates her investment in women, stating, "I'm investing in women," underscoring her strong belief in empowering Saudi women.

Figure 16 Marriam Mossalli sharing part of her interview with Arab NEWS, a local newspaper in Saudi Arabia



Source: post from Marriam Mossalli's Instagram posts (July 11, 2023)

While the majority of my case study subjects do not identify themselves with the label of feminism or feminist, they firmly believe in empowering Saudi women through their roles as entrepreneurs. Through their businesses, they actively support women in the fashion industry through collaborative projects and initiatives. This commitment to uplifting fellow Saudi women is evident in their collaborative work and in spotlighting other women in their field, as expressed in their earlier statements. This aligns with Albogami's (2024) study, which finds that empowerment on social media extends beyond individual success, as Saudi women feel that their achievements contribute to the broader advancement of all Saudi women. Their posts celebrate other women's successes, establishing a strong mutual support and empowerment network. These gestures are more than mere acknowledgments of individual accomplishments; they signify a larger cultural movement towards women's empowerment in Saudi society, reflecting an evolving social landscape where women's voices and achievements gain increasing recognition.

Fashion, in particular, serves as a powerful tool for self-expression and empowerment, allowing women to assert their identities while navigating cultural expectations. Mele (2020) suggests that Instagram plays a significant role in empowering women by helping them build confidence and organize their actions to align with their goals—whether through sharing fashion posts, promoting products or services, endorsing ideas, or engaging in activism. Similarly, Brown (2022) highlights how social media interactions incorporate postfeminist themes, blending fashion, beauty, and empowerment with feminist messaging. This dynamic is evident among the Saudi fashion entrepreneurs in my study, who utilize their agency to empower women in various ways. Marriam Mossalli leads a luxury marketing agency that collaborates with women to showcase their talents and achievements. Rawan Kattoa empowers women through personalized styling and event activations, while Naseeba Al-Hafiz champions local tailors and women's economic participation through her involvement in supportive organizations. Alaa Balky challenges societal taboos by sharing personal stories on body image and self-confidence, fostering discussions that encourage women to embrace their individuality. Lina Malaika's creation of a modeling agency has broken barriers, empowering women in a previously restricted field. These entrepreneurs not only redefine gender roles in the fashion industry but also contribute to shifting cultural norms by advocating for activist movements, collaborating with sustainable brands, and promoting inclusivity in their work.

This positioning aligns closely with postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007) and popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), where empowerment is framed as an individual and market-driven achievement rather than a collective political struggle. Postfeminism emphasizes choice, self-branding, and personal success, reflecting how these women navigate gender norms while maintaining cultural legitimacy(check chapter 3,section 3.5.2). By fostering women's participation in the fashion industry through entrepreneurship, social media branding, and digital visibility, they engage in a strategic adaptation of feminism—one that prioritizes agency, collaboration, and professional growth without directly confronting patriarchal structures (McRobbie, 2009). Their entrepreneurship serves as a form of cultural and economic feminism, using branding, collaborations, and social media presence to amplify their influence while aligning with the economic modernization goals of Vision 2030. Ultimately, their work embodies a popular feminist approach, where empowerment is mediated through digital and consumer culture, reinforcing the idea that Saudi women's progress is unfolding within both traditional and contemporary frameworks of gender and business

6.2.2. Beyond Fashion: Influential Entrepreneurs Driving Cultural and Professional Empowerment

Influencers and entrepreneurs play a vital role in supporting activist movements within the fashion industry; in my case studies, they contribute to activist movements but not in the classic sense. Marriam Mossalli, for example, spearheaded a remarkable initiative for women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia, one of which was "Under the Abaya." This initiative goes beyond being just a Street Style book; Mossalli's Through, Under the Abaya not only advocates for authentic storytelling and self-representation for Saudi women, giving them a platform to share their true voices and experiences, it's also a non-profit endeavor that channels 100% of its proceeds towards academic scholarships for women. As Saudi Arabia envisions a progressive future for women, with milestones like lifting the ban on driving and increasing opportunities in the workforce, "Under the Abaya" chronicles the journey of Saudi women leading this transformation. She then founded the #SaudiStyleCouncil, which aimed at supporting local creatives in the Saudi fashion scene, guiding them in navigating the business and attaining international standards and exposure. In 2022, Marriam organized the largest above-water fashion show in the GCC. This event featured real women from her "Under The Abaya" book as models aboard MSC Bellissima Cruise during a three-day trip across the Red

Sea, celebrating International Women's Day uniquely and empoweringly.

While the first edition of *Under the Abaya* introduced the world to the progressive Saudi woman, the second edition delves deeper into their challenges and aspirations. The vision behind this initiative is rooted in a strong belief in women's empowerment, aiming to support women locally and globally by placing them #IntoTheSpotlight to share their stories with the world. Partnering exclusively with LUX ARABIA for the second edition further amplifies this message. LUX ARABIA is a brand that champions the unwavering spirit of women who take pride in their beauty and refuse to be limited by societal judgments. Together with "Under the Abaya," they celebrate inspiring women who boldly step out of the shadows, showcasing their worth far beyond their appearance. These women proudly express their beauty while making significant contributions to enrich our world with their remarkable achievements.

The mission, as outlined on the book's website, is clear. All proceeds from book sales contribute to academic scholarships for underprivileged women in Saudi Arabia, empowering them to pursue their most ambitious dreams. Their involvement in the #WomenSupportingWomen movement transcends mere symbolism; it's a commitment to amplifying the voices of talented women in Saudi Arabia and providing them with the opportunity to realize their aspirations. The impact of this initiative was evident in the first edition, where funds raised supported five aspiring photographers through a one-year scholarship at Future Academy, Jeddah. The second edition aims to support females aspiring to pursue a BA in Fashion Design. Each submission is voluntary, embodying the essence of "women supporting women" and giving true meaning to the phrase by fostering a culture of empowerment and collaboration.

During our conversation, Marriam Mossalli shared the heartfelt story behind "Under the Abaya," revealing,

"My friend had just passed away, one of my best friends, who the book is dedicated to. And I said, Let me just do it. I had no idea how big of an impact it would have and how many women were so supportive. Even the guys I enjoyed on the call here were supportive. But I'm just saying it was touching again; we just wanted a place to hear our voices. And I think that what was so special was that it gave us a platform to show off our

cool fashion and universality. I want to say how we are like other women. As Arabs anywhere, whether you're from Egypt, we just want people to understand that we are still just women and that our struggles, our obstacles, are everything. It's very similar. It's the crystal thing. Women worldwide connect because we share the same thing. This whole idea of being a mom, wife, and career woman." (Marriam Mossalli)

In the (figure17), Marriam celebrated the contributions made by females to the "Under the Abaya" book, underscoring their significance in the initiative's success. "Just like the 350 pages of the @under_the_abaya #streetstyle book, the largest gathering for female empowerment in the region brought together a diverse group of amazing women! From yogis to stylists to cancer survivors and entrepreneurs, we all came together under the sentiment of #WomenSupportingWomen to raise awareness and lift each other! 🙏💙 Thank you to all who attended and those who supported from afar! #Grateful #MoreToCome"

Figure 17 Marriam celebrated the contributions made by females to the "Under the Abaya" book



Source: post from Marriam Mossalli's Instagram posts (March 22, 2022)

During the interview, Marriam emphasized an essential aspect of the book's reception globally, stating,

"I also think there's a lot of politics that falls when you're not only that we opened up, but also the west opened up into writing content about us 'Under the ABAYA' I made it as a woman empowerment book, but I put it on the disguise of our guides of fashion so that 'Gracia Italia' and 'Repair Itali' post about it, and 'Nylon Japan' talks about it. They all published articles because they were about fashion, not Saudi women. Nobody heard about Sikh fashion in Saudi Arabia before you did this."(Marriam)

In a recent Instagram post (Figure 18), Marriam expressed gratitude to L'Officiel Magazine for featuring the "Under the Abaya" book in their edition, underscoring the significance of their support in spreading awareness about the initiative. In the caption she wrote:

“Today, we are blessed to have been featured in dozens of publications worldwide—from Italy and Brazil to Japan and Poland! #WomenSupportingWomen Each time, we aim to highlight different women from the over 500 women who have participated since edition 1 was published. I want to thank @giorgiacantarini for featuring us in @lofficielitalia & for the amazing support we get from our sisters around the globe! ❤️👊 #undertheabaya #feminist #girlpower #saudiarabia#strongindependent #YouGoGirl #womensupportingwomen#girlboss #jeddah #riyadh #khobar #YouCan #womeninsports#sports”

The initiatives led by Marriam Mossalli, particularly *Under the Abaya* and the #SaudiStyleCouncil, exemplify how Saudi women entrepreneurs are using fashion as a platform for empowerment, cultural representation, and social change. These efforts highlight a unique approach to feminism in Saudi Arabia—one that blends economic participation, cultural heritage, and advocacy for women's visibility in a way that aligns with both societal expectations and evolving global feminist narratives. By integrating empowerment with fashion, these women challenge traditional perceptions while strategically positioning their work within the framework of cultural authenticity and national pride. This aligns with broader discussions in post-feminism and popular feminism, where economic success, branding, and individual achievement are celebrated as forms of empowerment. Mossalli's ability to gain

international recognition for Saudi women through fashion media while directing tangible resources—such as scholarships—towards women's education reinforces the role of entrepreneurship as a tool for both self-expression and collective progress. Through these initiatives, influential entrepreneurs are reshaping the narrative of Saudi women's agency, demonstrating that fashion is not just about aesthetics but a means of asserting identity, fostering solidarity, and advancing professional and social empowerment.

Figure 18 L'Officiel Magazine featuring Marriam Mossali street style book (Under the abaya)



Source: post from Marriam Mossalli's Instagram posts (February 7, 2022)

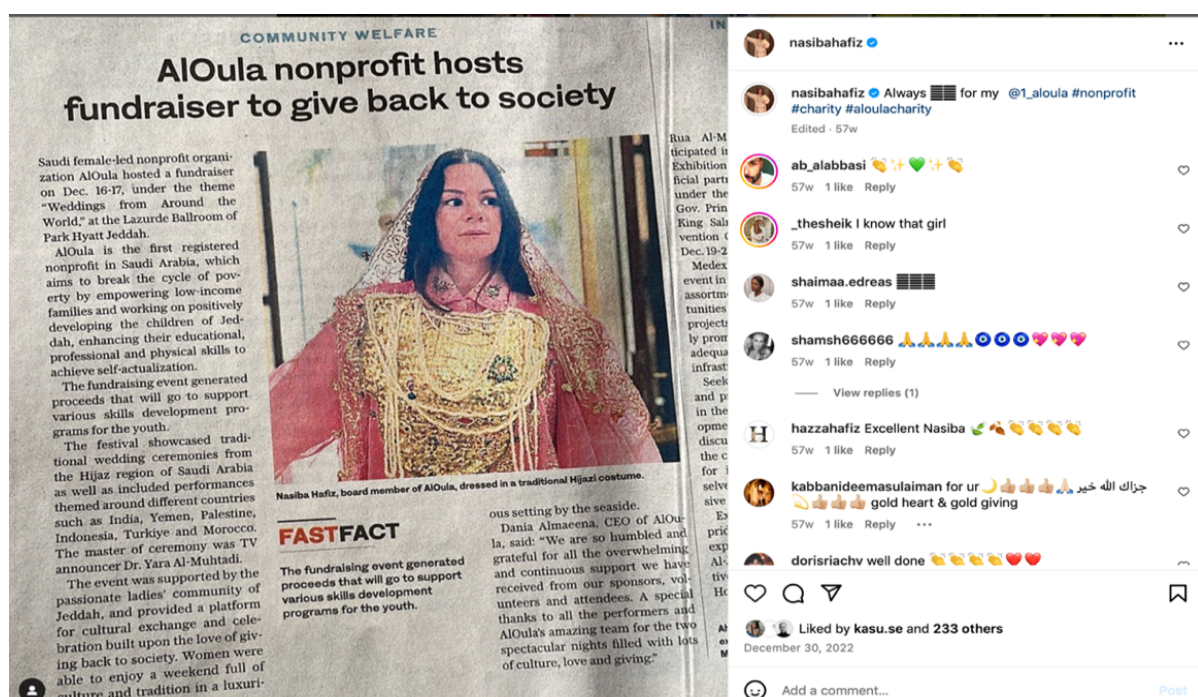
Moreover, Nasiba Hafiz uses fashion to promote sustainability and social impact. Known for her use of daring fabrics and innovative designs, Hafiz prioritizes eco-friendly production by repurposing materials and adopting sustainable practices. She collaborates with charities that provide employment opportunities for women, ensuring her brand contributes to both environmental and social progress. During our interview, she emphasized the deeper purpose behind her brand—to preserve and celebrate Arab culture while supporting women's professional and creative aspirations. Her work highlights how fashion can be a force for positive change, encouraging a balance between cultural heritage and modern industry

standards. Nasiba collaborates with charities that provide secure, productive, and sustainable employment opportunities for those in need. Partnerships with organizations underscore her commitment to making a positive impact. During the interview, Nasiba emphasized her brand's purpose, stating;

“The brand that I have is a brand with a purpose. It's a brand that supports women worldwide supports culture, and keeps our culture recognized internationally as Arabs, Saudis, and women. So when I work with charities, when I work with women, when I work with reviving a type of embroidery around the world, in the Arab world, this is aligned with my values because I want to keep the Arab and the Islamic, because these are part of my values and having a purpose, it's what makes us. And what we have to show people.” (Nasiba Hafiz)

Nasiba's dedication to social impact extends beyond her designs and collaborations. In a recent Instagram post (figures 19), she highlighted her involvement as one of the board members of AlOula, the first registered nonprofit in Saudi Arabia, which aims to break the cycle of poverty by empowering low-income families and women.

Figure 19 Nasiba sharing a news article about AlOula, the first registered nonprofit in Saudi Arabia



Source: post from Nasiba Hafiz's Instagram posts. (December 30, 2022)

Mariam Mossali is also a co-founder of Powder Beauty, the Middle East's first female-owned e-commerce platform dedicated to conscious beauty and wellness products. According to their bio, "Our products are hand-picked from around the world by beauty devotees who want to educate and empower everyone to shop based on their values, without compromising a thing. Our website allows you to shop based on skin concerns, type, and ingredients to choose the best products." These business objectives reflect how women's empowerment is intricately tied to wellness and lifestyle choices, aligning with concepts of post-feminism and commodity feminism.

In a post for Saudi National Day in 2022, Powder Beauty shared, "Happy Saudi National Day! Say hello to @noufalyousef_, Saudi Arabia's rising star, who is taking the fitness world by storm. We had the wonderful opportunity to interview Nouf to honor Saudi National Day and recognize the country's amazing development of skilled entrepreneurial women." This statement reflects how beauty, as a concept, is increasingly paralleled with empowerment and the recognition of women's roles in driving change. This highlights how platforms like Powder Beauty promote wellness and contribute to the larger narrative of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia, underscoring the evolving relationship between beauty, business, and feminist ideals in the region.

Figure 20 Post from Powder Beauty, a business for Marriam Mossali



Source: post from Powder Beauty Instagram posts. (September22, 2022)

6.2.3. Influential Entrepreneurs Promoting Body Positivity and Challenging Beauty Standards

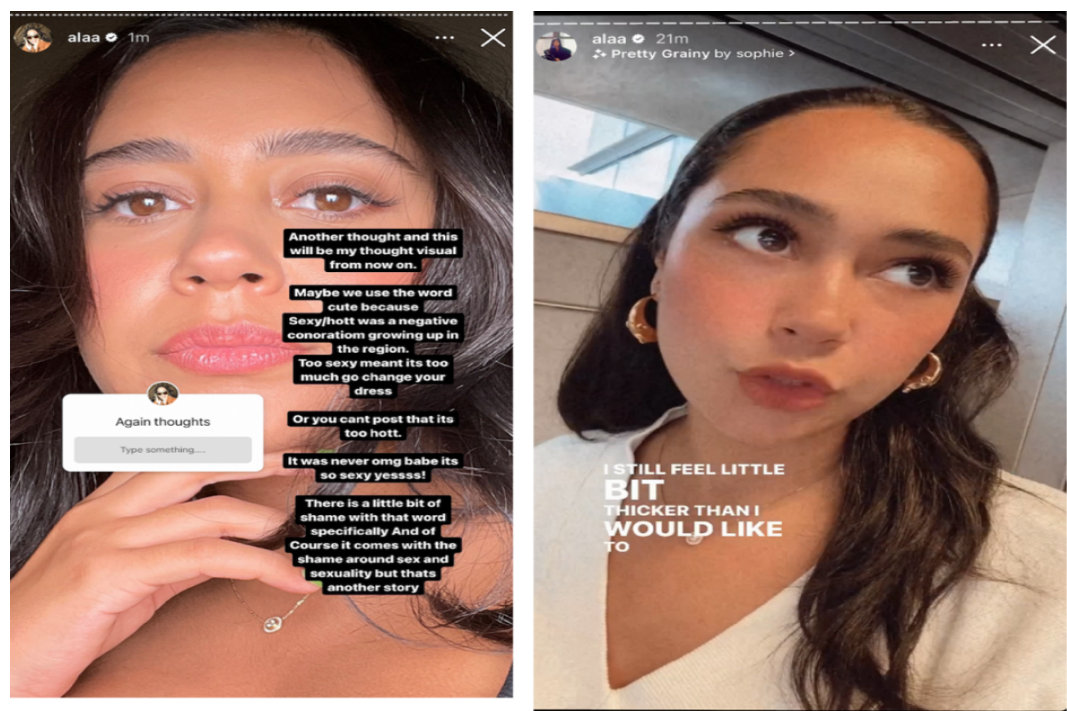
Fashion influential entrepreneurs play a crucial role in promoting inclusivity and diversity within the fashion industry. By challenging conventional beauty standards and celebrating diverse body types, they contribute to a more inclusive representation of women in Saudi society. Through their platforms, they defy traditional gender norms and stereotypes, offering alternative narratives that empower and inspire their audiences. By sharing personal stories, struggles, and triumphs, these influencers create a sense of connection with their followers, fostering a culture of self-acceptance and confidence. Their work extends beyond fashion; it becomes a tool for self-expression and empowerment, encouraging women to embrace their identities and redefine societal expectations.

In observing the Instagram accounts of the case study participants, it became evident how some influencers use their platforms to address issues affecting Saudi women. Alaa Balky, for instance, has been vocal about body image and self-acceptance. After becoming a mother and attending Paris Fashion Week, she openly discussed the pressures imposed by the fashion industry to conform to particular beauty standards. She shared a personal post with the caption, "11 months post baby, learning how to love my body again," (see figure 22) shedding light on the journey of postpartum body acceptance. By sharing her experience, she challenged the unrealistic expectations placed on women, reinforcing the importance of embracing natural body changes.

Beyond body image, Alaa has also addressed sensitive cultural topics, such as the language used to describe women in Saudi society. She highlighted how words like "sexy" are often replaced with "cute" due to cultural taboos surrounding sexuality (see figure 21). By bringing these conversations to the forefront, she initiated discussions on how societal perceptions shape women's identities and self-expression. Her openness to discussing such nuanced topics reflects a broader shift in Saudi Arabia, where women are increasingly using digital platforms to redefine cultural narratives and advocate for social change. Through their advocacy, fashion entrepreneurs are not only reshaping the industry but also creating spaces where women can see themselves represented in ways that align with their lived experiences. Their platforms serve as sites of empowerment, where fashion is used as a tool to celebrate

individuality, challenge societal norms, and promote self-confidence.

Figure 21 Alaa's post asking her followers if they still consider sexy a taboo word.



Source: post from Alaa balky Instagram stories (September 13, 2023)

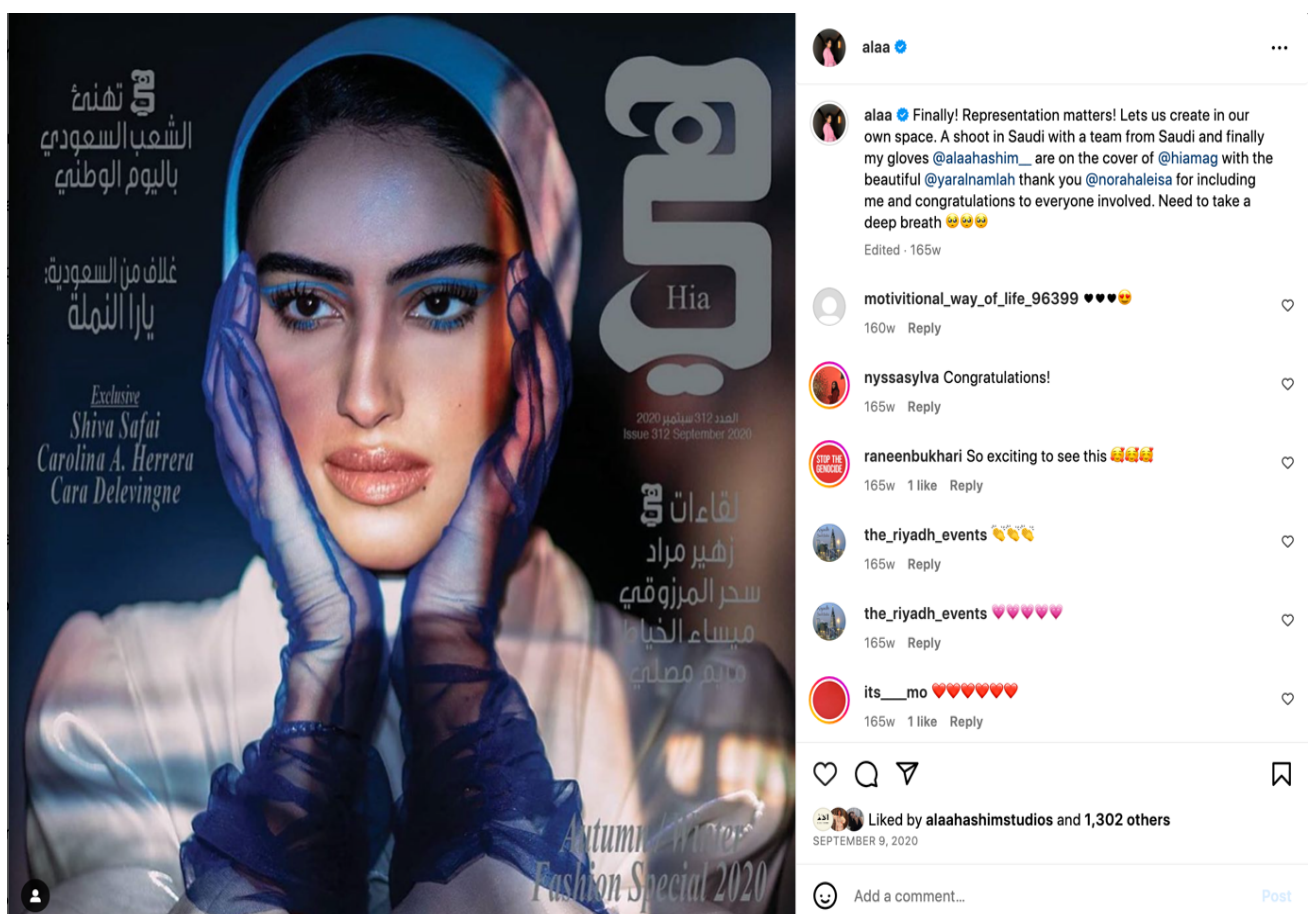
Figure 22 Post from Alaa



Source: post from Alaa balky Instagram posts

During the interview, Alaa Balky shared her commitment to addressing cultural and social issues, often sparking discussion and debate. She mentioned, *"I do ruffle the feathers regarding cultural social issues. Whether it's inclusivity or diversity, whether it's just posting a statement and seeing people's opinions."* Alaa specifically focused on the importance of inclusivity and diversity in the media, particularly in the context of Saudi women in the fashion industry. She emphasized the need for authentic representation, explaining that Saudi creatives should create work representing Saudi culture. In her Instagram posts, she showcased the significance of local representation in the fashion field. She cited an example where entrepreneur and influencer Yara Alnamlah appeared on the cover wearing Alaa's glove design. This collaboration highlights the importance of amplifying local talent and providing a platform for alternative narratives about Saudi women. Posts like these promote diversity and inclusivity and empower Saudi women in the fashion industry, offering a more authentic portrayal of their roles and contributions (Figure 23).

Figure 23 One of the Saudi influencers, Yara Alnamlah, appeared on the Hia cover wearing Alaa's glove design



Source: post from Alaa balky Instagram posts (September 9, 2020)

Furthermore, it's not just Alaa but all influential entrepreneurs in my study who share their successes and achievements on social media, aiming to uplift Saudi women and shed light on their accomplishments. They also share personal stories detailing their ups and downs, thoughts, and struggles. For instance, Nasiba Hafiz, in one of her posts, discussed self-confidence and the journey it took for her to share a raw photo with ample lighting without undergoing Botox treatments. (figure 24).

Figure 24 Photo of Nasibah Hafiz



Source: post from Nasiba Hafiz's Instagram posts (November 4, 2017)

In Figure 25, Arwa addresses a crucial issue in the fashion and creative industry: racism. She emphasizes that not all skin tones are treated equally, expressing the heartache caused by the struggles faced by individuals with darker skin tones in the Arab world.

Figure 25 Post from Arwa mentioning skin color matter

IT ACHES OUR HEARTS HEARING THE
DETAILS OF HOW PEOPLE WITH COLOR ARE
SUFFERING IN CREATIVE INDUSTRIES IN OUR
ARAB WORLD ..

من المؤلم الاستماع
الى معاناة اصحاب
البشرة الملونة في
عالمنا
العربي .. خاصة في
المجالات الابداعية



Source: post from Arwa Al Ammari's Instagram page (June 21, 2020)

6.3.Femvertising: Feminism as a symbolic value

Commodity feminism and femvertising, discussed in my theoretical framework, represent two prominent facets of contemporary advertising that intersect with feminist discourse. Commodity feminism refers to the commercialization of feminist ideals and the portrayal of consumer goods and consumption practices as empowering for women. On the other hand, femvertising involves advertising campaigns that explicitly promote gender equality, challenge stereotypes, and empower women. While both concepts aim to capitalize on feminist principles for marketing purposes, they are not without controversy. Some argue that these approaches commodify feminism, diluting its political and social significance, while others view them as positive steps toward promoting gender equality and media representation.

In this section, I will delve into the manifestation of commodity feminism and femvertising in advertising campaigns and Instagram posts shared by the influential entrepreneurs I interviewed. As discussed earlier in this section, these posts and initiatives inherently represent a form of commodity feminism. They leverage fashion, personal narratives, and a distinctly feminine approach to empowerment. Through critically analyzing these examples, I aim to explore the nuances of empowerment through consumerism and marketing tactics and the entrepreneurs' perspectives.

Marriam Mossalli expressed her critique of femvertising campaigns, highlighting a sense of repetitiveness and superficiality in their approach. She noted, "Advertising agencies... are trying to hop on that bandwagon. I would tell you that aesthetically, the commercials are all the same. I actually consult on many of these things, and I can tell you a lot of times, they still will not listen". Mossalli emphasized the prevalence of certain stereotypes in these campaigns, particularly in the selection of models and influencers. She remarked, "It's always the same girls. It's crap. They care more about followers than what she achieved in life." Despite her efforts to advocate for greater diversity and authenticity in advertising, Mossalli observed that many brands prioritize superficial metrics like social media following over real-life accomplishments.

Moreover, Mossalli pointed out the lack of relatability and authenticity in some international brands' advertisements. She cited examples of makeup brand campaigns featuring neon lights and exaggerated expressions of self-expression, which she felt did not resonate with the everyday experiences of women as she said;

" Look at one of the makeup brands' campaign, and It's neon light. It's the girls with the neon makeup. That's not how girls go. Or how I go to the office. Is this me expressing myself, in real? No. " (Marriam Mossalli)

Marriam criticized the portrayal of women in these ads, noting the disconnect between the scripts crafted by men and the reality of women's lives. Despite her ongoing efforts to provide feedback and consultation to improve these campaigns, Mossalli lamented that change has been slow, with brands often failing to listen to her insights and persisting in their current approaches.

Conversely, Marriam emphasized that these commercials could have a powerful impact if executed correctly. She remarked, "When a young girl sees a girl on TV doing something, she thinks, I can do that. That's what we need. So, are there more women on TV, in these commercials, in these ads? Yes, and yes." However, she stressed the importance of incorporating local insights and content into the creation process to ensure authenticity and relevance. Marriam criticized the tendency for such content to be produced by agencies based outside the local context, resulting in what she described as subpar outcomes.

Furthermore, Marriam highlighted the unique context of Saudi Arabia concerning commodity feminism, noting its distinctiveness compared to Western perspectives. She remarked,

"I think that you have to understand Saudi was a segregated country, so this community of women already had that. So it's a hilarious thing because I think your question is very much targeted towards a Western standpoint and not an Arab one. I think in the Middle East, this is something that we owned about. This has always been part of our culture, where now the women were always doing stuff and just showing themselves. It's about the visibility now." (Marriam Mossalli)

Marriam emphasized how women in Saudi Arabia were previously invisible in advertisements due to societal norms and regulations. Still, the situation has evolved drastically, with empowerment advertisements now reflecting diverse contexts, narratives, and visibility.

Arwa Alammari expressed her skepticism towards femvertising ads, considering them superficial and ineffective in empowering women. She remarked, "I find it superficial because they are direct messages. For me, these ads are not very understandable. For example, ads like these do not influence me much because I feel they are shallow and direct. However, there are other ways to impact women; they work better when they are indirect. Whereas mentioning some phrases like 'be inspiring, you are inspiring' you are strong doesn't mean to me. It may succeed with the younger generation. Honestly, I don't know; I'm just telling you from my perspective." Arwa's perspective suggests a preference for more nuanced and indirect methods of empowerment over overt and direct messaging in advertisements.

Conversely, Lina Malaika appeared in a Louis Vuitton campaign presented in Figure 26, donning the Yayoi Kusama collection for Valentine's Day in 2023. The photo featured the talented face of Saudi Arabia” along with the slogan, quoting her words, "My love for my work is romance in itself." This commercial conveyed that work can be synonymous with romance and love while promoting the new collection. It reflects a feminist approach intertwined with consumerism. When asked about this collaboration, Lina stated, "Brands are trying to be more relatable and humanize their strategy, and by using Saudi women, I relate to that."

Figure 26 Lina Malaika on the cover magazine for Valentine's Day campaign Loud Love “My love for my work..”

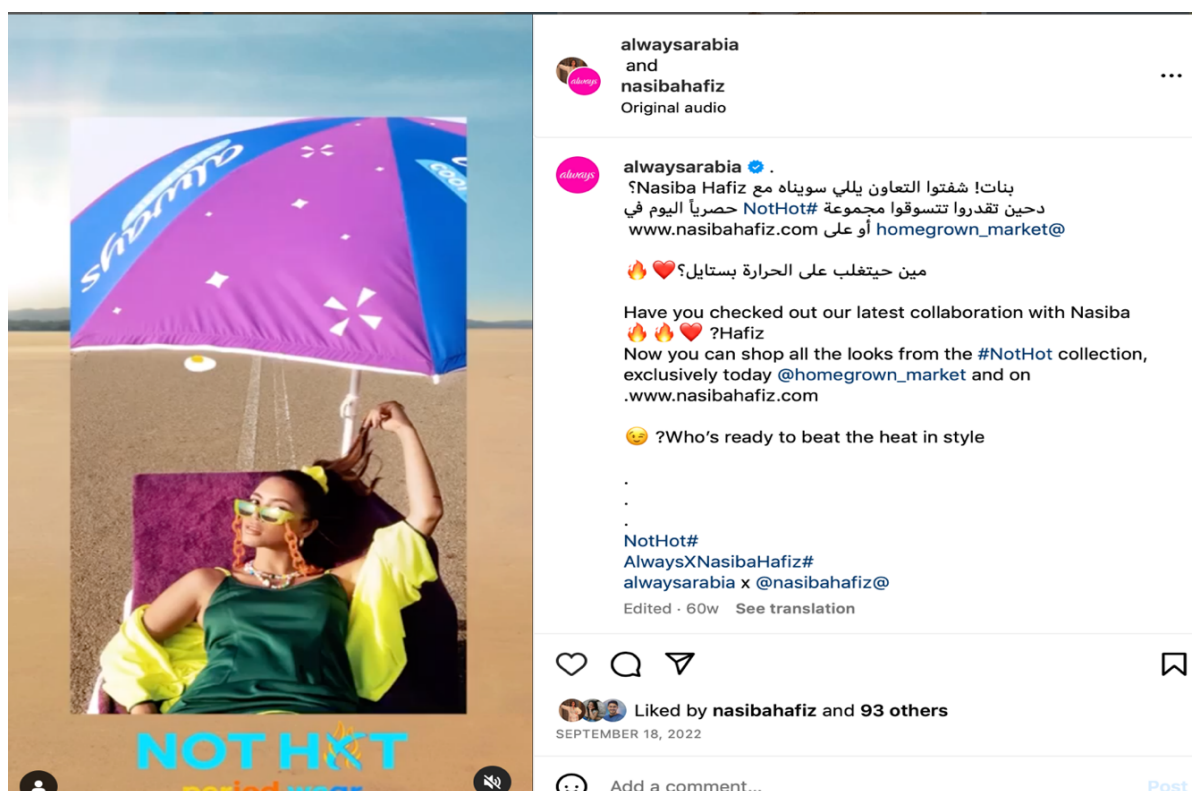


Source: post from Lina Malaika Instagram page (February 16, 2023)

Figure 27 is a post by Nasiba Hafiz discussing a topic previously explored in this chapter: how influential entrepreneurs challenge societal norms through their online content, but here, I'll analyze it within the context of femvertising advertisements. Brands recognize the potential of empowerment campaigns in addressing women, and this particular campaign

marks a notable shift. It portrays Saudi women in a modern light, showcasing diverse dressing styles. The ad's subject matter, previously taboo, now focuses on promoting pads designed for Saudi women—an inspiration for Nasiba's designs. When asked about the boldness of this campaign, Nasiba commented, "It was just showing the real modern Saudi woman. You know, not all Saudi women are covered, and we always wanted to show that we wanted to show a different side. We are both." She further emphasized the importance of depicting another perspective: some women are conservative, while others are more open. Nasiba highlighted that this portrayal doesn't exploit traditions or culture; instead, it reflects the multifaceted nature of Saudi women. Regarding using the term "not hot, fire," she stated, "It was normal. It's the hottest country in the world, so it's the weather."

Figure 27 A model showing Nasiba Hafiz's collection for the always campaign NOT HOT



Source: video from Nasiba Hafiz's Instagram page (September 18, 2022)

Furthermore, Alaa has been involved in several femvertising campaigns, including the recent Dove initiative titled "Congratulations, you're a woman" or "Mabrook Kbirti" in Arabic. This campaign aims to shed light on the harsh words and pressures young girls face during their transition to womanhood, which often result in low self-esteem and confidence. Alaa

shared her personal experience in the caption when she posted the campaign, stating, "Always heard comments about my hair growing up, so it's imperative for me to break the cycle by erasing harsh words from the conversation about hair." She highlighted the startling statistics that 73% of girls face intense pressure with negative comments about their appearance, and only 8% of young girls feel positive about their bodies. Alaa urged her followers to join her in empowering young girls to embrace their most authentic selves by erasing harsh words through the Dove Self-Esteem Project.

During the interview, Alaa emphasized the importance of authenticity and staying true to oneself when asked about the trend of femvertising commercials in Saudi Arabia and her collaboration with Dove Look (figure 28). She expressed that the Dove ad was relatable to many women and catalyzed meaningful conversations about self-esteem and body image. She says, "think it's important to be true to yourself, genuine, and not feel pressure to follow certain trends. When I saw the advertisement, it was very relatable; I think many women are related to it, and to shed conversation about this topic."

Figure 28 Post from Alaa Balky being part of femvertising campaigns for Dove



Source: post from Alaa Balky's Instagram page (February 19, 2023)

Arwa Al Ammari, when asked about empowerment and advertising commercials with empowerment strategies (femvertising), expressed her belief in the power of real success stories and experiences from Saudi women to inspire and impact others. She stated, *"I find it superficial because they are direct messages. For me, these ads are not very understandable. But there are other ways to impact women, and they work better when indirect."* Al Ammari emphasized the importance of genuine narratives of achievement and inspiration.

In the campaign shown in Figure 29, both Rawan Katto and Arwa Al Ammari highlight real women's success stories, focusing on femvertising messages. These messages empower women by showcasing influential figures who serve as role models of strength and resilience. Rawan expressed her pride in being part of the Elle Arabia cover, which featured HRH Princess Noura AlFaisal and Saudi jockeys Madawi, Bayan, and Abrar, illustrating how these women are leading the charge for women's rights and progress. She commented, *"Purely national integrity chosen not only behind the scenes. Proud moment. Support each other in an essential sense. It's me. It's our culture. It's our art."*

The campaign emphasizes women's empowerment and celebrates the fusion of heritage and modernity within fashion. The women featured were styled by Rawan, wearing an Aram design by Arwa Al Ammari, blending traditional Saudi designs with contemporary fashion. Incorporating projects like the Saudi Cup, NEOM, and the Red Sea Film Festival into the narrative helps amplify these women's visibility. It showcases the global attention drawn to their efforts in promoting change.

The magazine's title, "Get Inspired," featuring Saudi princesses, can be analyzed as a form of femvertising, where the fashion industry is used to empower women. It presents a modern and active image of Saudi women, countering traditional, passive portrayals. That aligns with the goals of Saudi Vision 2030, which encourages the participation of women in various fields, including fashion, politics, and business. Through these campaigns, the magazine promotes the idea that women can break free from restrictive stereotypes, elevate their presence in society, and become leaders in both their personal and professional lives, all while promoting the transformative power of fashion. Additionally, Marriam Mossalli highlights the achievements of pioneering Saudi women, such as Bayan Mahmoud Al-Zahrani, the first licensed female lawyer, and Reema Al Juffali, the first female race car driver. She

stated, “These are proper, real women on many levels. These are the girls transforming women’s futures. The influencers’ fashionistas are just posting about it.” This statement underscores the impact of these women across various sectors, positioning them as instrumental in shaping the future of Saudi women. The campaign featured below as discussed above celebrates such figures—women who have paved the way for others yet often remain outside the spotlight. This demonstrates that femvertising campaigns in Saudi Arabia go beyond showcasing models and fashion influencers; they celebrate women from diverse fields while simultaneously highlighting Saudi designs and fashion. In doing so, these campaigns not only recognize women’s achievements in their respective professions but also position fashion as a medium through which their success and cultural identity are expressed.

Figure 29 HRH Princess Noura ALfasil and Saudi Jockeys styled by Rawan Kattooa for an empowering campaign under the name of (get inspired)



Source: post from Rawan Kattooa's Instagram page (February 26, 2022)

6.4. Final Reflections

In my study, Saudi women entrepreneurs, especially those I interviewed, have shaped their interpretations of feminist culture and empowerment, acknowledging the complex history of women's rights in Saudi Arabia. They emphasize that Western feminism cannot be directly applied to Saudi society due to cultural differences. While most women, except for Marriam Mossalli, do not identify as feminists, their understanding of empowerment aligns with neoliberal values such as self-confidence, financial independence, and self-reliance—qualities they have cultivated as entrepreneurs. This entrepreneurial spirit empowers them and creates opportunities to empower other women, particularly in the fashion industry. Their approach resonates with popular post-feminism, which often ties feminist discourse to neoliberal ideologies focused on individual choice and economic empowerment (McRobbie, 2004b). Additionally, their work with fashion and styling reflects their belief in how personal style can be a powerful tool for empowerment. Their stories intersect with Popular Feminism, as described by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) and Pruchniewska (2017), showing how digital feminism activities are closely linked to self-branding—a central element of post-feminism. This self-branding is facilitated by platforms like Instagram, which prioritize visual content and commercialize identity, politics, and race (Stevens, 2021; Neri, 2022).

Social media, particularly Instagram, is critical in their advocacy and visibility. It provides a platform for them to showcase fashion, promote their businesses, initiate feminist and social campaigns, and engage in conversations with other women. Many of these entrepreneurs participate in femvertising campaigns, a growing trend in Saudi Arabia, marking a shift from the previous underrepresentation of women in advertisements. Their contributions to the fashion industry and collaborations with global brands have enabled them to practice commodity feminism, using their visibility to promote feminist ideals and advance women's empowerment initiatives.

CHAPTER 7

CULTURAL EVOLUTION IN FASHION AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

7.1.Introduction

This chapter addresses the fourth research question of this study by exploring the role of Instagram as a transformative force within the Saudi Arabian fashion industry. The influential entrepreneurs in this study demonstrate how they integrate their cultural identities into their professional endeavors, establishing collaborations with both local and global brands. This chapter uncovers key insights, including the increasing branding strategies in the Saudi fashion landscape, the transformation of fashion into a cultural product through advertising, and the strategic role of influencers in facilitating the entry of international brands into local markets. The influential entrepreneurs examined in this study constitute a niche group within Saudi society, possessing the agency to influence norms even before the inception of Vision 2030. With the advent of Vision 2030, their impact has been amplified, garnering increased visibility and empowerment. These entrepreneurs unanimously acknowledge the transformative shift in the Saudi fashion scene, marked by numerous initiatives focusing on culture through fashion.

In discussing societal responses to reforms and modernization, the entrepreneurs note a divergence in dress styles. Some individuals adopt a modern aesthetic, potentially diluting their identity, while others maintain a conservative approach with a practical twist. It's essential to recognize that these insights primarily pertain to influencers, actors, and talents within the fashion industry who operate in the spotlight, deviating from most Saudi women who may not be in the public eye. Furthermore, my experience as a woman living in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, since 2014 and working as a lecturer provides additional context. Observing societal changes, I've witnessed a noticeable shift in dress wear among Saudi women, particularly the younger generation. There's a growing comfort in expressing personal identity without societal pressure. Marriam Mossalli's notion of "smart layering" resonates, illustrating how Saudi women navigate public presentation through abayas while preserving another identity in private and during travel, which I observed.

7.2.Fashion industry and culture with conservative parameters

Saudi women have faced restrictions on their fashion choices due to societal norms and state policies. As discussed in various chapters of the theoretical framework (check Chapter 3, Section 3.2 for personal identity, Section 3.3.2.2 for fashion as culture, and Section 3.5 for feminism), these societal constraints have shaped their identities. Transgressing these norms, mainly through fashion, has become a form of feminist activism aimed at challenging and transforming social expectations surrounding dress style, as noted by Le Renard (2013). Historically, Saudi women's dress style was closely linked to their public identity, with the abaya being the dominant garment. This style has long served as a symbolic representation of specific societal roles. For example, the traditional attire and hijab styles of Saudi women have come to symbolize the identity of the Kingdom (Al Eid, 2023).

The personal identity of Saudi women has traditionally been viewed as a private matter. Understanding their identity involves looking at how they express themselves privately, their roles, and how they navigate society. In a related study by Tawfiq and Ogle (2022), which includes 15 interviews with women from Jeddah and Medina, the research delves into how Saudi women use clothing in private spaces to craft and express their self-identity. The findings reflect the complex nature of these identities and the evolving cultural landscape in Saudi Arabia. Traditional and Western attire play significant roles in shaping how Saudi women express themselves, with conventional dress reserved for special occasions and Western-style clothing being the preferred choice for daily wear. Although the abaya is still commonly seen in public, Saudi women's style reflects a blend of both traditional and Western influences. Their fashion preferences are diverse, and fashion plays a key role in expressing their identity and providing professional opportunities. However, despite these evolving personal styles, engaging in the fashion and design industry remained confined to Saudi women's comfort zones, with various limitations and restrictions due to societal norms.

Nevertheless, as my case studies illustrate, these women have begun challenging these boundaries, supported by a growing community fostering their creativity and entrepreneurial spirit. This shift signifies a transformative moment in Saudi women's relationship with fashion as they break through traditional constraints to express their identity more freely and professionally. In the interview, Marriam emphasized the historical role of fashion

entrepreneurship for Saudi women, operating within the conservative parameters of Saudi culture. Marriam said;

“I would say that fashion as an entrepreneur has always been a go Saudi; a woman could do that within her again, the parameters, the conservative parameters of Saudi culture. So, I would go to the souq (market) to buy my fabric. Okay, That's the only interaction I have with a man. Then I could go or have a tailor it for me. And then my customer is a female. So, my whole thing is within the comfort of my cultural thing. So fashion has always been something that women have been. I think what changed and what we're seeing are the differences between social media and the influencers of fashion.” (Marriam Mossalli)

On a different note, Alaa Balkhy delves into the dynamics of a predominantly female-driven industry, emphasizing the absence of substantial risks for women venturing into design or fashion. In her perspective, women seamlessly embraced these creative domains upon recognizing their lucrative potential, as she said

“ Women found that there's money in working in fashion and design. But men can never pursue that because there's always the risk of them not making enough money to be the family's main breadwinner. So it is like a female-dominated industry because of that, not because of fashion and beauty. Yes, because of the economic side of the part of the whole thing. Because it's so much easier for women to become artists because, from the family, it's like, oh, cool, you want to be an artist? But for men in Saudi Arabia, it's not easy to become an artist; interestingly, there are more artists are men than fashion designers in the world. But it's still very new in Saudi Arabia.” (Alaa Balkhy)

In this view, Arwa Al Amari provides a nuanced view, reflecting on her entry into the industry in 2014, when the fashion and cultural sectors were not accorded the seriousness they deserved.

“I started in 2014 when there wasn't much interest in the fashion and cultural industries. Fashion wasn't considered a serious profession; the same was true for

design. Nobody took it seriously. Even in terms of design, nobody took it seriously. But from 2014 to 2024, there has been a significant change.” (Arwa Al Amari)

On the other hand, Nasiba Hafiz highlights the prevalent focus on abaya design within the industry during the earlier years. She recalls the time around 2006 when she returned, noting the prevailing trend of designers primarily concentrating on abayas. Despite this prevailing trend, Nasiba was determined to venture beyond abaya designs. Her creative vision led her to establish a brand in 2012, aiming to create ready-to-wear clothing that allowed women to express themselves beneath the abaya. As she said

“I wanted to show that it's not only about the Abaya; it's also about what we wear under the abaya. We wore what we wore at home and our friend's house because Abaya was just something we wore out and about in public places. But there's so much more to our life” (Nasiba Hafiz)

Similarly, Marriam offers insights into Saudi women's fashion choices, particularly about the abaya. She underscores the nuanced approach adopted by Saudi women, describing the abaya as a cultural pride. However, Marriam introduces the concept of "smart layering," emphasizing that Saudi women are free to wear various clothing beneath the abaya. This challenges the notion of strict modesty, suggesting that the term may not entirely capture the diversity and dynamism of Saudi women's fashion choices, as she mentioned;

“we can call it modest, but I don't think it's modest in Saudi. We don't dress modestly. We have an abaya, and we take the abaya off, and everything is normal. But it's more about how that smart layering is done.” (Marriam Mossalli)

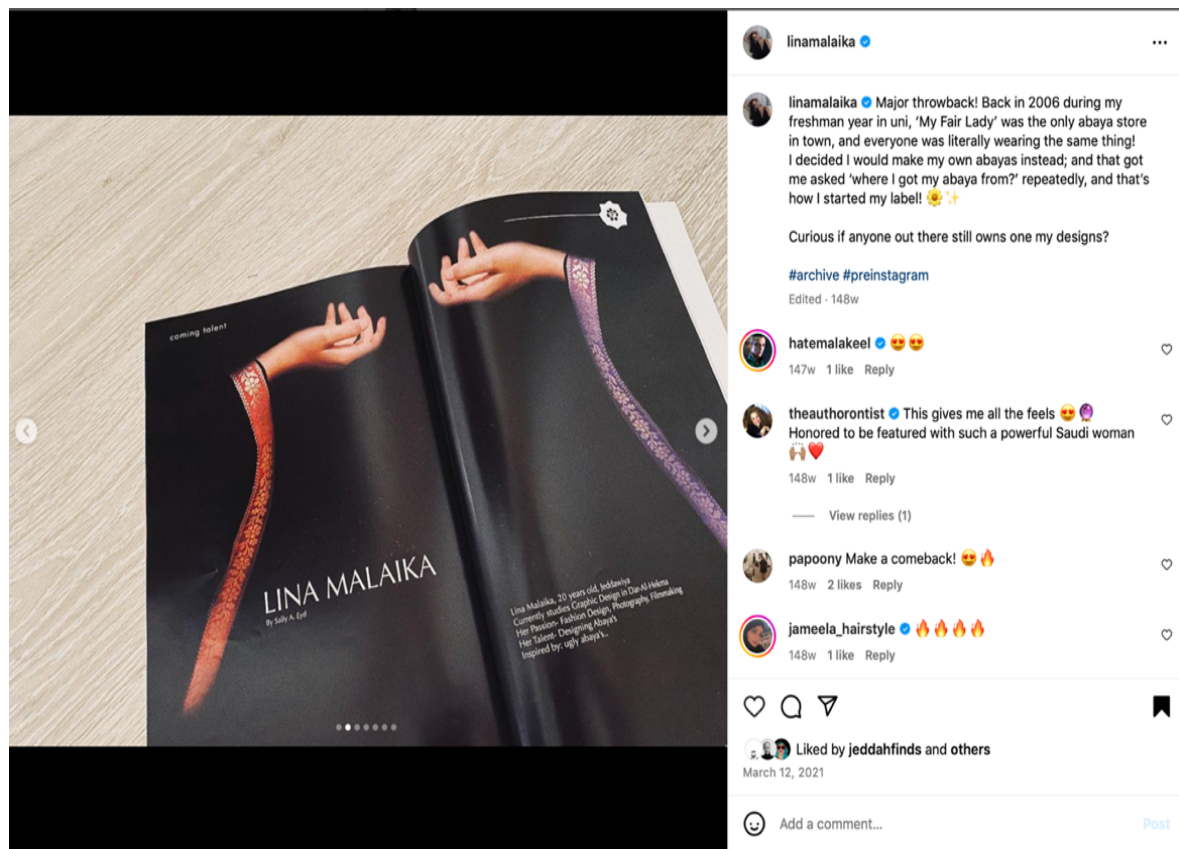
Moreover, Alaa Balkhy provides additional insights into the constrained dressing identity of Saudi women, reinforcing the initial notion that their expressive freedom was severely limited in public spaces. She articulates the historical context, noting that a past generation had to adhere to wearing the abaya, leaving only shoes or a handbag as the sole means of expressing personal identity. This limitation underscored the stringent societal norms and expectations dictated how Saudi women could present themselves. Alaa draws a compelling comparison with Kuwaiti women who, despite sharing a similar lifestyle, were not

bound by the abaya and were allowed to drive. This observation highlights a transformative shift, indicating a trajectory towards greater empowerment for Saudi women, enabling them to make autonomous choices regarding clothing and personal expression, as discussed in chapter five. The evolving landscape suggests a departure from the constraints imposed by family or societal expectations, marking a significant step towards individual agency and self-expression.

“You had a generation that grew up; we had to wear the abaya, and the only expressive thing we could show was shoes or a handbag. And I think what's so interesting is that we looked at Kuwaiti women who have very similar lifestyles, but I think the difference is they were driving and didn't wear abaya. I think now we're going towards that.”
(Alaa Blakhy)

In a reflective post in 2021, Lina Malaika shared an interview from 2006 as a Dar Al-Hikma University student expressing a sense of yearning for change in abaya fashion (Figure 30). She conveyed her desire to break away from the prevalent trend of all Saudi women donning identical abaya designs. In her interview, where she shared photos she captured, Lina emphasized the dual purpose she envisions for the abaya – not only serving its functional role but also incorporating a subtle element of design. She said, *“The abaya should do its job and simultaneously have a small design element.”* When I asked her about her post (presented in Figure 30) during my interview, she said, *“One of my first businesses was designing more youthful and innovative abayas when there weren't any options in the market - and that was me expressing my creativity, and people responded to that, and it was a very successful venture - and that's how creatives pave the way by showing the culture new norms and trends”*. Lina Malaika's reflections highlight how fashion serves as both a medium of self-expression and a vehicle for cultural transformation. Her early interest in reimagining the abaya reflects a broader shift in Saudi Arabia, where women entrepreneurs have played a key role in reshaping societal expectations through creative innovation. By introducing youthful and distinctive abaya designs, Lina challenged the uniformity of traditional dress, paving the way for greater individuality in Saudi women's fashion. Her statement underscores how influential entrepreneurs not only respond to market demands but also actively contribute to shaping new cultural norms, reinforcing the evolving role of Saudi women in redefining modern femininity and national identity.

Figure 30 Lina Malaika's first abaya, with some color and design, only shows model hands from 2006.



Source: post from Lina Malaika's Instagram posts (March 12, 2021)

Despite the rich diversity in traditional fashion and textiles in Saudi Arabia, the predominant representation internationally has been the black abaya for over three decades. Arwa Al Ammari emphasizes the misconception that everyone in Saudi Arabia speaks the same way and wears the same clothes, highlighting the diverse regional cultures and customs contributing to the nation's richness. She notes that each region has unique characteristics, challenging the notion of a homogenous Saudi style.

As discussed in (Chapter 3.3.2.2), the material identity of Saudi women, once symbolized by the abaya, is evolving from a collective representation to a more personal one, reflecting their changing roles in a modernizing society. By examining the individual experiences of my case studies, we gain insight into the dynamics of dressing and working in the fashion and design industries in Saudi Arabia. These experiences highlight women's agency to challenge traditional norms and push for change even before significant societal transitions occurred. Marriam Mossalli and Alaa Balkhy highlight the ease and prevalence of women in

the fashion or design industry. At the same time, Arwa Al Ammari points out the past lack of support and serious consideration for women. Nasiba emphasizes the industry's focus on abaya design, with limited options for ready-to-wear fashion. Lina Malikah's experience as a student in 2006 illustrates the uniformity of abaya designs, prompting her to initiate changes independently. However, the landscape shifted significantly with Vision 2030 and the emergence of social media platforms in Saudi Arabia, a transformation to be explored in the subsequent section. The fashion Industry transition within the entrepreneurs' experience. In the interview, Marriam stated, *“The world always thinks that we suddenly get up and start doing stuff. I started my company in 2011.”*

Fashion, similar to culture, is a social process embedded in material practices, experiencing continuous cycles of change and continuity. Scholars like Kaiser and Green (2021) recognize the dynamic nature of fashion marked by novelty and change. In Saudi Arabia, my study focuses on the fashion industry and dress code for women, which have evolved and become increasingly global, drawing inspiration from diverse cultures, places, colors, and aesthetic ideas. The announcement of Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia has led to significant initiatives in design and fashion, fostering a youth culture that emphasizes individuality, extraordinariness, and exhilaration. This has challenged cultural and religious restrictions on Saudi women, transforming the societal landscape (Alblowi et al., 2021). Despite the evident transformation in the Saudi fashion industry and its movement towards modernization for economic and social advancement, there is a concerted effort to preserve cultural heritage in a more modernized form. As Entwistle (2023) argues, fashion goes beyond material objects, encompassing specific values and symbolic meanings. Repositioning fashion within the extensive lifespan of societies challenges the notion that it is merely an expression of a desire for admiration and individual distinctiveness. From this perspective, fashion emerges as a complex and exceptional sociohistorical reality intrinsic to the West and modernity. It is not merely a signifier of class ambition but a departure from traditional norms, marking a distinctive feature of contemporary societies.

Examining the narratives of my case studies, who have been active in the fashion industry for a decade in various roles, including cultural and creative consultations, PR and marketing, design, and fashion styling, we will delve into the impact of this societal transition on their professional journeys and agency within this transformative period.

7.2.1. Fashion industry transformation and the focus on culture

Arwa Al Ammari, Vice Chairperson of the Board of the first Saudi Fashion Association (Azyaona), emphasized in the interview the current internal trend in Saudi Arabia to focus on culture through fashion. Events like National Day provide opportunities to support local fashion heritage, aligning with the vision for 2030, where fashion plays a crucial role in promoting national culture. She noted the shift in appreciation for traditional clothing like niqab or borgaa, stating,

“Wearing niqab or borgaa wasn’t appreciated even internally, but now the situation is different; the Ministry of Culture is involved in supporting local fashion, making it a part of the cultural movement aligned with Vision 2030.” (Arwa Al Ammari)

Arwa highlighted the multifaceted efforts contributing to this shift, emphasizing that *“Fashion is now part of the cultural identity, whether traditional or non-traditional. Many use fashion to promote culture, whether they take inspiration from culture or not. It's all part of supporting that. However, it's not just one thing; one idea won't push it. It's the combination of efforts that is making a difference.” (Arwa Al Ammari)*

Reflecting on her experience, Arwa shared how Vision 2030 significantly focused on culture, elevating fashion as a foundational element. In 2019, she achieved a notable milestone when her creative work at Aram Designs was covered by BBC World, reaching 50 million people worldwide. She described it as significant for her brand: “The world got to learn about Saudi heritage through our fashion.” Acknowledging the challenges, she mentioned the substantial effort she invested in attending lectures and meeting university professors to gain in-depth knowledge about Saudi culture. She emphasized the drastic change since 2019: “There has been a qualitative leap.” Arwa proudly shared the impact of her work, stating, “It truly succeeds because there are people in America who have started asking, ‘What Is ALSadu?’” Al Sadu craft (weaving) is one of the ancient traditional crafts practiced by Bedouin women in the Arabian Gulf and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Canavan & Alnajadah, 2013).

Furthermore, Lina Malaika highlighted the shift in societal appreciation for the creative and design industry. She noted, “The only difference I witnessed in recent years is that people are finally aware and appreciative of creative people. Society slowly and surely appreciates and understands the importance of creativity and arts, with much support from government

initiatives that help my fellow creatives and me." Alaa Balky emphasized the economic impact of the fashion and design industry, stating, " It moves the economy. She adds We've always been interested in fashion. Beauty is important to us, and now we're just showcasing it."

Rawan Kattoa shared how the changes and progress in Saudi society, particularly with the Vision 2030 initiative, impacted her life. She highlighted the richness of Saudi culture by saying, "Today, we are learning about Saudi culture day by day. We are learning and discovering new places in Saudi Arabia we, even as Saudis, didn't know about it before." Rawan appreciated the Ministry of Culture's support, citing initiatives like the Saudi Cup and 100 Saudi Brands, which provided a platform for influencers and celebrities to showcase their work. She also noted collaborations with events like the Red Sea Film Festival, where Saudi brands were featured on the red carpet.

7.2.2. Noticing the transition in dress wear

Rawan Kattoa, a stylist and fashion entrepreneur, offers valuable insights into the evolving fashion scene in Saudi Arabia, especially in how influencers and celebrities express their style. She observes the diverse fashion preferences among influencers, noting that *"some talents, they want certain brands, while others are attending shows and they have to wear from the shows to be more relevant."* Rawan further explains that specific contexts often influence fashion choices, such as the need to "create content" for social media or television programs that receive wide coverage. She emphasizes that fashion decisions are also shaped by personal factors, stating, "It depends on her body," as well as her "time," "personality," and "tone of color." These considerations and one's budget play a significant role in determining style. While Rawan maintains a sense of loyalty to her cultural values, she also accepts that influencers and fashionistas are free to express their individuality through fashion, adding, "I follow the values that we have, but some influencers have their own choice. It's about her image." This reflects a massive shift for Saudi women, especially when compared to the past when they were primarily seen wearing the abaya in public. This change demonstrates the growing freedom of self-expression and the balance between individuality and cultural norms, where fashion now serves as a platform for personal identity and respect for cultural values.

Furthermore, Marriam Mossalli referred to the Red Sea Film Festival in the interview,

where she observed a significant change in how Saudi women dressed. She noticed that international women attending the festival wore tight dresses and covered their bodies, which aligned with conservative dress codes. However, she also observed young women from Jeddah (Jeddawi girls) dressing more openly, a departure from traditional norms. In essence, Marriam highlights the cultural shift and the evolving fashion choices of young Saudi women, which global fashion trends and a desire for more freedom of expression may have influenced.

“Look at the Red Sea Film Festival. It was the first year you saw international women coming, and because it was Saudi, yes, they wore tight dresses, their bodies were covered, and everything was covered. Look at the Jeddawi girl. Everything open. And I couldn't believe that our young Saudi girl was dressing like this. But again, this was maybe also the older generation, especially in this industry film, that felt they wanted to be separated from the web”. (Marriam Mossalli)

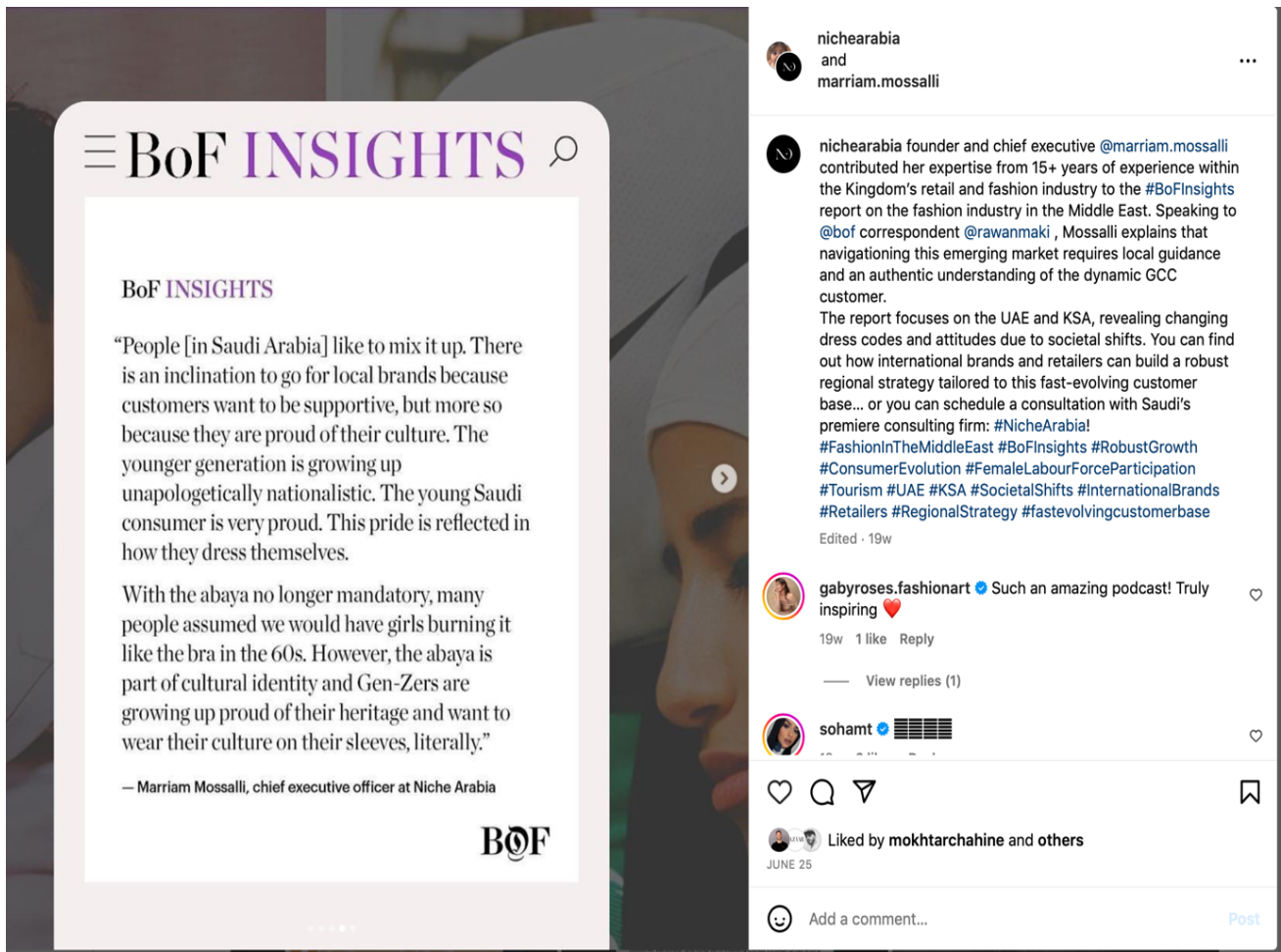
Nasiba Hafiz, a ready-to-wear designer, reflected on how her dress style underwent a significant transformation after Vision 2030. She stated, *"Of course, it has. 100%, 360 degrees. It affected my lifestyle"*. She emphasized her efforts to push boundaries in fashion shoots, saying, *"Previously, maybe all your designs were shot indoors, but recently we can see no, I did so many shoots of me outdoors before it was okay to shoot outdoors. So, yeah, I do like to push those boundaries a little bit, and it just means that we're a little bit more open, and we want to show the world who we are."*

7.2.3. Shopping behaviors transition in terms of cultural modernization.

In Figure 31, Marriam provides valuable insights into Saudi women's shopping behaviors and fashion choices. Her words reflect a deeper understanding of the Saudi cultural identity and its unique impact on the fashion industry. Marriam points out the inclination of people in Saudi Arabia to blend local brands into their fashion choices, not only as a show of support but also as a manifestation of cultural pride. This insight is critical because it speaks to the distinctiveness of Saudi consumer behavior, setting it apart from neighboring markets like Dubai and Kuwait. In the context of cultural shifts and evolving norms in Saudi Arabia, Marriam addresses the changing status of the abaya, which is no longer mandatory. Contrary to some expectations, there hasn't been a wholesale abandonment of this traditional garment.

Instead, Marriam highlights that the abaya remains a significant part of the cultural identity for many, particularly the younger generation (gen-zers). They proudly choose to wear their culture, symbolizing the resilience and adaptability of cultural elements within contemporary fashion.

Figure 31 Marriam Mossalli shared important data about abaya from her podcast with BoF



Source: post from Marriam Mossalli Instagram posts (June 25, 2023)

Marriam words in her interview with the BoF Podcast, we can observe the alignment between her spoken words and the visual content look (figure32). Marriam's insights in her interview highlight the transformative cultural changes underway in Saudi Arabia, leading to the development of a shared cultural identity. This evolving identity exerts a significant influence not only on the fashion industry but also on various creative sectors in the Middle East.

Figure 32 Marriam Mossalli shared important data about cultural change and influencers from her podcast with BoF



Source: post from Marriam Mossalli Instagram posts (June 26, 2023)

“Saudi Arabia's fashion industry is on the rise, thanks to changing regulations, new funding, and an influx of creative talent. The country is fostering the growth of the region's fashion industry by encouraging creative work from designers, influencers, and stylists. In particular, the Kingdom has introduced social and economic reforms to grow its cultural economy and attract foreign investment, contributing to the fashion industry's growth”. “With the integration of women into the labor force, fashion in the region has evolved to suit working women’s lives. Trends like “modest wear” have grown. “What we’re seeing is its [garments] changing ... Light fabrics, shorter, so that it doesn’t get caught inside our car door or the wheels of our office chair. It’s made now for us with that lifestyle in mind.” (Marriam Mossalli).

7.2.4. Abaya's style changed to follow the women's new lifestyle

Arwa Al Ammari elaborated on the changes in the abaya, stating, *"Look, there are two elements to this topic. Firstly, regarding the abaya, now it's allowed for women to wear it or not, but the majority still adhere to it because it's part of their identity. The second thing is that Saudi women love elegance and sophistication. They like feminine clothing even to the extent that when foreigners come, they buy abayas and wear them because they like how it looks"*.

In addition, she added, *"The second aspect is about the cuts, silhouettes, and the design of the abayas. There has been a significant change in them because women's lives have changed. They shop, they go to the office, so the design of abayas, the loose ones with a lot of fabric, has changed because women need to be more practical to enable them to carry out the details of their daily lives, whether it's driving or working in the office. From this perspective, there has been a change. Even the colors have changed. Women now wear more colors than before. Dark colors used to dominate, but now there is a change in colors. If you look at my account and the abayas we offer with our designs as a brand, they look different and have a lot of changes. This is a very significant change. It might have seemed like something from the realm of fantasy in 2012 and 2013, but now this has become normal. So, there's been a significant transformation in clothing, but the identity associated with the abaya is still present. They are still holding onto it, even for those who do not wear the hijab or the abaya"*. (Arwa Alammari)

7.3.The impact of social media, particularly Instagram, on the evolution of the fashion scene

In the initial segment of this chapter, I delved into the roles and experiences of my case studies within the fashion industry amidst the transformative reforms of Vision 2030. This section will concentrate on the involvement of influential Saudi entrepreneurs in intercultural communication and explore the reciprocal impact between their global marketing practices and their cultural roots. The analysis aims to scrutinize how these entrepreneurs engage with diverse communities, bridging their cultural identities with the international commercial culture and contributing to intercultural dialogue. A key focus will be on addressing one of the questions of this study: How do influential Saudi entrepreneurs utilize their Instagram

platforms to integrate their cultural heritage with the global commercial culture?

The subsequent analysis in this chapter is structured around four key themes, investigating how my case studies engage in and foster cross-cultural communication through their collaborations with both local and international brands on Instagram. As we explore how new media and modernization contribute to changes in the cultural identity of these influential entrepreneurs, manifested through their real-life practices and their online presence on the Instagram platform, the following four main themes will be discussed: Fashion as a Cultural Product Delivered Through Advertisement, Fashion as a Tool for Cultural Storytelling to Change Negative Narratives, Fashion as a Means of Injecting Money and Branding Saudi Arabia culture change.

7.3.1. Fashion has become a cultural product delivered by advertisements “global brands and the Saudi local market”

In examining how influential Saudi entrepreneurs use Instagram to express their cultural identity, mainly through collaborations and influencer marketing, it is essential to understand their role in bridging local and global fashion markets. As noted in Chapter 3, the presence of global brands does not automatically translate to a worldwide consumer base; understanding local consumers is essential for international brands. This section draws from case studies to explore the experiences of Saudi entrepreneurs, focusing on their work on Instagram and their collaborative efforts with local and global brands.

A key question in this context is how these entrepreneurs craft cultural messages through fashion-related posts and project collaborations. Do they maintain the product's original identity while introducing new dressing standards to their audience? Or do they strive to integrate global commercial trends with local cultural roots to preserve their identity? The narratives from my case study participants provide valuable insights into how Saudi influencers navigate this delicate balance, revealing the dynamics of intercultural communication between local entrepreneurs and global and regional brands. This analysis highlights the evolving nature of the fashion industry in Saudi Arabia, where cultural identity and commercial interests intersect.

Marriam Mossalli, the founder of Niche Arabia, a leading marketing and communications firm specializing in fashion activations in Saudi Arabia, highlighted the challenges brands face when trying to localize their campaigns. She explained the issue with many global brands that attempt to tailor their strategies to the Saudi market:

"I think it's hilarious because it's all about Saudizing now. We've gone to a thing where we've overdone it, where we call it now cultural washing. So, for example, you'll see all these activations happening in the ballad (historical Jeddah). The brand has been the ballad. They're in Alaula? and they just put the product in front of the background of ALULA, and they say, yes, this is Saudi now, looking gestures that don't have any depth. And I think that's the problem with brands: in the beginning, they were so strict about their brand DNA, but because of social media, we've changed that. Now we have, let's say, L'Oreal Middle East, L'Oreal Asia, so they've done that, and then the content there has become so localized but artificial."

Through her commentary, Mossalli critiques the practice of overly simplifying the localization process, which can result in a lack of authenticity. She points out that brands, to make their content more relevant to local audiences, sometimes lose their original identity or “brand DNA” in the process. By relying too heavily on superficial cultural elements—such as placing products against iconic backdrops like AlUla—brands risk undermining their credibility and failing to connect with the true essence of Saudi culture. Mossalli suggests this reflects a form of “cultural washing,” where localization is done for appearances rather than meaningful integration into the culture. The consequence, she believes, is that such campaigns, while seemingly tailored to the region, come across as artificial and lack the depth necessary for genuine engagement with the audience.

In Figure 33, a post shared by Marriam Mossalli, we see two camels in the Saudi desert with a Channel mirror makeup powder placed in the frame. In the caption, Marriam reflects on her journey, stating that she spent years advocating for global brands to invest in the Saudi market. She highlights how the situation has evolved over the past decade, with brands now showing keen interest in the Saudi market. Marriam, in the caption said “10 years ago when I first started [@nichearabia](#), I had to fly to Dubai, where all brand’s headquarters for the Middle East was located, and literally beg brands to trust us in order to create unique activations within the kingdom 🇸🇦 Fast-forward to today, when most brands are

choosing [#Riyadh](#) & [#Jeddah](#) as the location of their new flagship boutiques.. 🤔 We're seeing MORE than just an INTEREST in Saudi 🙌🙌🙌 We're seeing brands actually doing it!!”

Figure 33 Two camels in the Saudi desert with a Channel mirror makeup powder placed in the frame



Source: post from Marriam Mossalli Instagram (February 26, 2020)

Regarding localizing content, she adds :

"I think that communication should speak the language of your consumer, but when it's a product offering, that should be true to your brand DNA. And I think if, for example, I don't want to go and buy Mark Jacobs because a Saudi designer co-designed with Mark Jacobs. I want to buy Mark Jacobs because it's a quintessential New York City brand, and I like that brand's DNA. And that's why I'm buying Mark Jacob. If I want a Saudi version of it, I'll go and buy a local designer. I don't need the capsule collections with every local pop-up, whatever crap. Why do you buy Burberry? You don't want Burberry, Saudi. I want Burberry. I want British traditional". (Marriam Mossalli)

Marriam Mossalli expressed her thoughts on cultural appropriation and the challenges brands face when navigating cultural boundaries. She shared her frustration with terms like "cultural appropriation," arguing that they sometimes oversimplify the complexities of cultural exchange, particularly in the fashion industry. In her view, it's not about prohibiting others from engaging with your culture but about creating opportunities for them to understand it better. She stated:

"I hate the words cancel. I hate the words cultural appropriation. I think there's a fine line about how we kind of tell people, oh, God, you can't do that, because it's really in this field specifically it is by not allowing people, but inviting them to learn about your culture. This is an issue, and I understand there's, oh, you need to work with local artisans and consultants." (Marriam Mossalli)

She believes the key is encouraging external parties to engage with and learn from local cultures rather than shutting them out. She emphasizes how a culture communicates its values and traditions—primarily through design and branding—can reveal its authenticity. Local people are the ones who can provide insight into what truly represents the culture. She suggests that the authenticity of a brand or project can only be determined when local perspectives are integrated, especially when collaborating with regional artisans and experts. Mossalli advocates for an open and inclusive approach, where external partners are invited to understand and contribute to the culture in a way that aligns with its true essence rather than just appropriating it superficially. This ensures that the cultural exchange remains respectful and genuine.

She noted whether Saudis are losing their traditional culture in the global market: *"I think before, like ten years ago, I could say, okay, but nowadays we're becoming more global, and our aesthetic is becoming more synchronized. And I think, again, the phenomenon that's happening globally because every Saudi girl is also following Kendall Jenner, not just, I don't know, manifest. But that being said, I think it's not about losing your culture. I think everyone, again, is globalized. I'm half past; it's how you're communicating, what you're representing. I think people also tend to forget that, especially as, let's say, celebrity influencers. You're a role model to a lot of these people."* Mossalli acknowledges blending global trends with local culture but asserts that this doesn't mean Saudi culture is being lost. Instead, it's about how

individuals represent themselves in this globalized space. She stresses that as role models, influencers must be mindful of their cultural identity while engaging with global trends, maintaining authenticity and responsibility in their representation.

In Figure 34, Marriam Mossalli highlights the role of her marketing consultancy agency, Niche Arabia, in tailoring communication strategies for international brands entering the Saudi market. She emphasizes their transition to assisting local clients in expanding their global presence. In the caption, she wrote: “For the past ten years, Niche Arabia has been responsible for “auditing” communication strategies for international brands wanting to enter the Saudi market... now we are happy to assist our local clients with their international presence! #ExportingOurCulture not just #ImportingTheWest 🤔👉 #SaudiPride 🇸🇦🇸🇦🇸🇦🇸🇦 #ThisIsHowWeRoll #SaudiArabia #KSA #Vision2030 #Saudi #NicheArabia #SaudiTalent

Figure 34 Marriam Mossalli is trying by this photo to symbolize how she was (Saudizing) global brands, As we see Saudi women with niqab with Macdonlds logo on her hands.

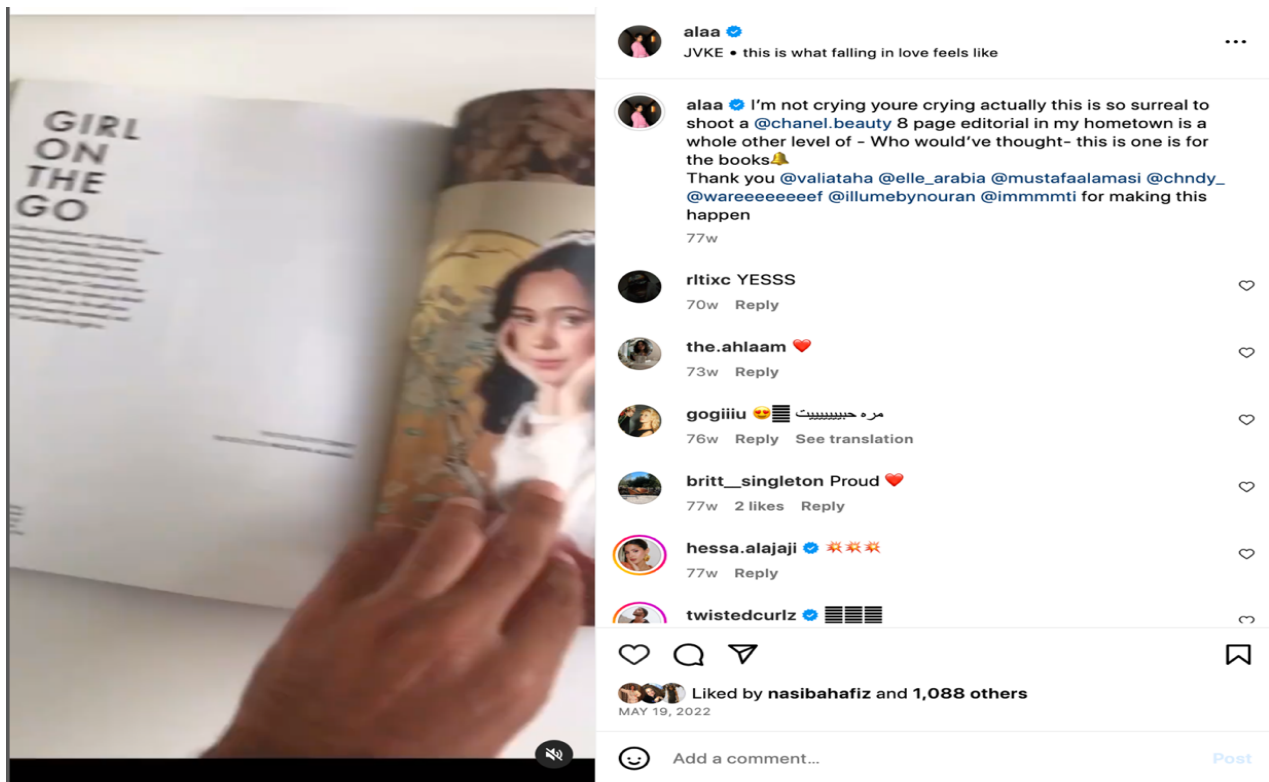


Source: post from Marriam Mossalli Instagram (February 23, 2020)

Contrarily, Alaa Balky, a cultural consultant at Vogue magazine and influential entrepreneur, shared her perspective on collaborating with international brands: *"I think it takes my career to a more serious level, not just working and being the face, but also getting to know the people that are working in these houses. For me, it's important to meet people from the headquarters in Paris or New York. You get in indirectly"*. Regarding her preference for working with international or local brands, Alaa expressed, *"I think international brands are great. Still, local brands are great, and I would like to work with both."*

When asked about the demands of international brands, she mentioned, *"No, they just don't understand the culture. They're very understanding."* Reflecting on her collaboration with Chanel look figure 35, Alaa highlighted the significance of shooting in Jeddah instead of Dubai: *"I think it was a win for me because they wanted initially to shoot in Dubai, because, for them, it's like, oh, let's just shoot anywhere in the region. And for me, it was important to shoot in Jeddah. These small things matter to me because Dubai is not Jeddah, and Jeddah is not Riyadh. Every place has its own. For me, it just meant a lot to shoot in Jeddah because I relate to it. And for a brand that I love so much, for us to be able to shoot here was nice."*

Figure 35 Alaa sharing her collaboration with Chanel



Source: post from Alaa Balky's Instagram (May 19, 2022)

Alaa emphasized the importance of understanding the unique characteristics of each city:

"Every city is different. You can't copy and paste an event in Dubai, Jeddah, and Riyadh. Jeddah is different. Realist is different. You need to understand what's happening. You need to be open. You need to hire people from the local market who can explain things to you, but they're very knowledgeable. Very aware. They're trying to be very aware and taking the right steps because it's about time." (Alaa balky)

On representing Saudi culture through international brand collaborations, Alaa agreed with Marriam Mossalli, stating, *"It depends on the campaign and what they're trying to do. Every situation is different. If they want to highlight culture, or if they don't, I think it's just like, we don't have to interfere with Saudi culture in everything! It's like expecting Japanese women to wear a kimono everywhere they go, and they eat sushi, and they're just like, you don't have to be that all the time; you are where you're from. But I don't have to carry that with me constantly."*

On the flip side, Lina Malaika shared her insights on collaborating with international brands:

"I only work with luxury brands that hire me as a Saudi female creative to represent their brand. And sometimes I do it for fun. As a filmmaker or creative consultant, I work with many international brands behind the camera. These brands need to cater to our market, and they need people like me to help guide them. The great shift is that global brands now understand that it's important to implement culture and heritage creatively in their campaigns to appeal to their target audience, and that's what I do with my creative and cultural consultancy." (Lina Malaika)

In figure 36, Lina Malaika illustrates her endeavor to portray modern Arab women while steadfastly embracing her heritage. This aligns with the study's findings, indicating that these influential entrepreneurs aim to embody a globalized yet culturally rooted identity. The photo prominently features Lina adorned in traditional Saudi attire against the backdrop of a historical location in Saudi Arabia, specifically AlUla. In the caption Lina stated "Stepped outside my comfort zone to be part of the new Ramadan Campaign showcasing what it means to be a modern Arab while still holding on to our heritage. It was really fun to do this along side such inspiring women."

Figure 36 Lina Malaika showcasing what it means to be a modern arab woman being a model for the Sephoramiddleeast Ramadan campaign



Source: post from Lina Malaika (March 23, 2023)

Rawan Katto, a prominent fashion entrepreneur and stylist, shared insights into her collaborations with local and international brands, highlighting the distinctive aspects of each. She expressed her appreciation for the uniqueness of the Saudi and global markets, emphasizing the importance of catering to local preferences and cultural nuances. According to Rawan,

“When you work with Maison de Valentino, I would say, like Valentino or Dior. With this history of years and reputation, it's something amazing. But also when you work with an authentic, locally made, and homemade original. I don't have a preference, but once you see my work, you will see that I work a lot with local and homemade designers because it's part of my, I would say, objective and part of my identity to showcase any Saudi girls' culture to the world”. (Rawan Katto)

When working with local brands, Rawan sees it as an opportunity to highlight the progress made by Saudi women. She believes these collaborations shed light on historical places, women, and fashion, providing a holistic view of Saudi Arabia and its women's evolution. As she said,

“When you work with local brands, and it shows the progression happened to the Saudi women, you are shedding light on historical places, women, fashion, everything related to Saudi Arabia or women in Saudi Arabia.” (Rawan Katto)

Rawan aligns with Alaa in noting that international brands are not demanding but respectful of the local culture. Her expertise is sought for her fashion sense and her understanding of Saudi culture, which proves crucial when planning activations and strategies specifically tailored for the Saudi market. In her words: *“No, the opposite. They respect the culture, and they choose me because I'm part of the culture, because they need someone who understands it”*.

Nasiba Hafiz emphasizes the importance of aligning values when considering collaborations with international brands. Drawing a parallel to relationships, she likens collaboration to a partnership where shared values and interests are pivotal. For Nasiba, collaboration hinges on finding common ground and shared values, much like the foundation of a friendship or marriage.

“If there were a chance to collaborate with international brands, I would have to align my values with theirs and see if we share something. When you marry someone, you have to share something. When you're friends with someone, you have to share things; why do you become friends? Why do you get married? Why would I collaborate with someone who doesn't have the same values or share the same interests and things that I share?” (Nasiba Hafiz)

Highlighting her commitment to particular causes, Nasiba mentions her work with charities and women and the revival of traditional embroidery in the Arab world. These endeavors, aligned with her values, aim to preserve Arab and Islamic heritage. For Nasiba,

having a purpose in her collaborations is essential, as it reflects shared values and contributes to preserving cultural and Islamic elements integral to her identity.

“So when I work with charities, when I work with women, when I work with reviving a type of embroidery around the world, in the Arab world, this is aligned with my values because I want to keep the Arab and the Islamic because these are part of my values and having a purpose, it's what makes us. And what we have to show people”. (Nasiba Hafiz)

Regarding her preference for working with international or local brands, Nasiba expresses:

"Both. I work with both. I feel like with international brands I learn, and with local brands, maybe I learn, and I teach. It's both." (Nasiba Hafiz)

She explains what she teaches: *"Sometimes with local brands, they come to me because they want my input or my experience. And with international, it's the other way around".* She emphasizes having more freedom to express herself authentically when collaborating with local brands. In contrast, working with international brands feels more like following their lead, especially with big companies that may have specific limitations and guidelines. While she acknowledges not having extensive experience with big international brands, she notes that alignment with a brand's values is crucial. Nasiba concludes, *"If you don't align with the brand and don't identify with the brand, maybe you can say no."*

Arwa Al Ammari, unlike other influential entrepreneurs, focuses on fashion's capability to promote Saudi culture by introducing local Saudi brands to the international fashion scene. She emphasizes,

"Many use fashion to promote culture, whether or not they take inspiration from culture. It's all part of supporting that. However, it's not just one thing; one idea won't push it. It's the combination of efforts that is making a difference. Saudi Arabia has started large projects attracting global attention, such as NEOM, the Red Sea film festival". (Arwa Al Ammari)

Arwa Al Ammari's approach differs from that of other influential entrepreneurs. Instead of aiding international brands in accessing the local Saudi market or attempting to convey Saudi culture through collaborations, she focuses on introducing her brand to the global market. As a designer who participated in the 100 Exhibition in New York and dressed Hollywood actress Eva Herzigova in the #AIUlaCreates program from @filmalula,⁹ she reflects on this experience, stating, "I'm introducing a standard about Saudi fashion. I'm showing that I can compete with international brands. Along with the Ministry of Culture and the Fashion Commission, we aspire for all Saudi designers and brands to be on the fashion map and take the lead. For example, we strive to be part of the fashion calendar, participating in fashion weeks in Paris, Milan, New York, and London.

Arwa provides a unique perspective on the impact of Saudi influencers, asserting that they don't have a significant international audience. According to her, their role is more about helping international brands understand the Saudi market better. She clarifies, "They are not delivering our culture to the international market; Saudi fashionistas and Influencers don't have an international audience, meaning the high number of their viewers in Saudi Arabia, GCC, or the Arab world." Arwa, in contrast, uses high-profile events like the Oscars to showcase Saudi culture. For instance, when an international actor wore a dress inspired by AIUla at the Vanity Fair Oscars, Arwa aimed to generate interest and inquiries about AIUla look figure 37. She explains, "It's a way to tease people to get interested in searching and reading about it. Because even if my brand becomes an international brand, it's not this audience that I care about. When I dress this international actor, I want to do it for my country, Saudi culture, and identity as a Saudi woman." Arwa focuses not solely on selling her products but on delivering and promoting Saudi culture to a broader audience. Her approach reflects a deeper sense of national representation, where fashion is not merely a business venture but a means of cultural diplomacy. By dressing international figures in Saudi-inspired designs, she leverages global platforms to spark curiosity and awareness about Saudi heritage. This aligns with a broader movement among influential Saudi women who seek to redefine cultural identity on the world stage, reinforcing a shift from passive representation to active cultural advocacy.

⁹For more information, visit the official instagram account <https://www.instagram.com/filmalula/>

Figure 37 Eva Herzigova wears Arwa Alammari design inspired by a historical place called ALULA



Source: from Arwa ALammari's Instagram posts (March 15, 2023)

7.3.2. Fashion is a tool for Cultural storytelling To Change the negative narrative

Suh (2020) highlighted the democratization of fashion in the digital space. Unlike in the past, where high fashion was primarily accessible to privileged groups, social media platforms have democratized the fashion landscape. Individuals from various backgrounds can publicly express and share their fashion, eroding the exclusivity once associated with high fashion. Furthermore, the study implies that information and communication technologies in the digital age have created a new cultural space and elevated fashion's role in shaping and recording visible identities. Advancements in communication technologies present not only technological advancements but also opportunities for cultural development. Our internet-dominated world will persist in influencing and shaping how we interact with others and perceive ourselves. (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

Structuration interaction refers to the dynamic interplay between social structures and individual agency during social interactions. It recognizes that social structures offer a framework and resources for social actions, while individual agency influences and sustains those structures through everyday interactions. In her speech, Marriam Mossalli discussed her pivotal role in reshaping negative narratives through her work. She emphasized her ultimate goal as "exporting culture," underscoring the importance of public relations and cultural dissemination. She highlighted the significance of exporting Saudi culture and noted the emerging governmental strategies aligned with this vision. Initially motivated by a desire to represent Saudi Arabia, she now focuses on broadening the narrative beyond national borders. Moreover, she added,

“Even our local stories we were thinking for broiders, we weren't writing ourselves. So, I started writing stuff, not just taking press releases, and it started us wanting to tell our narrative. That's why I did under the abaya book via Everything I Do and Saudi style council, and it's all about Saudis owning their narrative and telling the world their story, not the world playing their story for them. And I think what has happened over these past twelve years is that I am proud to say that I fulfilled my ambition of being the PR for Saudi Arabia.” (Marriam Mosalli)

The post below (Figure 38) captures Marriam Mossalli's belief that meaningful change in Saudi Arabia must be communicated through the country's cultural lens rather than adopting the vocabulary of Western activism. Her commitment to narrating Saudi Arabia's transformation from within highlights her dedication to authentic cultural representation. The magazine's title and subtitle, *“A new generation of Saudi women faces the future,”* underscore the profound shifts in women's roles, signaling a departure from traditional narratives toward a more dynamic and self-defined identity. Mossalli's strategic engagement with global media outlets like TIME magazine illustrates the power of fashion and media as tools for cultural storytelling. By engaging with international audiences, she ensures that Saudi women's evolving roles are represented on their own terms, rather than through Western-centric feminist narratives. This perspective aligns with the broader movement of Saudi female entrepreneurs and influencers, reinforcing the narrative of Saudi women as active agents of change who are shaping their future while preserving and celebrating their cultural identity.

Figure 38 Marriam Mossalli sharing a photo from *Time* magazine on the cover Saudi woman with hijab driving a car with the title keys to the kingdom



Source: from Marriam Mossalli's Instagram posts (July 1, 2018)

Furthermore, Marriam highlighted her involvement in a governmental project facilitated by her marketing and PR agency, which focused on promoting Saudi Arabia through the Formula 1 event. She described her role in creating PR communication strategies, stating,

"And those events, we're inviting Mohammed Hadid and these people to come and learn about Saudi and then go back to the States and talk about, oh my God. When I was in Saudi F One, the people were friendly, the girls were beautiful, and they were interesting; this is what we want. And I changed the stereotype image." (Marriam Mossalli)

I also believe there's a lot of politics involved when it comes to how both Saudi Arabia and the West portray each other in written content. Marriam mentioned the "Under The Abaya" fashion street book initiative, previously discussed in the feminism chapter, and how she framed it as a woman empowerment book disguised as a fashion guide to appeal to international

magazines. She recounted her experience with international editors, stating,

"We flew in and invited some editors from New York, and then they said, we don't want to write about Saudi Arabia. So then, why the hell did you come? You just want a free trip. They're selectively biased when they want, but then when? Now, let's say we do the Andy Warhol Museum in ALAULA. They'll all come because they want to see Andy Warhol stuff. So it's really funny that even now when we want to get, let's say, like I just told you the story, some New York editors don't want to publish our shit, it's okay. Before any, we would always say push it. But now it's like, okay, you don't want to push it, that's your loss. And guess what? You're not invited to the next big thing now in Saudi." (Marriam Mossalli)

Marriam Mossalli reflects on the shift in how international media, particularly New York editors, treat Saudi Arabia. Previously, these editors would dismiss Saudi events as irrelevant despite being invited. Now, she points out the irony, noting that they are eager to cover high-profile events like an Andy Warhol exhibition. She expresses frustration with this selective bias, emphasizing that such behavior is no longer tolerated. Mossalli asserts that those who reject Saudi initiatives are missing out, highlighting the country's growing cultural influence and the shifting power dynamic where Saudi Arabia no longer needs international validation. She also remarks on the newfound confidence among Saudis, stating that they no longer need to beg the West for a favorable portrayal. Instead, she emphasizes that those who refuse to deliver the true narrative will ultimately lose out in this evolving landscape.

In Figure 39, Marriam Mossalli articulates that Saudis have not only opened their doors to the West but also aspire to export their culture globally. This statement underscores the ongoing intercultural communication facilitated by fashion, highlighting that it's not just the West influencing the East but also the East endeavoring to convey its narrative and culture. Marriam Mossalli's participation in *Curated Conversations* highlights her role in shaping discussions around Saudi Arabia's evolving luxury market and the broader socio-economic transformation under Vision 2030. In the Instagram post (Figure 39), she engages in a dialogue with Rohma Theunissen, sharing insights on the rapid changes taking place in the Kingdom, the evolving Saudi consumer landscape, and the key factors for success in one of the world's fastest-growing emerging markets. Mossalli not only amplifies the narrative of Saudi Arabia's transformation but also positions herself as a key voice in bridging global luxury markets with

the Kingdom's unique cultural and economic shift.

Figure 39 Marriam Mossalli sharing a quote from an interview she did



Source: from Marriam Mossalli's Instagram posts (March 7, 2021)

Furthermore, Arwa AlAmmari shed light on governmental initiatives to export Saudi culture through fashion designers participating in the Saudi 100 Brands project. This initiative involves a global traveling exhibition featuring a curated selection of clothing and accessories from 100 Saudi designers. These talented designers were selected from nearly 1500 candidates to create pieces that reflect Saudi heritage and culture across eight categories: ready-to-wear, modest, concept, premiere, demi-couture, bridal, bags, and jewelry.

When asked about the impact of these initiatives on changing the stereotypical image of Saudi women, Arwa AlAmmari remarked,

"The image of Saudi women has indeed changed, but there is still a stereotypical view that needs to change. When people come to Saudi Arabia, they see a different reality, but there is still a stereotypical view, and we need to change that. False media representations have perpetuated a distorted image of Saudi Arabia for many years. Our image still needs refinement." She continued, "So, now when I look at a Pakistani

woman or if I haven't been there and haven't met them, I might have a certain perception based on media stereotypes, like, 'Oh, poor thing.' Therefore, there is a shift nowadays, and Saudi Arabia is making every effort. For example, significant projects and the implementation of easy electronic visas aim to facilitate visits and provide a closer look into Saudi Arabia for a better understanding. Our efforts play a role; they are joint efforts. For instance, our trips to Paris, Milan, or any place to participate in global fashion events." (Arwa Al Ammari)

Lina Malaika also acknowledged the existence of a stereotypical image of Saudi women, stating;

"I do believe that there's a stereotype for Saudi women in the world, and that narrative was always frustrating for me. So, I'm glad that the truth can be finally told, and social media helped with that." (Lina Malaika)

In Figure 40, Lina Malaika shared a statement as a creative director, expressing how her generation is finally paving the way forward and sharing the Saudi narrative from their perspective. She also mentioned how she is inspired and motivated by her heritage.

Figure 40 Malaika sharing thoughts about Saudi culture



Source: from Lina Malaika's Instagram posts (September 24, 2021)

Additionally, Rawan Kattoo shed light on how global brands have evolved and now recognize the potential of Saudi youth, leading to a change in the stereotypical image. She stated, "They understand how the culture is now full of young girls and youth. They want to understand the market. They want to have stories with these real people. And that's why you can see luxury brands they might be able to do. Their brands have Saudi talents or actresses as ambassadors for them. This is the first time in history if you want to be part of the success of history and the successive emergence of our cultural roots with global market culture."

7.3.3. The Global Interest in the Saudi Market: A Fusion of Economic Potential and Branding Opportunities

One of the most crucial inquiries in my research interviews revolves around the interest of global brands in entering the Saudi market, considering that historically, their focus was primarily on other Gulf regions. Whether this interest stems from economic-commercial motives or genuine cultural interests is the underlying question. The responses from my case studies echoed similar sentiments, albeit expressed in varying words. Arwa Al Ammari emphasized,

"The international brands are endeavoring to assert their dominance in the local market and industry, driven by the significant purchasing power in the GCC region. With global economic challenges, a notable shift in buying and selling patterns has occurred. There's a distinct focus on this region, akin to the attention given to countries like China or Japan, owing to their substantial population and consumer interest. For example, Dolce & Gabbana tailored a collection of abayas for the Gulf market. Similarly, Karl Lagerfeld introduced a resort collection inspired by Dubai during his time at Chanel. The emphasis here lies on the Gulf's economic potential rather than cultural appreciation." (Arwa Al Ammari)

Furthermore, she added that governmental projects empower Saudi culture by promoting local fashion. She stated,

"The Ministry of Culture is involved in supporting local fashion. Fashion is becoming part of the cultural movement aligned with Vision 2030. It's not just one thing; multiple factors

work together towards one goal. Fashion is now integrated into the cultural identity, whether traditional or contemporary. Many use fashion to promote culture, whether they draw direct inspiration from it or not. It's all part of supporting that. However, it's not just one initiative; one idea alone won't suffice. It's the collective efforts that are making a difference. Saudi Arabia has embarked on large-scale projects garnering global attention, such as NEOM and the Red Sea Film Festival. Additionally, there is collaboration in the film industry, notably with AlUla Film.” (Arwa Al Ammari)

On another note, Alaa Balky expressed,

“Collaborations with international brands happen because everyone's getting paid. I think it is the local, the regional agencies that don't get it.” (Alaa Balky)

Alaa drew attention to the issue of campaigns being executed superficially, lacking proper representation of local culture due to the oversight of hiring the right people or local Saudi artists. She elaborated,

“So you have people that are not Saudi, and they don't get it. For them, they're hearing men in HQ, and all Saudi is important. For them, it's like, 'Oh yeah, we can hire.' For them, it's just filling a quota. It's not like they care. It's not like they want to empower. They don't have a connection to Saudi, and I get it if you have someone who's not from the region, they don't have a connection to it. To them, it's not their main thing.” (Alaa Balky)

Regarding international brands, she commented, “Real is different. You need to understand what's happening. You need to be open. You need to hire people from the local market who can explain things to you, but they're very knowledgeable. Very aware. They're trying to be very aware and taking the right steps because it's about time.”

Moreover, Marriam Mossalli clearly said: *“What happened is Saudi became cool because of the money, because of the project, because we're the ones when you look around the rest of the world, and because of that, the media interest is there. And now they want to tell our stories. Whereas before we fight to tell our stories, the field of industry is moving, and the country is moving in all the fields. So everybody is interested”.* (Marriam Mossalli)

In contrast, Rawan Kattoa found that these international brands are enriching the market, and they have both economic and cultural interests, as she stated;

“I think it's an enriching market with a lot of potential. And for any brand, they want to be part of it. They want to be part of this change. Of course, they will think about commercials and sales at the end of the day because they have products to sell. But that's the end goal. But you can see so many brands who are not only doing, I would say, collaborations or events just to sell because Saudis were already there even before this vision. The shopping behavior is extreme. Even outside Saudi Arabia, they want to leverage their potential and be vigilant about what's happening. And they want to be part of the change as we are. Yeah, they are interested in being part of the change. It's not only commercial”. (Rawan Kottoa)

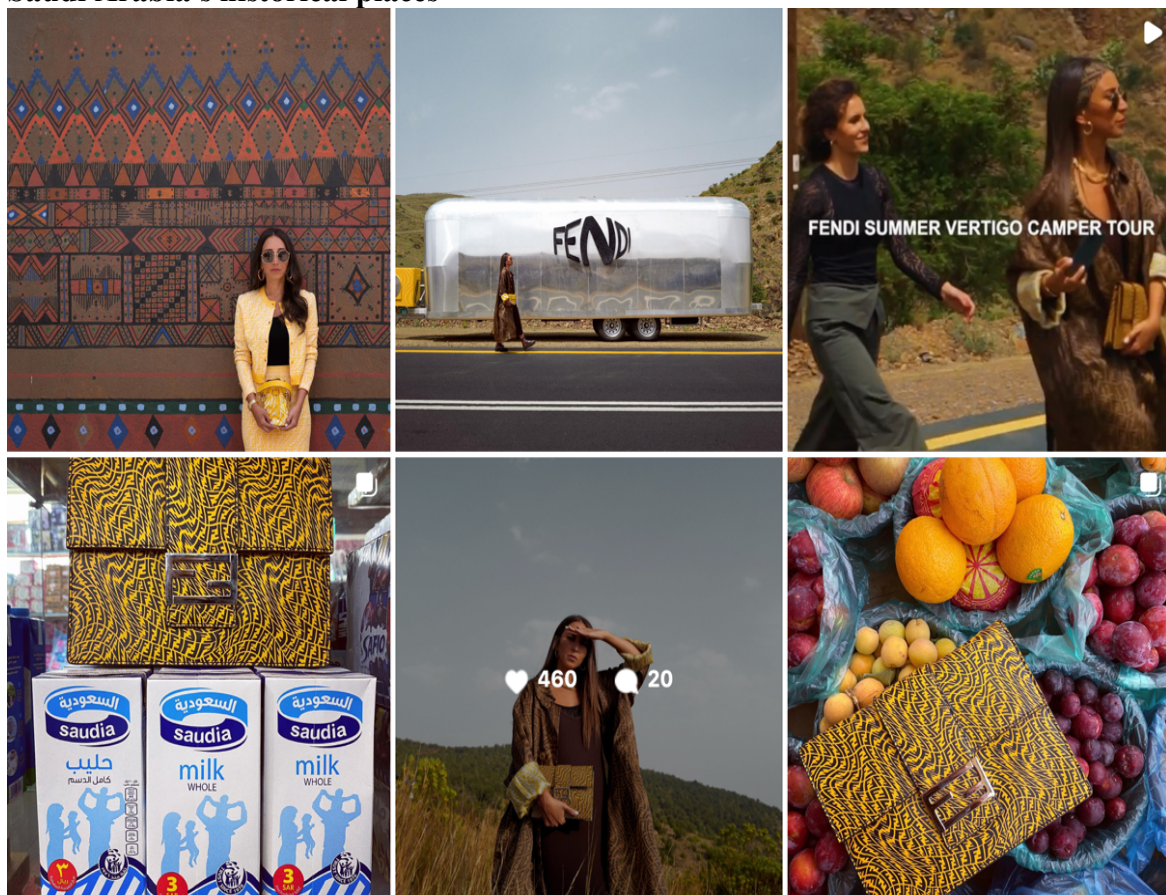
The increasing global interest in the Saudi market reflects a broader shift in how international luxury brands engage with emerging economies, cultural heritage, and evolving consumer bases. The 2021 Fendi campaign (Figure 41), filmed in the breathtaking Soudah Mountain within the Aseer National Park, is an example of this trend, as it strategically integrates elements of Saudi culture with a contemporary, global aesthetic. This campaign not only showcases Saudi Arabia as a visually compelling destination but also repositions the country as a rising hub for fashion, creativity, and youth culture.

Lina Malaika's participation in the campaign further exemplifies the intersection of local cultural figures and global branding. The campaign's description of its Saudi participants as “cool kids” underscores how global fashion brands are tapping into the energy and aspirations of the younger Saudi generation, presenting them as trendsetters who embody a fusion of heritage and modernity. Unlike traditional portrayals of Saudi culture, this campaign does not rely on conventional symbols of the region; rather, it captures a dynamic and evolving identity that reflects the aspirations of a new generation. This campaign is indicative of a broader movement in which international luxury brands recognize the growing purchasing power and cultural influence of Saudi consumers. The Vision 2030 reforms, which have opened up various sectors including tourism, arts, and entertainment, have played a significant role in making Saudi Arabia a desirable market for global brands. By localizing their campaigns and incorporating Saudi influencers and creatives, brands like Fendi align themselves with the

country's cultural transformation while simultaneously capitalizing on the exclusivity and allure of the Saudi landscape.

Furthermore, this campaign reflects the concept of *glocalization*—a strategic approach where global brands adapt their messaging and visuals to resonate with local audiences while maintaining their international prestige. The fusion of tradition and modernity in the campaign aligns with the wider branding strategies employed by luxury brands in emerging markets, where authenticity and cultural representation are increasingly valued by both local and global consumers. Ultimately, the Fendi campaign in Saudi Arabia exemplifies how international brands are not just entering the Saudi market for commercial reasons but are actively engaging with its cultural evolution. By featuring Saudi creatives and capturing the scenic beauty of Aseer, this campaign highlights how fashion can serve as a storytelling tool, reinforcing the narrative of Saudi Arabia's emergence as a cultural and economic powerhouse on the global stage.

Figure 41 Images of Lina Malaika during photoshoot for Fendi campaign in one of Saudi Arabia's historical places



Source: several posts from Marriam Mossalli's Instagram posts (June, July 2021)

7.4. Final Reflections

The influential entrepreneurs from Saudi Arabia recognize the transformative power of fashion in conveying Saudi culture to the global stage. They advocate for a modernized interpretation of traditional heritage in fashion, emphasizing individual choice and personal identity. While some influencers and Saudi fashionistas may opt for more revealing outfits to align with current trends and global culture, my case studies share a shared sentiment about the importance of preserving cultural roots and uniqueness in presentation. This shift reflects a broader societal transformation where women's dress style becomes a reflection of personal identity intertwined with Saudi collective identity, which is undergoing its evolution; fashion is used as a communicative strategy to deliver cultural transformation.

Both government initiatives and individual efforts are instrumental in reshaping the narrative surrounding Saudi Arabia and elevating Saudi fashion internationally. Saudi Arabia is opening its doors to international brands and actively exporting its culture. Localizing marketing campaigns by global brands to align with Saudi cultural norms signifies a significant shift in economic interests. Also, it serves as a branding opportunity for Saudi Arabia.

However, merging cultural roots with global market culture is nuanced, with some campaigns appearing superficial while others demonstrating a strong connection to local values. Nonetheless, the representation of Saudi women in media, particularly on Instagram, has evolved, granting them a platform to communicate their narratives and challenge stereotypes. This evolution in dress style is not confined to social media but also reflects real-life transformations, mirroring the modernization occurring within Saudi society. Overall, fashion serves as a mirror to culture, reflecting the ongoing changes and modernization happening in Saudi Arabia.

CHAPTER 8

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

8.1.Introduction

This chapter presents the study's conclusions, synthesizing findings in response to the research aims. These aims examine Saudi women's cultural identity and agency, online identity construction, contributions to feminist culture and social transformation, and intercultural communication and global integration. By addressing these dimensions, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how influential Saudi entrepreneurs navigate cultural shifts, exercise agency, and position themselves within digital and global landscapes. Additionally, this chapter assesses the conceptual and theoretical frameworks adopted in the study and highlights its contribution to the existing body of knowledge.

8.2.Saudi Women identity

8.2.1. Saudi Women's Cultural Identity: A Transformation Toward Confidence and Self-Categorization

A key finding of this study is the strong emphasis on self-categorization, as Saudi women are among the influential entrepreneurs analyzed in this research. The case studies, observations, and interviews showed that their Saudi identity was their primary point of reference, shaping how they positioned themselves in both professional and social spheres. This aligns with Phinney's (1995) argument that self-categorization is the precondition for all other dimensions of collective identity. Before identifying with any specific roles—whether as business leaders, influencers, or creatives—these women first defined themselves through their national and cultural identity. This pattern underscores the importance of collective identity in shaping personal narratives, especially in societies where national and cultural affiliations hold significant social value.

The implementation of Vision 2030 has played a critical role in shaping a more positive and empowered identity for Saudi women, as analyzed in Chapter 5, Sections 5.1.2 and 5.1.3. The reforms introduced under Vision 2030 have expanded women's participation in economic

and public life and contributed to a psychological shift, fostering a stronger sense of pride, confidence, and self-worth. Marriam Mossalli stated, *"I was a proud Saudi woman before it became a trend, and now it is a trend to be a Saudi woman."* This sentiment reflects the growing national pride and identity assertion among Saudi women, a phenomenon I have observed in my research since 2020. In my engagement with Saudi women influencers and entrepreneurs, I noticed a significant transformation in how they present themselves online and offline. Many have updated their Instagram bios to explicitly identify as Saudi, often including the Saudi flag emoji as a symbol of national pride. Similarly, in offline settings, there has been a visible shift in how Saudi women articulate and embrace their identity, further reinforcing the influence of Vision 2030 in redefining social identity narratives. This transition is particularly significant through social identity theory, which suggests individuals derive their self-esteem from group affiliations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Historically, Saudi women's social identity was shaped by narratives of restriction and endurance, often characterized by pain tolerance and stereotype threat. However, as this study has demonstrated, the shift toward self-esteem and empowerment is evident in how Saudi women now articulate their identities. For many women in this study, being Saudi is no longer framed as a limitation or challenge but rather as a source of pride and agency.

8.2.2. Private Identity to Public Expression: The Emerging Salience of Individual and Collective Identity

While the emphasis on collective Saudi identity remains central, another significant shift observed in this study is the increasing visibility of individual identity. In the past, personal identity for Saudi women was largely private and hidden, often overshadowed by the expectations of collective social norms. Public representations of Saudi women were typically homogeneous and constrained, leaving little space for individual expressions of selfhood. However, the transformative social and cultural shifts by Vision 2030 have allowed greater fluidity between collective and personal identities, enabling women to publicly articulate their unique perspectives, aspirations, and creative expressions.

This transition can be understood through salience, which refers to the degree to which an identity is ready to be enacted in social contexts (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). The salience

between collective and individual identity is increasingly evident as Saudi women balance embracing cultural heritage and asserting personal uniqueness. This negotiation is particularly pronounced among entrepreneurs, influencers, and creatives, who now have more excellent agency to publicly express their individuality without compromising their national identity.

Fashion and digital representation are some of the most notable areas where this transformation is visible. Previously, fashion choices were primarily dictated by collective modesty norms, with individual styling remaining largely private. Today, however, Saudi women are using fashion as a tool of self-expression, blending modern aesthetics with cultural authenticity. Similarly, social media platforms have become powerful spaces for women to showcase their identities, allowing them to craft narratives reflecting their cultural belonging and distinctiveness as individuals.

This evolving relationship between collective and personal identity reflects a broader cultural shift, where Saudi women no longer see these two aspects as opposing forces but as complementary dimensions of selfhood. The reforms within Vision 2030 have enabled them to redefine what it means to be a Saudi woman in contemporary society, demonstrating that modernity and tradition, global engagement and cultural pride, individual agency, and collective belonging can coexist harmoniously.

8.2.3. Saudi Women as the Face of National Identity in Public Life

Saudi women have long been central to the representation of national identity, serving as symbols of the state's cultural and ideological positioning. In the past, Saudi Arabia projected its conservative norms and policies through women, emphasizing modesty, tradition, and religious values as core elements of the national image. However, with the introduction of Vision 2030, Saudi women have become the face of a modernized and redefined national identity, reflecting the country's progressive economic and social transformation.

What sets this era apart is that Saudi women now have the agency to choose how they wish to represent themselves. Unlike in the past, when national identity was imposed through rigid societal expectations, today's Saudi women navigate their self-representation based on their *habitus*. This concept will be discussed in the following section. This means that a modern

Saudi woman is not defined solely by Westernized aesthetics or professional roles but by her own choices. She may opt to wear a niqab, hijab, or abaya or choose Western attire, depending on her beliefs, upbringing, and social environment. Similarly, her role in society is fluid, whether she is a stay-at-home mother, a working professional, a business leader, or a public figure.

One of the most visible changes in Saudi Arabia today is the evolving role of women in public life. A simple observation in daily social settings, workplaces, and social media or media reveals how all categories of women are now recognized and represented in the national narrative. The state no longer promotes one singular version of womanhood; instead, Saudi Arabia now showcases a spectrum of female identities, from traditional to modern, conservative to progressive, all coexisting in the public sphere.

8.2.4. Fashion as a Reflection of Cultural Transformation and Identity in Saudi Arabia

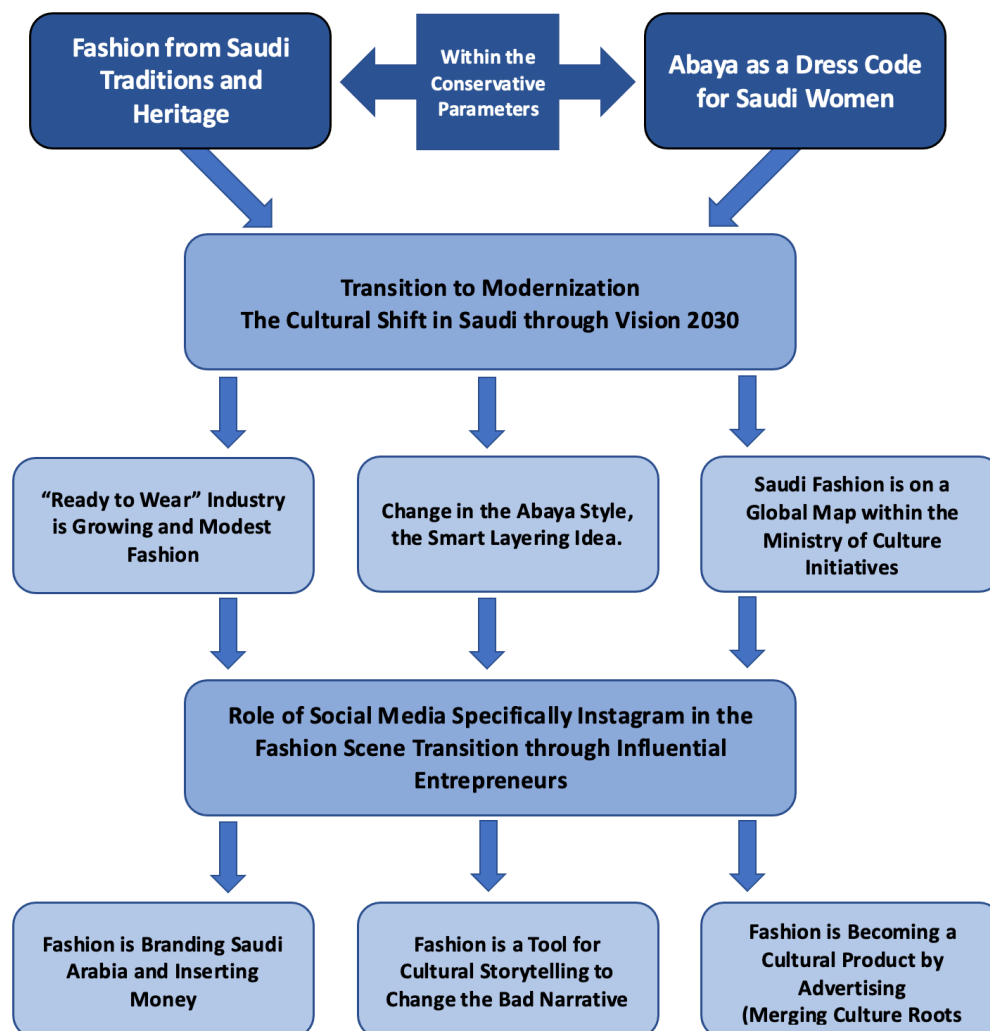
The fashion industry has played a significant role in reflecting and facilitating the cultural transformation of Saudi women, particularly under Vision 2030. Women are at the forefront of this industry, which has long operated within conservative cultural parameters (Chapter 7, Section 7.2). The recent fashion boom in Saudi Arabia has provided them with new avenues for self-expression, economic participation, and social representation.

Today, Saudi women navigate a diverse spectrum of attire, ranging from niqab and abaya to modern abayas, casual wear, and professional attire. This variation demonstrates that being a modern Saudi woman does not mean abandoning cultural roots. As Nasiba states, *"Being Saudi and respecting culture doesn't mean we all wear the same. A modern woman is still part of Saudi identity."* This highlights the evolving relationship between modernity and tradition, where women adapt their dress to align with their identity while remaining rooted in cultural values in their ways.

The findings of this study highlight that fashion serves as a medium for Saudi women to navigate their evolving societal roles, balancing tradition, modernity, and individuality. While social media and digital branding shape public perceptions of Saudi women's fashion, offline observations also confirm that women continue expressing their cultural identity

through dress choices. The abaya remains a key element of Saudi women's identity, even as fashion norms diversify to accommodate a broader spectrum of styles. Ultimately, the fashion industry mirrors the transformation of Saudi women and provides them with a powerful platform to assert their agency, negotiate their identity, and contribute to the modernization of Saudi Arabia's national presentation.

Figure 42 Dynamics of fashion and dress code in Saudi Arabia before and after Vision 2030



Source: own demonstration

This figure encapsulates how Saudi Arabia's fashion industry is navigating its transition to modernization while preserving its cultural identity. The insights gathered from interviews, post analysis, and literature highlight that social media and entrepreneurship are key forces in this transformation, driving economic, cultural, and social change under Vision 2030. The transformation of Saudi Arabia's fashion industry is deeply intertwined with social media, particularly Instagram, and the entrepreneurial efforts of influential women. This shift reflects a balance between modernizing fashion trends and maintaining cultural heritage, creating new opportunities for branding, empowerment, and global visibility. The growth of the "ready-to-wear" industry and modest fashion illustrates the increasing demand for styles that merge tradition with contemporary aesthetics. Saudi designers and influencers are at the forefront of this evolution, redefining modesty through layered and personalized styles while preserving cultural identity. The evolution of the abaya is a key aspect of this change, as its designs now incorporate smart layering, diverse fabrics, and modern tailoring. These developments not only signal aesthetic transformation but also reflect social and cultural shifts influenced by globalization and government initiatives.

The increasing recognition of Saudi fashion on a global scale is largely driven by strategic efforts from the Saudi Ministry of Culture and local entrepreneurs, positioning the industry within international markets. This global outreach is facilitated by collaborations with international brands, participation in fashion diplomacy, and efforts to redefine the narrative surrounding Saudi women in fashion. By leveraging government support and state-led cultural initiatives, Saudi fashion entrepreneurs are using their industry as a means to project a modernized national identity while ensuring that local values remain integral to this representation. Social media, particularly Instagram, has played a crucial role in shaping and accelerating this transformation. Fashion entrepreneurship is not only a personal endeavor but also a branding tool for Saudi Arabia, integrating fashion into economic growth strategies. Additionally, it has become a powerful tool for cultural storytelling, challenging outdated perceptions and presenting Saudi women as dynamic, creative, and empowered. Advertising and digital branding strategies further integrate cultural heritage into fashion marketing, with local and international brands merging traditional Saudi elements into commercial campaigns. This evolving landscape demonstrates that fashion in Saudi Arabia is more than an industry—it is a cultural movement that bridges past and present, tradition and innovation, local and global identities.

8.3.Saudi women agency before and after vision 2030

This study builds on Anthony Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, which conceptualizes the duality of structure, where structures shape individual behaviors, and in turn, individuals reproduce and modify these structures. Through an analysis of Saudi women entrepreneurs and their interaction with social structures—including state policies, social norms, and cultural expectations—this research highlights the evolving nature of women's agency in Saudi Arabia.

A critical aspect of agency in Saudi Arabia is its interplay with power and structural constraints, as the state has historically played a pivotal role in both enabling and regulating women's actions. While social norms and family structures continue to influence women's behavior, Vision 2030 has introduced significant reforms that have expanded women's opportunities, particularly in entrepreneurship and public life. The state's intervention in reshaping cultural and religious understandings of gender roles has facilitated this transformation, aligning women's agency with national development goals and shifting societal expectations. Thus, women's agency in Saudi Arabia today is not solely a product of individual resistance against power structures but is deeply intertwined with state-led transformations that have redefined their roles in the public and economic spheres. Women are now leading change in various fields, actively contributing to the modernization of Saudi society.

However, this does not imply that Saudi women lacked agency before these transformations. Women practiced creative forms of agency, aligning with Bayat's (2013) concept of "quiet encroachment of the ordinary," which describes subtle, everyday acts of resistance and adaptation within existing social and political constraints. Unlike overt activism, Saudi women challenged authority through routine actions, such as informal work and gradual cultural shifts. Similarly, Mustafa (2017) described agency maneuvers, where women conformed while strategically resisting norms. Mustafa and Troudi (2019) further categorized this agency into nonliteral pious agency, where women aligned with religious ideals to challenge Western feminist assumptions; compliant agency, where women engaged with religious traditions while navigating marginalization; and confinement agency, where women utilized religious traditions for self-improvement and to move beyond domestic constraints.

Findings from this study indicate that Saudi women's agency before Vision 2030 was strongly tied to role identity salience, which reflects an individual's desire to fulfill a particular role and their engagement in anticipatory behaviors (Losh & Nzekwe, 2017). Influential Saudi women entrepreneurs have long valued their national identity, demonstrating a commitment to playing an active role in societal and economic development, even before state-led reforms (Serpe & Stryker, 1987). This was evident in case studies, such as Marriam Mossalli, who stated, *"I want to be a public relations representative for my country, marketing and PR. We were always working, and the difference is now we are under the spotlight."* Similarly, Arwa Al Ammari noted, *"Even in the years when they considered Saudi Arabia to be closed, and the media portrayed that women didn't have rights, we didn't experience that."* These entrepreneurs adopted dual roles—as Saudi women representing national culture and as corporate leaders driving economic transformation.

Not all Saudi women internalized narratives of marginalization or passively accepted structural limitations. This study found that their self-concept linked them to the broader social structure, allowing them to position themselves as representatives of Saudi culture and individuals expressing their unique identities (Mead, 1934, cited in Morris, 2013). Women's agency before Vision 2030 was often confined to specific spaces, but they actively engaged in social, cultural, and professional endeavors within those spaces.

Further analysis reveals that women's agency can be understood through the lens of habitus and field. Habitus, as defined by Bourdieu's Habitus (1977, 1990), refers to internalized dispositions and ways of thinking shaped by life experiences, guiding individual actions and adapting to changing circumstances. On the other hand, Field refers to the external social spaces where individuals compete for status and navigate power structures using economic, cultural, and social capital. The research findings reveal that education (especially international education), family background, social class, and geographic location equipped many Saudi women to push for change and assume leadership roles.

This study aligns with (O'Hara, 2019) argument that, despite state-led policy changes, family structures remain the primary influence on women's behavior in Saudi Arabia. Women exercise agency according to their beliefs, family expectations, and morals. For a niche group of women, transitioning into new cultural and professional roles was relatively seamless, as

they were already prepared for these changes. Others are gradually adapting, while some remain resistant to transformation. (Altuwajjiri, 2019) study supports this, arguing that this niche group has facilitated the broader societal acceptance of cultural change.

As Marriam Mossalli emphasized, *"The world thinks we suddenly woke up and started doing things. Many of my inspirations were Saudi princesses. Saudi women were always active—we just weren't in the public light."* She clarified that influencers and public figures are not transforming Saudi women's roles; instead, they amplify the success stories of real Saudi women who have excelled in different fields. Alaa Balkhy also pointed out that while everything in Saudi Arabia is changing, how individuals embrace these changes is influenced by family background and tribal affiliation.

From my experience of living and working in Saudi Arabia, agency and transformation are not limited to elite women—many women across different social classes and professions practice agency in diverse ways. However, those at the forefront of change have helped pave the way for broader societal shifts, making it easier for others to navigate and embrace new roles. Fashion has played a particularly significant role in expanding women's agency compared to other industries. After Vision 2030, opportunities for women in the fashion sector increased substantially, positioning it as a key site of cultural transformation. Influential fashion entrepreneurs benefitted from government support, facilitating their empowerment and visibility. Structural reforms significantly reduced social constraints on women's agency in the fashion sector, allowing them to expand their entrepreneurial influence.

The digital sphere has also contributed to this transformation and women's agency, mainly through social media platforms like Instagram. Saudi women entrepreneurs navigate cultural constraints while engaging with audiences, forming brand collaborations, and shaping online identities that blend local values with global fashion trends. While cultural resistance and societal expectations persist, women's agency has been amplified by state-led policies encouraging greater public and economic participation. The state's role is pivotal—it has not only provided the legal framework for women's empowerment. Still, it has also actively shifted cultural and social norms, making women's agency more visible and widely accepted.

This study demonstrates that Saudi women's agency has evolved from subtle resistance

to active participation in shaping national transformation. While Vision 2030 has significantly expanded women's opportunities, their agency existed before the reforms, albeit in more constrained and negotiated forms. The intersection of state policies, social norms, and individual agency continues to shape the dynamic role of Saudi women in modern society, influencing their identities, professional roles, and contributions to national progress.

8.4.Saudi Women's Identity in Global Brand Collaborations: Intercultural Communication and Global Integration

This study found that Saudi women working in the fashion industry—PR and marketing consultants, cultural consultants, magazine editors, fashion entrepreneurs, personal stylists, designers, or influencers—actively engage with global brands through online platforms such as Instagram. Their work facilitates intercultural communication by bridging global brands with local and international audiences. This phenomenon is not simply about Saudi Arabia receiving or localizing global culture; instead, Saudi culture itself is increasingly being represented on international fashion platforms through the efforts of these women who are leading the industry. The global interest in the Saudi market reflects a fusion of economic potential and branding opportunities, with fashion serving as both a cultural product and a tool for storytelling, challenging past narratives and redefining Saudi identity in the global sphere. As discussed in Chapter 7.3, this shift underscores how fashion has become a mechanism for cultural transformation, reinforcing Saudi Arabia's modernization while preserving cultural heritage.

This transformation is not unique to Saudi Arabia, as women worldwide similarly engage in these processes. Marriam Mossalli noted in an interview, *"I think everyone is globalized."* This observation aligns with the study's conceptualization of "Glocalized Habitus," which describes a flexible and adaptive disposition that individuals develop as they navigate global influences and local traditions. Rather than passively adopting foreign trends, Saudi women actively negotiate global norms while maintaining their cultural identity, shaping their social practices, personal branding, and professional engagements accordingly.

Saudi women's involvement in fashion entrepreneurship, digital branding, and luxury collaborations highlights their role in shaping a new and dynamic national identity. The

globalization of culture and the integration of neoliberal ideologies have influenced individual Saudi women and shaped national policies aimed at positioning Saudi Arabia within the global economic framework. As Saudi women assume new roles in public and private sectors, they emerge as key figures in reshaping the country's identity, demonstrating that state-led transformations under Vision 2030 are deeply intertwined with women's agency and visibility.

In their online experiences, Saudi entrepreneurs skillfully navigate the intersection of local and global cultures. By leveraging social media platforms, they showcase Saudi identity while adapting to global trends, engaging with international brands and audiences, and maintaining strong connections to Saudi traditions and values. Modernization and globalization, facilitated by mass media and digital communication channels, are key drivers of Saudi women's evolving cultural identity. While individuals in Saudi Arabia continue to cultivate local identities shaped by upbringing, traditions, and language, the influence of globalization is undeniable. Traditional cultural practices and beliefs are being reshaped by global media, market economics, and rising education levels, leading to a hybrid identity that blends local and international elements. Throughout this transformation, influential entrepreneurs remain deeply proud of and actively promote their Saudi culture, particularly as being a Saudi woman becomes an increasingly celebrated identity.

A key example of this cultural negotiation is the transformation of the abaya, once a simple black robe, now evolved into a high-fashion statement piece. Modern abayas incorporate Western-inspired cuts, bold colors, embroidery, and luxury fabrics, merging global aesthetics with Saudi traditions. This transformation illustrates how Saudi designers and consumers are not merely adopting Western fashion but localizing and redefining it, ensuring that cultural identity remains intact while engaging in global fashion dialogues.

The rise of Saudi fashion influencers, entrepreneurs, and digital culture has further amplified this process. Social media platforms such as Instagram have played a pivotal role in shaping Saudi Arabia's glocalised fashion culture. Influencers like Nojoud Alrumaihi, Alaa Balkhy, and Yara Alnamlah engage with global brands, participate in international fashion weeks, and promote Western luxury fashion while styling their looks in ways that align with modest fashion aesthetics, reflecting a hybridized approach to personal branding. Additionally, digital spaces have enabled Saudi consumers to engage with global fashion while discussing

local cultural expectations, demonstrating that glocalized habitus is not only shaped by direct experiences but also by digital exposure and virtual engagement.

The luxury fashion sector provides further evidence of this transformation. Many emerging Saudi designers are positioning themselves as global fashion leaders while preserving Saudi heritage. Designers like Arwa Al Ammari incorporate traditional embroidery, Arabian Peninsula-inspired patterns like (Al Sadu) refer to the conventional woven textile made by Bedouin women, and historical motifs into internationally appealing designs. This hybridization enables Saudi brands to compete in the luxury market while maintaining a distinct cultural identity. Additionally, large-scale fashion events in Saudi Arabia, such as Fashion Futures and Riyadh Season, provide platforms for local designers to showcase their work alongside international brands, reinforcing the interconnectedness between global fashion systems and local creativity. Through initiatives like the Saudi Fashion Commission and Vision 2030, the Saudi government has played a key role in supporting this cultural-economic exchange, allowing Saudi designers to develop a glocalized brand identity that appeals to both international and local markets.

The findings of this study align with Anthony Giddens' (1991) concept of time-space distancing, demonstrating how Saudi women entrepreneurs extend their reach beyond local boundaries using digital technologies. Platforms such as Instagram allow them to collaborate with international brands, influence global markets, and connect with audiences worldwide, disembedding their work from physical and social constraints. This digital engagement enables Saudi women to act as cultural mediators, facilitating cross-cultural exchanges between global fashion trends and Saudi consumers.

Although Saudi women remain deeply rooted in their cultural identities, their exposure to global trends and fashion markets has led them to adopt and adapt to international influences, reflecting Giddens' (1991) theory that modern communication technologies enable individuals to participate in local and global worlds simultaneously. Before Vision 2030, societal norms restricted women's ability to express hybrid identities publicly, forcing them to compartmentalize their engagement with foreign cultures. However, the expanded freedoms introduced by Vision 2030 have allowed many of these women to blend local traditions with global influences, creating a more visible, confident, and multifaceted identity.

This shift exemplifies Giddens' (1991) view of globalization as an interconnected system where local and global identities coexist and shape one another. Through their entrepreneurial endeavors, Saudi women are not just adopting global trends but actively redefining cultural narratives, asserting their Saudi roots and global connectivity. Their ability to navigate dual identities highlights the role of globalization and modernization in reshaping Saudi women's presence in the worldwide fashion industry, reinforcing their agency, economic influence, and cultural impact.

Ultimately, this study finds that Saudi women entrepreneurs and fashion influencers are redefining national identity through global engagements. By leveraging social media, brand collaborations, and digital platforms, they have positioned themselves as key players in Saudi Arabia's cultural and economic modernization. The fusion of state-led transformations, globalization, and individual agency is shaping a new generation of Saudi women who are deeply connected to their heritage and actively engaged with the international market. The ability to bridge cultures, challenge stereotypes, and redefine fashion narratives positions Saudi women as leaders in global cultural exchange, reflecting the societal transformation within Saudi Arabia today.

8.5.Feminist Culture Among Saudi Influential Entrepreneurs: Negotiating Global and Local Empowerment Narratives

This study finds that influential Saudi entrepreneurs consistently reject feminism, particularly as understood in a Western context. They do not identify as feminists nor align with Western feminist ideologies. Instead, they support Saudi women's empowerment, framing their agency within culturally embedded notions of progress and social responsibility. As discussed in Chapter 3, Sections 3.5.1 and 3.5.2, feminism remains a contested and often taboo concept in Saudi Arabia, primarily due to its association with Western liberal frameworks and its perceived misalignment with Saudi women's lived experiences and cultural values.

Marriam Mossalli, one of the case study participants, articulates this distinction: *"Feminism is towards a Western standpoint and not an Arab one. And we've always had that women's girl group community. So I think in the Middle East, this is something that we had owned. This has always been part of our culture."* Her statement underscores the view that

Saudi women's empowerment does not necessitate an imported feminist framework but instead emerges as an organic process shaped by cultural, religious, and social values. This perspective aligns with Al-Dabbagh (2015), who argues that an explicitly feminist agenda is not the norm in Saudi Arabia and is neither widely adopted nor agreed upon by women working on gender-related issues. This avoidance suggests a broader disengagement from Western feminist narratives, reinforcing the idea that Saudi women seek empowerment on their terms, independent of external ideological influences.

Feminism in Saudi Arabia, however, can still be observed through creative discourse and entrepreneurial activism, forming part of the country's economic and historical narratives and gaining political significance. This reflects Bayat's (2018) concept of 'social non-movements,' where individuals, acting independently but similarly, contribute to social transformation without formal activism or collective organization. Through these evolving forms of engagement, Saudi women have demanded greater rights, expanded freedoms, and increased visibility in economic and public life, all without directly adopting the feminist label.

Digital platforms and entrepreneurship are pivotal in empowering Saudi women, particularly fostering economic independence and professional visibility. The expansion of Vision 2030, which encourages female participation in the workforce and entrepreneurship, has provided an enabling environment for women to reshape traditional gender roles. As a result, Saudi women have leveraged digital tools to establish economic independence, expand career opportunities, and redefine societal perceptions of female leadership.

Despite rejecting feminism as a label, the way these women describe empowerment, practice agency, and engage in digital spaces intersects with various Western feminist frameworks, including sensible post-feminism, popular feminism, and commodity feminism. Two primary factors have facilitated this transformation: Vision 2030 and the emergence of "Glocalized Habitus." The former has expanded economic and professional opportunities for women, while the latter reflects how individuals internalize and negotiate local traditions and global influences. As Saudi women entrepreneurs navigate digital platforms and international markets, their understanding of empowerment, success, and self-branding is shaped by Saudi cultural values and transnational feminist discourses.

Marriam Mossalli further highlights the shared global experiences of women, stating, *“Women around the world, we connect because we share similar experiences. This whole idea of being a mom, a wife, and a career woman is not unique to just Arab women—we are all out there proving ourselves.”* Lary (2023) found that Saudi micro-celebrities are shaping new gender norms by portraying the ideal modern Saudi woman—beautiful, fashionable, a devoted mother, successfully balancing a prestigious career, domestic responsibilities, and a joyful persona.

This study finds that while influential Saudi entrepreneurs do not identify with feminism in the Western context, their engagement in digital culture, branding, and entrepreneurship aligns with popular, post-feminism, and commodity feminism. Their empowerment is framed mainly through individual success, financial autonomy, and consumer engagement rather than collective activism or structural political change. This aligns with Gill’s (2007, 2016) interpretation of post-feminism as a “sensibility”—where empowerment is embedded within neoliberal ideals of self-reliance and consumer choice—while also resonating with Banet-Weiser’s (2018) theory of popular feminism, which emphasizes visibility, branding, and social media as central to feminist discourse in the digital age.

A key example of commodity feminism is the integration of feminist rhetoric into branding and marketing strategies, where empowerment is commercialized and repackaged as an aspirational lifestyle. Lina Malaika’s participation in a femvertising campaign, titled “My love for my work is romance in itself,” wearing Louis Vuitton’s new collection exemplifies this trend, where corporate branding incorporates feminist themes to market products.

Similarly, Saudi women’s engagement with global brands through influencer marketing and product endorsements demonstrates the commodification of empowerment, in which success is measured through economic capital, brand partnerships, and consumer participation. This is further reflected in the fashion and beauty industries, where branding serves as a vehicle for empowerment. Rawan Kattaa, a Saudi stylist and fashion entrepreneur, describes how her work supports women’s empowerment through fashion and styling: *“I work on women’s empowerment through their style. I want them to love themselves in a certain way, supporting them in styling. My business objective is empowering people to support others. Still, in the fashion industry,”* This aligns with post-feminist sensibility, where empowerment is

closely tied to consumer choice, self-expression, and self-improvement rather than structural feminist advocacy (Gill, 2007).

Similarly, Alaa Balkhy highlights how financial autonomy and digital entrepreneurship are key drivers of empowerment, stating: *“It’s empowering to be an influencer because it brings in so much money—not just for me, but for the economy, the beauty industry, the fashion industry, and the local industry.”* This reflects Repo’s (2020) argument that feminism has increasingly become a marketable product, emphasizing individual choice and economic success over collective struggle. The monetization of empowerment through social media sponsorships, brand collaborations, and self-branding reinforces the idea that consumer participation is now central to feminist discourse.

Additionally, Arwa Al Ammari underscores the influence her designs, work, and personal life have on her audience, recognizing the responsibility of being a role model. She carefully curates the content she shares on social media, understanding that her audience perceives her as an influencer. Her brand and image embody the intersection of personal empowerment and commercialized feminism, where visibility, branding, and aspirational lifestyle marketing contribute to shaping the modern Saudi woman’s identity.

8.6.Saudi Influential Entrepreneurs’ Online Identity: Navigating Agency, Culture, and Empowerment

As explained earlier in this section, the transformation in Saudi women's cultural identities has enabled them to negotiate traditional expectations while embracing new forms of agency and empowerment. This shift is particularly evident among influential entrepreneurs, who construct and formulate their online identities in response to these evolving cultural dynamics. Unlike social media personalities who primarily identify as fashion influencers, makeup artists, or public figures, the women in this study first established themselves as entrepreneurs and later leveraged social media—particularly Instagram—to expand their reach, market their brands, and engage with local and global audiences. It is crucial to emphasize that this study focuses on this category of influential entrepreneurs rather than those whose primary identity revolves around social media influence alone. These women use Instagram as a strategic tool for professional growth, branding, and fostering economic independence,

navigating the intersection of entrepreneurship, self-representation, and identity construction. In doing so, they shape a hybrid feminist identity that blends Western feminist frameworks with deeply embedded Saudi socio-cultural values, reflecting the nuanced ways Saudi women engage with digital culture and globalized gender norms.

The role of Instagram as a platform for identity construction is central to this transformation. Theoretical perspectives highlight how social media enables women to share experiences, attitudes, and aspirations, fostering a sense of agency, power, and self-determination (Rettberg, 2014). Observations from this study confirm that Instagram provides a space for Saudi women to shape their public personas, carefully curating content that reflects both their professional ambitions and personal identities. This digital self-branding is evident in their visual narratives, captions, and selective glimpses into their personal lives, all contributing to a broader narrative of empowerment and representation.

The findings of this study also demonstrate how social media functions as a soft power tool, allowing Saudi women entrepreneurs to challenge established gender norms while maintaining a balance between cultural expectations and modern expressions of femininity. While they may not explicitly label themselves as feminists, their online presence, engagement with global brands, and participation in entrepreneurial initiatives empower both their immediate audiences and broader societal perceptions of Saudi women's evolving roles.

Moreover, the study highlights the role of personal experiences—such as aging, motherhood, and marriage—in shaping online identity construction. These factors contribute to how Saudi women negotiate their public and private identities, reflecting an awareness of how digital engagement extends beyond personal expression to broader narratives of gender and empowerment. Sharing professional milestones, reflections on personal growth, and collaborations with international brands allows them to position themselves as agents of change within the context of Vision 2030.

8.7.Future Research Recommendations

While this study focused on Saudi women entrepreneurs who worked in the fashion industry and later became social media influencers, research on the "Entrepreneurial

Influencer" category remains limited, particularly among Saudi women; this category includes makeup artists, public figures, fashion influencers, and models who initially gained visibility and amassed a large following. As their influence grew, they leveraged influencer marketing opportunities, generating substantial income and eventually enabling them to transition into entrepreneurship. Future research should explore how this category of Entrepreneurial Influencers differs from traditional entrepreneurs who use social media as an extension of their business. Investigating their trajectory, online identity formation and economic success could provide deeper insights into the impact of digital culture on Saudi women's entrepreneurial practices and how social media transforms professional opportunities and financial independence.

Social class, geographic location, and family background are critical in shaping Saudi women's access to digital entrepreneurship and self-representation strategies. While this study primarily examined elite and upper-middle-class women, further research could investigate how women from diverse socio-economic and regional backgrounds navigate digital entrepreneurship. Understanding these differences could reveal varied expressions of agency, financial independence, online identity construction, and the structural barriers women face outside privileged social circles.

As other digital platforms such as TikTok, LinkedIn, and YouTube gain popularity, examining how Saudi women engage with these emerging tools could provide a broader perspective on digital empowerment. This study focused on Instagram, but exploring how other platforms shape professional branding, self-representation, and entrepreneurial success could expand knowledge on how Saudi women navigate different digital environments.

While this study analyzed digital identity construction, further research is needed to examine how online empowerment translates into offline social and economic mobility. Investigating how Saudi women use their online presence to enter male-dominated industries, influence policy discussions, and foster offline networks would provide a more holistic view of the intersection between digital agency and real-world impact.

The study's findings on commodity feminism and self-branding suggest that consumer culture shapes empowerment narratives. Future research could explore how feminist rhetoric

is incorporated into Saudi marketing, advertising, and entrepreneurial ventures, revealing the extent to which commercial interests commodify and shape empowerment.

Future research could undertake a comparative analysis of fashion influencers in Saudi Arabia, other Middle Eastern and Gulf countries, and the West, examining their role in intercultural communication through collaborations with global brands. Grounded in the framework of 'glocalized habitus,' such a study could explore how these influencers navigate the interplay between global fashion trends and local cultural norms. By highlighting similarities and differences in digital branding, modernization, and socio-cultural impact, this research could provide deeper insights into the evolving dynamics of digital influence and cultural identity across diverse socio-political contexts.

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