IT'S NOT AS WHAT WE'VE BEEN TOLD

"*Exploring the influence of social media on women's traditional modesty in visible offline and online identities: An examination within the mixed-gender spaces and social media public accounts in Saudi Arabia through the lens of CCT*"

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the influence of social media on consumers' self-concept and identity-related consumption, especially in religion-driven and conservative societies, is important for marketers. From a consumer behaviour point of view, understanding the process as well as the outcomes of such influence will enable researchers and practitioners to understand the attitudes, behaviours, and aspirations of consumers in these societies. The concept of modesty in such societies is an important factor in determining how offline and online visible identities are constructed. Thus, modesty as a concept and how it is actualized within visible identities is pivotal, whether in the offline or online realms, especially when there are gender-specific modesty-related laws and cultures that govern visible identities in mixed-gender spaces.

This research explores the influence of social media on traditional modesty in offline and online visible identities within mixed-gender spaces in an Islamic society and public accounts, respectively. Since the nexus among social media, modesty, gender, and identity-driven consumption has not been explored in a socio-cultural context that is underpinned by conservatism, this study adopts the theoretical perspectives of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which accounts for the socio-cultural effects on consumer attitudes and behaviours.

Applying a qualitative approach, this study employs face-to-face interviews with 23 Saudi women, together with offline and online ethnography. Using a thematic analysis, a conceptual model and a set of propositions are developed. The findings of this study indicate that social media has significantly and systematically influenced the concept of modesty to the extent where traditional modesty standards were challenged on several levels in offline and online identities. For example, unconventional cultures and subcultures that revolve around beauty and style have started to emerge. However, the extent of such emergence is greater online than offline due to the emancipatory nature of social media, as opposed to the strong influence of family and society in the offline mixed-gender spaces. This study paves the way for future studies that aim to generalize the findings of relevant enquiries. Moreover, it will enrich consumer research, Islamic marketing, digital marketing, and CCT by providing in-depth and rich information about social media's influence on conservative societies where identity-driven consumption is underpinned by distinctive expectations of modesty in visible identities.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my loving parents and my precious princesses Lara and Sidra. I can't find the proper words to express my love and appreciation for what you have done and gone through to help me in completing this thesis.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

In the first chapter of this study, preliminary information about the fundamental motives for conducting this research will be presented. Furthermore, a general overview of this study's scope will also be discussed by explaining the rationale, contribution, and framework before presenting the questions and objectives that this study aims to address. Finally, this chapter will be concluded by explaining the thesis structure.

1.1 Preliminary information

The advancement of self-concept approaches, along with the flourishing philosophical views of postmodernity, have substantially impacted the marketing literature. In addition, consumer research has evolved from being relatively marketer-centric to become more concerned with consumer centrism and socio-cultural contexts. Furthermore, the advent of social media and its effects on consumers' self-concept, identities (Earley, 2014), and societies (Baines, 2017) have been increasingly attracting researchers' interest. Such interest is focused on exploring and understanding consumers' motives for consumption, which are better understood through the lens of multiple selves (Sirgy, 1979). These motives for consumption have also been studied from various perspectives such as hedonism (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982), symbolic interactionism (Belk, 1988), and postmodernism (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). The aforementioned perspectives, among many others, have emphasized how consumers are seeking and producing different meanings and cultures through their consumption of marketer-generated materials. Moreover, they have highlighted the reciprocal relation between agency and structure, and its influence in shaping consumers' attitudes and behaviours. Thus, the importance of considering socio-cultural factors, experiences, and ideologies with regards to consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) have become undichotomized from numerous consumer research projects and integrated within these studies.

Religion is a substantial ideology, experience, and socio-cultural factor that affects consumers' behaviours and attitudes (Arli et al., 2016; Eid & El-Gohary, 2015; McAlexander et al., 2014), and the majority of people around the world, above 70 percent, have some sort of religious belief (Hunt & Penwell, 2008). Islam is the youngest religion among the Abrahamic religions, which include Judaism and Christianity, and it is the second largest and fastest growing religion after Christianity with approximately 1.5 billion adherents worldwide (Sheldrake, 2014). The birth of Islam took place within the current territories of Saudi Arabia which, unlike the majority of Muslim countries, used to strictly adhere to the rules and teachings of a conservative branch of Islam (Hunter, 1998). Such adherence has thrown its shadows over the Saudi society, and more specifically on Saudi women.

Traditionally speaking, the nature of the Saudi society is patriarchal, which subjugates females to males' guardianship. Several aspects of Saudi women's lives have been affected by such patriarchy, such as travelling, working, commuting, and consuming (Hussain, 2016). In addition, the only two influential and official religious committees, which are known for their religious strictness, that are allowed to issue the religious edicts known as *fatwas* (Abdul Cader, 2015), have only male members. The pervasive influences of patriarchy, religion, and tradition have affected Saudi women materially and socially, especially within mixed-gender spaces in the Saudi society. That is to say, Saudi women's visible identities within mixed-gender spaces have to follow certain standards of modesty that veils a woman's body and beauty in order not to be a source of attraction to the other gender. For instance, Saudi women's traditional public dress in mixed-gender spaces is a black overgarment called an *abaya* (Le Renard, 2014), which is socially perceived as a symbol of religiosity and virtue (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Furthermore, friendship with the opposite sex, except those of one's extremely close family members, is fiercely condemned by the society and the dominant religious institutions (Ham, Madden & Shams, 2004). Consequently, it is no wonder that sex segregation is omnipresent in places such as hospitals, malls, and restaurants, where certain areas – usually waiting/dining spaces – are designated as either for families, only men, or only women (Quamar, 2016). However, with recent government reformations that are aimed to modernize the country, the socio-cultural environment in Saudi Arabia has been experiencing rapid change. Nevertheless, all in all, Saudi women's visible identities within mixed-gender spaces in the Saudi society are still mainly, if not totally, driven by religion/tradition which mandate certain standards of modesty in appearance.

Since 1999, when the internet was made publicly available in Saudi Arabia, the ideological mosaic of the Saudi society has been gradually changing to depict Western lifestyles. Internet use and online behaviours in Saudi Arabia are heavily regulated and monitored by the Saudi government for numerous reasons that include but are not limited to promoting morality and preserving Islamic values (e.g. adult websites are censored) (Chaudhry, 2014). Although a handful of Saudi religious figures issued controversial fatwas in terms of using the internet, such as "internet chats between young men and women are the gates to evil" (Al-Kandari & Dashti, 2014, p.142), the pace of internet use among Saudis has boomed, especially with the advent of social media.

Social media has provided consumers with dynamic means of communication that transcend their socio-cultural structures and institutions to enable them to freely express who they genuinely are, what they believe in, and what they need/want (Belk, 2013; Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Toma, Hancock & Ellison, 2008). As a result, it has deeply affected several dimensions of consumers' self-concept and identities, including their religiosity (Campbell, 2017; Hoover, 2006) which is an influential factor in terms of orienting consumers' consumption and creating marketplace cultures (Karataş & Sandıkçı, 2013). In the majority of the Western world, women are neither socially nor lawfully required to affiliate themselves, or

symbolize their identities with religion (Taylor, 2010), especially through their dress style or general appearance (i.e., visible identities) in mixed-gender spaces. Thus, it can be inferred that modesty that is underpinned by religion/tradition within this context has a minimal influence on consumption. Nevertheless, Saudi women have been socially and lawfully required to demonstrate certain levels of modesty in their visible identities within mixed-gender spaces (Sechzer, 2016). Consequently, modesty is a major and influential drive for Saudi women's identity-related consumption whether offline or on social media.

1.2 Rationale

Several consumer researchers have studied the effects of social media on consumers' identities and self-concept within Western contexts from various angles (e.g., Kedzior, Allen & Schroeder, 2016; Belk, 2013; Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). In such research, the interconnectivity between modesty, gender, and religion, and their flexibility in terms of being influenced by social media to an extent where they would result in creating new identity-related consumption practices, were unaccounted for, let alone explored. A logical explanation for not inclusively considering modesty, gender, and religion within social media and identity-related research relating to consumer behaviour in Western contexts is the relative triviality of these constructs in terms of influencing Western consumer behaviour. Nevertheless, these constructs are of great importance and influence on consumer behaviour within the majority, if not all, of the Islamic world, especially a country such as Saudi Arabia where traditional Islam is its constitution (Hussain, 2016).

Within the context of the Arab-Islamic world, the majority of research which has explored the constructs of modesty, gender, and religion has either insufficiently accounted for social media's role and its different platforms (e.g., Abu Nab, 2019; Sobh, Belk & Gressell, 2012) or accounted for social media's role without either adequately addressing these constructs in an inclusive fashion or considering the distinguishing capabilities of several different social media platforms (e.g., Alsaggaf, 2019; Qutub, 2018).

The common factor among all of the aforementioned studies is that none of them has explored the influence of different social media platforms on women's modesty in their offline and online identities within the context of an Islamic country that has been widely known for its conservatism, especially when it comes to women's appearance in public places and accounts. Thus, this research aims to explore the influence of different social media platforms (i.e., Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube) on Saudi women's traditional modesty in their visible offline and online identities within offline mixed-gender spaces and online public accounts. The decision to include the aforementioned platforms was formed according to the CITC's (2015) most recent publicly available report which reported that Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube were among the top platforms used by women in Saudi Arabia.

1.3 Contribution

This research intends to address gaps in academic knowledge within consumer research in general, and Islamic marketing, digital marketing, as well as CCT in particular, by exploring how social media influences consumers' religion-based negotiations of consumption choices to construct their online and offline visible identities within the context of a religion-driven society. This research develops a similar inquiry to Wattanasuwan and Elliott (1999) who explored how teenage Buddhists negotiate their Buddhist beliefs to construct their identities through their quotidian consumption. Nevertheless, unlike Wattanasuwan and Elliott (1999), the researcher intends to explore a specific aspect of religious belief, which is modesty, instead of attempting to circumference the complexity and depth of all religious belief. Furthermore, this research also extends an inquiry made by Sobh, Belk and Gressel (2012) who explored modesty and vanity in Muslim Qatari and Emirati women's offline identity. However, the present study is exploring social media's influence on modesty in both Saudi women's offline and online identities.

Although a handful of consumer researchers have explored how religion and its constructs guide consumers' endeavours to build their identities using marketer-generated materials (e.g., McAlexander et al., 2014; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Sandikçi & Ger, 2010), such exploration did not sufficiently account for the role of social media in influencing religion-based consumption choices and practices, specifically the influence on women. Consequently, the fundamental contribution of this research lies in the intersection of social media, religion, gender, and identity-driven consumption. The findings of this study would enrich the marketing literature with a deeper understanding of Muslims', particularly female Muslims, consumerist experiences and aspirations with regards to their odyssey in constructing visible offline and online identities, especially in conservative and religion-fuelled societies. Such an understanding is also practically valuable for marketers, since religion-based consumption choices, with specific regards to Islamic identity, have shown a substantial influence on products' images, and in extreme cases the influence even stretches to jeopardizing the mere existence of multinational companies in such religion-driven societies (Abosag & Farah, 2014).

1.4 Framework

Since the empirical evidence on social media's influence on consumers' visible offline and online identity from a modesty perspective is scant in the literature, the researcher deemed that exploratory research would be appropriate. In addition, although Berger (1975, p.125) proposed that "the scientific study of religion must bracket the ultimate truth claims implied by its subjects", the intense influence of socio-cultural factors, and the variation of lived experiences (Ozanne & Hudson, 1989), have contributed in forming the decision of adopting an interpretivist approach. In other words, this research believes that reality is constructed within a consumer's perceptions which are influenced by socio-cultural factors. Consequently,

the theoretical perspectives of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) are adopted as the umbrella for this research, in which consumers' experiences within their socio-cultural environments are highly accounted for. The fundamental source for collecting the data in this research is face-to-face in-depth interviews. Moreover, triangulation is also employed through ethnography in order to enhance the level of trustworthiness in this research.

1.5 Objectives and questions

This study aims to explore and understand the influence of social media on Muslim women's traditional modesty standards in their visible offline and online identities, within mixed-gender spaces in the offline world and public accounts in the online world, and particularly within the context of Saudi women in Saudi Arabia. The main objectives of this research are as follows:

1. Understanding the mechanism and phases of social media's influence on the traditional concept of modesty in visible identities
2. Investigating the factors which could delay/negate social media's influence on the traditional concept of modesty in visible identities
3. Exploring how social media's influence on the traditional concept of modesty is expressed through visible offline and online identities
4. Exploring the limits of social media's influence on modesty in visible offline and online identities
5. Understanding the reasons behind the differences, if any, between offline and online visible identities within mixed-gender spaces and public accounts in social media
6. Understanding how Saudi women perceive and evaluate the influence of social media on traditional modesty standards in visible offline and online identities

In order to achieve the aforementioned research objectives, the researcher will attempt to answer the following three main questions which were identified from reviewing the relevant literature:

1. How does social media influence Saudi women's conception of traditional modesty in a visible identity?
2. How is such influence expressed by Saudi women in their visible offline identities within mixed-gender spaces in Saudi Arabia?
3. How is such influence expressed by Saudi women in their visible online identities within public accounts on social media?

1.6 Thesis structure

This thesis is constructed with seven chapters. The present chapter provides introductory information for this thesis, outlining the rationale, contribution, framework, and the objectives and questions. The remaining chapters are succinctly described below.

Chapter 2 reviews the relevant academic literature starting with conceptualizing the self-concept in consumer research and explaining the role of multiple selves in order to smoothly introduce and then review the concept of identities. Afterwards, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is delineated with emphasis on two of its main relevant areas to this thesis, which are identity projects and marketplace cultures. There follows a discussion on social media which includes essential information about the platforms used in this study (Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube). In addition, the literature that addresses offline and online identities is reviewed. Finally, all the literature that was reviewed so far is synthesized within the last section of Chapter 2, which focuses on Saudi women's socio-cultural milieus where Islamic modesty, religiosity, and offline and online identities are all discussed inclusively. Consequently, knowledge gaps are identified, and this gives birth to the main questions of this thesis.

Chapter 3 presents in detail different philosophical paradigms in order to justify the philosophical stance of this thesis. Furthermore, the thesis design, data collection, and data analysis are discussed in detail and justified in the light of the pertinent literature.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 demonstrate the empirical findings and discussions for each main question of this thesis. That is to say, the attempt to provide answers for the first question is being addressed in a dedicated full chapter, which is Chapter 4, whereas the second and third questions are addressed in Chapters 5 and 6, respectively.

Chapter 7 provides the conclusion for this thesis by reflecting on the findings from the previous three chapters. In addition, a conceptual model is proposed which integrates the fundamental findings of this thesis. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes with the contribution of this thesis, its limitations, directions for future research, and concluding remarks which succinctly summarize a research journey of almost four years in a couple of lines.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher will analyze the pertinent literature, define the fundamental concepts, and identify the knowledge gaps which will be addressed by the three research questions presented later in this chapter. The researcher preludes the following review by discussing the concept of the self since it is a fundamental concept in identity-related research. After grasping the most important and relevant concepts of the self, the researcher will review identity literature before presenting Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), the perspectives of which serve as the backbone of this research. Subsequently, social media is discussed before synthesizing all the aforementioned points with Saudi women's socio-cultural milieus. Finally, the summary of the chapter is presented. It is important to emphasize that the concept of religion in general, and Islam in particular, is objectively addressed and discussed within the context of Saudi women's socio-cultural milieus to strategically achieve the research objectives, and to maintain the scope of this research rather than deviating into theological discussions/religious studies. Similarly, modesty as a religious construct is also delineated within the context of Saudi women's visible identity.

2.1 Self-Concept

One of the mysterious as well as intriguing components of a human's life is the concept of the self, which has been explored through multiple perspectives such as psychological, sociological, and anthropological. Self-concept reflects the most truthful conception as well as evaluation of the aggregate perception of one's qualities as a human (Esnaola et al., 2020). Beheshtifar and Rahimi-Nezhad (2012, p.162) describe how, "In addition, self-concept is learned. No one is born with a self-concept. It gradually emerges in the early months of life and is shaped and reshaped through repeated perceived experiences, particularly with significant others". As one grows, the embodiment of her/his self-concept can be via multiple means. However, one of the means that is most relevant to this study is the identity, which is situated firmly within consumer research.

Consumer research has gradually changed from being fiercely leaning towards marketers, to be more delicately embracing consumers' experiences, motives, and meanings for consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Such change is mainly driven by the growing interest in identity-driven consumption, which allows consumers to embody their self-concept through a narrative of identities (e.g., Saint Clair & Forehand, 2020; Wattanasuwan, 2005; Wattanasuwan & Elliott, 1999; Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1986). In addition, consumer researchers have demonstrated a keen interest in the self-concept for numerous reasons. For instance, consumers express their self-concept through the symbolic attributes of items (Harmon-Kizer et al., 2013; Ahuvia, 2005). Such expression could take many forms and shapes. To elaborate more, consider

for example a consumer's decision to wear a tie front crop top as opposed to wearing a loose crew neck long-sleeve top on a spring day. Both of these garments would enable a consumer to express herself through the reliance on the different symbolic signals of each of these garments (Leigh & Gabel, 1992; Belk, 1988). That is to say, one's self-concept is demonstrated through her/his materialistic possessions which form a significant part of an identity. Furthermore, some consumers would be involved in what is known as self-congruity, which "is a psychological process and outcome in which consumers compare their perception of a brand image…with their own self-concept" (Sirgy, 2018, p.198). Sirgy also noted that the aforementioned concept has been strongly present and discussed in consumer behaviour research within the last forty years. However, one's self and her/his identity are usually confused with each other. In other words, the terms self-concept and identity have been used interchangeably in some literature. As a starting point, a line in the sand will be drawn between the aforementioned concepts by defining one of them to prelude a discussion of the other. Thus, identity could be conceived as an embodiment of certain modules, or segments of one's self-concept (Leary & Tangney, 2012; Tajfel, 2010; Baumeister, 2005; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Since the self is the umbrella for identities, it is important to start with conceptualizing the self in order to have a clear distinction between self-concept and identity, as well as an understanding of the connection between them. Such conceptualization is best approached by starting with a historical glimpse of self-concept in consumer research.

2.1.1 Conceptualizing the self in consumer research

The plethora of consumer research studies that were substantially underpinned by self-concept approaches emerged back in the early 1960s (Belch, 1978; Grubb & Hupp, 1968). Ever since, self-concept in consumer research has undergone many changes and advancements. For instance, Bellenger, Steinberg and Stanton (1976) conceptualized consumers' self-concept as a single component that was referred to as *self-image* (i.e., actual self), which resembles a consumer's realistic view of himself. On the other hand, Landon (1974) and Belch (1978) referred to self-concept as an entity that has dual components which are self-image and *ideal self-image* that resembles a consumer's aspirations of himself. However, the societal and situational influence on one's self had not been examined intensively and thoroughly before Schenk and Holman's (1980) critique of the duality construct of the self-concept. Consequently, they suggested the *situational-self* as a combination of the self-image and the ideal self-image, but with additional acknowledgement of societal and situational roles in influencing a consumer's self-concept. In other words, it is the *activated self-concept*, as Arnould, Price and Zinkhan (2015) have described it. Thus, it can be said that a consumer's self-concept is not detached from the influence of others nor is it unchanged; instead, it is dynamic, and others contribute significantly in forming it. For instance, whether it is through special moments, events, or even role changing, such as when a woman transitions to become a mother and demonstrates such a

transitioning through celebrating with a baby shower (Fischer & Gainer, 1993), the self-concept will go through different evaluation points in which other people contribute.

Even though consumers highly value their self-concept (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967), which is not infinitely attached to reality/actuality, the ideal self-concept is also of high value. To some extent, idealism directs consumers' attitudes and behaviours. Thus, the collaborative relation between societies and individuals in shaping the actuality and idealism of consumers' self-concept has been referred to as either the *social-self*, which is one's beliefs and thoughts of how others perceive one's self, or the *ideal social-self*, which is one's aspirations of being perceived in a certain way by others (Sirgy, 1982, 1979). In other words, consumers have *possible-selves* which are perceptions and self-images of what they wish or fear to become (Myers, 2010). Each of the aforementioned self-concepts consists of more than one *schema*, which is a consumer's own idea/impression about her/himself in certain aspects/domains with regards to dispositional, situational, and structural factors (Morgan, 1993). Because some domains are substantially important to some self-concepts, while trivial or unacknowledged by others, the existence of self-schema in every domain of the self-concept is nearly impossible (Baumeister, 2005). This can be exemplified in how consumers deliberately create a divergent self-schema in a variety of domains (e.g., talents, interests, or roles) which are considered to be personally important to them (Morgan, 1993). In addition, such schemata are mostly bipolar in nature: attractive versus unattractive, masculine versus feminine (Reichert, LaTour & Kim, 2007), and so on. Nevertheless, when schemata surface on one's actions whenever she/he is dealing with different people in different settings, understanding the concept of multiple selves would assist in clarifying what appears to be on the surface as contradictory actions. To elaborate more, to understand self-concept, marketers need to fathom the concept of multiple selves (Sahaf, 2019).

2.1.2 Multiple selves

The suggestion that an individual has many selves is attributed to James (1890) who conceptualized the self-concept as an active entity that consists of the "I", which is one's recognition-awareness-schemata-knowledge-assessments-esteem, and the "Me" which is one's material-social-spiritual needs. In other words, the "I" is the subject that thinks about the "Me" as the object. Another argument that supports the suggestion of multiple selves was made by Freud (1923) who portrayed the self as the "Ego" which interacts consciously and subconsciously with the "Id", which is the hedonic aspect of the self, and the "Super-Ego" which is the morally driven aspect of the self. Both the "Me" and the "Super-Ego" are strongly related to social factors. Therefore, the societal role in influencing and shaping one's self-concept, with emphasis on attitudes and behaviours, was demonstrated by Mead (1934) who argued that significant others form one's self-concept in many ways, such as in how one learns the symbols' meanings and social roles from them. Likewise, Cooley (1902) acknowledged society's role in shaping the behaviours of an individual. Cooley's

theory of the *looking-glass self* describes how an individual imagines others' reaction towards her/him by imagining seeing herself/himself through their eyes.

Within the multiple selves paradigm, several researchers have studied consumption using the approach that consumers have more than one self-concept. For instance, studies have focused on the fragmented self (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Gould, 1991), the malleable self (Aaker, 1999), and selves that are enacted in certain roles (Fischer & Gainer, 1993). In general, multiple selves as a concept has been drawing the attention of multiple consumer behaviour researchers (e.g., Ruvio & Belk, 2018; Bahl & Milne, 2010; Ahuvia, 2005; Sirgy, 1982), especially to understand consumers' internal negotiations and how they are externalized through their offline and online identities. Even though there is an extensive body of research in this area, still there is no agreement among scholars about a unified definition for self-concept and its dimensions. Actually, throughout human history, and in almost every culture, many attempts have been made to define the self. Although each definition has its own serving purpose, the following definition of self-concept is adopted in this research: "the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (Rosenberg, 1979, p.7). Unlike the self-concept, identities can be relatively seen, and as a result could be relatively identified without the complexity that is associated with the self-concept.

2.2 Identities

Identities show different sides of one's self, becoming relatively diversified over time and context, and consumers use them to classify and express themselves within a society (Bhattacharjee, Berger & Menon, 2014; Reed II, Cohen & Bhattacharjee, 2009). Since an identity is an influential motivator of behaviour (Oyserman, 2009), individuals' consumption choices are conveyors of multiple identities (Belk, 1988). Thus, it can be said that identities are constructed through the mutual interaction between *internal* identity-related self-schemas and *external* socio-cultural factors (Kleine III & Kleine, 2000). Once activated, one's *personal identity* is salient, identifiable, unique, and relatively constant. In certain situations, it is used as a means for assimilation, whereas in others it is used as a means for differentiation. Within the context of Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory (i.e., social symbolic elements are acquired from one's place in a social class), it can be said that personal identities are externally ascribed/internally achieved, therefore forming one's embodied state. In addition, material (Belk, 1988) as well as digital objects (Belk, 2013) are used to objectify identities, whereas institutions and informal groups in a society evaluate them. Although individuals have the agency to some extent to define themselves independently, they also use social groups to define themselves interdependently. *Social identity* is the "we" perspective of one's self-concept that thinks about the "us" which is one's in-group, as opposed to "them" which is one's out-group (Myers, 2010). The social identity starts with labelling/categorizing people, as well as ourselves, into different categories that consists of in-groups, which we identify with and favour over other out-groups (Tajfel, 1982;

Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As Stets and Burke (2000, pp.225-226) state, "In general, one's identities are composed of self-views that emerge from the reflexive activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in particular groups or roles". Being a member, whether in a family, organization, or country, indicates being a member of the group's culture, not to mention their culture of consumption which has certain 'codes' in terms of using identity-related materials to construct identities. In an ideal world where collective values have the first priority, it is presumed that rationality is favoured over hedonism. Nevertheless, in the real world, that is not always the case, especially where one's identity consumption choices struggle between satisfying her/his pleasure as opposed to serving a utilitarian purpose.

2.2.1 Hedonism and rationality

As mentioned earlier, consumer behaviour literature has been significantly impacted by the abundance of concepts and theories of self-concept. As a result, it is no wonder that identity-related research has flourished with a growing focus on identity-driven consumption, in which marketer-generated materials are operationalized to signify identities (Reed et al., 2012). Furthermore, marketer-generated materials (e.g., goods, services, and information) and marketplaces have shifted from being abstract and utilitarian, as a means to an end per se, to being meaningful and symbolic, so that consumers indulge in them to forge and experience multiple identities as well as producing different cultures (Kozinets, 2002a; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Belk, 1988; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

The projection of more than one identity by a consumer is not always subject to rationality. To shed more light on this issue, Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) conceived consumers' sense of self through an aspect that they referred to as *hedonic consumption*, as a complementary field to motivation research, which examines how everyday consumption evokes emotions and satisfy fantasies, and was introduced as a non-traditional approach in terms of understanding the motives for consumption. Hedonic consumption, underpinned by Levy's (1959) views of symbolic meaning, framed marketer-generated materials as sources of an emotional fulfillment that is achieved through consumers' imagination and multisensory capabilities (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). However, hedonic consumption did not account for consumers' rationality in their pleasure-seeking consumption. Consequently, it is no wonder that Gutman (1982) suggested the *means-end chain model* where marketer-generated materials were viewed as a means that consumers rationally use to achieve their desired sense of self. Similarly, Belk (1988) argued that consumers rationally use marketer-generated materials to symbolize themselves, or as he metaphorically expressed 'extend themselves'. The feasibility of assuming consumers' rationality in seeking meanings for their consumption experience has been questioned from different angles in several contexts, such as in Bourdieu's cultural capital (Holt, 1998), postmodernism (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), subcultures (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), and online shopping (Lindh & Lisichkova, 2017). In addition, trying to force a certain agenda by marketers on consumers through reliance on the premise that consumers would always choose rationally is

also under question. To elaborate more, contrary to Pine and Gilmore's (1998) claim that experience ought to be staged by marketers through cues, consumers are no longer subjects to implicit/explicit cues that induce their willingness to experience. Actually, consumers occasionally seek fragmented, irrational, and unstaged experiences that are led neither by society nor by marketers (Firat & Shultz, 1997). In other words, consumers are emancipating themselves from total market control, and they are using several marketer-generated materials autonomously as well as consciously to create their own unique meanings and identities (Featherstone, 2007). Thus, it cannot be said that consumers are either hedonic or rational; rather, their sense of identity, which is symbolized and extended through consumption, consists of a combination of hedonism and rationalism, but with varied degrees. Moreover, consumption is not a meaningless/abstract practice, but it is an experience which consumers seek and use to project their identities (Stephan, Hamilton & Jafari, 2018; Gabbott & Hogg, 1994; Mano & Oliver, 1993). Such projection, which is aimed to communicate specific information whether to others or to one's self, does not have to conform to a general theme or adhere to the majority.

Consumers frequently make identity-related consumption choices using identity-related materials to stand out from the majority in order to ensure that their identity is signalled saliently as well as effectively (Berger & Heath, 2007). For instance, an example might be riding a Harley-Davidson motorcycle and wearing a leather jacket (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Furthermore, consumers also associate themselves with various consumption activities in order to demonstrate a specific aspect of their identity (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). For example, Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993) studied how consumers seek risky consumption activity, which is sky diving, to construct an identity that is characterized by leaning towards high risk. Likewise, Murray (2002) demonstrated how being a golfer could signal a certain meaning of having a high social status which in return would influence one's identity. To put it differently, certain aspects of consumers' identities are strategically projected by them whenever their consumption was focusing on either identity-related materials or activities, or on both. For instance, in a seven day 'anti-market' event, Kozinets (2002a) emphasized how consumers engage in consumption activities and construct their identities through identity-related materials in an emancipatory fashion, freed from market-controlled identities. To elaborate further, to a certain extent, markets inspire consumers' creativity in terms of expressing themselves through the way they construct their identities (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), particularly the visible aspect of their identities.

2.2.2 Visible identity

The premise that if it is not visible it does not exist has proven to be wrong on many levels. However, it would be more accurate to say that if it is not visible, then it is obscured to sight. Alcoff (2006) proposed that all the major aspects of one's identity can be revealed with precise observation of her/his physical appearance. In addition, she argued that even gestures (e.g., a pose or smile) contribute towards uncovering

more information to the observer. On the other hand, Clair, Beatty and Maclean (2005, p.78) delineated the features of visible and non-visible identities as follows: "Visible characteristics usually include sex, race, age, ethnicity, physical appearance, language…. Nonvisible characteristics usually include differences like religion, occupation, national origin, club or social group memberships, illness, and sexual orientation". Within the context of Saudi Arabia, Abu Nab (2019, p.2) argued that "visible identity is communicated through how women dress in public". The previous definitions lack the consideration of one's body as a construct of visible identity. Thus, by putting it all together, the researcher will adopt the following definition for visible identity in this research: visible identity is any part of one's identity constructs, whether it was inborn or acquired, which is seen by others.

Interestingly, the expression visible identity appeared in the literature not only to refer to human appearance but also to the appearance of products and brands. For example, De Chernatony (2010) used the iceberg analogy to demonstrate his suggestion that the visible identity of a brand (e.g., packaging) is 'above the water surface' and contributes 15% to the total value, with the rest of the identity being 'submerged' (i.e., non-visible aspects of a brand). In addition, he argued that in order to know about the culture of a brand, diving below the water surface is ultimately the best option. Although De Chernatony's (2010) suggestions would be appealing whenever applying them to brands, the situation would be totally different with individuals. For instance, Noack (2011) described dress as a significant part of one's visible identity which would give an indication of religious, social, and even marital meanings. Furthermore, in each culture there are signs, which might seem trivial, in one's visible identity that would actually indicate sensitive personal information. For example, a common inference about a Muslim woman who applies nail polish for prolonged periods is that she is on her period (Tricic, 2015), although such inference is not always accurate (Sandıkçı, 2013). Similar objectifying inferences exist in almost every society, and they start especially with females from an early age. For instance, Dines (2010) reported that the easiest and most popular visible identity that female adolescents can adopt is the one that accentuates them as a sexual being and eliminates any other quality. Such adoption has many reasons, of which among them is the contemporary culture of consumption.

2.3 Consumer Culture Theory

Globalization has contributed to changing individuals' attitudes and behaviours resulting in fragmenting a society into *neo-tribes*, which are societies within a society. In other words, societies as well as cultures are shifting from homogeneity to heterogeneity (Maffesoli, 1996). Yet the hegemony of globalization could also be understood as promoting diversity in certain aspects, while requiring conformity in others (Wilk, 1995). Individuals as well as social institutions have certain limits and plasticity to embrace change. Nevertheless, these limits are relatively fading with the growing ease of internet accessibility, which has

impacted individuals in terms of their different life aspects as well as their identities (Schau & Gilly, 2003). For instance, Arnett (2002) suggested that the forces which contribute to promoting globalization would have a psychological impact on one's identity creation and development. This is evident in how some individuals would create a "bicultural identity, in which part of their identity is rooted in their local culture while another part stems from an awareness of their relation to the global culture" (Arnett, 2002, p.777). Since globalization has influenced individuals' cultural identity and consumption style, it is no wonder that new consumer cultures have started to emerge in a way that is not limited to traditional market dimensions or social structures, not to mention traditional values.

When surveying consumer research, one will find many of the researchers in that field are using concepts as well as theories from numerous disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Historically speaking, starting from the 1980s, several researchers have explored the elements of the consumption cycle using a multi-lens approach that emphasized symbolic meanings and consumers' experience within their socio-cultural contexts (e.g., Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989; McCracken, 1986; Mick, 1986; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). These researchers, among others, created a body of knowledge which has been expanded further to study and understand how consumers productively interact and generate meanings from market offerings, either individually or collectively, throughout the consumption cycle (e.g., Kates, 2002; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995; Belk, 1988).

The term CCT was coined by Arnould and Thompson (2005) to aggregate/brand a plethora of consumer research that had been completed over the course of the past thirty years. The core themes and questions of these research studies shared mutual commonalities in terms of studying the ideological, experiential, and symbolic aspects of consumption. Arnould and Thompson (2005, p.868) defined CCT as "a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings". According to Kravets et al. (2017), CCT overlaps numerous fields such as psychology, sociology, media studies, and anthropology. Succinctly, CCT focuses on consumer behaviour using socio-cultural perspectives. The main four focal areas of CCT are: (1) *Consumer Identity Projects*: where consumers search/create identities using marketer-generated materials; (2) *Marketplace Cultures*: where consumers reconfigure/generate cultures; (3) *The Sociohistoric Patterning of Consumption*: where consumers are influenced by their social structures and institutions; and (4) *Mass-Mediated Marketplace Ideologies and Consumers' Interpretive Strategies*: where consumers' actions in response to mass media normative messages vary between acceptance/rejection. Broadly speaking, "CCT research investigates the influences that economic and cultural globalization exert upon consumer identity projects and identity-defining patterns of social interaction distinctive social contexts" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.874; see also Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003; Bonsu & Belk, 2003; Coulter, Price & Feick, 2003; Wilk, 1995; Arnould, 1989).

Exploring consumers within their milieus in order to understand their consumption motives is among the fundamental drivers which resulted in the existence of CCT (Arnould & Thompson, 2007). Although such orientation in understanding could be perceived by some as approaching consumers through lenses that focus on the ideology of consumption instead of its practicality, Ostergaard and Bode (2016) proposed that CCT's practicality is visible in its adoption of an interpretive approach in terms of exploring consumers' consumption motives. Along these lines, Fitchett, Patsiaouras and Davies (2014) also emphasized that CCT was formed with the intentions to support consumer research by being a credible and reliable theoretical structure that is driven by interpretivism. Thus, it is no wonder that numerous CCT researchers have delved into exploring consumers' identity-related consumption using postmodernism as a trail in their projects (Thompson, Arnould & Giesler, 2013).

2.3.1 Identity projects

Among the four primary areas of CCT, the concept of identity projects is fundamental to this research since it is the main concern within the scope of this study. Before going further, it is important to differentiate between identity projects and managing impressions. The study of managing the impression (i.e., self-presentation) is fundamentally attributed to Goffman (1959) who is associated with the dramaturgical metaphor in which he conceptualizes the performance of an identity in social interactions as if it were in a theatre setting (e.g., with an audience, roles, front and back stages). In such performance, individuals (i.e., actors) maintain their impression management and try to avoid being perceived wrongfully by the audience. A handful of researchers, and interestingly all of them are Saudi women, have adopted Goffman's approach in similar studies that involve social media and Saudi women's identities (e.g., Alsaggaf, 2019, 2015; Aladsani, 2018; Altuwayjiri, 2018; Qutub, 2018). However, there are several voices – including the researcher – who have doubted using the said approach in specific contexts because, as Leary (1995) reported, such researchers considered portraying human social interaction within a frame of excessive attention to managing others' impression as an indication of self-centredness and manipulative intentions. In addition, the researcher justifiably believes that framing his findings – let alone the participants – within the settings of a stage, audience, and actors would neither accurately reflect nor serve all the aims and objectives of this research.

The concept of consumer identity projects connotate that individuals are actively searching, creating, enhancing, and experimenting with identities (Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould, 2012) in an emancipatory fashion which prioritizes what one wants over what others expect (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Thus, it can be said that the ends of such a project are about maintaining a sense of identity rather than maintaining a certain impression. Contrary to approaching and understanding consumers through narrow conjectures, the phenomenon of gradual liberation from market and society constraints, and the emergence of individuals' ideologies to create social links according to their own choices, have been classified under several terms

including *postmodernism* (Cova, 1997), which acknowledges consumers within different contexts in their daily lifestyle. Furthermore, postmodern consumption is not about the detachment from the hegemony of a standard and unified lifestyle. Rather, it is a transition from the influence of a mono-consumption style that adheres a consumer to a typical identity, to a variety of numerous consumption styles that are activated through fragmentation and incorporation of multiple identities (Firat & Dholakia, 1998). According to Cova, Maclaran, and Bradshaw (2013, p.216), "postmodernism played a major transformative role by revealing sociocultural processes at work in consumption activities". Thus, although cultures and societies are extremely important factors that shape consumers' identity projects, postmodernism is facilitating the emergence of visible identities that emancipate consumers from conformity to their socio-cultural environment. In addition, it empowers them to forge their own social ties and cultures through the use of marketer-generated materials (Ulusoy, 2016), as well as through the marketplace.

2.3.2 Creating marketplace cultures through identity narrative

Markets create and produce unique foundations which consumers are able to stand on to fulfill their personal aims through enacting their individualities and constructing narratives of identities. However, consumers do not adhere to a single position. Rather, they could indulge autonomously in certain market positions without eradicating the possibilities of experiencing other positions. In other words, consumers are not limited to a certain identity/self-concept (Belk, 2013; Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Schau & Gilly, 2003); indeed, they are agentically experiencing several identities and producing a variety of cultures. That is to say, the effects of marketer-generated materials are not limited to consumers' identity projects. Actually, their effects stretch even broader to the extent of generating new and unique marketplace cultures. In this respect, consumption is not culturally infertile; rather, it is capable of conceiving a culture and eventually gives birth to it as a new marketplace culture. For instance, creating and forming the rules and the rituals of a consumer society that is founded on the basis of emancipation from certain personal/social identities, as well as the traditional marketplace, has produced a new marketplace culture that is detached from the traditional culture (Kozinets, 2002a). Similarly, a consumer could have identity-related possessions/social ties that differ from the typical ones associated with such identity in a specific cultural setting (Laverie, Kleine III & Kleine, 2002). Consumers are therefore culture creators and communicators. As a result, it is no wonder that approaching consumer behaviour from socio-cultural perspectives has contributed remarkably in shifting the level of understanding of consumer behaviour in contexts that previously rarely accounted for socio-cultural presence/influence on consumption. Even though cultures are important factors in determining one's agency, identities, and consumption they are not immune to penetration by external influences (Cleveland et al., 2016). Therefore, cultures are relatively changeable, and consumers negotiate and construct their cultural as well as their social boundaries through their identity projects in a variety of ways (O'Sullivan & Shankar, 2019; Schouten, 1991). For instance, consumers strategically interpret the

dominant depiction of identities on mass media, and eventually decide whether to embrace or reject what is being communicated (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Although mass media messages have been significant in terms of influencing consumers' identities, social media has not only influenced consumers' identities but also countries' identities to a large extent.

2.4 Social media

Often, the term *social networking sites* is used as a synonym for social media which can succinctly be perceived as "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content with networks (i.e., friends, followers, etc.) they construct for themselves" (Pittman & Reich, 2016, p.155). Thus, it can be said that social media is an online space where individuals generate content and interact with other online users. Mostly, online interaction on social media would result in forming friendships with other users (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Such online friendships, not to mention social media's existence, would not be possible without accessing the internet and Web 2.0.

The growing availability of accessing the internet, along with the massive diffusion of Web 2.0, which emerged in the mid-2000s (Obar & Wildman, 2015), has changed consumers' lives in many aspects (Gironda & Korgaonkar, 2014). The numerous capabilities of Web 2.0, such as providing internet users with free-of-charge spaces to store user-generated content that could be interlinked with other users, have resulted in the creation of virtual social networks. Web 2.0's main feature is allowing its users to be producers as well as consumers, or what is known as *prosumers* (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Accessing social media, which comprises several internet-based applications built on Web 2.0 technologies (Kaplan, & Haenlein, 2010), is not limited to a certain place or time. Aside from using laptops, tablets, or smartphones, a username and a password are needed to delve into the social media world. It is worth noting that sharing usernames and passwords are not common practices, even between partners/couples, although the decision could be a sign of maximum intimacy, or extreme paranoia (Belk, 2013). In spite of the unclear definitions for the term social media due to the swift expansion and development of technology, in addition to the shared similarities between social media and other technological means of communication, the following definition will be adopted to clarify and distinguish social media from other services: social media is a website/application that is institutionally maintained and relies on Web 2.0 which enables individuals and groups to prosume, and create interconnected user-specific profiles (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Although there are numerous applications and websites which would technically fall within the previous definition, there are a few of them that have succeeded in attracting billions of users from all over the world.

2.4.1 Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and public accounts

In this subsection, the four social media platforms which are considered in this thesis are explained in order to provide a clear understanding of the major differences among them, so whenever recalling any of these

platforms at later points in this chapter and throughout this study, the unique features of them will be understood. In addition, the challenges of having public accounts on these platforms are also discussed, particularly within the context of conservative societies (i.e., adhere to traditions and do not tolerate change). It is important to note that the reasons for considering such platforms are delineated in the next chapter, which is the methodology chapter.

Snapchat, which was launched in 2011, is one of the most popular mobile multimedia messaging applications. Initially, it started as an application that allows its users to send 'snaps', which was at that time photos, that could be viewed by the recipient for a specific amount of time before vanishing (i.e., self-destructing). Currently, the self-destruct feature has evolved differently in each of Snapchat's prominent features which are *My Story* and *Our Story* (Habib, Shah & Vaish, 2019). By default, the friends (i.e., people added) of a Snapchat user can access the snaps shared to My Story for a limitless number of times during a 24-hour window (Snapchat Support, 2020c). By contrast, snaps that are shared on Our Story could be viewed by any user on Snapchat; in addition, the access time for these snaps before being self-terminated could be more than 24 hours (Snapchat Support, 2020a). Another famous feature on Snapchat are the filters and lenses. Filters (i.e., overlays) can be used to edit snaps to show the location, time, speed, temperature, or even add different colouring effects (Snapchat Support, 2020b). Whereas, lenses change one's appearance as well as the environment around her/him. Succinctly, lenses change one's face and environment, while filters are merely overlays.

Concluding a casual chat with someone that an individual might be attracted to by asking for her/his Snapchat/Instagram username is not particularly odd since both of the platforms are broadly similar, so it should be a simple two-horse race between them. However, according to Statista (2020c), the distance between Snapchat and Instagram is significantly wide in terms of the active number of users, which is around 397 million for the former and one billion for the latter. Instagram is famously known as a photo-sharing application which allows its users to take photos, optionally edit them by using filters/effects, and share them whether publicly or privately (Tiggemann, Anderberg & Brown, 2020). It was launched in 2010, and dramatically succeeded in attracting users at a staggering rate. In 2016, Instagram launched its version of photos/videos that are compiled by users to form stories that vanish after 24 hours, which was observed by many as a clone of Snapchat stories (Yurieff, 2018). Since then, Instagram has introduced several new features to its users such as Instagram Live, which enables a user to share a live video in real time for not longer than one hour (Instagram, 2020).

With consideration to Snapchat and Instagram capabilities, consumers have different perspectives about their visible online identities in these two platforms. For instance, Choi and Sung (2018) argued that one's actual self is conveyed through Snapchat, as opposed to the ideal self which is portrayed in Instagram. Although such argument holds merit in certain contexts, it cannot be proven in contexts where consumers'

actuality and ideality are strongly influenced by socio-cultural factors. In conservative societies, where one's visible identity in public accounts is constantly scrutinized by the public (Hatfield & Rapson, 2015), expressing the actual/ideal self through visible identities in public accounts is strongly attached to the society's expectations and requirements, especially if one's ideality involves transgressing the offline culture that mandate certain standards in appearance. Thus, it can be inferred that in certain societies, projecting a visible online identity whether in Snapchat/Instagram is a process that requires careful consideration to the repercussions which might result from such projection.

Unlike the aforementioned platforms, Twitter is mainly known as a microblogging or a text-based platform, although it can include weblinks, photos, or videos. Twitter was launched in 2006 with a concept to allow its users to interact publicly or privately with messages (i.e., known as tweets). Such tweets can be indexed by using hashtags which could be a single word or a phrase that is aimed to classify one's tweet under a subject/theme, besides organizing the discourse of conversation among users. In other words, "The Twitter hashtag might therefore be seen as a structural feature for public debates on Twitter, as it is often used as a symbolic anchor tied to a specific topic, and enables newcomers to join in on, as well as initiate new debates" (Enli & Simonsen, 2017, p.3). The tweets had been confined to 140 characters before 2017 when the characters doubled to 280 (Stephen, 2019). Since the essential theme of Twitter is words instead of photos/videos, it is no wonder that Twitter is used by many to be informed about breaking news. Indeed, the posts on Twitter are not subject to a certain subject or domain, but instead they span a wide variety of topics (e.g., science, theology, fashion, etc.). However, in contrast to the other platforms, Twitter has been perceived by several influential people from different backgrounds and professions as a source for misleading information or "fake news" (Li & Su, 2020).

Any type of information that is shared publicly online could backfire on the user. One's publicly shared opinions on Twitter are definitely not immune to criticism, even in societies where the tolerance for accepting what is different than the usual is relatively high. For instance, a female British feminist campaigner was subject to severe online abuse on Twitter to an extent where she had not only received rape threats, but also death threats (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016). Thus, it can be inferred that online abuse to those who publicly share their views is present in different societies. Nevertheless, the possibilities for similar online misogynistic abuse being directed towards public Twitter accounts that belong to women in conservative societies are quite high. As a matter of fact, such abuse is not limited to sharing opinions. For instance, a woman was arrested, let alone the amount of online abuse she has been through, because she publicly posted on Twitter a visible online identity that does not conform to the traditional dress code in her society (Samuelson, 2016). As a result, it can be argued that public posts on Twitter whether they are in the form of videos, photos, or texts are subject to social scrutiny and judgments.

Moving on from online threats and abuse, watching live news channels, makeup tutorials, or even a 10-hour fireplace video on one website/application was not a common thing before YouTube. Considering all the platforms in this study, YouTube has the greatest number of active users, which is two billion (Statista, 2020c). In addition, it was the first to launch in 2005. YouTube's popularity, let alone accessibility, has stretched all over the world to a point where the number of hours watched on a daily basis on YouTube is one billion (YouTube, 2020). Some of the YouTube videos are produced and uploaded by organizations from different fields. Others are posted by individuals, and once an individual starts to upload videos on their personal channel then she/he would be called a YouTuber (Jerslev, 2016), who usually embrace the platform culture of asking for subscription and likes. Beneath most of the YouTube videos on screen, there is a section where users can write their comments. Due to the humoristic and sarcastic nature of many of these comments, it is no wonder that people scroll down to the comments section while the video is running, not to mention replying to or liking them. Furthermore, occasionally, there would be a comment that would summarize the main points of a video or even show timestamps, which are links to a specific timeframe in the video.

Although showing the face on one's YouTube channel is considered as an important factor to achieve better impressions among viewers (Teijeiro-Mosquera et al., 2014), such practice is not common in religion-driven conservative societies where to a certain extent it is considered that a woman's face is not to be seen by the public, let alone on a YouTube channel. For instance, a prominent female YouTuber had been posting numerous videos on her YouTube channel without being seen for almost three years before showing her face in 2015 (Pahwa, 2019). Thus, it can be inferred that publicly showing the visible identity whether fully or partially, in a social media platform that fundamentally relies on videos, is not a common practice in certain societies.

Last but not least, a common characteristic among all the aforementioned platforms in this subsection is interactivity among their users. For example, users of these platforms can send text messages, photos, or videos to each other whether privately or publicly depending on each user's preference in this regard. Such interactivity takes many non-textual forms such as liking, disliking, subscribing, or following. Furthermore, suggesting content based on one's interest is also a common habit which is practiced by the said platforms. The suggestions are tailored to one's interest according to her/his activity. In addition, these platforms are not limited to ordinary individual users; instead, companies and even countries use them. Some countries even regulate/monitor what is being produced/consumed. Finally, the platforms are not totally isolated from each other. To elaborate more, some of them are interlinked with each other so a user can share content from one platform to another.

2.4.2 Online and offline identities

As its name indicates, the nature of social media is mainly social, where individuals improve and extend their social ties and relations. However, individuals approach social media not only to socialize but also to individualize. In this regard, social media has given consumers a deck of possible online identities that they can autonomously shuffle through to pick an up-card identity which suits their dynamic dispositions and situations (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Moreover, it has emancipated consumers from the traditional market, society, and culture by allowing them to freely practice self-experimentation, which to some extent is attributed to the anonymity feature which most social media platforms provide for its users (Belk, 2013). Unlike the offline world, where one of the essential notions of identities is continuity (Baumeister, 2005), people in the online world can choose an identity with full autonomy, and detach from it whenever they want, especially when they are anonymous. Likewise, consumers are capable of staging, elaborately and selectively, the content/identity that they want to communicate online, whether they are images, videos, or words. For instance, they can take numerous pictures from a variety of angles while using different social media tools (e.g., filters/lenses) before choosing which one to post online. Such online sharing empowers one's sense of self because it allows for control over one's representation of one's personal identity (Schwarz, 2010).

Social media has exposed consumers to foreign meanings, symbols, and lifestyles. It has even influenced consumers' acculturation and consumption choices (Kizgin et al., 2018). Furthermore, it has relatively bypassed political and societal censorship in many places in the world (Duan & Dholakia, 2015). For example, a woman who is geographically living in a patriarchal, religiously strict, and modesty-inclined society could simply livestream, or at least glimpse, several photos/videos of a Victoria's Secret fashion show. Such exposure to new or exotic culture via social media might affect consumers' offline and online attitudes and behaviours which, whether they are related to social media use or not (Wilcox & Stephen, 2014), also to some extent have an impact on their society and culture. In other words, the ability and facility that social media has provided to its users in terms of exploring and interacting with other cultures have revolutionized individuals as well as whole societies (Khondker, 2011). Such a revolution has cast its shadows over individuals' online and offline identities.

The line that separates online and offline identities is relatively blurry in the literature. For instance, Belk (2013) renovated his concept of the extended self (Belk, 1988) by applying it to the online world. He suggested the re-embodiment of the self into online avatars (i.e., a form of an online identity), arguing that consumers in the online world are "disembodied and reembodied as avatars, photos, and videos" (Belk, 2013, p.481), and that such a process has an influence on one's offline identity as well as behaviours. Putting it all together, Belk is proposing that although there is a strong link between online and offline identities, the former would have a relative control/influence over the latter. Hongladarom (2011, p.534) proposed an

even stronger parallel, stating that "the so-called online self, in other words the putative self-existing on profile pages and updated timeline or news status on social networking sites… is essentially no different from the real self that is already there in the 'offline' world". In addition, he concluded that the strategies for constructing online and offline identities are the same. Thus, he is proposing that the differences, if any, between offline and online identities are insignificant. In contrast to Belk and Hongladarom, Šimůnková (2019) suggested an interesting perspective to the online and offline identities argument. She stated that "The contemporary hybrid human condition is online/offline hybridity and the space we live in can now be termed hybrid space" (2019, p.50). Moreover, she argued that mobile phones are not just devices to call, message, or face time. Rather, they are necessities and connected to one's life almost 24/7. All in all, Šimůnková (2019) argued for what she has labelled an online/offline hybridity in which the distinction between online and offline identities is being questioned since technology, particularly mobile phones which are used most often as the gateway to social media, have become an indispensable part of human life.

Although Belk, Hongladarom, and Šimůnková all have solid arguments, they did not account for the influence of a consumer's socio-cultural factors on her/his offline and online identities. A logical explanation is that the aforementioned studies were using the lens of Western contexts where restrictions on a consumer's identity-related choice, whether in the offline or the online realms, are not the same as those contexts where religious conservatism is a fundamental socio-cultural factor that is visible in everyday life. To put it differently, arguing that an online identity has an influence on a consumer's offline identity (Belk, 2013), or proposing that the variances between online and offline identities are trivial (Hongladarom, 2011), let alone assuming online and offline identities hybridity (Šimůnková, 2019) are all justifiable premises within Western contexts. However, in certain contexts where religious conservatism is strongly present, the need for accounting for the influence of one's socio-cultural factors in shaping one's online and offline identities is extremely crucial. In such contexts, unlike offline identities, online identities are constructed using social media tools and capabilities that attenuate social restrictions to a certain extent. Such tools give consumers control and relative freedom over their online identities' projection, narratives, and temporalities. For instance, a consumer takes a selfie, which is "a photograph that you take of yourself, usually with a mobile phone" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020), and enhances it by using social media tools before posting it online. This type of enhancement could assist those who live in conservative societies to construct their ideal visible identities. Surprisingly, approximately 93 million selfies are taken every day all over the world (Cohen, 2016). That is to say, it is a practice that is not limited to one society over another; instead, it is a pervasive global practice.

Consumers loosen the social and cultural restrictions online. Suler (2004) referred to such type of loosening as the online disinhibition effect which could be either positive or 'toxic'. The positive disinhibition would

stimulate the showing of care, kindness, and being open to sharing fears/wishes. On the other hand, toxic disinhibition would compel the showing of hatred and threats. Interestingly, toxic disinhibition would involve the urge of users to go to places where they would not go offline (Suler, 2004). However, as different cultures vary in defining the toxicity levels of acts, one's online identity in a certain culture might evoke criticism, harassment, and even death threats, whereas the exact same online identity in other cultures would not be noticed, or at least would not receive such condemnation/threats. For instance, in a conservative society, a woman who posted a video on social media showing herself driving a car was extremely stigmatized to a point that she received death threats because she just simply defied a typical offline identity for women in her region (Aarts, Roelants & Gardner, 2015). That is to say, although she used the online space, where social and cultural restrictions are relatively eased, the expected standards of modesty for her offline identity were also required to be met by the society in the online world. Putting it all together, it seems that in conservative societies, being online will not change the offline socio-cultural rules/expectations, especially for women. However, in non-conservative societies, the situation is noticeably different.

In Western societies, gender inequality in social media is not as pervasive as it is elsewhere. Unlike the real world, individuals tend to reveal their sexual identity by 'coming out' more online than offline, as Craig and McInroy (2014) discovered. In addition, Craig and McInroy have noticed a theme which demonstrates how online identity is activated/enacted offline. With reference to their theme, social media has given consumers a wide range of resources to infinitely explore marketplaces, social groups, and other individual consumers with whom they collaboratively and autonomously construct online identities based on mutual interests regardless of any social restriction or cultural agenda. However, women in Western societies have relatively more liberty in terms of abiding by cultural and social norms with regards to their offline/online identity projects. On the other hand, in other non-Western societies, particularly religion-driven conservative societies, women's identity projects are extremely confined by socio-cultural norms and traditions. A typical society that has such characteristics is the Saudi society (Aarts, Roelants & Gardner, 2015).

2.5 Saudi women's socio-cultural milieus

The word 'culture' is used in almost every context to give numerous indications. In addition, other words are also attached to it in order to narrow down the intended meaning (e.g., pop culture, subculture, or cultural reset). Etymologically, culture means to farm and cultivate, and it is defined as a system of shared values, beliefs, and expected behaviours in a society (Hofstede, 2001). To elaborate more, it is how things are done within specific social settings at certain locations among specific individuals/groups. A word that is pervasively misused as a synonym for culture is tradition which is the inheritance of values, beliefs, and

expected behaviours. Thus, although culture and tradition are slightly different, both encompass values, beliefs, and behaviours for a society. According to Jameson (2007, p.199), cultural identity is "an individual's sense of self derived from formal or informal membership in groups that transmit and inculcate knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions, and ways of life". Thus, it can be inferred that cultural identity is an integral part of one's identity, not to mention the visible aspects of identity. The concept of cultural identity spans a variety of elements such as language, aesthetics, food, and even religion. Similarly, national identity is "a collective sentiment based upon the belief of belonging to the same nation and of sharing most of the attributes that make it distinct from other nations" (Guibernau, 2007, p.11). Whereas national identity functions at the nation/country level, cultural identity can function at a smaller/sub-group level. Nevertheless, both national identity and cultural identity could be expressed through identity-related items (e.g., sombrero, kilt, or kimono).

Levelling cultural identity with national identity is not an odd practice within the literature. For example, Sussman (2000) argued that cultural identity and national identity are not two different constructs, but instead, both terms are used interchangeably. Alternatively, some researchers have emphasized that the concept of national identity is extremely convoluted and involves numerous dimensions (İnaç & Ünal, 2013; Kowert, 1998). Since this study is concerned with the visible aspects of Saudi women's identities, the concept of Saudi Arabia's national identity is conceptualized as the umbrella that incorporates aspects such as cultural identity and religious identity.

The Saudi society has long been driven by following a strict branch of Islam as well as conservative traditions (Hussain, 2016). Islam is the most recent religion among a group of monotheistic religions, which includes Judaism and Christianity, and it is positioned in second place after Christianity in terms of world followers (Sheldrake, 2014). The contemporary lands of Saudi Arabia witnessed the birth of Islam. In contrast to other Muslim countries, Saudi Arabia adheres to a strict school of Islam which was perceived by many scholars as one of the most conservative schools (Hussain, 2016; Hunter, 1998). Saudi Arabia's Islamic identity, which is also considered a core part of its national identity, has been profoundly rooted in protecting its version of Islam from external influence, especially Western influence. This protective attitude is attributed throughout Saudi Arabia's history to the relative cultural isolation from any foreign influence on national traditions and Saudi Arabia's cultural identity (Aarts, Roelants & Gardner, 2015). Furthermore, such protectiveness has formed a patriarchal society where the concept of guardianship has until very recently existed in almost every aspect of Saudi women's lives.

Unlike the rest of the world's countries, it used to be illegal for Saudi women to drive in Saudi Arabia before June 2018 when they were allowed to be issued with a driving license (Van Sant, 2018). Moreover, Saudi women used to be required and monitored in terms of following a conservative dress code that covers the majority, if not all, of their skin in public places where they could be seen by unrelated men (Le Renard,

2014). Recently, Saudi government's reformative acts have slightly abated the patriarchal grip on Saudi women's lives. As a result, Saudi women have gained more financial and social empowerments (Hussain, 2016), leading towards comparatively elevated consumeristic ideologies and Western lifestyles among them (Le Renard, 2013). For instance, veiling has started to become less frequent in public places, especially in upmarket locations within big cities in Saudi Arabia (Quamar, 2016). In addition, a Saudi woman can now travel without the need to ask for permission from her 'guardian' (Hubbard, 2019). Furthermore, the general socio-cultural theme has dramatically changed in Saudi Arabia. For instance, cinemas were opened after having been banned for almost 35 years (Carey, 2018) due to religious grounds. In addition, in December 2019, segregation between men and women according to gender/marital status is no longer enforced/required (Turak, 2019) as will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

The proposition that Islam is the ultimate and dominant stream that eternally supplies Saudi Arabia's culture is flawed. Actually, aspects of Islam are interpreted and adopted differently among Muslims, and the culture of each and every Islamic country does not conform absolutely to mere religion (Bayat, 2007). However, Saudi women's autonomy in constructing their visible identities in the Saudi society through marketer-generated materials is still confined by Saudi Arabia's tradition and culture. In summary, Islam is part of the culture in Saudi Arabia, not a synonym of Saudi Arabia's culture. Consequently, religion in Saudi women's socio-cultural milieus is not a trivial construct.

2.5.1 Religion

The ideological role of religion in influencing one's consumption has been firmly acknowledged in consumer research (e.g., Mathras et al., 2016; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Sandikçi & Ger, 2010). The followers of a religion would mostly follow its teachings and laws which govern the consumption of a wide variety of consumables such as food, drink, dress, and even entertainment. To elaborate more, religion influences a wide range of consumer behaviour, such as diligently searching for information regarding whether to use products or not (Hirschman, 1981). For instance, Muslims are forbidden by Islam to consume alcohol. Actually, it is not just forbidden to consume alcohol, instead, even participating in any part of its supply chain, whether in terms of delivery or even serving it is prohibited (Ibn Majah, 2007). In some countries, religion's influence on consumption exceeds individuals to include countries as it is the case with Saudi Arabia, where alcohol is yet banned (Nereim & Abu-Nasr, 2019). In Saudi Arabia, the national identity is strongly associated with Islam. This type of association can be witnessed in everyday practices as well as consumption activities. Indeed, the majority of religious societies have various norms and traditions, which are underpinned by a religion that governs and guides its members' consumption choices (McAlexander et al., 2014; Arsel & Bean, 2013; Sandikçi & Ger, 2010; Üstüner & Holt, 2007). Thus, consumers within these societies express the religious aspects of their identities through their consumption (Coşgel & Minkler, 2004). Minton et al. (2016, p.366) concluded "In sum, social theories would suggest that religious behavior

is learned from others and religious actions are taken to portray a religious identity to others". Such portrayal is not unified because of one's level of religiosity, and one's socio-cultural structure.

According to Vitell (2009), and Bjarnason (2007), religiosity has three dimensions which are beliefs, affiliations, and practices. Moreover, Minton and Kahle (2014, p.12) perceived religiosity as "the degree to which one holds religious beliefs and values both through an internal spiritual connection and external religious practices and behaviors". In a nutshell, religiosity is what consumers believe is sacred in their lives (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989). Religiosity might be intrinsic as an end, extrinsic as a means, or a quest as a constant search for truth (Khraim, 2010; Allport & Ross, 1967).

In Saudi Arabia, religious fundamentalism has been a major driving force behind expanding patriarchy in the lives of numerous Saudi women. Emerson and Hartman (2006) and Antoun (2001) argued that religious fundamentalism is rejecting the values of modernism and secularism. Among these values is the concept that women have the right to decide how to express themselves through identity-related materials without the need to seek approval from the eldest man/men within their social circle, not to mention religiously justifying their consumption choices. However, in consideration of the recent governmental reforms in Saudi Arabia, there is a high potentiality that such religious fundamentalism would gradually transform to religious spiritualism, which Pargament (1999) described as focusing on the intrinsic dimensions of religion instead of the extrinsic ones. That is to say, Saudi women's social acceptance in public spaces will not be contingent on demonstrating religiosity through their visible identity. As a result, the emergence of a modern visible identity within a religion-driven society is not impossible.

With consideration to the current socio-cultural changes made by Saudi Arabia's government, it is not odd to hear voices calling for patriarchy to be abated or even eradicated. Mostly, such voices would adopt an 'Islamic feminist' approach which seeks justice and equality by handling Islamic teachings through a non-traditional patriarchal-free perspective (Bakhshizadeh, 2019). Interestingly, this is not always the case as Le Renard (2014) reported a phenomenon among young Saudi women that she called 'consumerist femininity' in which Saudi women's visible identities are constructed in a fashion that transgresses traditional Islamic perspectives. All in all, it can be said that in Saudi Arabia, Islam has a significant influence in terms of guiding how femininity in women's visible identities is accentuated through marketer-generated materials. To put it differently, religion is still the major force that controls consumption in Saudi Arabia, and the bipolar ideology of the sacred and profane is present not only as a mental construct but also as an integral part of Islamic/consumerist femininity. Nevertheless, in Saudi Arabia, the profane for a woman could be the sacred for her society. Such profanity and sacredness stretch beyond beliefs to cover even marketer-generated materials. Consequently, such a dilemma would mostly result in Saudi women's defiance or obedience to the society's expectations/requirements, although the latter has been gradually changing since the advent of social media (Yuce et al., 2014).

2.5.2 Technology

Throughout Saudi Arabia's history, technology's influence on the society has been a source of multifaceted religious agitation because technology mostly, if not always, comes from the feminist and liberal West. For instance, the satellite dish was banned in the mid-nineties because of the complaints that were raised by Saudi clerics on the grounds that these aerial technologies would contribute towards corrupting Saudis morally and politically (Eickelman & Piscatori, 2004). Thus, it is no wonder that the traditional all-male clerics usually do not favour Western technologies, such as in the case of the internet, the adoption of which was either disapproved or conditionally approved by the majority of them, as Al-Kandari and Dashti (2014) found. Yet, the influence of technology has become a vein running through aspects of Saudis' daily lives, resulting in unique and substantial change (Gruber & Haugbolle, 2013).

The internet was introduced to the Saudi public in 1999. Since then, the social fabric has dramatically shifted, and Western lifestyles have gained popularity. Accessing the internet in Saudi Arabia is not unmonitored or unregulated. In fact, the internet as well as online interaction are strongly regulated and supervised by the state for several reasons, of which among them is preserving Islam and morality. That is why it is no wonder that access to gambling sites is blocked (Chaudhry, 2014). Furthermore, numerous Saudi clerics have taken a stance that they perceive the internet and its users, let alone women, in a suspicious way. For instance, one of these clerics said that "internet chats between young men and women are the gates to evil" (Al-Kandari & Dashti, 2014, p.142). However, despite such clerical opposition, the pace of internet use among Saudis has been booming, especially with the advent of social media.

In Saudi Arabia, social media has a high usage rate at about 91 percent among the population, with 42 percent constantly connected to social media, whereas 43 percent spend a minimum of two hours daily on social media (CITC, 2015). These statistics demonstrate how social media has become an integral and influential component in Saudi Arabia's society. Although both Saudi men and women heavily use social media, Saudi women use it more ardently (Xanthidis & Alali, 2016), and it even influences Saudi women's online purchase decisions more than Saudi men (Makki & Lin-Ching, 2015). Due to the nature of social media platforms, online interaction has never been easier between users regardless of their gender. To illustrate this point, the filters or privacy options that would allow users to filter who they would interact with according to gender are not common on social media. For example, a woman could be approached by an unrelated man, whether by a text, photo, or video and vice versa. Thus, it is no wonder that some Saudi religious scholars have addressed the urge for segregating men and women on social media (Guta & Karolak, 2015).

On social media, Saudi women strategically maintain their public accounts in a way which allows them to carefully navigate between the society's expectations and their own personal aims. One of the most fundamental reasons behind this cautious navigation is the fact that their visible identity would be

scrutinized by their society (Alsaggaf, 2019). The outcomes of such scrutiny could be severely unpleasant to an extent where it might result in not only being arrested but also landing in prison (Samuelson, 2016). However, with the rapid socio-cultural changes that are happening in Saudi Arabia, many of the concepts pertaining to Saudi women's visible online identity have been reshuffled. In addition, it can be witnessed that the influence of religious edicts by the dominant religious institutions is gradually fading with regards to Saudi women's offline visible identity, let alone their online visible identity which has evolved to unprecedented levels. A fundamental aspect that controls such evolvement in Saudi women's visible identity is modesty.

2.5.3 Modesty within mixed-gender spaces

Theoretically, racial segregation, especially in public places, has been abolished in many parts of the world; however, it is still present within the unwritten rules of almost every society. Segregation according to race or ethnicity is generally considered unlawful in many parts of the world, not to mention segregation based on gender which exists to a large extent in Saudi Arabia. Within public spaces, segregating based on gender used to be part of daily life in Saudi Arabia. Such practice stems from Saudi Arabia's traditional interpretation of Islam which emphasizes that unrelated men and women should not intermingle (Doumato, 2009). As a result, many places have dedicated spaces for either women only or for families (i.e., women with related men such as husband, father, and brothers etc.) (Le Renard, 2014).

In the early 2000s, many voices in Saudi Arabia increased their calls for rethinking the feasibility of gender segregation, besides highlighting the need for intermingling (Van Geel, 2016). Such calls were fiercely opposed by numerous clerics; however, the Saudi government has started to gradually ease its stance on the said issue. For example, in 2009, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) was opened, and intermingling (i.e., coeducation) was permissible within it (Meijer, 2010). After a few months of KAUST's opening, the head of the religious police in Mecca, which is one of the two holiest cities in Islam, argued that intermingling is not an abnormal practice but, instead, it is 'part of normal life' (Zoepf, 2010). In contrast, several Saudi clerics were opposed to what appears to be a systematic propagation of intermingling by the state. For example, one cleric overtly condemned coeducation, while another accused anyone who encouraged intermingling of apostasy and believed they should not be left to live unless she/he change their stance (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Despite such aggressive opposition, intermingling in Saudi Arabia has gradually started to be part of everyday life. Consequently, the spaces which could be labelled as mixed-gender spaces have proliferated since 2018. For instance, women were allowed to enter soccer stadiums to watch matches (Duerden, 2018).

The term offline mixed-gender spaces is used in this study to indicate public places where men and women as strangers can intermingle, such as at malls, restaurants, and cafes. It is worth noting that the aforementioned term was not devised by the author. That is to say, it has appeared in numerous studies

(e.g., Almahmood, 2018; Shah, 2018) which used it to indicate places where unrelated men and women can be present at the same time. Before going any further, it is important to explain what is meant by the religious police, which is a controversial phenomenon that has been associated with mixed-gender spaces in Saudi Arabia for a long time. The religious police is a terminology used for male members of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which is an official government institution that was organized in the 1980s to enforce multiple tasks such as making sure that Saudi women's visible identity maintains the ultra-conservative standards of modesty in mixed-gender spaces (Le Renard, 2013). For instance, a woman could be approached by one of the members of the religious police and asked to leave a shopping mall because she is putting on nail polish (Vela, 2012). One of many controversial aspects about the religious police is the way they are perceived within the Saudi society. To elucidate, some social segments have clung to the assumption that the presence of the religious police, or 'the guardians of virtue' as their proponents call them, in mixed-gender spaces is extremely important to preserve traditional modesty in visible identities. On the other side of the argument, other social segments have opposed being religiously policed according to the religious police member's subjectivity in terms of defining modesty. Apparently, the controversy that surrounds the religious police has come to an end, especially since they have been gradually curbed since 2016 (Anishchenkova, 2020; Chan, 2016). Nevertheless, the controversy that surrounds Saudi women's modesty in their visible identity within mixed-gender spaces is still going on.

As mentioned earlier, religion's influence on consumer behaviour is significantly noticeable, especially in religion-driven societies. In Islam, there are certain guidelines that govern how a woman's visible identity should be in mixed-gender spaces, and at the top of these guidelines is the concept of modesty. To conceptualize modesty in Islam, the concept of *awrah* must be first delineated. *Awrah* is an Arabic term which among its meanings is 'that which is to be veiled', and Muslims are required to hide their awrah from strangers as well as refraining from looking at another person's awrah. Numerous Muslim scholars have provided different interpretations in terms of what constitutes awrah for women in mixed-gender spaces. For instance, Al-Qaradawi (1995), who is a well-known Egyptian cleric, argued that with the exception of hands and face, a woman's entire body is deemed to be awrah in the presence of unrelated men (Al-Qaradawi, 1995). Similarly, Ibn Uthaymeen and Ibn Jibreen, who are prominent Saudi religious scholars, have clearly emphasized in multiple fatwas that women are not allowed to uncover their faces in the presence of unrelated men (Refer to questions 257, 264, and 269 in Al-Musnad, 1996). Putting it all together, it can be said that there is a consensus among Muslim clerics that a woman's body, including her hair, should be covered from unrelated men; however, there is disagreement on whether the face and hands should be covered or not (Amer, 2014). Interestingly, the concept of awrah stretches beyond dress to include

even the tone of a woman's voice (Al-Qaradawi, 1995), which should not be 'sexy' when talking with unrelated men. Otherwise, it is deemed to be awrah.

After the concept of awrah was presented, modesty as an abstract term could be perceived as "a multidimensional construct which includes aspects of appearance, or how one dresses and looks; behavior; beliefs; culture or religion; and relationship or interaction with others" (Andrews, 2004, p.31). However, considering the context of this study, traditional modesty is defined as following traditional Islamic guidelines that pertain to how a Muslim woman's visible identity must be constructed in mixed-gender spaces where unrelated men are present and can see them. A major construct of modesty is veiling since if it is efficiently employed, a woman's awrah would be covered (Boulanouar, 2006). Traditionally, veiling involves three main garments, which are the *abaya*, *hijab*, and *niqab*. Although these garments have different names in other parts of the Islamic world, as well as in different regions in Saudi Arabia, the main purpose of them is to efficiently veil women's beauty from unrelated men. From a perspective in which Islamic modesty is highly prioritized, it can be said that the essential aim of the abaya, which is an overgarment that is supposed to cover the whole body, is to modestly cover a woman's body from men's sight. In Saudi Arabia, the abaya as well as the hijab had been lawfully forced on women as a public dress code which symbolically indicates the state's national identity as well as Saudi Arabia's understanding of Islamic modesty (Yamani, 2000). The hijab is a veil for the hair (i.e., a scarf), although some women use its ends to also cover the lower part of their faces. The niqab, which is similar to a *burqa*, is a veil for the face which leaves the eyes and comparatively little space around them uncovered (refer to Appendix 7 for more information). Interestingly, enlarging the space around the eyes so that the nose and eyebrows could be seen is not allowed in Islam according to Shaik Ibn Jibreen's fatwa (Refer to question 260 in Al-Musnad, 1996). Traditionally, the dominant colour of the abaya, hijab, and niqab is black. This colour originated as a cultural code for women's dress in mixed-gender spaces, and gradually transformed to gain religious significance in the society (Le Renard, 2014; Al-Rasheed, 2013).

All in all, the fundamental theme of dress style within mixed-gender spaces in Saudi Arabia for Saudi women is underpinned by traditional Islamic modesty; indeed, "In particular, for women, wearing loose, black, garments that traditionally conceal the body, hair, and in some cases the face is the social norm legitimized by the religious requirement of modesty for women in Islam" (Sobh, Belk, & Gressel, 2012, p.357). In addition, the characteristics of such modesty in dress for Saudi women in mixed-gender spaces is elaborately defined by the Saudi Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and the Issuing of Fatwa, which is an official government entity, in their Fatwa Number 21352 (2000, cited in Al-Qasimi, 2010, p.56) which describes what constitutes the Islamic overgarment the *abaya* as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Modest traditional Islamic abaya

Should be…	**Should not be…**
Loose and covers the entire body	Body-clinging/form-fitting
Made of material with high density and thickness	Transparent and fine (light)
Only in front opening	Wide sleeve opening
Hanging from the top of the head	Imitating non-Muslim clothes regardless of their gender
Modest	Ornamented with attractive symbols (e.g., embroidery, writings, drawings)

Adapted from: Fatwa Number 21352 issued by the Saudi Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and the Issuing of Fatwa (2000, cited in Al-Qasimi, 2010). Refer to Appendix 6 for a pictorial representation of this table.

It is also important to reiterate that modesty is not limited to dress per se. For instance, makeup, tattoos, tone of voice, hair extensions, fake eyelashes, nail polish, perfumes, gaze, pose, hand and facial gestures are all elements that are considered within the concept of Islamic modesty. An interesting act that is considered also as immodest is when a woman intentionally walks with heavy steps (i.e., stamping) in order to draw men's attention, especially if such footsteps would be accompanied by the sound of her ornaments (e.g., jingling sound) (Al-Qaradawi, 1995). That is to say, anything that would cause attraction from the other gender would be perceived as Islamically immodest (Al-Albani, 2002). A legitimate counter argument would be that attractiveness is subjective, just like beauty which is in the eyes of the beholder. Thus, it appears that the fundamental reason behind veiling is to put a barrier between the beholder's eyes – as well as his senses – and what might provoke his subjective aesthetic judgments, not to mention being attracted to what he can see, hear, and smell. Nevertheless, it seems that the interpretation of modesty is subject to a woman's individual understanding. For instance, within mixed-gender spaces in the Saudi society, Le Renard (2013) noticed that young Saudi females' dress style is pervasively fashionable, form-fitting, and attractive. Le Renard attributed such evolution in the visible identity for young Saudi women to the mounting consumerism along with governmental reformative acts. Likewise, Quamar (2016) found that the practices of veiling the face by a *niqab* and scarfing the head with a *hijab* have started to relatively decline among urban Saudi women. However, both Le Renard and Quamar did not adequately consider or sought to explore the influence of social media on such visible identity transformation. Such an influence might not only affect the offline visible identities but also the online ones.

2.5.4 Online and offline modesty

From a traditional Islamic perspective, the general theme for modesty in women's visible identity should not change according to the place (Al-Albani, 2002; AlMunajjed, 1997; Al-Qaradawi, 1995). To elaborate more, whether a Muslim woman was in Saudi Arabia or in another country, the unequivocal standards of modesty (i.e., covering the whole body in line with Islamic teachings with the exception of face and hands (Amer, 2014)) remain unchanged whenever there is a chance that she might be seen by unrelated men (Refer to questions 238 and 257 in Al-Musnad, 1996). Within these lines, a logical inference would be that modesty standards in a visible identity would not be any different between the online world (e.g., Instagram photos, Snapchat/YouTube videos, or a Twitter profile picture) and the offline world (e.g., shopping mall and restaurants, etc.). That is to say, modesty in offline mixed-gender spaces would be the same as modesty in online mixed-gender spaces which is used in this research to connotate Saudi women's public accounts on social media where their posts – specifically photos and videos of themselves – would be seen by unrelated men.

Theoretically, Muslim women's online and offline visible identities would remain consistent, modesty wise. However, a conceptual argument that is constructed using a Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) lens would impose different questions on the validity of the aforementioned conclusion. Considered in this light, postmodernism has infiltrated through consumers' mindsets as well as societies (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995) to an extent where religion's influence in steering consumeristic behaviours has significantly diminished (Featherstone, 2007). For instance, the socio-cultural aspects in individuals' identity projects have been relatively constructed to signal individuality instead of conformity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) to a specific interpretation of modesty in visible Islamic identities (Sobh, Belk & Gressel, 2012).

The likelihood of using a postmodern approach within the context of Saudi Arabia is not high within the literature. For instance, North and Trip (2012) perceived Saudi Arabia as a modern country where extremely ancient attitudes are still present, while Anishchenkova (2020) described it as a modern country with significant cultural complexities. Likewise, Alhadlaq, Kharrufa and Olivier (2019) argued that it is a modern country with a conservative society. A common factor among all the aforementioned perspectives is the lack of accounting for social media's multidimensional influence, such as infusing postmodernity within Saudi Arabia's social-cultural milieus, not to mention Saudi women's identity projects.

The major studies which explored social media's influence on Saudi women's visible identities in social media (e.g., Pahwa, 2019; Alsaggaf, 2019, 2015; Qutub, 2018; Guta & Karolak, 2015; Al-Saggaf, 2011), or the repercussions of being on social media on their offline life (Al-Saggaf, 2016), did not sufficiently investigate the extent of social media's influence on modesty as a construct of their visible online and offline identities, although most of these studies have immensely contributed in underpinning the conviction that social media is changing the way Saudi women navigate their online identities. However, the studies,

within the consumer research field, which have explored modesty in online/offline visible identities within the context of Saudi/Muslim women (e.g., Abu Nab, 2019; Sobh, Belk & Gressel, 2014, 2012, 2010; Bachleda, Hamelin & Benachour, 2014) did not sufficiently acknowledge nor adequately investigate social media's role in influencing the conception of modesty, and how such conception is externalized through visible identities within offline and online mixed-gender spaces. Table 2 provides succinct information about some of the most prominent studies that took a similar approach in terms of this research inquiry:

Table 2: Examples of studies that involved modesty in visible Islamic identities

Researchers	**Research main inquiry**	**Main social media platforms explored**	**Findings that delineate social media's influence on traditional modesty in offline and online visible identities within mixed-gender spaces**
(Abu Nab, 2019)	Exploring socio-cultural factors influence on fashion and clothing consumption of Saudi women	-	-
(Sobh, Belk & Gressell, 2012)	Exploring modesty and vanity in Muslim Qatari & Emirati women's offline identity adornment practices	-	-
(Alsaggaf, 2019)	Exploring how Saudi women strategically construct and manage their online identities	Facebook	-
(Qutub, 2018)	Exploring how cultural norms and platform affordance influence Saudi women's online identities	Snapchat & Instagram	-
(Guta & Karolak, 2015)	Exploring how Saudi women negotiate and express their identities in social media	Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr	-
(Pahwa, 2019)	Exploring how a Saudi woman has mediated modesty in social media	YouTube	-

Putting it all together, using Saudi Arabia and Saudi women as contexts, the researcher would attempt to bridge the aforementioned gaps through exploring social media's influence (i.e., Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter) on the traditional conception of modesty, and how such influence is expressed through online and offline visible identities within mixed-gender spaces and public accounts. Such exploration would be achieved by answering the following research questions;

1. How does social media influence Saudi women's conception of traditional modesty in a visible identity?
2. How is such influence expressed by Saudi women in their visible offline identities within mixed-gender spaces in Saudi Arabia?

3. How is such influence expressed by Saudi women in their visible online identities within public accounts on social media?

2.6 Summary

The researcher preluded the literature review by emphasizing that the concept of consumers' multiple selves has contributed towards extending consumer research to consider consumers' ideality in their self-concept, rather than just focusing on their actuality. Moreover, consumers' self-concept has many means to be expressed, such as personal and social identities which are both to some extent constructed via marketer-generated materials. Although consumers move autonomously between rationality and hedonism with regards to their consumption motives, the influence of socio-cultural factors on such autonomy is extremely immense in terms of constructing one's identity projects, as Arnould and Thompson (2005) argued within CCT, of which the theoretical perspectives were discussed earlier.

Starting from the advent of the internet and continuing with the emergence of numerous social media platforms (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube), the socio-cultural building blocks of many identities and societies have been reshaped, and the concept of reality, not to mention identity, has become relatively split between offline and online visible identities. Social media has encouraged consumers to liberate themselves from their socio-cultural structures and institutions, especially those pertaining to gender. Nevertheless, the dominance of such agendas differs from one country to another, and specifically between Western and Arab Muslim countries.

Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries in the world which is used to strictly adhering to an extreme conservative branch of Islam. Furthermore, Saudi women are expected by their socio-cultural structures and institutions to reflect their adherence to Islam by maintaining a visible Islamic identity which mainly consists of following a modest appearance, specifically within mixed-gender spaces in the Saudi society. However, social media has exposed Saudi women to cultures from all over the world, and it has given them the opportunity to interact with a variety of users who have different consumeristic, social, and religious ideologies. The existing academic literature has addressed such influential exposure, but without sufficiently exploring its influence on Saudi women's conception of traditional modesty and how such conception is expressed in their online and offline visible identities within mixed-gender spaces and public accounts. Rather, the majority of studies that have explored the influence of social media on Saudi women's identities/self-presentation approached this phenomenon from different perspectives that lack the adequate consideration of modesty as a religious construct that is embodied in visible identities.

In addition to attempting to close the encountered gaps in the current literature that were highlighted throughout this chapter, this research is responding to several calls that were made by marketing scholars for addressing constructs of religion (i.e., modesty), consumption (i.e., identity projects), and gender within

specific geographical contexts. For instance, Izberk-Bilgin (2012) argued that the research on consumers' religion, and how it is interwoven with their consumptive attitudes and behaviours, is still scant. Likewise, Minton et al. (2016, p.365) stated that "yet, insufficient research has examined religion's influence on consumption". In addition, Askegaard and Linnet (2011, p.394) have expressed how "researchers that identify with the CCT field still submit works totally devoid of references to the nationality, gender, age, geographical location, political leanings, etc. of the informants in question". Finally, this review is concluded with the key members of the *Journal of Islamic Marketing* editorial team's recommendation, which is to explore how social media platforms are contributing in 'rewriting' the definition of modesty in visible Islamic identities (Wilson et al., 2013).

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

In order to conduct research in a scientific way, many criteria must be considered including the research methodology, which can be defined as a multi-step systematic approach to execute research in a scientific manner. In this chapter, the researcher will explain and discuss in detail the research design, data collection, and data analysis. To begin, an explanation of research philosophy and the different research paradigms will be presented to serve as a prelude for the philosophical stance of the researcher. Throughout different parts in this chapter, the obstacles as well as the challenges that were encountered by the researcher will also be presented. Figure 1 delineates the framework which the researcher deemed to be appropriate in terms of answering his research questions and accomplishing the aims and objectives of this thesis:

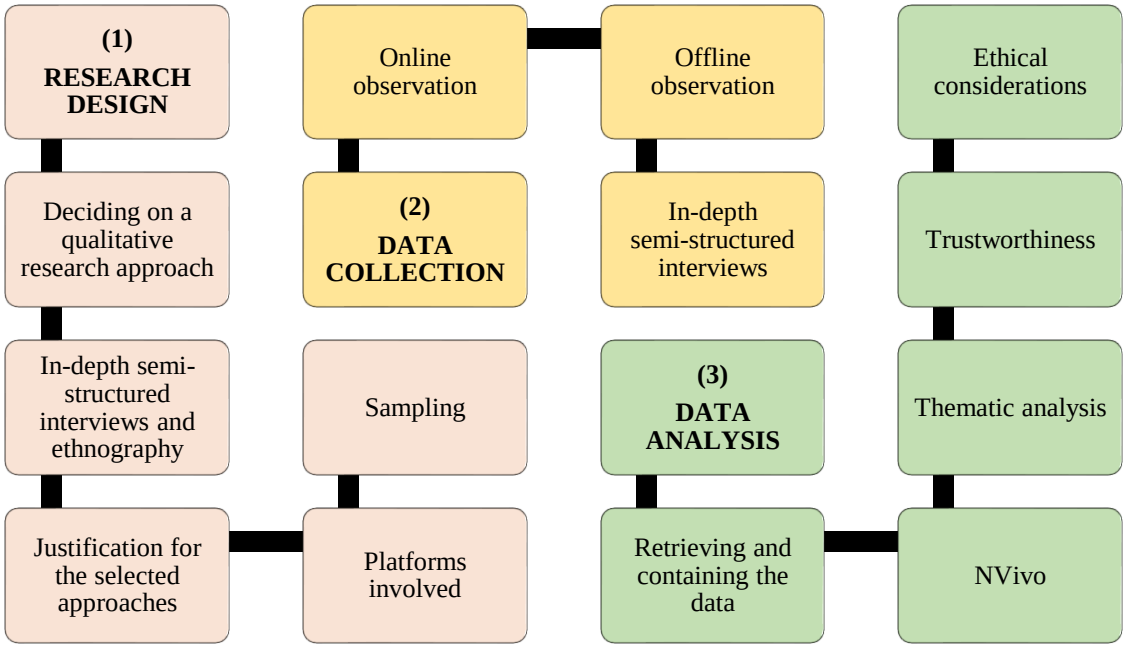

Figure 1: Proposed research framework

3.1 Research philosophy

To scientifically form the rationale for the philosophical stance adopted in this research, several philosophical approaches will be discussed throughout the following subsection. According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), the quality of the research can be judged from its philosophical arguments which are emphasized through the research methodology. Furthermore, they highlighted that there must be a clear distinction between the pertinent philosophical approaches in order to scientifically

navigate through the research framework. As a result, the first step would be discussing different research paradigms before situating this research within a precise paradigm.

3.1.1 Paradigms in research

A research paradigm could be perceived as a philosophical perspective which the researcher uses within her/his research. To elaborate more, Creswell (2014, p.6) described a research paradigm as "a general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to a study". Creswell also explained two of the basic philosophical constructs which form the research paradigm: ontology and epistemology. First, ontology is the nature of reality (i.e., whether it is single or multiple). Second, epistemology is the ways in which knowledge is gained. The importance of explicitly stating the choice of the research paradigm is extremely crucial to a point where Blaikie and Priest (2017) argued that the chosen research paradigm has relatively more importance than the choice of research methods, which are defined by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) as the techniques and methods used to collect and analyze data.

In social science research, there are two fundamental paradigms which are objectivism and subjectivism. Both of these paradigms were delineated by Burrell and Morgan (1979) as follows: first, ontologically, objectivism is assuming that a single reality exists independently and externally to individuals, let alone their perception. Epistemologically, gaining knowledge via objectivism would be through searching for causal and regular relationships between variables by examining pre-formulated hypotheses to see whether they go with or against the laws of science (Potter, 2000). Second, ontologically, subjectivism (i.e., constructionism) is assuming that the existence of multiple realities is internal and dependent on individuals and their interpretation. Epistemologically, gaining knowledge via subjectivism would be through delving into the socio-cultural milieus of individuals as well as their points of view in order to understand how they perceive reality (Potter, 2000). It is worth noting that in qualitative methodology, the subjectivity of the researcher is saliently present and that it guides almost every aspect of the research, such as choosing the topic, setting the criteria for sampling, and interpreting data. However, such subjectivity is not totally detached from objectivity, as Ratner (2002) has argued that although one is adopting a subjective methodology, objectivity is not completely negated from the researcher's aims and scientific standards.

Burrell and Morgan (1979) identified four philosophical areas within the two fundamental paradigms (i.e., objectivism and subjectivism) that take totally different and opposite worldviews. In such distinct and incompatible philosophical areas (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015), the majority of researchers in social sciences can be placed according to their research approach. The present research is situated within the area of interpretivism which Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler (2014) viewed along with positivism as one of the most prominent research philosophies (i.e., paradigms) adopted by researchers in the business and management fields. To elaborate this point, an interpretivist philosophy, which is normally used in

qualitative research, argues that phenomena are very complicated, thus, cannot be adequately and holistically explained by relying on theories and laws. Researchers who adopt interpretivism as a philosophy probe into the context and circumference the totality of a phenomenon in an attempt to understand how people perceive the world (Zickermann, 2014). For instance, an interpretivist will interact with the informants/participants in order to capture and interpret their views. In such interactions, the interpretivist is influenced by her/his beliefs, values, and reasoning (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2014). By contrast, a positivist philosophy, which is normally used in quantitative research, argues that phenomena are natural by nature, thus, laws and theories are relied on to study and explain such phenomena. In addition, unlike interpretivism, the results that emerge from a positivist study have more chances in terms of being generalized since there are no possibilities for more than one interpretation (i.e., multiple realities) (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2014).

A common ground among all the aforementioned approaches and paradigms is the use of logical reasoning. In essence, such logical reasoning is more of an organized way to connect the ideas of any research, whether it is quantitative or qualitative (Reichertz, 2014). The two major logical reasoning means are deduction and induction (Bryman, 2016). According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009), deduction is about the development of a theory through extremely thorough and careful testing. In addition, they have reported that deduction has several unique characteristics. For instance, the independence of the researcher from what is being studied and, in addition, generalizability. In terms of induction, the data is leading the theory. In other words, unlike deduction where the data follows theory, in induction the theory will follow the data. Among the common characteristics for induction are the dependency of the researcher on what is being studied (e.g., being immersed in the culture to understand meanings and symbols) and, in addition, less interest in generalizability. Finally, in positivism, deduction is usually the dominant logic used, while in interpretivism induction is favoured, although there is no practicality in such selective adoption of logic (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

3.1.2 The philosophical stance of this research

After consideration of the different philosophical paradigms in research, the researcher can explicitly state and explain his philosophical position in terms of this qualitative research. The researcher adopts an interpretivist approach to explore how traditional modesty in Saudi women's offline and online visible identities is influenced by social media. The adoption of such an approach would affect this research ontologically and epistemologically. To be specific, the ontology of this research would not embrace the belief that there is only one reality; instead, this research is conducted on the basis that there are multiple realities which are socially constructed within individuals' perceptions. Furthermore, the epistemology of this research is based on an interpretivist approach through the reliance on ethnography (i.e., online and offline observation) and in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Thus, it can be inferred that this

research is employing triangulation, which is cross checking and validating the findings of one research method with the findings of another research method (Bryman, 2016). In addition, triangulation would also assist the researcher in understanding the cultural meanings and feelings of the interviewees, besides the interviewees' motivations in terms of responding to certain questions in a certain way (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Overall, the researcher justifiably believes that his philosophical stance is appropriate considering the exploratory nature of this research. In such a stance, data is fundamentally gained by attempting to understand how the participants perceive and interpret social media's influence on their visible identity through the lens of modesty. As mentioned earlier in the previous chapter, modesty in appearance within the context of Saudi Arabia is strongly related with a socio-cultural construct (i.e., religion) that immensely shapes and controls the lives of Saudi women. Thus, the researcher is confident that approaching his qualitative research enquiry using triangulation between ethnography and semi-structured interviews would serve the objectives and the aims of this research in an optimal way. The following sections will shed more light on the research methodology by discussing in detail the research design, data collection, and data analysis.

3.2 Research design

Planning in advance for projects would increase the chance of success. In such planning, a design, blue-print, or a road map is needed in order to ensure that a project will achieve its intended purposes. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009), research design is required by a researcher in order to ensure her/his research questions are answered. In addition, they suggested that the research design should address several fundamental points in research such as defining the place of conducting the research and providing a comprehensive description of the research methods used, not to mention the justification behind using such methods. Succinctly, a research design is a systematic framework in which different constructs of the research are presented in a logical way.

3.2.1 Deciding on a qualitative research study

Due to the nature of this research, which is exploratory, the researcher decided to embark on a qualitative design since the subject under study is considered to be uncharted, to a certain extent, as demonstrated previously in Chapter two. That is to say, the role of social media in influencing modesty in Muslim women's online and offline visible identities is scant in the literature, not to mention in the context of Saudi Arabia where conservatism is strongly visible in aspects of everyday life. As a result, the researcher strongly agrees with Braun and Clarke (2013) in terms of their argument that a quantitative design would not contribute significantly to the originality of a research project that is seeking to contribute to knowledge by attempting to answer questions that have not been clearly addressed before, whether in a specific field of

study (e.g., consumer research) or specific contexts (e.g., Saudi Arabia). From the previous lines, it can be inferred that there are certain qualities in qualitative research that contributed to the researcher's decision to favour qualitative design over quantitative design. Such favouritism would be better clarified as well as justified when it is highlighted within the context of the three main motives which propelled the researcher to conduct a qualitative design. However, before discussing these motives, it is best to demonstrate some of the familiar differences between quantitative and qualitative research:

Table 3: Familiar differences between quantitative and qualitative research

Quantitative	**Qualitative**
Behaviour	Meaning
Numbers	Words
Researcher's perspective	Participants' perspectives
Theory testing	Theory emergent
Researcher distant	Researcher close
Generalization	Contextual understanding
Hard, reliable data	Rich, deep data
Static	Process
Artificial setting	Natural setting

Adapted from Bryman (2016)

With consideration to Table 3, the first motive for choosing a qualitative design, instead of a quantitative one, is to understand how traditional modesty as a religious construct in Saudi women's offline and online visible identities is influenced by social media. In other words, the researcher is aiming to understand the participants' perspectives (i.e., subjective meaning) of such influence which could stretch to an extent where even one's religiosity might be scrutinized, especially when considering the conservative nature of the Saudi society. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, within consumer research, no study yet has explored such influence as it is framed and contextualized by this research. Indeed, the majority of studies from various social science branches that have probed into exploring the nexus of social media, Islamic modesty, and identity-driven consumption, have not considered inclusively all the aforementioned elements, nor the context of Saudi Arabia.

The second motive in terms of choosing a qualitative design is due to the researcher's adoption of Consumer Culture Theory's perspectives, which the researcher believes would enable him to scientifically circumference the multiplicity of interrelated and overlapping fields associated with this research enquiry (e.g., psychology, media studies, sociology, and anthropology, not to mention different interpretations of

Islamic religiosity). To elaborate more, according to Kravets et al. (2017), CCT overlaps numerous fields such as media studies, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Furthermore, CCT perceives consumers' identity projects as well as their capabilities in reconfiguring/generating new socio-cultural meaning through the consumption and usage of identity-related materials. Moreover, CCT acknowledges that consumers' behaviour in response to the normative messages of mass media (e.g., social media) varies between acceptance/rejection. Thus, considering these theoretical perspectives of CCT, which are strongly attached to the qualitative orientation (Levy, 2015), besides emphasizing the qualitative, interpretivist, and postmodernist perspectives (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), the researcher decided to adopt a qualitative research design. It is important to reiterate that "CCT research investigates the influences that economic and cultural globalization exert upon consumer identity projects and identity-defining patterns of social interaction distinctive social contexts" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.874; see also Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003; Bonsu & Belk, 2003; Coulter, Price & Feick, 2003; Wilk, 1995; Arnould, 1989). Generally, and apart from CCT, "The marketing literature will be enriched by more exciting phenomena that are of more relevance and significance to the conditions of contemporary life in Muslim contexts" (Jafari, 2012, p.30). Thus, a qualitative design would enable the researcher to generate a rich and deep description of an interesting phenomenon that is visible all over the Islamic world, whether in the offline or the online domain.

The distinctive context of Saudi Arabia is the third motive that contributed to adopting a qualitative design in this research. To elaborate more, although Saudi Arabia is a country where Islam and traditions contribute immensely in shaping Saudi society's lifestyle, let alone women's visible identities, different regions, cities, and even individuals in Saudi Arabia have different levels of malleability in terms of accepting or adopting Western modernity as an abstract concept or in women's appearance. For instance, Quamar (2016, p.316) noted that "Saudi women do not constitute a single homogenous group, that there is diversity in terms of the regions from which they come and the world views to which they subscribe, which shapes their public and private lives". From the previous lines, it can be said that Saudi women have different interpretations of Islamic modesty in appearance. Such interpretations are considered by the researcher to be rich and deep data that is best captured through close proximity by contextual understanding of the natural setting in which Saudi women's interpretations of modesty are actualized in their online and offline visible identities within mixed-gender spaces.

All in all, the aforementioned main motives have significantly contributed to the researcher's decision to favour the qualitative design over the quantitative one. In addition, one of the main bodies of knowledge to which the researcher aims to contribute has also called for consumer research where interpretivism is adopted instead of positivism. For instance, Jafari, Karababa and Suerdem (2011) argued that Muslims negotiate numerous constructs of their value system through their consumption practices; as a result,

scholars are urged to adopt interpretive methods when exploring Muslim societies in order to overcome generalization which has been confining Islamic consumption research. Within interpretivism, there are numerous research approaches that would assist the researcher in terms of collecting data. However, the researcher's choice was to adopt the following two methods.

3.2.2 In-depth semi-structured interviews and ethnography

According to Bryman (2016), in qualitative interviewing, the approach is less structured than quantitative interviewing; thus, the two major types of qualitative interviewing are unstructured and semi-structured interviewing (i.e., non-standardized interviews). Table 4 demonstrates the main characteristics for both of the qualitative interviewing types:

Table 4: Main characteristics of qualitative interview types

Unstructured	Semi-structured
No questions are decided in advance	List of themes and questions are predetermined
Tends to be conversational	Some questions might be omitted or altered during the interview
Informal	Additional questions could be asked during the interview
Non-directive	Order of the questions will follow the flow of the conversation

Adapted from Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009)

The main aim of qualitative interviewing is not only to get information about the participants' perspectives, but also to discover why they have formed such perspectives. In addition, in such interviews, information is not collected only through words; instead, tone of voice, facial expressions, hand and body gestures, and even the clothes which the participant is wearing are all considered as information collected and could be used by the research as questions (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). When the information intended to be collected by the researcher involves the participants' personal experiences and perspectives, especially when the subject investigated is sensitive, in-depth semi-structured interviews, which are usually conducted face-to-face, are commonly used (Mack et al., 2005). Moreover, Mack et al. (2005) noted that in in-depth semi-structured interviews, the researcher aims to explore and learn every aspect of the research topic from the interviewees, whom the researcher refrains from leading/encouraging to provide answers according to his preconceived notions. Another approach that is commonly used with in-depth semi-structured interviews is ethnography.

Prior to the 1970s, ethnography, which used to be labelled *participant observation*, was essentially attached to social anthropology studies, where foreign lands and societies are visited by a researcher 'investigator' whose main goals were to gain access and immerse themselves in the culture in order to uncover and

understand it (Bryman, 2016). According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009), the essence of an ethnographic approach lays in participant observation and, to elaborate more, the typology of participant observation varies in terms of the extent of involvement in observation as demonstrated in Figure 2:

	Researcher takes part in activity		
Researcher's identity is revealed	Participant as observer	Complete participant	**Researcher's identity is concealed**
	Observer as participant	Complete observer	
	Researcher observes activity		

Figure 2: Typology of level of involvement in observation. Adapted from Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009)

Since the 1970s, ethnography has significantly expanded to a point where it is rarely conducted within consumer research without being accompanied by other data collection methods, particularly interviews (Mariampolski, 2006; Elliot & Jankel-Elliot, 2003). Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) reported that interviews are frequently cited as the best way to collect information. According to Agar (1996, p.163), ethnography is an approach in which "You are directly involved in community life, observing and talking with people as you learn from them their view of reality". Although Agar implied that the ethnographer would be observing and talking with the people that she/he is observing, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.3) argued that talking and taking part in the activity as a researcher (i.e., being a complete participant or a participant as observer) is optional, also underlining the importance of giving the ethnographer the freedom to employ different research methods:

> *participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry.*

From the aforementioned lines, it can be deduced that ethnography is not limited to specific research methods (e.g., observation and interviews). Instead, ethnographers would completely immerse themselves within a social setting in the cultural context under investigation using all their senses as well as accumulated knowledge and social skills to collect, whether covertly or overtly, tangible and non-tangible data that would contribute to the subject under research. Nevertheless, before becoming immersed in a culture and accessing a social setting, a researcher obviously needs to access the place in which the study will be conducted. Such places vary in terms of their accessibility. In other words, there are limited access

and unlimited access places. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) used the terms non-public settings (e.g., factories, schools, cults, etc.) and public settings (e.g., restaurants, malls, libraries, etc.); unlike the non-public settings, the researcher does not need to obtain access to public settings via formal documented communication, or a complex process of negotiations with gatekeepers. Among the ways which ethnographers overcome the obstacle of gaining access to non-public settings is through covert ethnography.

The concealment of the ethnographer's identity as a researcher is a strategy used by numerous ethnographers as a means to avoid negotiating access into organizations (Bryman, 2016). Such concealment is known as covert ethnography (e.g., complete participant or complete observer), as opposed to overt ethnography (e.g., participant as observer or observer as participant) in which the ethnographer discloses her/his identity as a researcher to the social group involved in her/his study. In certain socio-cultural settings (e.g., similar to the one in this research), disclosing the identity of the researcher could severely affect the naturalistic nature of the environment of the study. Consequently, the spontaneity of the observed would be subject to potential distortion whenever the realization of the existence of an observer (i.e., ethnographer) occurs (Mariampolski, 2006). In addition, the general naturalistic theme of the social setting might transform to mimic a controlled setting that is similar to a laboratory experiment. Thus, it is crucially important in ethnography to maintain the naturalistic mode of enquiry, which can also be accomplished in the cyberspace.

The act of conducting online observation has been expressed in the literature through numerous terms. For instance, recent publications have been titled *Cyber Ethnography* (Ward, 1999), *Computer-Assisted Webnography* (Horster & Gottschalk, 2012), and *Netnography* (Kozinets, 1998, 2002b, 2010, 2015). Kozinets (2002b, p.65) emphasized that one of the fundamental characteristics of online observation is accessing "information that is not given specifically and in confidence to the marketing researcher". In addition, he highlighted the importance of conducting online observation, whenever needed, in a 'lurking' style: "Netnographers are professional 'lurkers': The uniquely unobtrusive nature of the method is the source of much of its attractiveness and its contentiousness" (Kozinets, p.65). Although there are nuances among these terminologies with regards to their scope (e.g., single community versus multiple communities), the researcher would join Grincheva (2014) in her argument that such terminologies are synonymous. All in all, according to Delbridge and Kirkpatrick (1994), ethnography is an endeavour to know the multidimensional aspects of the observed identity. In addition, it allows the observer to systematically witness and understand the process of constructing/reconstructing the different aspects of the observed identity.

3.2.3 Justification for the selected approaches

In Islam, there are certain codes that govern how Muslim women should maintain a modest visible identity within mixed-gender spaces where unrelated men can see them. In practice, as long as there are unrelated men, such Islamic codes for modesty are not limited to one space over another, and that includes cyberspace. In Saudi Arabia, religion is a central construct of the socio-cultural environment, which is among the most conservative environments when it comes to women's visible identities. However, with the growing popularity of using social media, with its power in changing societies as well as countries being witnessed every day, there are prospects that Saudi women's traditional conception of modesty would be influenced to an extent where their visible identities in the offline and online worlds might be constructed in a manner that is outside the conventional modesty framework. Therefore, the researcher is mainly using ethnography in order to fathom the limits of modesty as a socio-cultural construct in the offline and online realms. In this enquiry, face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews are fundamentally used to explore the influence of social media on modesty limits within online and offline visible identities. To be specific, with consideration to the cultural sensitivity of the researcher's work, it is best deemed to conduct ethnographic work as a complete observer (i.e., covert ethnographer). Furthermore, unlike unstructured interviews which are non-directive and where no questions need to be predetermined in advance, semi-structured interviews will equip the researcher with the liberty and the practicality of asking questions according to certain themes (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Moreover, using in-depth semi-structured interviews is an ideal choice to gain rich data with regards to sensitive topics (e.g., social media's influence on modesty within Islamic context) about identity construction/reconstruction (Mack et al., 2005). In addition, by adopting ethnography and face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews, the researcher aims to provide rich and deep description, while accounting for the socio-cultural complexities in Saudi women's lives as well as their interpretive and behavioural strategies with regards to social media's conceptual and symbolic influence on their visible identity-related consumption choices.

It its worth highlighting that ethnography has gained popularity among consumer researchers within recent decades, as well as CCT researchers (Venkatesh et al., 2017; Valtonen, Markuksela & Moisander, 2010; Elliot & Jankel-Elliot, 2003; Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). In a nutshell, ethnography is extremely important in consumer researcher since it allows researchers to understand the dialogue (i.e., how Saudi women negotiate traditional modesty standards) and the practice (i.e., how such negotiation is reflected in their visible identities) within a specific context (i.e., offline mixed-gender spaces in Saudi Arabia, and online mixed-gender spaces) (Venkatesh et al., 2017).

Before concluding this subsection, it is also important to reiterate from the previous chapter that the terminology 'offline mixed-gender spaces' is used in this research to refer to public places where unrelated men and women can intermingle, such as at malls, restaurants, beaches, and so on. All the mixed-gender

spaces involved in this study, whether offline or online, unequivocally fall within Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007) definition of public settings. That is to say, the researcher does not need to formally negotiate through documented means with individuals who are deemed as gatekeepers in order to gain access to such mixed-gender spaces. In Saudi Arabia, the offline mixed-gender spaces are limited – although government reforms are expanding them – when compared to Western countries as well as other Middle Eastern countries. Nevertheless, in the online world, the mixed-gender spaces exist in almost every social media platform. As a result, for several reasons, the researcher narrowed down such platforms to only four.

3.2.4 Platforms involved

When the researcher reviewed the pertinent literature that investigated social media, Islamic modesty, and visible online and offline identities, it was found that numerous social media platforms were the arena of investigation by multiple researchers within the context of Saudi women. Studies have focused on YouTube (Pahwa, 2019), Snapchat and Instagram (Qutub, 2018), Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr (Guta & Karolak, 2015), and Facebook (Al-Saggaf, 2011). In addition, ethnography was not alienated from the previous research (e.g., Pahwa, 2019; Al-Saggaf, 2011), particularly in the online realm. However, the common factor among all these researchers is the lack of acknowledgement of the multiple and diverse features of social media platforms in their studies. In other words, each platform in social media has its own distinguishing content, functionalities, and interface, or as Voorveld et al. (2018) proposed, each of these platforms has its own culture and norms that create a distinctive experience for their users. For instance, a famous feature of Snapchat is the self-destruct messages, while Twitter is traditionally known for its hashtags which span a wide range of topics. On the other hand, YouTube is considered to be one of the largest video hosting platforms, not to mention acting as a video search engine, whereas Instagram's popularity is in its features that add effects to photos and videos which is similar to Snapchat's lenses and filters. In all of the said platforms, users can interact with each other whether symbolically (e.g., heart icon, thumbs-up or thumbs-down icons) or literally (e.g., writing a comment or sending a message). Putting it all together, the distinctive features and experiences which social media platforms provide have not previously been thoroughly investigated in terms of their influence on modesty in visible offline and online identities within the context of Saudi women. Consequently, the researcher decided to choose a variety of distinctive social media platforms in this study.

Since there are numerous social media platforms, the researcher had to carefully and justifiably choose the platforms that would assist in actualizing the research aims and objectives, besides contributing to knowledge. Thus, in consideration of the context of this study, the researcher had to rely on an official Saudi resource that would provide him with data in terms of different social media platform use in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia's Communication and Information Technology Commission's most recent and

relevant market study, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat were reported among the top web applications which are used by women in Saudi Arabia (CITC, 2015, p.69). Although in the said report other platforms were reported, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, the researcher has excluded these two platforms because of the abundance of studies that have explored Facebook in terms of its influence on Saudi women's identities (e.g., Alsaggaf, 2015, 2019; Al-saggaf, 2011), and WhatsApp's limited features when compared to other social media platforms. As a result, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube were chosen by the researcher as the social media platforms which are going to play a significant role in the sampling process.

3.2.5 Sampling

According to Creswell (2014), in a rigorous qualitative research study, the essence of sampling lays in the researcher's decision about where her/his research will take place and with whom it will take place. Furthermore, he proposed that the sample size is not limited to studying a handful of individuals/spaces; instead, it includes extensive studying and collecting of details about the individuals/spaces under study. Deciding to adopt one or more sampling strategies depends on the first place on the research questions. Specifically, the research questions would provide guidelines in terms of who/what needs to be sampled (Bryman, 2016; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Thus, it is important to revisit the main research questions which this study aims to answer:

1. How does social media influence Saudi women's conception of traditional modesty in a visible identity?
2. How is such influence expressed by Saudi women in their visible offline identities within mixed-gender spaces in Saudi Arabia?
3. How is such influence expressed by Saudi women in their visible online identities within public accounts on social media?

From the above questions and giving full consideration to the context of the study, the researcher decided to adopt two sampling strategies which are purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. The purposeful or judgmental sampling strategy is a key qualitative sampling technique by which the inquirer purposefully and judgmentally chooses individuals and spaces that will optimally enable him to achieve the research's objectives and answer its questions (Creswell, 2014; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). To elucidate further, it is "A type of non-probability sampling that is most effective when one needs to study a certain cultural domain with knowledgeable experts within" (Tongco, 2007, p.147). On the other hand, snowball sampling is also a non-probability sampling strategy that is mainly used with hard-to-find participants (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015), who would meet the purposeful requirement by the researcher. Putting it all together, it can be inferred that the sampling decisions would be based on three fundamental

components, which are Saudi women, social media, and offline and online mixed-gender spaces, as will be elaborated when data collection is discussed. It is worth noting that sampling according to one's religiosity level, or modesty in appearance, was totally avoided by the researcher due to the strong interconnection among modesty, religiosity, and Islam within the context of Saudi Arabia, and particularly Saudi women. That is to say, asking a Saudi woman, whether in English or Arabic, about her modesty/religiosity level is extremely offensive, not to mention when such a question is addressed by a man in a qualitative research setting.

In qualitative research, sampling the places before sampling the participants is a common strategy that is used by numerous researchers with different sampling techniques (Bryman, 2016). Thus, after purposefully choosing Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, the researcher had to decide upon two options that were suggested by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) which are designing one's own observation system or using an 'off-the-shelf' system. Due to the complexity of the socio-cultural environment in Saudi Arabia, the researcher decided to use an observation protocol that is underpinned by reflective and descriptive notes (Creswell, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2013) that will enrich the data with an extrinsic *etic* dimension. Moreover, the researcher's fundamental aim of using online and offline observation is to become immersed in the culture that constitutes modesty in Saudi women's visible identities before conducting face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews, which will enrich the data with an intrinsic *emic* dimension, as will be shown at the end of the next section.

3.3 Data collection

After presenting the research design and its constructs, this section will demonstrate and discuss in detail the processes of collecting the data. First, the researcher would like to underline the fact that he is a Saudi citizen who was born and raised in Saudi Arabia. In other words, he is an insider who has an advantage of knowing the deep and unwritten socio-cultural traditions and values. However, the socio-cultural environment in terms of interaction between unrelated men and women was a pivotal factor in making the researcher an outsider. Thus, the researcher was carefully navigating through the different research methods which he used to gather data.

The research methods used in this study to collect data will be presented chronologically in the order in which they were employed. Namely, the researcher started with online observation, and then completed offline observation before conducting face-to-face interviews. It is important to emphasize that in each and every process of collecting the data, the researcher has considered the potential implications of his activities to ensure that he would not either jeopardize the safety, wellbeing, and confidentiality of all the research parties or deceive them. These issues will also be addressed in a subsection dedicated to ethical considerations at the end of this chapter.

3.3.1 Online observation

Since ethnography is a methodological orientation that accentuates observing consumers within their naturalistic settings (Mariampolski, 2006), observation 'as a complete observer' was used to gain an adequate understanding of the phenomenon (Erlandson et al., 1995), and to constantly enhance the strength as well as the trustworthiness of the research (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). It is worth noting that using ethnography techniques by a male researcher to observe Saudi women on social media had commenced almost a decade ago. For instance, Al-Saggaf (2011) used online observation in his study which explored young Saudi females' experiences with Facebook.

Although the researcher has been continuously conducting online observation throughout this study, the methodical observation was conducted for over two years from August 2017 to December 2019 through the use of different pseudo-accounts in Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. There are many reasons for choosing to be a complete observer that are underpinned by Saudi Arabia's culture in terms of interaction between unrelated men and women. In addition, the researcher justifiably believes that revealing his identity as a researcher on social media, let alone taking part in the activities, would significantly impact the natural settings. Thus, in all the social media platforms involved in this research, the researcher was a complete observer (i.e., did not reveal his identity or participate in activities), and expressed his observations through reflective and descriptive notes. Finally, based on the research questions, the researcher as an ethnographer relied on his judgment in terms of systematically selecting the participants and the way to collect the data from the social media platforms involved in this study (Creswell, 2014).

3.3.1.1 Instagram and Snapchat

According to Choi and Sung (2018), Instagram is perceived among many of its users as a platform where one's ideal self is expressed through her/his visible identity. In contrast, the users of Snapchat perceive it to be a platform where their actual self is projected through their visible identity. In both platforms, such projection of ideality and actuality would usually be in the form of photos/videos. Thus, the researcher used the said platforms to mainly focus on the photos and videos that are publicly shared by 20 Saudi women who were purposefully sampled in order to filter out unreliable data. The following purposeful sampling process was devised by the researcher in a way that would enable him to be immersed in the culture of modesty in Saudi women's online visible identities.

Initially, an Instagram account would be followed if it fulfilled the following main criteria:

- A public account that belongs to a Saudi woman who lives in and posts from Saudi Arabia
- Has been posting several images/videos that show her visible identity
- Most of the visible identity is shown in these posts (e.g., accounts that show only hands were excluded)

- Has no more than 10,000 followers (this number is considered by the researcher as the threshold to fame or 'being a celebrity' as will be explained later)

The detailed mechanism of the sampling process involves seven stages: first, the starting point for creating a pool of social media accounts from which to choose and filter the samples was a Saudi female social media influencer who has a public account in Instagram. Second, the researcher went through her followers to search for informants who would meet the aforementioned criteria. Although the majority of the accounts which signal an association with Saudi women (e.g., profile name) were private, the researcher was able to identify plenty of public accounts that belong to women who appear to be Saudis, living in Saudi Arabia, have been posting materials that show most of their visible identity in Saudi Arabia, and with not more than 10,000 followers. Third, the researcher started to verify that these females are Saudis and located in Saudi Arabia. In the verification process, images, audio, texts, and videos were all relied on (Costello, McDermott & Wallace, 2017). For example, the account names, the pronunciation (i.e., being attentive to subtle foreign accent), the location of the posts, and the 'bio' were all among the criteria that were carefully checked by the researcher. Several women have disclosed their real names, nationality, and residence on their 'bio', whereas some have chosen to identify themselves using avatars/icons (Belk, 2013) that have some kind of association with Saudi Arabia (e.g., Saudi Arabia's flag). Fourth, the researcher relied on his educated judgement in terms of deciding who would be chosen according to the previous criteria in the verification process. Fifth, after identifying numerous Instagram accounts that belong to Saudi women who dwell in Saudi Arabia and met all the other main selection criteria, the researcher began to identify which of these women have posted their Snapchat username/QR code on their Instagram profiles. Sixth, the researcher followed the Snapchat accounts that are publicly open, in order to check whether their holders are actively posting content which show their visible identity or not. If yes, their accounts would continue to be observed. Otherwise, they will be excluded. Seventh, and finally, the researcher ended with a sample of 10 public accounts for Saudi women on Snapchat and 10 public accounts for Saudi women on Instagram (i.e., a total number of 20 different Saudi women). Figure 3 summarizes the fundamental stages of selecting the observed informants.

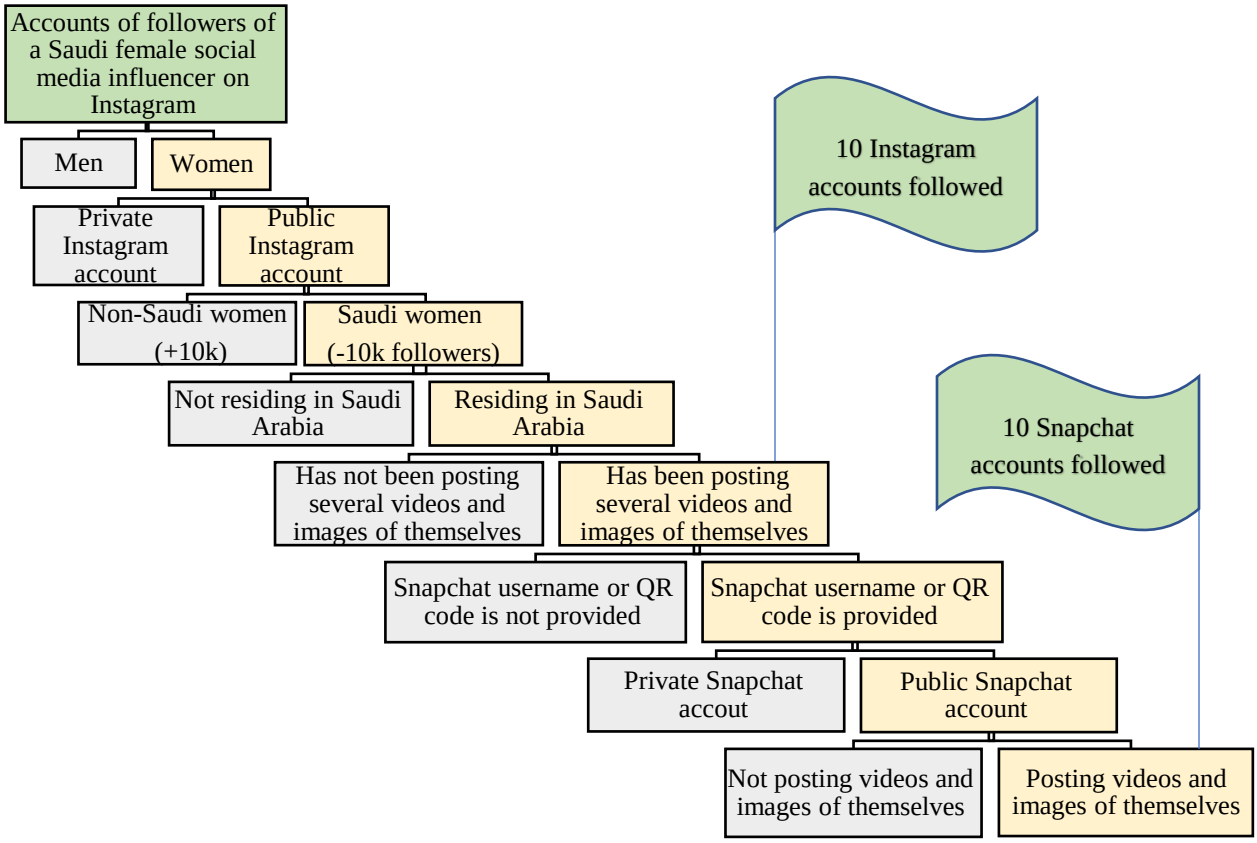

Figure 3: Main sampling process for Instagram and Snapchat accounts

Although there are several famous celebrity Saudi women on Instagram that would meet all of the criteria that was set by the researcher, except having a number of followers below 10,000, the researcher did not eliminate this criterion because of his belief that the higher the number of followers, the higher the possibilities of disturbing the natural setting. However, the number 10,000 was based on the researcher's judgmental sampling which he believes is going to keep the aims and objectives of the research on track (Creswell, 2014; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). It is worthy to note that there is no universally agreed number of followers which would automatically transform an individual to be a celebrity. For instance, *The Advertising Standard Authority* (ASA, 2019), which is the United Kingdom's independent regulator of the advertising industry, ruled that an individual with more than 30,000 followers is considered to be a celebrity. This number might be the magic number in the UK but there is no evidence that it is applicable worldwide.

3.3.1.2 Twitter and YouTube

Unlike the methodological approach used with Instagram and Snapchat, the researcher approached Twitter and YouTube differently, although still as a complete observer. With regards to Twitter, instead of following accounts per se, the researcher chose to focus on discussions under trending hashtags in Saudi Arabia that are relevant to this study. The reason for this choice by the researcher was to become exposed

to numerous perspectives about modesty in Saudi women's visible identity. All the hashtags were in the Arabic language, and the majority of discussions under each hashtag were also in Arabic. Twitter in Saudi Arabia reflects to a large extent the different perceptions among Saudis in terms of the dramatic socio-cultural changes that Saudi Arabia has been witnessing within the last few years, particularly the changes in relation to Saudi women's visible Islamic identity. The consequences of these changes were reflected on Twitter by the Saudi society to the extent that Alkarni (2018) reported that the Saudi society is experiencing 'normative disorder' on Twitter. Table 5 shows samples of the 20 hashtags (refer to Appendix 2 for the full list) which the researcher observed to assess how Saudis argue and justify their stance in terms of modesty in Saudi women's visible identity:

Table 5: A sample of trending hashtags in Saudi Arabia observed by the researcher

Translated hashtags	Original hashtags observed
Hijab is chastity and covering for women	#الحجاب_عفاف_وستر_للمرأة
Inside-out abaya	#العباية_المقلوبة
Banning the niqab	#حظر_النقاب
Abaya is not mandatory according to a Saudi cleric (Al-Mutlaq)	#المطلق_العباية_غير_الزامية
Burning the niqab	#حرق_النقاب
Disco in Jeddah	#ديسكو_في_جده
Taibah University graduation gown	#عباية_تخرج_جامعة_طيبة
Riyadh Halloween	#هالوين_الرياض
Abolishing abaya	#اسقاط_العباية

With regards to YouTube, the researcher chose two YouTube channels, Miva Flowers and دراما كوين (which literally translates as Drama Queen). Both of these channels belong to Saudi women who were ranked by Tubular Labs, which is an online video intelligence company, as two of the five most influential female Saudi creators on YouTube (2016, cited in Marshall, 2016). Drama Queen has approximately 1.3 million subscribers, whereas Miva Flowers has around 590 thousand. The main reason for choosing these two channels above others is that both women who run each channel do not show their full face although, after almost seven months of observing her content, Drama Queen started to uncover her face. In other words, the researcher was aiming to understand how these women, whose main content is about beauty and lifestyle, managed to be among the five most influential Saudi women Youtubers while concealing many parts of their visible online identities. Thus, the researcher focused his observation on the nature of comments (i.e., approving or disapproving) as well as the changes in the visible online identities of both women. The total number of videos that were included in the observation was 406 for Miva Flowers, and 238 for Drama Queen. It is worth noting that the duration of some videos is less than three minutes.

3.3.2 Offline observation

Unlike the online observation, which was continuous for over two years, the offline observation was conducted when the researcher had the opportunity to go back to Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, offline observation took place in two consecutive months in 2018, and also two consecutive months in 2019. Similarly to what was noted in relation to online observation, the idea that a male researcher would be observing Saudi women in offline settings is not alien in the literature. For example, a research team led by a Saudi male, Almahmood et al. (2018), conducted observations with regards to women's negotiation of socio-spatial processes of exclusion in the sidewalks of one of the main streets in Saudi Arabia's capital. The research findings were described as follows: "As observed in this study, some young women negotiate gender norms and spatial bounds by uncovering their faces and adding colour to their Abayas, which makes them look more 'stylish'" (Almahmood et al., 2018, p.202).

In line with the style of observation in the online setting, the researcher also chose to be a complete observer in the offline setting because of many socio-cultural considerations which suggest that being a complete observer is the best level of involvement that would benefit this research. For instance, it is not common nor culturally appropriate that a woman would be approached by a male researcher in a public place to participate in an ethnographic study that aims to explore how social media influences traditional modesty in her visible identity. In essence, the main aim of doing offline observation is to be immersed in the culture (Bryman, 2016) and understand what constitutes modesty in Saudi women's visible offline identities within mixed-gender spaces. Thus, the researcher chose Jeddah, which is his hometown, to conduct his offline observation within the following offline mixed-gender spaces, as shown below:

Table 6: The places where offline observation took place

Malls	Restaurants	Coffee shops	Shisha (hookah) cafes
Beaches	Traditional marketplaces	Walkways	Hospitals
Exhibitions	Family entertainment centres	Bookstores	Airport

In the aforementioned places, and at different times of the day, the researcher observed how the visible identity is constructed by using identity-related materials in a variety of styles that signal different understandings of modesty. However, a challenging issue that the researcher encountered was verifying which women are Saudis and which are not. With consideration to the socio-cultural restraints in this regard, the researcher had to use his senses and accumulated knowledge as an insider to Saudi Arabia's culture to form his educated judgment. Another challenging issue emerged when the researcher was denied entrance to some of the said places unless he was accompanied by a family member (i.e., with a female). Thus, in

some places, the researcher had to make the proper and legal arrangements in order to access mixed-gender spaces. In all the places, the researcher translated his observations into descriptive and reflective field notes.

3.3.3 In-depth semi-structured interviews

In exploratory research, in-depth semi-structured interviews are an extremely helpful research method that can assist the researcher to understand "what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light' (Robson, 2002, p.59). In addition, such type of interview is considered to be appropriate when exploring sensitive topics that contain rich and deep data, particularly in relation to identity construction/reconstruction (Mack et al., 2005), and especially within the context of Saudi women in Saudi Arabia. Thus, this research is implementing face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary source for collecting data. The main reason for choosing face-to-face one-on-one interviews, instead of one-to-many (e.g., focus groups) or even one-on-one via telephone/video conferences, is the researcher's belief that discussing such a topic in a face-to-face one-on-one fashion would allow the participants to overcome their potential hesitation in terms of opening up about the topic under study. Along the previous lines, Mack et al. (2005) proposed that one-on-one interviews are more appropriate when the information could be of a socially sensitive nature.

As mentioned earlier, the two sampling strategies used in this research are purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. As with the location of offline observation, the researcher decided to conduct the interviews in Jeddah. However, such a decision required advanced planning in terms of setting the criteria for selecting the participants, searching for Saudi women who would meet such criteria, and finding a place where interviews could be conducted professionally and safely. Since this research is mainly exploring social media's influence on Saudi women's online and offline identities modesty wise, the researcher purposefully chose the following criteria to select the participants for the interviews:

- Saudi women
- Have a public social media account in at least two of the platforms involved in this research
- Have publicly posted their visible identity in any style (e.g., with or without niqab, hijab, or abaya)
- Spend at least two hours daily on the aforementioned platforms

The researcher refrained from specifying that the participants would have public accounts in Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and Twitter inclusively because such a specification would significantly decrease the chances of finding participants who would meet such criterion. To clarify this decision, before going to Saudi Arabia to conduct the interviews, the researcher used pilot interviewing with Saudi women in Norwich, UK, in order to ensure that his sampling criteria are representative. However, the researcher encountered difficulties in terms of finding a Saudi woman who would have public accounts in all of the platforms involved in this study and would be willing to be interviewed. As a result, such criterion was not

mandated by the researcher for his participants. However, the reason for setting the minimum number of daily hours spent on social media to two hours is that it is the number of hours which the majority of people in Saudi Arabia spend daily on social media (CITC, 2015).

3.3.3.1 Searching for participants

Once the researcher arrived in Jeddah in July 2018 to collect the data, he started to search for participants who would meet his sampling criteria. A reasonable starting point would be places where Saudi women work in large numbers. Thus, the researcher approached numerous private organizations, which have relatively less complicated administrative procedures in comparison with public organizations, in order to explain his research and try to obtain their approval to conduct interviews with their Saudi female employees, who would match the sampling criteria, within their premises. The reason for choosing the location of the interviews as an organization's premises instead of a public place (café or restaurant) is to provide the participants with a safe, professional, and less distracting environment.

Although the process of searching and finding participants sounds as though it should be smooth and easily implemented, it was extremely complicated and full of disappointment, to the extent where the researcher thought that he would never be able to conduct interviews in 2018. For instance, in one of the organizations, the researcher was asked to provide official letters that were specifically addressed to the organization from Saudi Arabia's Cultural Bureau in London and the University of East Anglia in order to officially review – not grant – the researcher's request. Furthermore, more than once, the researcher was asked to leave his contact information (i.e., a polite way of refusal) in order to be contacted once a decision is made, although the researcher has as yet not read or heard such a decision. In one of the organizations, the researcher's request was granted; however, the available women at that time did not fall within the borders of the sampling criteria.

After numerous visits to several organizations in different fields, the researcher was fortunate enough to meet with an organization owner who was interested and impressed by the enquiry of this research. In addition, the organization owner gave his full permission to the researcher to interview his female employees, if they gave consent, within the organization's premises. The researcher asked him to circulate the participant selection criteria among his female employees, who were all Saudis, in order to establish how many of them would meet the criteria and be willing to be interviewed. Eventually, nine employees expressed their willingness to participate. At that stage, the researcher used his second sampling strategy, which is snowballing. To implement this strategy, after securing the organization owner's full approval, the researcher approached the nine participants and provided them with more information about the research and asked them to propose other participants from their social circles who would match the sampling criteria. Although nine participants could have been a sufficient number, there is no fixed number which the literature agrees on in terms of reaching data saturation, which is the point where additional data will

not add new insights (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). For instance, saturation could be achieved in 6 to 12 interviews (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006), or 20 to 30 interviews (Creswell, 2014). However, it has been established that "there is no one-size-fits-all method to reach data saturation, moreover, more is not necessarily better than less and vice versa" (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p.1413). Thus, at this stage of searching for participants, the researcher was trying his best to find as many participants as possible who would meet the sampling criteria.

3.3.3.2 Conducting interviews

After using snowballing, the final number of the participants who were willing to be interviewed was 23 Saudi women. One of the participants who works in the organization offered to provide assistance in terms of organizing the interviews by contacting all the other participants to check with them about their availability times. Eventually, the interviews were scheduled to take place in one of the organizations' meeting rooms over a period of four consecutive days, with each participant being dedicated a 1-hour slot. The meeting room is situated in a location where anyone who passes by can see inside since it has a large glass wall. In addition, it has a fairly large boardroom table where the researcher planned to sit on the opposite side of the participants.

At the start of each and every interview, the researcher would have a light chat (i.e., instead of asking yes or no questions) with each participant in order to double check that they meet the sampling criteria, which all of them did. Afterwards, the researcher would explain in detail the purpose of the study, the fundamental terminologies used in this study (e.g., offline and online mixed-gender spaces, offline and online visible identities), as well as his procedures in terms of protecting the identity of the participants. Then, the Information Sheet and the Participant Consent Form (refer to Appendices 8 and 9) were handed to the participants, with the Consent Form to be signed and returned to the researcher. In the Participant Consent Form, the researcher was extremely careful and considerate when he explained to the participants the reason for adding a field which asked them to optionally provide their email/telephone information. In other words, the participants were clearly made aware that their future participation in discussing the findings of this study is completely optional.

Each participant was asked about her language preference for the interview and the research questions to follow. Since there was a high possibility that some of the participants would prefer the interview questions to be in Arabic, the researcher prepared an Arabic version of the research questions that were translated by him in a way that would express the meaning instead of following a word-by-word (i.e., literal) translation. All the participants were clearly told and made aware that the interviews were going to be recorded on a digital voice recorder in order to be used for analysis. The researcher also used note taking during the interviews to describe the participants' visible identity, certain emotions that surfaced in response to certain questions, and their facial and bodily gestures. It is worth highlighting that the researcher refrained from

relying on any kind of photography during the interviews since it might cause inconvenience or embarrassment for the participants.

The interviews were not designed to follow an improvised style; instead, the researcher designed an interview protocol (i.e., interview guide) with open-ended questions that assisted him with executing the semi-structured interviews in a professional manner (refer to Appendix 10). Questions that are not included in the interview protocol could be addressed as the researcher follows on with what the participant is saying (Bryman, 2016). Adopting this approach, the researcher focused on making the interview flexible in order to create a comfortable atmosphere which would encourage the participants to give as much information as possible. For example, the participants were encouraged to use the language that would make them comfortable, whether it is Arabic, English, or both. It is important to note that the researcher chose to carry on with the interviews by himself without using an interpreter – or a female gatekeeper – because of three fundamental reasons. First, obviously, the researcher has a good command of English as well as Arabic. Second, relying on an interpreter could raise numerous issues with regards to the levels of the research validity (Kapborg & Berterö, 2002), and reliability (Cheuminto et al., 2018). Third, due to the sensitivity of the topic in this study, the researcher tried his best to provide the participants with a positive interview atmosphere, without any distraction, where the participants would feel safe, calm, and assured that their privacy is totally respected. Thus, no third individual of any kind was involved in any of the one-to-one face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews.

After each interview was concluded, the researcher would thank the participants and ask them whether they wanted to add something that would enrich the research, or if they were expecting to be asked certain questions which the researcher did not ask. Interestingly, the nature, the depth, and the emotions which accompanied some of these post-interview discussions were extremely helpful. Finally, the researcher would make sure that each participant would take a copy of the information sheet, whether in Arabic or English, in order to contact the researcher at any time with regards to any concerns that might occur in the future about any issues relevant to the study. In addition, the Participant Consent Form was double checked to make certain that it was completed and signed. However, only five participants agreed to be contacted in the future to discuss the findings of this study. Table 7 demonstrates initial information about the 23 participants. In this table, as well as throughout the following chapters, the researcher used fictitious female names (i.e., pseudonyms) of which none of them match or even indicate the real names of the participants.

Table 7: Participants' information

	Fictitious Name	Age	Marital status	Education level	Employed	Hours spent on social media per day
1	Sumayah	41	Single	Master	Yes	6 – 9
2	Areej	37	Single	Master	Yes	5
3	Lamiah	37	Married	Master	Yes	4 – 5
4	Ghada	36	Single	Master	Yes	4
5	Elham	35	Single	Bachelor	Yes	4 – 5
6	Rawan	34	Married	Master	No	3 – 4
7	Nawal	33	Single	Master	Yes	4 – 5
8	Hanan	32	Married	Master	Yes	3
9	Mai	32	Single	Master	No	4 – 6
10	Amany	28	Single	Master	Yes	5
11	Mona	28	Single	Master	Yes	10
12	Rahaf	27	Single	Bachelor	Yes	3 – 6
13	Amal	26	Married	Bachelor	Yes	7 – 8
14	Abrar	25	Single	Bachelor	Yes	4
15	Lina	25	Single	Bachelor	Yes	4 – 5
16	Huda	24	Single	Bachelor	Yes	3
17	Dana	23	Single	Bachelor	Yes	4 – 5
18	Suha	23	Single	Bachelor	No	6
19	Razan	22	Single	Bachelor	No	3 – 4
20	Basma	22	Single	Bachelor	No	8 – 9
21	Hadeel	21	Single	Bachelor	No	5 – 7
22	Nada	19	Single	High school	Yes	8
23	Tala	19	Single	High school	No	3

3.4 Data analysis

Usually, whenever data is analyzed in qualitative research, researchers will adopt approaches that frame the data in a way which would enable the implementation of a systematic process to decrease the level of complexity and allow the gradual development of findings about the topic under study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In this research, data was collected from multiple sources. Namely, data derived from online observation, offline observation, and interviews. The common factor among all the collected data is that the final form of them is words (i.e., qualitative). Thus, the researcher used NVivo, which is a computer software program used mainly for analyzing qualitative data, to implement a thematic analysis approach that could be defined as repetitive examination of the data in order to extract fundamental and distinguishing themes (Bryman, 2016). In this section, the researcher will discuss in detail the said approach and the relevant aspects of data analysis.

3.4.1 Organizing and retrieving the data

The different research methods used in this study generated data which in its nature could be described as etic (i.e., from the researcher's point of view) and emic (i.e., from the participants' points of view). In other words, when the researcher did online and offline observations, he used reflective and descriptive notes. Whereas in interviews, there was little room for the researcher's reflectivity. Thus, the researcher classified the data into two categories, which are data from interviews and data from observations. The latter was essentially relied upon to explore and to become immersed in the culture of modesty in Saudi women's online and offline visible identities within mixed-gender spaces. Furthermore, the data from observations was used as a triangulation tool to generally enhance the research trustworthiness (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989), and to cross-check the findings from the interviews (Bryman, 2016). All the field notes were recorded on hard copies (refer to Appendices 3 and 4 for a sample of some of the main points that were extracted from the online and offline observation field notes).

Unlike the field notes from observations, the data that was collected from the interviews included private and confidential information that pertain to the participants. As a result, and in line with the UK Data Protection Act (2018), the researcher used a storage system with strong security features in order to make sure that no one would access the data, whether in its hard or soft copies, other than him. In addition, the audio files were transferred from the digital audio recorder to a USB flash drive which is password protected. Moreover, the audio files were also saved in a second password protected USB flash drive in order to decrease the possibilities of losing the data.

When the researcher decided to start transcribing the interviews, each audio file was listened to and transcribed organically (i.e., without any translation). For instance, the language used in some interviews was a mixture of Arabic and English, while in others English was used only to describe terminologies, and in some interviews only Arabic was used. The reason behind such variation in discourses was the participants' different styles in using either English or Arabic words to express themselves. After each and every interview was transcribed into separate MS word files on the researcher's personal computer, the researcher reviewed all the interviews in order to make sure that not only every word was transcribed, but also some features of the discourse that signal excitement or hesitation were noted (Bryman, 2016). At this stage, all the data that pertains to the participants in one of the USB flash drives was completely erased since the need for data backup was no longer required.

After the interviews were organically transcribed, the researcher started the process of translating the Arabic words into English in the sections of the interviews that are relevant to the research. Being knowledgeable in the Arabic culture is extremely important whenever attempting to translate between Arabic and English (Mares, 2012). Moreover, Mares (2012) highlighted that understanding the connotations as well as the applications of the words would assist translators of Arabic and English to determine the appropriate

equivalents in particular contexts. However, a major challenge for Arabic to English translators is diglossia, which is the coexistence of formal and informal varieties in a specific language (Dickins, Hervey & Higgins, 2002). Since the researcher is a native Arabic speaker and is familiar with several of the major colloquial dialects in Saudi Arabia, he was able to identify and understand formal and colloquial words, besides their connotations and applications to specific contexts. To ensure the validity of the translations, a bilingual expert double-checked the translations as needs arise.

3.4.2 NVivo

There are numerous advantages in using computer software programs in qualitative research. Thus, after going through a number of these programs, the researcher decided to use NVivo 12 for several reasons. For instance, it is relatively easy to use, and its user interface was found by the researcher to be organized and non-complicated. Moreover, it allows for importing files (e.g., transcribed interviews in MS word files) and arranging them in folders. Last but not least, it also facilitates the process of analyzing text by selecting the desired content and coding it as a node, which is a container that can store one or more codes. Furthermore, a node could be used as a container of other nodes (i.e., storing several nodes inside a node). The following bullet points present some of the aspects which Creswell (2014) regarded as advantages for using computer software programs in qualitative data analysis:

- Organizing and storing qualitative data
- Effectively locating texts associated with [nodes]
- Making comparisons among [nodes]
- Creating multiple levels of abstraction
- Generating visual diagrams of [nodes]
- Enabling the use of memos

All of the translated interview transcripts were imported to NVivo which facilitated organizing as well as accessing the transcripts as shown in Figure 4 below. Subsequently, each interview file was the subject of thorough analysis that aimed to identify themes.

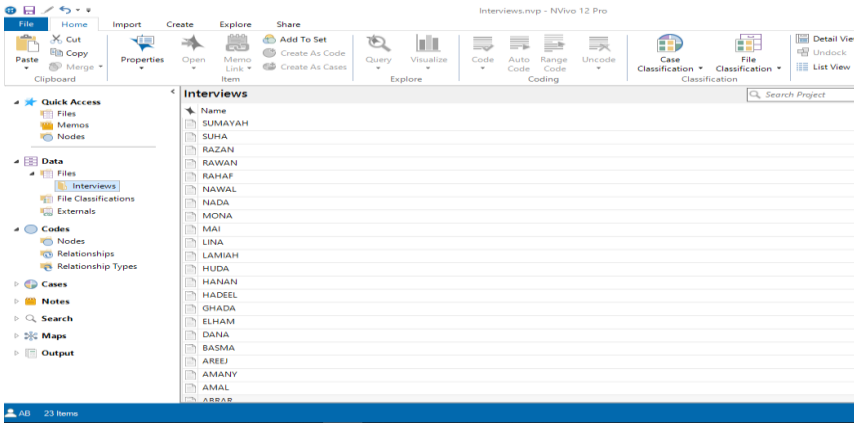

Figure 4: Translated interview transcripts imported to NVivo

3.4.3 Thematic analysis

The analytical approach adopted in this research is thematic analysis, which is defined as "A method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p.57). Braun and Clarke (2012) also emphasized that a plethora of patterns could be identified in a data set and, as a result, the researcher's fundamental objective would be identifying those patterns which are relevant to answering his research questions. In order to follow a systematic framework with regards to thematic analysis, the researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis which is demonstrated in Figure 5 below:

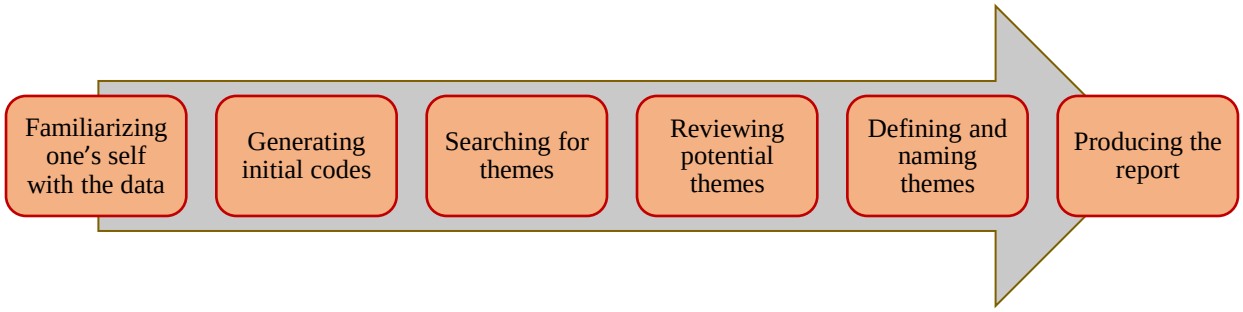

Figure 5: Six-phase approach to thematic analysis. Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006)

First, in order to be familiar with the data, the researcher started by thoroughly reading the transcripts more than once. In addition, the notes taken by the researcher during the interviews were also scrutinized. Moreover, the offline and online observation notes were also read. One of the helpful features in NVivo is the memos feature, which are documents that could be linked with interview transcripts in a way that allows the user to record her/his comments and insights about each interview. Using this feature, a memo was

created for every interview transcript in order to record information the researcher believes is of value and interest regarding the subject under study. Figure 6 provides a visual example to explain the memos role:

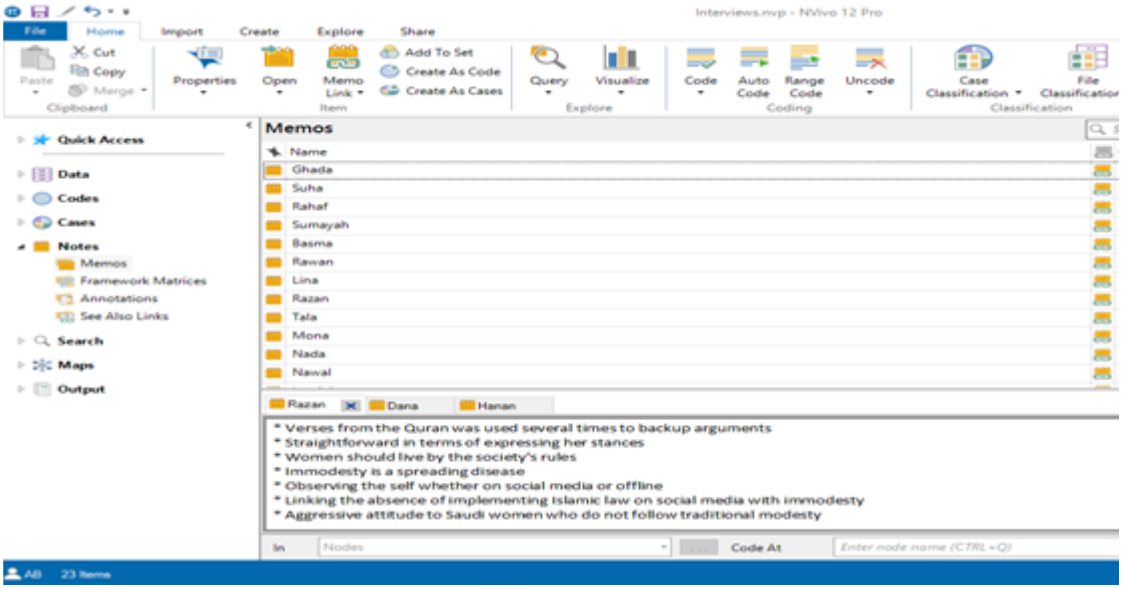

Figure 6: Using Memos in NVivo

Second, after the researcher had become immersed in the data and recorded his initial insights and ideas as memos, he started to produce initial codes, which are either a word or a phrase that summarize the meaning of a part of sentences, a statement, or pictures in the data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015; Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2009). Each of the interview transcripts were read again carefully and thoroughly. Consequently, a plethora of initial codes were generated. To elaborate this process in more detail, through the use of the NVivo coding feature, certain relevant lines of the data were highlighted and then coded into nodes, which are storage areas in NVivo for references to coded text (Bazeley, 2007). Figure 7 demonstrates such nodes:

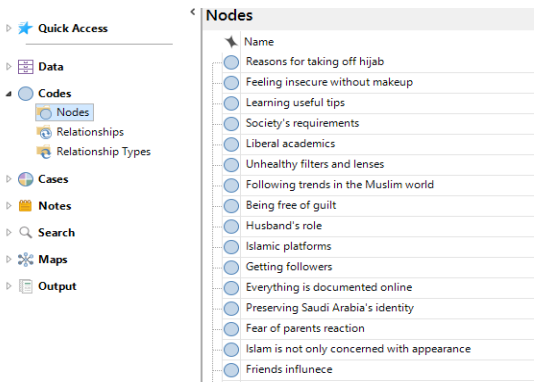

Figure 7: Nodes that have references to coded text

Third, the search for themes commenced by reviewing the nodes in NVivo in order to identify areas of overlap and similarity between them (Braun & Clarke, 2012). A theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). In addition, mapping a conceptual relationship between the themes and considering how different themes would fit together to tell a narrative was also considered at this stage. Thus, some themes were discarded since their relevance to the study was not as high as other themes. Although discarding data that was the result of a long time of hard work is not an easy process, the researcher had to take this step in order to make sure that the themes would create a cohesive narrative.

Fourth, in order to check the quality of the previous three phases, a review of potential themes is needed (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Such a review process was completed mainly on two levels, which are the codes level and themes level. At the codes level, the researcher reexamined the coded data in order to make sure that the codes are relevant to the enquiry of social media's influence on modesty in visible online and offline identities within mixed-gender spaces. At the themes level, the researcher went through all the themes in order to check that they would provide an answer to the said enquiry. Eventually, some nodes were relocated/discarded, while others were created.

Fifth, the final themes and subthemes were defined and created. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), this phase is marked by deep analytical work which involves shaping the thematic analysis into a meaningful narrative. In addition, they also suggested creating themes that are related and to develop previous themes in a way that addresses the main research questions. Thus, the researcher relied on NVivo features to define and create final themes and subthemes for each question in the research. For instance, Figure 8 demonstrates part of the final themes and subthemes that were created and defined in NVivo for the first question of this research:

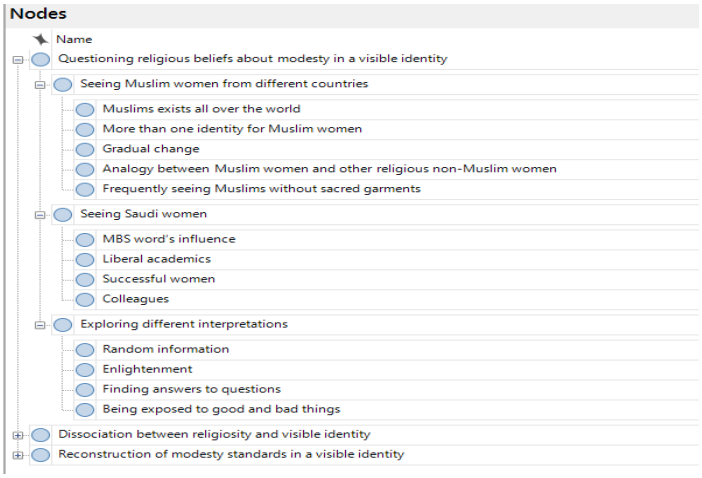

Figure 8: Demonstration of the final themes and subthemes in NVivo

The last phase is producing a written report of the thematic analysis. Such a report needs to be cohesive, organized, logical, non-repetitive, and reflect an interesting narrative which reflects what the data say (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, the researcher decided to write up a report for each question in this research with consideration to maintaining cohesiveness and connection among them. In addition, providing an interesting and critical discussion instead of a mere description of data was an aspect which the researcher considered important in the report writing phase.

3.4.4 Trustworthiness

A positivist paradigm that prioritizes prediction was pervasive in consumer research prior to the 1980s, which was an era that marked the birth of CCT-related research (Arnould et al., 2019). According to Tadajewski (2006, p.449) "The overriding goal of science is not, in actual fact, prediction, but instead, understanding". One crucial way of understanding is achieved through an interpretivist paradigm which could be described as an attempt to understand how a phenomenon is perceived by people (Zickermann, 2014). Positivists and interpretivists have certain criteria to judge the quality of studies within the parameters of each of these paradigms. In interpretivism, the term trustworthiness is used to describe the overall quality of a piece of research (Bryman, 2016). To ensure that a research study has a high level of trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that the following criteria ought to be considered: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility, which parallels internal validity in positivism, is enhanced when triangulation is applied (Bryman, 2016) (e.g., online observation, offline observation, interviews). Conversely, transferability, which parallels external validity in positivism, is enhanced when a rich and dense description of a culture is provided (Geertz, 1973). Since dependability and confirmability, which respectively parallel reliability and objectivity in positivism, are enhanced by numerous ways, of which auditing is one of them (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Bryman, 2016), the researcher contacted the participants, who agreed to provide their feedback, and discussed the findings of this research with them. As mentioned earlier, only five participants indicated their willingness to be contacted by the researcher in order to discuss the findings of the study. In addition, the researcher was consciously acknowledging and aware of his values, beliefs, personal experiences, and biases which could negatively influence the overall trustworthiness of this research (Creswell, 2014). Finally, it is important to emphasize that the nature of this research is qualitative-exploratory, which does not intend to generalize its findings to all Saudi women. Instead, it intends to explore a phenomenon and provide an understanding for it (Tadajewski, 2006).

3.4.5 Ethical considerations

According to Bell and Bryman (2007), the ethical issues encountered by management researchers are not typical to the ones that are usually faced by other social scientists. As a result, Bell and Bryman (2007) analyzed the content of ethics principles created by nine professional social sciences associations and

identified ten principles of ethical practices that are defined by the majority of these associations. Table 8 summarizes the aforementioned principles.

Table 8: Principles of ethical practices

Making sure that **no harm of any type** (e.g., physical or psychological) comes to the participants
Respecting the dignity of all the parties involved in the research, providing comfort and avoiding causing anxiety
Ensuring the fully **informed consent** of the research participants
Protecting the privacy as well as avoiding the invasion of the participants' privacy
Ensuring confidentiality of research data
Protecting the anonymity of individuals and organizations
Avoiding deception whether through lies or misleading behaviours
Declaring any affiliations that could have influenced the research, funding sources, and conflicts of interest
Communicating information about the research in an **honest and transparent** way
Avoiding any misleading, misrepresenting, or false reporting of research findings

Adapted from Bell and Bryman (2007)

In the in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted by the researcher, all of the aforementioned principles were honoured and followed; additionally the University of East Anglia's guidelines and procedures for ethical conduct in research were also adhered to. In terms of the online and offline observations, the application of some of these principles was impossible without influencing the naturality and spontaneity of the setting and women, respectively. For instance, approaching a Saudi woman in mixed-gender spaces, whether offline or online, and asking her to give her consent to be observed by a male researcher is completely illogical as well as unacceptable on many socio-cultural levels. Thus, being a complete observer was the reasonable and effective research method that would allow the researcher to immerse himself in the culture and practically understand the fine lines that define modesty in Saudi women's visible online and offline identities within mixed-gender spaces. Such immersion was done with full consideration to not jeopardize the safety and anonymity of all the involved parties. Furthermore, the field notes from the observation were used to cross-check the interview data which are the crux of this research study's findings. That is to say, being a complete observer not only assisted the researcher in understanding modesty in online and offline visible identities, but also resulted in field notes that were used as triangulation tools. It is important to emphasize that during online and offline observations, the data was collected in the form of descriptive and reflective field notes. To be clear, photographing, audio taping, or videotaping did not occur throughout the online and offline observations. Otherwise, there would be ethical consequences (Baker, 2006).

3.5 Summary

In this chapter, the philosophical stance of this research was explained and justified. In addition, the fundamental components of the research design, data collection, and data analysis were all addressed and discussed. Succinctly, this exploratory-qualitative study adopted an interpretivist approach in which reality is not deemed as being single. Instead, it is constructed differently in the perceptions of individuals. Thus, in order to fathom such reality, this study was designed in a way where different research methods were adopted. Online and offline observation was used in a complete observer manner on Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter. The main reason for choosing a complete observer stance was to fulfil the researcher's aim to understand what constitutes modesty in visible offline and online identities within mixed-gender spaces. In addition, the field notes from observations were used to triangulate with another research method, which is the face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews. These interviews are the fundamental source of data which underpin the findings of this study. In total, 23 Saudi women were interviewed, and their interview transcripts were imported to NVivo which is relied on to assist the researcher in conducting a thematic analysis. Finally, the chapter concluded by emphasizing the trustworthiness of this research as well as shedding light on the principles of ethical conduct in this research.

CHAPTER 4: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON SAUDI WOMEN'S CONCEPTION OF TRADITIONAL MODESTY IN A VISIBLE IDENTITY

4.0 Introduction

After discussing the methodology of the research in the preceding chapter, this chapter and the subsequent two chapters present and discuss the insights which were obtained by empirically collecting the data. This approach means that each of the three research questions is answered and discussed in a separate chapter in order to illustrate the findings and discuss them unequivocally in an organized way.

The analysis of the interviews has generated four final themes (see Appendix 1 for the framework of themes, subthemes, and initial coding) that address the answers of the first question of this research: how does social media influence Saudi women's conception of traditional modesty in a visible identity? The first of these themes, questioning religious beliefs about modesty in a visible identity, consists of three subthemes which are seeing Muslim and conservative women from different countries, seeing Saudi women, and exploring different interpretations. The second final theme concerns the disassociation between religiosity and visible identity. It stems from the following roots: religiosity commitment and relationship with God, appearance indication, acceptance of what is different. The third final theme highlights the reconstruction of modesty standards in a visible identity, and it stands on two subthemes which are archaic religious views and encouragement. The fourth final theme is participants' perspectives about the fading of conventional modesty standards and is underpinned by Westernized visible identity and importance of covering.

Throughout this chapter, the CCT theoretical perspectives, particularly "mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies" and "the sociohistoric patterning of consumption" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.874), are going to be focal. The chapter will explore how social media has influenced Saudi women's conception of modesty in a visible identity, starting from the factors that led to a reexamining of Islamic beliefs, moving to a process that involves detaching religiosity from appearance, redefining modesty standards, and ending up with participants' struggle to acknowledge the decline of conventional modesty standards.

4.1 Questioning religious beliefs about modesty in a visible identity

The participants expressed in numerous ways that social media has provoked their curiosity to scrutinize their preconceived religious beliefs about modesty in a visible identity. Such scrutinization was triggered through social media in multiple ways, such as observing how Muslim and conservative women in other parts of the world express their modesty standards through their appearance. The next subsections show three fundamental subthemes, which are the building blocks of one of the four final themes that address the answers to the first research question of this thesis. Each of the following subthemes are presented and discussed in conjunction with the pertinent literature.

4.1.1 Seeing Muslim and conservative women from different countries

The data initially reveals that social media has given Saudi women opportunities to freely explore what other Muslim women in multiple geographic locations are doing with regards to their visible Islamic identity. Such exploration has challenged Saudi women's religious beliefs about modesty. As a matter of fact, Saudi women's realization as well as acknowledgement that other Muslim women are constructing their visible identity in different ways have led Saudi women to redefine their conception of modesty. In other words, the participants have stressed that social media has shifted their paradigm in terms of realizing that Islam and its teachings with regards to modesty do not exist solely in Saudi Arabia. For example, Hanan expressed her experience of using social media in which she saw how other Muslim women embrace coloured abayas/hijabs:

> *The black-coloured abaya is an important thing just here in Saudi Arabia. You can see in social media that all of the other Muslim world is not obsessed with the black colour when it comes to the abaya or hijab. So, it's not reasonable that we are the only ones who follow Islam, and others are following something else. Well, I have started to believe that the coloured abaya is a beautiful thing because it allows women to express themselves.*
>
> *Hanan*

It is widely known that Muslims are diffused all over the world. Nevertheless, as Hanan noted, social media made it possible for her to see what other Muslim women are wearing without the need to physically move out of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, she has started to doubt whether her previous understanding of modesty is feasible or not, not to mention her holistic Islamic beliefs. As a result, it can be inferred that social media has altered Saudi female consumers' conception of modesty because it has enabled them to see how other Muslim women around the world are presenting themselves. In contrast, Suha was more rigorous in terms of scrutinizing her understanding of modesty through her use of social media, to a point where she started to ask questions in a condemning tone about the traditional Saudi formula of modesty, which is where Islamic modesty equals concealing one's identity in black:

> *Women's identities, including mine, here in Saudi Arabia are supposed to be unidentifiable. In other words, we are supposed to cover ourselves by a pitch-black abaya. I am asking why? Why are we so threatening that we must be covered in such a way? Fortunately, social media showed me that Muslim women do not fall into one category. I mean I have seen there are a lot of Muslim women, from different countries, who do not wear either an abaya or a hijab. Yet, they are still honest Muslims, at least for me. Seriously, I am thinking, just thinking, to be like them, at least partially.*
>
> *Suha*

Social media was a source which assisted Suha in realizing that a visible identity does not have to be unified. Rather, there are a wide spectrum of visible identities that she considers as Islamic. Although an abaya and hijab have been fundamental pillars in Islamic modesty (Aarts, Roelants & Gardner, 2015), Suha did not accuse the women who rejected them of immodesty or wickedness; instead, she used them as a living proof – if not idols – to herself that modesty is not about concealing one's identity, especially with a black garment. Apparently, Suha's words have a connotation which emphasizes the role of social media in clarifying consumers' uncertainties through finding out what others are doing, especially when it comes to appearance. To elaborate more, consumers' decision whether to transform their contemplation into actions is on hold waiting for a reconciliation between their actual and ideal self-image (Sirgy, 1979, 1982).

Sumayah, who is another participant, emphasized that her beliefs about modesty are malleable and under continuous scrutiny. Furthermore, she noted that everything is subject to change, including her conception of modesty which was influenced by her daily exposure to social media, particularly observing the chronological change in Muslim women's visible identity:

> *There is nothing wrong with changing my beliefs about modesty, even if this change is going to occur over and over. I am an individual who likes to question and think critically about many issues, and modesty is one of them…. I believe that my conception of modesty was gradually influenced because I have witnessed how other Muslim women are evolving day-by-day, modesty wise, on social media.*
>
> *Sumayah*

Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017) suggested that Muslim women from various countries, who are modest fashionistas that follow the Islamic dress code, are presenting themselves in social media in a way that is extremely influenced by non-religious norms. In addition, they are market-oriented (i.e. constantly changing) despite the fact that they are still projecting their Islamic culture through semiotics on social media. Through linking the previous suggestion with the participants' words so far, it can be said that the influence of being exposed to seeing different Muslim women from different countries in social media has reshaped Saudi women's conception of modesty. In other words, it appears that the traditional conception of modesty is going to be gradually devoured by the dominant mainstream secular culture on social media. Interestingly, one participant explained how social media made her realize that modesty is a product of accumulated culture, rather than a teaching from religion (i.e. from human intellect, not from the God of monotheistic communities). To put it differently, Areej saw how some conservative – if not extreme – Christian and Jewish women embrace the concept of modesty in their appearance. Consequently, she began to question her previous understanding of modesty in a visible identity:

> *I found on social media several people posting images of the hijab for ultra-orthodox Jews and Christians, and the similarity between Muslim and Jewish women's hijab as well as*

niqab puzzled me. In other words, I would not be able to differentiate between a conservative Muslim and Jewish woman who wears such a hijab. Frankly, we should bravely admit that covering a woman in this way is a tradition not a religion. Otherwise, why do such identical practices exist in approximate geographic locations?

Areej

It seems that social media's influence has exceeded the conception of modesty to a point where such influence might impact critical beliefs, such as one's religious worldview. In other words, seeing recurrently how other individuals on social media express, explore, and recreate their identities, precisely the ones that are associated with religion, has relatively alleviated the burden and the guilt that Saudi women associate with relinquishing their sacred identity-related beliefs.

The sacredness of the abaya, hijab, and even the niqab is a thorny issue due to the various Islamic interpretations in this matter. Nevertheless, Amany was hesitant as well as uncertain about whether these garments have a conspicuous connection with a visible Islamic identity because of what she is seeing on social media. In fact, she emphasized that it is becoming a pervasive phenomenon to see Muslim women on social media who do not associate their identities with garments that used to be conceptualized as sacred within the Saudi society. Moreover, she implied that these garments are not sacred per se. Rather, they are tools operationalized to fulfill a controversial concept. Amany also noted that she has started to suspect what she learned in school or was told by her parents:

In the age of social media, sacredness has become an elastic word. I mean in the past we used to be dictated to about this topic at school or from our parents. Now, the frequent sight of Muslim women from all around the world on social media who do not abide by these propagated garments which are falsely labelled as sacred has made us doubtful about the validity of what we have been told in the past.

Amany

Due to the fact that social media content is not exclusive to certain ethnicities or limited by geographical and political borders, the logical conclusion would be there are higher possibilities that Saudi women would doubt and question modesty in a visible identity. Up to this point in the research, the data reveals that many participants have attributed their uncertainty and questioning, with regards to their religious beliefs about modesty, to seeing Muslim and conservative women from different countries on social media. Nonetheless, the following subtheme illustrates what the data revealed in terms of how the participants were questioning their underlying Islamic beliefs about modesty because of seeing Saudi women on social media.

4.1.2 Seeing Saudi women

The social identity begins with categorizing individuals into numerous categories that are compiled of in-groups, which individuals identify with and approve over other out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel,

1982). A common factor that people use to primarily differentiate between in-groups and out-groups is national identity (Salazar, 1998). The data implies that one of the factors that influenced the participants' religious beliefs about modesty was seeing how Saudi women (i.e. those who share the same national identity with the participants) present themselves on social media. Before going any further in presenting the findings in this subsection, it is extremely important to address the critical time gap between interviewing the participants in summer 2018 and submitting this research because of many issues that have profoundly affected the socio-cultural face of Saudi Arabia. In this respect, as mentioned in Chapter 2, Saudi Arabia has radically and rapidly changed to become a modern country where women's rights, whether Saudis or not, have been the target of reformation by Saudi Arabia's leadership. The timetable in Figure 9 succinctly highlights some of the most noticeable socio-cultural changes in a chronological order, with consideration to the time period when the interviews were conducted:

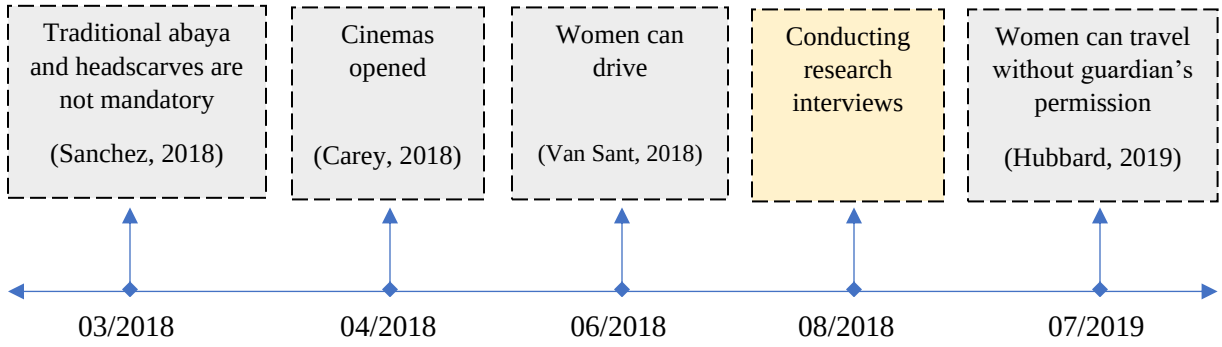

Figure 9: The timing of the research interviews with consideration to fundamental socio-cultural changes

Taking into account the fast-paced systematic process of change, which was described by the Saudi Crown Prince as 'shock therapy' to modernize Saudi Arabia's culture (Ignatius, 2018), the national identity of many segments of the Saudi society as well as some of the participants is still fermenting. In terms of gender issues, the state's progressive cultural reformation has loosened up the conservative and strict aspects of Saudi women's conventional national identity, which is firmly attached to Islamic identity (as discussed earlier in Chapter 2). Consequently, the conception of modesty in a visible identity is also subject to such fermentation if given the appropriate incubating environment, which is – considering the research context – seeing how the socio-cultural changes reflect on the visible identity of Saudi women on social media. Along the previous lines, Lina said:

> *The echo of MBS's* [the Crown Prince's] *words "the abaya is not obligatory" is amplified everywhere. For instance, in social media, several Saudi women praised his words. While others used it as a green light to post photos/videos of themselves without wearing an abaya. I believe it is just a matter of time before people here realize that we are living in a*

new era where the stereotypical medieval conception of modesty is going to be eradicated by our leadership with the help of brave Saudi women.

Lina

As far as Lina's words indicate, the socio-cultural changes in Saudi Arabia are diffused through social media, and some Saudi women contribute essentially as well as effectively in such diffusion, which is proven to be efficient in terms of conveying new conceptions of modesty among Saudi women who still pendulum between the premodern and the modern era of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Lina's statements indicate that the hegemony of political power over the social structure and agency would result in the obliteration of the premodern conception of modesty, or at least not criminalizing a modern, Western-oriented, conception of modesty. Therefore, it can be argued that the influence of seeing Saudi women who actualize Saudi Arabia's modernity vision through their visible identity on social media has a considerable effect on changing the traditional stereotypical conception of modesty among Saudi women. Likewise, another participant, Lamiah, stretched Lina's emphasis but with concentration on a specific group of Saudi women who are academics:

Also, social media has showed me that several Saudi female academics are appearing in a modern and respectful way, in contrary to the stereotype that academics' appearance is kind of geeky. As a future academic, I do not know for sure whether I am going to take off my hijab or not. However, I would not pretend that I am not thinking about it.

Lamiah

According to Stets and Burke (2000, pp.225-226), "In general, one's identities are composed of self-views that emerge from the reflexive activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in particular groups or roles". Lamiah considers herself as a member of the academic community. As a result, she is absorbing what other Saudi academic women are pouring into social media, "which enables professional identity expression, exploration, and experimentation" (Kasperiuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019, p.9), in terms of their modern appearance. Furthermore, she spoke out about her hesitation about taking off her hijab, which plays a fundamental part in the conventional Saudi Arabian visible identity. The data indicates that the influence on the conception of modesty could come from communities with which one identifies. This finding supports Cova, Kozinets and Shankar's (2011) argument that tribal affiliation has an enormous power in shaping and directing one's identity-related decisions. In contrast, Areej did not focus on a specific group or community of Saudi women who she saw on social media. Rather, she emphasized that those women are from different professions and classes:

Social media has shown me that numerous successful Saudi women who are entrepreneurs, artists, moms, and academics are wearing coloured abayas without a hijab. It is

unbelievable how everything is changing. To an extent, social media clarified many things about the false Islamic beliefs about modesty which was implanted in our minds.

Areej

In that sense, it can be presumably argued that not only do individuals from the communities with which the participants identify have influence on their conception of modesty, but also that such influence might come from a wide range of different communities. However, the common factor that unites such communities is the national identity, which is changing incredibly in social media as Areej said. Such change was evident in Hurley's (2019) findings about a Saudi woman Instagram influencer whose national identity and religious identity were discretionary on her Instagram's posts. Furthermore, Areej was grateful that her wrong beliefs about modesty had been rectified by social media. Interestingly, she attributed her old misconception about modesty to what she learned throughout her life, whether in school or from her parents. The same attribution was made earlier by Amany in terms of the sacredness of the abaya and hijab. Nevertheless, Areej did not label the abaya/hijab as false, as Amany did. Rather, she stated that her previous Islamic beliefs about modesty were false. It is not that Areej or the other participants are criticizing Islamic teachings or the different interpretation of Islamic modesty. Actually, Moberg and Granholm's (2012, p.112) words shed more light on this sensitive issue: "the argument here is not primarily that religions or religious traditions in themselves have been radically changed or altered in consumer-capitalist/consumerist culture but, rather, that people have come to engage with them". Such engagement does not necessarily mean that the case will always be defiance against old religious beliefs. For instance, Rahaf said:

When I see some of my Saudi female colleagues post on social media, I wonder to myself what is wrong with them. I mean professionally they are decent Muslims, but sometimes they are exaggerating by publicly posting pictures and videos of themselves without thinking about the consequences. So far, this disturbing phenomenon is spreading rather than receding.

Rahaf

From Rahaf's words, it appears that the reflection of social media's influence on Rahaf's conception of modesty is not the same as for the other participants. However, social media was still a source which made Rahaf question the religious beliefs of other Saudi women. In addition, she implied that there is a growing number of Saudi women on social media who do not abide by the conventional modesty definition. Thus, it can be inferred that there is a substantial possibility of radical change in the conception of modesty among Saudi women, to a point where the minority will be those who cling to the conventional understanding of modesty. This inference coincides with the arguments of Veresiu and Giesler (2018), and Luedicke (2015), who state that the dominant culture will lure – if not force – individuals into adjusting their conceptions, and eventually identities, to a point where coexistence is not at its optimum state. In this context, taking

into account that Saudi Arabia is embarking upon a massive cultural reformation, along with seeing different Saudi women on social media presenting themselves in accordance with the state's orientation, the outcome of questioning religious beliefs about modesty will mostly result in the adaptation/adoption of a new conception of modesty.

4.1.3 Exploring different interpretations

Social media has given consumers an environment where they can interact with other people in many ways and for numerous reasons. YouTube and Twitter are among multiple social media platforms where consumers can learn about almost anything (Chernev, Hamilton & Gal, 2011). Among many ways of learning is the inquiry about the reasons. Although there are many choices of interrogatives, asking why is one of the most spontaneous questions that a child/adult can ask. In countries where the majority, if not all, aspects of life as well as the socio-cultural environment are profoundly influenced by religion, one's enquiry about matters, which have direct or indirect association with religion, usually end up with an answer that has limited room for argument. However, this is not the case in microblogging platforms such as Twitter, where questions and answers span a wide spectrum of subjects. For instance, Basma pointed out that:

> *Twitter to me is just like going to Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, but from the ease of my home. I am not exaggerating when I say that it has changed my religious views about modesty since I am completely free to ask "why this" and "why that" and get answers from all kinds of people.*
>
> *Basma*

The interactive features on Twitter, along with its functionality, have assisted consumers in exploring and verifying multiple perspectives of religion. Such perspectives have influenced to a certain extent individual's conception of modesty. In addition, since Twitter is an open platform where consumers can explore multiple opinions and choose what mostly appeals to them, it is no wonder that Lina has described her experience on Twitter as being enlightened, as she noted:

> *Social media has helped me a lot in terms of selectively reading different opinions on Twitter that enlightened my belief. This enlightenment has reflected on my mentality to a degree where I can prioritize reason over tradition when it comes not just to modesty, but almost in every aspect of my life.*
>
> *Lina*

Although it requires a considerable amount of effort to refrain from being subjective, Lina's words were implicitly stating that despite the plethora of numerous opinions that are on Twitter, she was specifically focusing on the ones that she believed would add value to her. In other words, social media is not replacing old religious perspectives with brand new ones. In Lina's situation, the influence was expansion of the horizons of modesty to reach a profound understanding. This finding matches Orbe's (2012) report that

consumers search for messages in the media that correspond to their actual beliefs and attitudes. Nevertheless, it is not always the case that consumers deliberately search for content that matches their belief. For instance, Ghada said:

> *We used to believe for a long time that women needed to veil because they resemble lollipops. Otherwise, they will attract flies. Anyway, I saw a random video on YouTube where a guy was saying that lollipops are things and women are human. As silly as it sounds, I cannot understand why I did not think about it this way, although it is common sense.*
>
> *Ghada*

Apparently, the influence of being exposed to a different interpretation other than what a consumer is used to read or hear has a noticeable effect, especially on one's religious belief. Ghada did not intentionally seek out a video to understand more about modesty, nor did she put a substantial effort into exploring multiple opinions about modesty. The incident of seeing a YouTube video that provided a different interpretation to a saying that she used to consider as true was merely accidental. Therefore, with reference to Lina and Ghada, it can be argued that the influence of being exposed to multiple interpretations of modesty on social media could range from gaining deeper understanding without abandoning preexisting belief, to forming a new belief that replaces the old one. The critical factor in this finding is whether the exposure to a different interpretation about modesty was selective or unselective.

So far, the data shows that the vulnerability to different interpretations of modesty on social media has relatively changed consumers' conception of modesty. However, the following participant has added an interesting dimension to the data:

> *Just like the old saying goes, anything can be a double-edged sword. Social media has many good things that we can learn from, but it also has a latent devastating influence, especially on our Islamic values. For example, an immodest woman would be called modern, a woman that audaciously criticizes Islamic teachings would be called brave. The pattern here is giving things different names without any control. Just ask yourself, is social media subject to Islamic sharia?*
>
> *Razan*

Since religious values are the central ideas that a believer in a religion uses on a daily basis to differentiate between what is right or wrong (Shambare & Donga, 2019), Razan's words imply that the existence of multiple interpretations on social media has negatively tipped the scale of Islamic values by naming things other than their original names. Thus, it can be inferred that the lack of Islamic control (i.e. censorship underpinned by Islamic law) over the content on social media has resulted in the spreading profusion of confusion in the conception of modesty among Saudi women. This inference goes in parallel with Shehu,

Othman and Osman's (2017) claim that the rapid and unorganized proliferation of using social media has imperilled Islamic values and standards.

The calls to regulate social media content according to Islamic sharia law most probably, if not definitely, will not be answered because social media platforms – at least the ones in this study – have their distinct organizational values (i.e. secular profit-oriented values). However, many governments have rationalized their intervention as well as exerted their power over social media content. Considering the context of this study, Saudi Arabia introduced a law which criminalizes (e.g. being imprisoned for a maximum of five years) posting or sharing content that ridicules Islamic values (Barnes, 2018). Drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality, "which is to say governmental rationality" (Hugh, 2008, p.363), modern governments rationalize their numerous interventions, such as erratically controlling arguments and interpretations, in addition to presenting new concepts (Lemke, 2007). Saudi Arabia's socio-cultural environment is moving at an ultra-speed towards becoming a modern country. Furthermore, the rules and policy of social media platforms do not subjugate their content to monoideism. As a result, tying it all together with the findings of this research, the different interpretations of Islamic modesty on social media will keep expanding to a point where Saudi women "can prioritize reason over tradition", as Lina, one of the participants, emphasized.

4.2 Disassociation between religiosity and visible identity

In the previous section, the data demonstrated how social media infused doubts in Saudi women's beliefs about modesty, and how these doubts were transformed into questioning the traditional concept of modesty. This section continues the presentation and discussion of the data in an attempt to gain more understanding of the potential answers to the first research question. Three subthemes were identified suggesting that social media has caused a disassociation between religiosity and visible identity.

4.2.1 Religiosity, commitment, and relationship with God

According to Minton and Kahle (2014, p.12) religiosity is "the degree to which one holds religious beliefs and values both through an internal spiritual connection and external religious practices and behaviors". In addition, religiosity could be considered as a form of commitment which is underpinned by religion to what consumers consider sacred in their lives (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989). It could be intrinsic (i.e. as an end regardless of any influence), extrinsic (i.e. as a means to gain comfort/approval), or a quest (i.e. as a constant search for truth) (Khraim, 2010; Allport & Ross, 1967). According to Vitell (2009) and Bjarnason (2007), beliefs, affiliations, and practices are considered to be fundamental dimensions of religiosity. Within the context of Saudi women, these dimensions have been preserved through a strict commitment to the conventional Saudi Arabian religiosity principles in women's appearance. However, social media has influenced such commitment, as Hanan explained:

I don't have negative feelings towards women who call themselves moultazimat [Muslim women who are committed to Islamic religiosity's dimensions]. However, I do not agree with their belief that religiosity must be projected through appearance, simply because it is a matter of personal choice. This understanding about religiosity is circulating all over social media platforms, and many Saudi women have realized this true meaning of religiosity. For example, a lot of women believe now that religiosity is about the essence and the way you handle people, not the way you dress.

Hanan

As far as Hanan's words go, attributing the detachment of conventional religiosity from one's appearance to personal choice is an indication of a diminishing influence of the single religious view, which dominated Saudi Arabia's socio-cultural environment for a long time. Furthermore, the propagation of the concept "personal choice" in social media appears to have an influence over Saudi women's interpretation of religiosity. Contrary to Bartels' (2005) argument that "personal choice" is a strategy used by Muslim women to justify their decision of holding on to their visible Islamic identity in secular societies, Hanan insinuated that Saudi women, who live in one of the most religion-driven societies, are attributing the effect of changing their conception of religiosity to the cause of "personal choice" which is propagated in social media. In other words, it seems that social media is diffusing the fundamental constructs of consumer culture, in which consumers consciously and willingly rely on their individuality whenever they are seeking or producing various meanings and cultures (e.g. Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Belk, 1988; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). As a result, consumers are prone to rationalization or even hedonism, as opposed to blindly committing themselves to following cultural norms. According to McClay (2001), rationalization and religiosity have an inverse relationship. That is to say, the more logical a consumer is, the less committed to religiosity's dimensions she/he is, and vice versa. Nevertheless, the variance in the consistency of such commitment also has its implications on what many Muslims describe as maintaining a relationship with God.

Mutual commitment is an important cornerstone of many relationships. In addition, it is arduous to measure the actual commitment in a relationship before it ends (Hocutt, 1998). Some Muslims depict their relationship with God as a personal relationship of which no one has the right to interfere. Moreover, they also consider religiosity to be a path which they voluntarily walk upon whenever they wish, without committing holistically to its dimensions. Sumayah's words shed more light on the influence of social media in terms of this issue:

There is a famous actress who had decided suddenly to wear a hijab before taking it off after about a year from starting to wear it. It didn't stop there, a video of her went viral in which she was wearing a revealing dress. It is a little bit puzzling, but it is her choice you

know. What really touched me was a comment that was defending her decision. I can't remember it exactly, but it was something about how a woman might be righteous in God's eyes regardless of her appearance since no one knows what is between her and God.

Sumayah

Although the comments section in almost every social media platform could have deceitful and false information (Sharmin & Zaman, 2017), Sumayah was moved by what she read there. From her words, it can be inferred that social media in general, and the comments section in particular, have shown her that a relationship, which God is a party to, does not follow either the assumptions or the laws that govern relationships among humans. This specific type of relationship is a mixture of mysticism (Bowman, 2002) and enigma and only the entity who/which has the ultimate decision about the relationship knows when and how it will end. Furthermore, Sumayah's words suggest that making conclusions about one's relationship with God according to the way religiosity is signalled through appearance is futile, especially when such signalling is aimed to please others. Her suggestion is supported by Patwardhan, Keith and Vitell (2012), and Swinyard, Kau and Phua (2001), who argue that internal religiosity notably produces religiously pertinent behaviour, as opposed to external religiosity which mostly does not result in religiously pertinent behaviour. Thus, it can be said that the variance in maintaining a consistent commitment to a specific theme in one's visible Islamic identity does not mean jeopardizing the relationship with God, neither does it reflect one's internal religiosity. Rather, it reflects a constant quest that involves defining/redefining this divine relationship, of which internal religiosity plays a fundamental role.

For Muslims, regardless of their gender, questing for knowledge whether by experience or education is supposed to be a sacred journey because of what the prophet Mohammad said: "Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim" (Ibn Majah, 2007). Despite Haşıloğlu and Çubukçuoğlu's (2016) suggestion that Muslim consumers' internal religiosity decreases whenever their education level (i.e. knowledge) increases, Mona emphasized that the more religious knowledge she acquires from social media, the more she gets closer to God:

From time to time I read or watch on social media something from here or there that expands my religious information and makes me get closer to God. Also, I have found there are a lot of Saudis whose conception of Islam matches mine, and this conception is gaining acceptance and spreading here…. That does not mean that I have started to veil my face and cover my hands because these are trivial and exoteric issues. What really matters is to love God esoterically, hoping to be beloved by him.

Mona

From Mona's words, it can be said that the impact of gaining religious knowledge from social media could lead to the birth of social phenomena that are substantiated by religion (Nisa, 2018). These phenomena tend

to be leaning towards the concepts of spiritualism, rather than fundamentalism. To elaborate, religious fundamentalism is refusing the values of modernism and secularism (Emerson & Hartman, 2006; Antoun, 2001), whereas religious spiritualism is a relationship with a powerful entity (LaPierre, 1994), and it emphasizes one's experiential subjectivity of the sacred (Pargament, 1999). Moreover, these concepts of spirituality overlap with the fundamental constructs of internal religiosity (Marler & Hadaway, 2012). Therefore, it can be concluded that the knowledge which Mona gained from social media has shifted her spirituality to a level where she trivializes the conventional visible Islamic identity and prioritizes internal religiosity, which she considers the most important aspect of her odyssey to accomplish a relationship with God that involves mutual love.

An interesting finding is in Mona's usage of two terminologies that are commonly used among people who follow Sufism, which can be succinctly described as "a term indicating the esoteric core of Islam" (Francesconi, 2009, p.112). The two terms used by Mona are esoteric, which is the knowledge of the inner (Cook, 2017), and exoteric, which relates to the outer. Mona insinuated that this ideology of Sufism is spreading in social media among Saudis. From a socio-political perspective, Saudi Arabia has been described as a source of cultivating and spreading Islamic fundamentalism (Conesa, 2018). However, from Mona's statements, it can be inferred that social media is mediating between the government's premonition regarding Islamic activism (Zahran, 2019) and the government's socio-cultural reformation plans. From this perspective, the propagation of Islamic ideology that focuses more on the esoteric aspects of Islam (e.g. believing visible identity does not necessarily reflect one's religiosity) on social media does not impose either political or social threats to the government (Muedini, 2012). Rather, it goes in line with the government's reformation plans, especially if such plans are intended to modernize Saudi Arabia, not to mention women's rights. As a result, it can be argued that the influence of Islamic fundamentalism on the Saudi society, and particularly on Saudi women, is not as it used to be due to numerous factors, of which social media is pivotal among them. Furthermore, it appears that there is an inclination to explicitly reject the traditional strict concepts of religion in favour of an individualized spiritual quest. These findings are supported by Roof's (1993) study outcomes which, using a sample from the baby-boomer generation, described those who deserted institutionalized religion and embarked upon a spiritual quest as being more spiritual and educated, and placing higher value on their individuality.

4.2.2 Appearance indication

The relationship between religion, style, and modernity is convoluted, especially in religion-driven societies where Muslim women consumers use their appearance as a means to project their conceptions of aesthetics and religion while considering numerous factors, such as being faithful to Islam (Sandıkçı & Ger, 2005), and considerate to the society's expectations. In Saudi Arabia, veiling has carried the connotation of virtuousness, but Elham thinks that social media has contributed to debunking such a connotation:

In the past, the idea of covering the face because good Muslim women do so was pervasive everywhere here. Also, people would automatically assume that the more a woman covers and hides her body the more virtuous she is. At that time, these ideas somehow made sense, but now things have changed to the contrary, and the obsession about women's niqab and hijab is not as it used to be. I think that social media plays a big role in this change by showing that women who completely veil are not nuns. I mean, in social media, some of them are respectable, while others are crossing the red lines to territories that I can't describe.

Elham

Before analyzing and discussing Elham's words, it is important to recap on some of the terminologies with specific consideration to their meaning in Saudi Arabia's culture. The niqab, which is similar to a burqa, is a veil for the face which leaves the eyes and a relatively small space around them uncovered. In addition, widening the space around the eyes so that the nose and eyebrows become visible is not permissible in Islam according to Shaik Ibn Jibreen's fatwa (Refer to question 260 in Al-Musnad, 1996). The hijab is a veil for the hair, although some women use it also to cover the lower part of their faces. Shaikh Ibn Uthaymeen and Shaikh Ibn Jibreen, who are prominent Saudi religious scholars, have stressed in many fatwas that women are religiously not allowed to unveil their faces or their hair in the presence of unrelated men (Refer to questions 257, 264, and 269 in Al-Musnad, 1996).

In her book titled *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, AlMunajjed (1997) noted that avoiding being stigmatized by society and preserving chastity are reasons among many others that Saudi women chose to fully veil. However, after about two decades, Elham, a woman in Saudi Arabia today, implied that these reasons for veiling made sense back then, but now such justifications do not resonate either with her or with the contemporary institutions in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Elham emphasized that currently the obsession about veiling is on an opposite pole than what it used to be, and social media's contribution in this change is significant. In other words, it seems that social media has probed into what is beneath the veil and revealed that not all the women who completely veil are idols of supreme morality or virtue. Likewise, not all the women who unveil parts of their bodies are wicked. Thus, along these lines, Zampi (2016) argued that unfortunately, in numerous Western countries, the niqab is conceived as a camouflage for terrorism. Drawing on such an argument, it appears that social media has led Elham to conclude that in many Muslim societies, the veil is used by some women as a camouflage for righteousness.

Another participant, Nawal, supports the aforementioned findings. However, unlike Elham, she specifically focused on the influence of social media on her conception about women who put on the niqab and ignore its fundamental purpose:

The niqab has nothing to do with Islam, it is just a tradition. Actually, I see it as a mask to not be known. Do not get me wrong, I have nothing against the women who choose to put it on, and to let you know, my mom puts it on and I am really proud of her…. Mostly on Snapchat you will see many of them putting half a kilogram of makeup on their eyes. I mean aren't they putting it on [the niqab] to be modest and avoid being attractive? I tell you; it does not take us women more than a glance to differentiate between those who wear the niqab as a habit [tradition] and those who wear it as a form of worship [religion].

Nawal

The conviction that the niqab is detached from religion is apparent in Nawal's words which assert that the niqab is a product of tradition. In addition, she was decisive in terms of not generalizing any negative judgments upon women who choose to put on the niqab and used her mother as an example of a women who puts it on while holding to its functionality in terms of modesty (i.e. to avoid attraction). However, her cynical perspectives about the women who wear the niqab, precisely on social media, were directed to those who purposely emit from their niqab's slit their desire to be noticed. According to Nawal, such an emission should not transgress beyond the niqab. Otherwise, the niqab, or the mask as she described it, will be harnessed to augment a woman's attractiveness, rather than harnessing her beauty from the opposite gender's eyes. Furthermore, the participant emphasized that spotting women who adopt the niqab only to hide their identity does not require more than a glimpse. In other words, there is a culture of stigmatizing one's motives only because of personal appearance.

The purposes of wearing masks among theatre actors, carnival participants, movie superheroes and even adult performers varies. Since ancient times, mask usage was not only limited to disguise and protection, but it was also used to ease the release of repressed instinctive desires (Taylor, 1980). To a certain extent, such desires could not be externalized without masking one's identity due to social, religious, or even sexual restraints (Tseëlon, 2001). Likewise, the findings of this research – up to this point – suggest that some women who put on the niqab have used social media to externalize their desires to be attractive by applying makeup intensively. On the other hand, Roy (2015) argued that the context plays a fundamental role in determining the semiotic meaning for the niqab to those who wear it. Therefore, it can be concluded that the relative absence of socio-cultural constraints on social media has created an ideal context for women who embrace the niqab, as a tradition rather than religion, to exhibit their multiple identities, or – holistically speaking – their authentic self-concept. Consequently, the niqab is being relatively abstracted from its religious indication, whether by the observed (i.e. those who wear it), or the observer.

Unlike the previous two participants, Sumayah addressed the indication of appearance from an angle that highlights the importance of beauty and style in a visible identity:

A good look has a big role in covering up many defects in all people. For example, on Instagram, you will find that the majority of Saudi females who have the most followers are not following the traditional dress code. Rather, they are putting their beauty and style in the first place on the account for meaningful content. Yet, they are still Muslims… Beauty is not an antonym for Islam, it might be even used for da'wa [Invitation to Islam]. Our admiration for the style of many non-Muslims on social media has led us to know more about them and their culture, so why don't we invite them to Islam in a way that will attract them instead of repelling them with a gloomy appearance?

Sumayah

The participant emphasized that a beautiful appearance, whether it was in men or women, has a strong influence which could compensate for the absence of signalling religiosity through appearance. Such type of compensation is visible in many Saudi women's Instagram accounts, where the secularity of appearance replaces the visible conventional Islamic identity, especially for women who aim to increase the number of their Instagram followers. The previous lines are echoed in Hurley's (2019) semiotic analysis for the posted images of two Saudi women Instagram influencers (i.e. both of them have substantial number of followers in the Arabian-Gulf region). For example, Hurley (2019, p.11) described one of them in her Instagram photos, which was taken outside Saudi Arabia, as follows, "Her direct gaze in a number of the posts operates in a demand mode yet her parted lips, long eyelashes, and sideways glance are coy and sultry". Using a different analysis lens that accounts for the scope of the present research, the researcher visually analyzed the appearance of that Saudi influencer on her public Instagram account and found that her appearance in many of her posts is undoubtedly striking in comparison to the researcher's online and offline field notes. For example, she appeared in many photos wearing a bandeau bodycon mini dress, tie front crop top, or a sports bra. Thus, it can be argued that the secularization of appearance through the accentuation of beauty and style in social media has overshadowed cultural identity-related signals to an extent that trivializes the necessity of indicating religiosity in appearance.

Sumayah, as well as many other participants, expressed her conviction that appearance should not be taken for granted as an indication of religiosity. However, peculiarly, Sumayah insinuated that an immodest appearance, precisely the one that falls within the traditional immodesty standards in Saudi Arabia, could be a means to preach Islam on social media. To explain, she suggested the following three-step argument. First, she started by premising that Muslims are gravitating towards the aesthetical appearance of non-Muslims who are dominating the mainstream culture on social media. Second, she proposed that such gravitation has led Muslims to be curious about exploring the culture of those prominent figures on social media. Third, she concluded that when Muslims start delving into the said culture, they will come across many of its constructs such as religion. Finally, Sumayah then concluded that an aesthetical appearance for

Saudi women is a pivotal factor which contributes in attracting a huge base of followers from multiple non-Islamic cultures on social media. Such attraction would provoke the followers' curiosity to seek more information about the culture of these women. Eventually, the followers would indirectly find and know Islam since it is embedded in Saudi Arabia's culture.

By using Sandıkçı and Ger's (2005) suggestions to preface the discussion of the above findings, it can be said that Muslim women who are consciously 'savvy' about their style would dedicate a lot of effort and time to have a beautiful appearance, which derives from an aesthetic sense, to create a distinctive modern Islamic identity. In addition, combining Islamic modesty, distinction, and modernity to create an appearance that will not be sexually attractive is a perplexing puzzle, since all these three components are approached and conceived relatively as well as subjectively, especially on social media where people accentuate their individuality and uniqueness (Belk, 2013). In this respect, the literature supports the finding that Muslim women's appearance on social media is gradually gliding away from a featureless, unaesthetic, and identity-veiled appearance rather than gliding towards it. Moreover, such gliding does not indicate heading towards the very wrong end of modesty (i.e. obscenity). Rather, it is a delicate process that involves a skillful demonstration of beauty with consideration to abstracting it from being sexually attractive, in accordance with one's personal understanding of Islamic modesty. However, the literature, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has not addressed the idea that the beautiful and modern appearance of Muslim women on social media could be a means to preach Islam, whether to Muslims or non-Muslims. Yet, starting from the third millennium, multiple Muslim men have preached Islam on different media platforms in an unprecedented style (Armbrust, 2014), which modernizes the conventional visible Islamic identity to encompass Western-style clothes, physical fitness, and a shaved beard (Olsson, 2016; Worth, 2009). While these male preachers are labelled as 'the new preachers' because of their different approach to Islamic piousness (Moll, 2016), some prominent Saudi female preachers are still labelling women who wear trousers, and even pants, as piously imperfect (Makboul, 2017). All in all, it can be argued that although the literature suggests that Muslim women's aesthetic appearance is infused with a beauty, style, and modernity that could be negatively conceived within some religious circles, the literature also demonstrates how their opposite sex have shed their conventional visible identity and created new religious circles in which aesthetics in appearance is used as a means to convey Islamic preaching. Therefore, through synthesizing the previous argument with Guta and Karolak's (2015, p.117) proposal that cyberspace produces "a space where women have an equal access and they are able to contribute to the public sphere in ways that are not possible outside of the virtual world where they are always regarded as women, beings subordinate to men", it is no wonder that an appearance that used to indicate Islamic immodesty would be used to preach Islam on social media.

4.2.3 Acceptance of what is different

When the internet was made publicly accessible in Saudi Arabia in 1999, several Saudi clerics had negative views, mainly because it was a new and different technology that came from the West. However, as time has progressed, their negative perspectives have gradually changed to approve either fully or conditionally the use of the internet (Al-Kandari & Dashti, 2014). Likewise, many Saudis have started to embrace the idea that the internet is a necessity rather than a choice, as the number of internet users in the country has radically increased from one million users in 2001 (CITC, 2011) to 24 million around the end of 2016 (CITC, 2016). Evidently, what used to be suspiciously looked upon because it was different, not to mention that it came from the West, is now embraced and has become an integral part of daily life. The pattern of rejecting what is different and then eventually accepting it is also present in Ghada's words:

> *Long ago, the number of Saudi women who presented themselves on social media in a Western style was limited, and whenever I used to talk with my friends or relatives about these women, usually their responses would show some contempt about such women. I am not exaggerating when I tell you that those women who were the subject of contempt before are now admired by the same people who previously had negative attitudes towards them. I believe that social media has been reorganizing our minds to accept liberal appearances for Saudi women.*
>
> *Ghada*

As claimed by Ghada, the unfavourable attitude towards Muslim women who construct their online identity in a liberal manner was a thing of the past that barely exists today. Moreover, she noted how some of her close groups have radically changed their perspectives about Saudi women whose appearance on social media does not indicate conventional modesty. Such a 180-degree change is a result, as Ghada claimed, of continuous exposure to the mainstream culture of social media, which accentuates women's physical beauty as opposed to Islamic modesty. Consequently, the predisposition to reject styles that do not abide by Islamic modesty is being replaced with a disposition to accept styles that emphasize Western style, whether in dress, body shape, or to a certain extent value. This finding goes in parallel with Perloff's (2014) argument that social media's changing power has infiltrated cultures that used to be relatively immune to Western ideologies and lifestyle. However, it is important to note that the immunity of Saudi Arabia's culture to infiltration by Western values is not so strong to the extent that such values would not be accepted or even practiced. Actually, Sohail and Al-Gwaiz (2013) found that Saudis, specifically men, have a notion that one of the negative influences of advertising is its contribution in spreading Western values in Saudi Arabia, including the unsuitable representation of women. Therefore, it can be proposed that the influence on Saudi women of social media, of which advertisements are a fundamental component, has been gradually

increasing to a point where what used to be labelled as an invading Western ideology or practice has become a benchmark for liberty and a familiar style.

The notion that all Saudi women have common modesty standards that are underpinned by a unified understanding of Islamic teaching is not accurate. Just as in any Muslim society, there are variations in what constitutes modesty. Such variations can be observed in the way Saudi women construct their visible identity, particularly in mixed-gender spaces. Suha emphasized how social media has made her realize that diversity in modesty is widely present among Saudi women:

> *Social media has contributed to my knowledge of how our society is diversified. For example, when I see pictures or videos of entertainment events in Saudi Arabia, I see women that wear the niqab, women that wear coloured abaya, and women who put on heavy makeup without wearing an abaya or hijab. It is really a beautiful thing to have this diversity because it reflects how our Islam can contain different views about modesty.*
>
> *Suha*

Social media was conceived by Suha as a reliable source of information that showed her how other Saudi women are using their visible identity to project different versions of Islamic modesty. Furthermore, she described the scene of multiple Saudi women on social media with different modesty definitions as delightful, which asserted her belief that Islam in Saudi Arabia is not situated only in the radical or fundamental end of the spectrum. Rather, it sways among multiple positions, and that is what makes it capable of containing numerous conceptions of modesty which emphasizes the diversity in Saudi Arabia's society. The following illustration demonstrates such diversity in Saudi Arabia, as expressed by Suha:

Figure 10: Women wait for the show at Al Comedy Club in Jeddah. Photograph: Al Dabbagh (2018) for *The Los Angeles Times.*

Another participant, Lina, expressed her conviction that social media has significantly helped in exposing some of the clergy who have been preaching for radical Islam that feeds on ethnocentricity:

One of the good things which social media has brought is revealing to us how we were fooled into believing that the West is conspiring to intellectually invade us. This belief was promoted by some of the clergy who used to warn us [women] from being an easy prey to Western values such as working with men and ditching the hijab. Ironically, thanks to social media, we have seen that their sons and daughters are studying in Western universities, and some of them [clerics' daughters] have abandoned wearing a hijab. Now, as MBS [the Crown Prince] said, we will no longer live under these radical views, and we will return to an Islam that tolerates all cultures and people.

Lina

When Suha attributed her realization of the existence of multiple conceptions of modesty among Saudi women to social media, she was not criticizing such diversity in appearance. Similarly, Lina also was not criticizing the act of appearing on social media without covering the hair. Rather, she was attributing her realization of the reality that some Saudi clergy have been preaching on social media paradoxically given their public and private lives. For instance, they have depicted to Saudi women that the West is trying to skew them from the path of Islam towards a path where they will become mentally and practically Westernized. Such a depiction relied heavily on religious as well as ethnic xenophobia. Moreover, Lina was emphasizing that social media is not only a source of information but also a source of revelation that uncovers the false preaching of being targeted by the West, by preachers whose daughters are studying in Western countries and to a certain extent adopting the facades of Western identity. In addition, she accredited Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince for his salient reformations initiatives which promote an Islam that is more accepting towards all different cultures.

By reflecting the above findings on to the literature, it is no wonder that some clergy would try to demonize social media, or at least propagate the idea that such platforms are a means to spread evil (Al-Kandari & Dashti, 2014) because of social media's nature which gives its users the freedom to decide when, how, and in what type of interaction they are going to be involved (Ariel & Avidar, 2015), without being religiously policed, not to mention the anonymity feature which adds more fuel to the fire. As a result of these characteristics, social media has bypassed to some extent political censorship in many places in the world (Duan & Dholakia, 2015). In addition, it also has relatively bypassed religious control, and equipped its users with many features such as anonymity which enables the evasion of potential social stigma and religious condemnation. For instance, Bin Mokhtar, Bin Wan Sukeri and Abd Latif (2019) have found that social media plays a significant role in spreading the LGBT culture in a conservative Muslim society, where anyone who overtly identifies with the LGBT's community or culture would be considered as a disbeliever in Islam and might be subject to lawful punishment. On the other hand, Qayyum and Mahmood (2015) argued that Muslims would enhance their religion when they follow famous Muslim clerics on social media.

Therefore, it appears that the literature is indicating that social media could be used 'Islamically' in either a negative or positive way. However, discovering in social media that some famous Muslim preachers, who are supposed to guide their followers from what is religiously wrong to what is right, have been using double standards in identity-related issues between their daughters and females followers has expedited the divorce between conventional modesty and visible Islamic identity. For example, "Many Saudis are fed up with the inordinate interference of religious authorities in their lives, and one can even speak of an anti-clerical movement" (Meijer, 2010, p.94), and social media is a perfect incubator for such a movement which is specifically directed towards those who preach different words for different audiences/followers. Moreover, the Saudi leadership is also cracking down on preachers of radical xenophobia in order to restore true Islam, as the Saudi Crown Prince said "We are simply reverting to what we followed – a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions…. Honestly, we won't waste 30 years of our life combating extremist thoughts, we will destroy them now and immediately" (Chulov, 2017).

4.3 Reconstruction of modesty standards in a visible identity

In the previous section, the data demonstrated how social media has contributed to separating the connotations of religiosity from a visible identity. The following section continues with analyzing and discussing the data to solidify the understanding of the possible outcomes of the first research question. Two subthemes were identified suggesting that social media has created new standards of modesty in a visible identity.

4.3.1 Archaic religious views

Until about two decades ago, the religiously substantiated belief that music, and anything associated with it (e.g., listening to music, learning to play wind/string instruments, or even working in music shops), is Islamically not permissible was widely adopted among many Saudi clerics (Otterbeck, 2012), not to mention cinemas. However, over time, these perspectives have diminished to a point where multiple prominent Saudi clerics have argued that music is not prohibited in Islam (TRTWorld, 2019). Likewise, when festivals started to be officially organized by the General Entertainment Authority, which was established in mid-2016 and was given the responsibility of organizing entertainment activities in Saudi Arabia (GEA, 2019), Saudis did not hesitate to attend music festivals held in Saudi Arabia. For instance, the tickets to a music festival in Jeddah, which embraced one of the biggest stages that was made in the Middle East, was sold out only four hours after they went on sale (Abueish, 2019). So far, Saudis are witnessing significant socio-cultural changes. Moreover, religious views as well as beliefs are not immune to such changes. One of the participants in this research, Mai, has presented her opinion with regards to social media's role in renovating outdated religious perspectives about modesty:

In my perspective, religion is a system of beliefs and deeds that is intended to uplift societies to civilization. Thus, our mentality with regards to certain aspects in religion such as modesty should not be hindered by the interpretations made by previous generations because many things have changed since their time. I am not sure whether this is the right word or not, but I think it is updating. So, updating our religious perspectives is crucial to our success, and one way of learning about contemporary religious perspectives is social media.

Mai

Mai argued that religion is a complex of interconnected ideas and actions that are aimed to enhance and develop humanity's milieus. Furthermore, she emphasized that one's religious worldview should not remain static and stuck with the interpretations of ancestors who had lived in totally different cultures and times. In other words, civilization requires advancement, and so does religious understanding about modesty, to which social media's technological and communicative features are contributing in terms of advancing old-fashioned Islamic modesty concepts. Interestingly, Mai's call to be emancipated from living by other people's understanding of Islam in general and modesty in particular is not a call that one can usually hear in Saudi Arabia, especially if the other people who she referred to are Muslim scholars from the past. To elaborate further, respecting religious scholars – and the more historically ancient they are, the more they are honoured - and refraining from rigorously questioning their interpretations of Islamic laws has been a pervasive norm in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, it seems that social media has contributed toward reconstructing many norms in the country.

When mirroring the aforementioned findings with the literature in a chronological manner, it can be said that around the tenth century, traditional Muslim scholars started to intensively follow (i.e., imitate) their Muslim predecessors' interpretations of Islamic laws for numerous reasons, including the conviction that these predecessors' had an unrivalled understanding of such laws to an extent where stretching Islamic jurisprudence beyond what they have already established was futile (Coulson, 1964). Thus, it is no wonder that after the tenth century, the Muslim world has experienced a protracted decrease in many levels (Chachi, 2005). For throughout Saudi Arabia's modern history, many prominent clerics have underlined the importance of not criticizing the interpretations of Muslim predecessors, or even contemporary Saudi Muslim clerics, without being qualified to do so (i.e. having adequate religious knowledge by being a cleric) (Zaman, 2009; Kechichian, 1986). However, many voices in different social media platforms have started to argue that there is a massive difference **"**between the Islamic holy texts that are the foundation of the Muslim religion and the explanations, interpretations, and inferences of the texts made by [medieval] religious legists, who lived in different times and under different personal and societal conditions" (Al-Houni, 2005, cited in Zoubir, 2015, p.141). In terms of Saudi women, there has been an ongoing pattern of

male control over religious interpretations (Kazi, 1997). Moreover, the role of the conventional constructs of Saudi traditions need to be either eradicated or reinterpreted in order for Saudi women to gain greater autonomy (Pharaon, 2004). Nevertheless, reinterpretation of Saudi traditions is more applicable because of the interconnected and convoluted relationship between tradition and religion in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, Mai's argument that modesty in a visible identity needs to be "updated" through social media is one way of reinterpreting archaic modesty standards. To be more precise, social media is being used as a tool for setting new modesty standards which stem from prioritizing individual logic over following logics that seemed to work for people who lived in ancient socio-cultural environments. Suha also adds more depth to the previous finding by saying that:

> *Twitter has influenced a lot the way I view what I used to consider as religiously essential because of the ongoing discussion on that platform. People there would use resources to support their arguments, thus I would be able to examine the authenticity of their arguments and ideas. For example, I used to be strict when it comes to uncovering my face. I used to cover my face, except my eyes, whenever going out in public. I mean I was raised to believe in practices, yet I did not know what the justifications behind them are. They [parents or whoever in power] would say something, and we would repeat it just like parrots. You can say that Twitter has changed the parrots' culture for us women here.*
>
> *Suha*

In a similar fashion to this research, in which references are used to support the validity of the researcher's claims, Suha emphasized that a handful of people on Twitter would also use references to support their religious arguments. As a result, she can verify whether their arguments are true or false. However, she insinuated that her religious knowledge, especially what constitutes her beliefs around modesty, was built by others rather than herself, and her role did not go beyond watching how others were constructing her beliefs on her behalf. Interestingly, she used the metaphor of parrots' culture to express how she, and many other Saudi women, have been mimicking the belief of their parents, guardians, and even teachers at school without questioning the logic behind such beliefs (i.e., just like how parrots imitate sounds). However, with social media and its individual-oriented culture, Suha has started to experience some freedom in terms of reconstructing her beliefs to a point where she has loosened her strictness about taking off the niqab whenever she is at public places.

Suha's metaphor of the "parrots" was used in some of the literature from a totally different perspective that could be considered as a counterargument to what she said. Interestingly, it was used to stigmatize those who get fascinated and bedazzled by whatever comes from the West, particularly the ideologies/values that demolish Islamic heritage. For instance, Qutb (2000) criticized Muslims who perceive the West as a source of civilization and inspiration to an extent where they mimic Western lifestyle and principles just like

parrots, without knowing the consequences of mimicking the West on Islamic identity. Moreover, Qutb (2000) also compared Muslims who proudly accept to be followers (i.e., being led rather than leading) of Western culture with apes that would happily take anything thrown for them. The previous argument held some weight for several Muslim clerics who had abstracted social media platforms from their developmental impact on social, cultural, economic, and political spheres in the Muslim world. For example, Qayyum and Mahmood (2015) pointed out that some religious entities in several Islamic states issued religious edicts about social media in general and Twitter in particular which, as they claim, does not suit Islamic law because of the role of such a platform in spreading deceit and mutual accusations. However, when social media is thought of holistically, Suha's metaphor of the "parrots" resonates with Luppicini and Saleh's (2017) finding that social media has emancipated Saudi women from being confined to a traditional societal stigma which has a traumatic impact affecting numerous aspects of their lives. In specific terms, they found that social media significantly helped divorced Saudi women to develop their identities despite being in a society that is to a large extent dominated by traditionalism. Thus, it can be said that social media is contributing massively to changing what Suha described as "parrots' culture", besides changing the traditional modesty standards for women who live in religiously conservative societies.

4.3.2 Encouragement

The threshold of tradition was the main obstacle that hindered many Saudi women from expressing their own conception of modesty through their visible identity. However, with the advent of social media, this threshold was hesitantly tiptoed across because of the fear of provoking a conservative society that would not spare an effort to socially outcast those who dare to trespass. As time goes on and the society becomes more acquainted with social media, modesty standards have started to both figuratively and literally recede from what they used to be. Moreover, social media has triggered a chain reaction (i.e., domino effect) of encouragement for Saudi women to reconstruct their modesty standards, as Dana explained:

> *In the past, I remember that any girl who would not completely cover her hair, people would look at her in a despicable way because she's challenging the general norm. However, now you'll see women showing off their hair and flaunting their beauty without hesitation or fear. I believe that they would not have the courage to do so if they had not seen on social media others doing such acts.*
>
> *Dana*

According to Guta and Karolak (2015), social media has steadily transformed the Saudi society in many astonishing ways. In addition, they have concluded that social media will keep changing many aspects of Saudi women's lives. Guta and Karolak's (2015) conclusion was supported by Dana's words which emphasized how social media has been a factor in assisting Saudi women to gain the courage to adopt and express modesty standards that were not possible to express just a few years ago without being confronted

by the religious police. For instance, around the middle of 2012, a Saudi woman was asked by the religious police to get out of a shopping mall just because she was putting on nail polish (Vela, 2012). It is important to reiterate that the religious police is a term used to describe male members of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which is an official governmental authority that was organized in the 1980s to carry on multiple tasks such as ensuring that Saudi women's visible identity maintains the ultra-conservative standards of modesty in mixed-gender spaces (e.g., totally covered by the abaya) (Le Renard, 2013). However, the religious police power has started to diminish gradually since 2016 (Chan, 2016) because of the Saudi Arabia Crown Prince's reformation acts which unlocked modern social life in Saudi Arabia and empowered women (Gause III, 2018).

Empowerment does not require that one should relinquish Islam, which has five fundamental principles (i.e., pillars). Succinctly, these pillars are recital of the creed, praying, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage. The same principle of adherence to Islam applies to social media, as Areej explained:

> *I would say that social media has emancipated us from many restraints, not from our Islamic principles as some people claim. To me, Islamic principles are such that without them I will be outside Islam's circle. The restraints that I am talking about are social and cultural, besides our personal restraints such as the way we struggle with ourselves to be ourselves. Indeed, our understanding of modesty is a restraint not a principle. That is why many of us [Saudi women] here have changed from what we used to be.*
>
> *Areej*

The above participant argued that social media has unleashed Saudi women from socio-cultural constraints, not the fundamental basis of Islam. Consequently, social media has been liberating their minds and encouraging them to act without fear from provoking the society or displeasing God. Furthermore, Areej implied that modesty is a construct of Islam, not a foundation of the religion or among its five pillars. Thus, her modesty beliefs as well as practices would not exclude her from being a Muslim. Furthermore, the understanding and practice of modesty have not been consistent through locations and time, unlike the fundamental principles of Islam which are not subject to different interpretations. For example, believing that there are multiple gods, or fasting for only two hours in the night instead of from dawn to sunset, would be extremely peculiar practices since the main religious texts in Islam have unambiguously addressed these issues. In contrast, "the concept of modesty has its roots within the principal sources of Islam, however its meanings and interpretations remain contested in Islamic scholarship" (Syed, 2010, p.154). In this regard, there is plenty of room to define modesty in a visible Islamic identity, and social media's influence on enriching such definitions is strongly present, to an extent where men and women's overt interaction is no longer a social taboo, as Elham explained:

On Snapchat, there are many Saudi females who produce content which show their personal and professional life. Some of them are interacting with their male coworkers in a relaxed and casual way while maintaining certain limits; like avoiding physical contact or dressing in something that is inappropriate. In general, social media has affirmed to the society that interaction between men and women is totally natural, and there is no need to panic that men would prey on women who do not cover their face or hair. These soggy ideas [outdated] do not suit our time.

Elham

Before proceeding it is important to recall that, in Saudi Arabia, intermingling between unrelated men and women is deemed to be prohibited by one of the most highly influential religious institutions, 'The Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatwa' (Alwedinani, 2017), which provides "state-sanctioned fatawa (religious decrees) on major social and political issues in the kingdom, and offer advice directly to the Saudi king" (Schanzer & Miller, 2012, p.1). However, as Elham said, social media did not only loosen the Saudi society's strictness about intermingling, but also assured women there that they do not live in a jungle where the only defense tactic against predation from members of the opposite sex is being covered from head to toe. The previous finding has similarities with what Ghada said earlier in this chapter: "We used to believe for a long time that women need to veil because they resemble lollipops". Ghada and Elham's direct and indirect metaphors – lollipop and meat, respectively – cover a wide array of meanings. To cite Rodríguez (2007, p.23), "In fact, casting women in the guise of foodstuffs enables the language user to present females as objects of lust". Women's objectification has been discussed within different contexts and perspectives. For example, interestingly, Bernard et al. (2019) concluded that objectification is more likely to be triggered by one's posture than by exposing skin. In a contrary argument, Ennaji (2016) pointed out that many Muslim women believe that covering the skin frees them from being objectified. However, this present study argues that social media has contributed in encouraging Saudi women to uniquely confront and eventually overcome contingent objectification (i.e., the more skin exposed the greater the chance of being objectified) while knowing their personal 'limits', which include but are not limited to body posture.

4.4 Participants' perspectives about the fading of conventional modesty standards

In the previous sections, the researcher presented multiple perspectives to address the first research question. In these perspectives, the content and enthusiasm for the change that social media made to Saudi women's conception of modesty were unreservedly present in the participants' words. However, in this section, the participants' perspectives which conveyed implicitly or explicitly the discomfort or confusion about how social media is gradually changing the traditional modesty standards will be analyzed and

discussed. Before going any further, it is worth remembering that Saudi Arabia's cultural and political scenes have been changing rapidly due to the 'shock therapy' which is aimed to modernize the country (Ignatius, 2018). Such rapid and sudden modernization have made many Saudis experience cultural shock while in Saudi Arabia (Northam & Tanis, 2018) because of the psychological challenges associated with embracing a new culture that replaces a familiar one (Rhinesmith, 1985). As a result, some participants have shown mixed feelings and attitudes as will be demonstrated in the following subsections.

4.4.1 Westernized visible identity

The fact that the most followed women in the world on different social media platforms, such as Instagram and Twitter, are dominantly Western celebrities (Statista, 2019, 2020a) has numerous indications and effects on many levels. Considering the scope and the objectives of this research at this point, the major focus is going to be about understanding the effects rather than the indications. Ghada gave an example of what she labelled as social media's 'hype' which is distorting traditional modesty standards:

> *When eyelash extensions, which I call fake lashes, became a thing on social media, many women started to put them on. To let you know, regardless of their attraction power, some would not even know that they come in different lengths and curls, they just want to stick them on without any consideration that they could deform one's appearance if not chosen correctly. These kinds of hype, which lean towards mimicking Western pop culture, are noticeable in the younger generation, and even middle-aged women, in almost every way such as in the way they wear makeup, what products to buy, what styles to wear. It is fine to learn from the West, but those women are blindly copying to show that they are keeping up with trends, but unfortunately at the expense of many other things.*
>
> *Ghada*

The participant was expressing her disapproval for women who specifically copy trends on social media because they have emerged from the West, without putting in any effort to at least think about the aesthetic consequences of such copying. In addition, she highlighted that such copying has encircled many consumption practices, not to mention encouraging consumer culture. Furthermore, Ghada expressed her approval for learning from the West as long as such a process does not end up with transforming Saudi women to be Westernized without realizing the tangible and non-tangible possessions that they have had to give up for such a transformation to occur. In her remarks, she therefore implied that there are certain constructs which should not be given up by Muslim women, particularly the ones that are related to the visible identity. For Ghada, the eyelash extension per se was an example that she used to demonstrate her perspective about how social media has affected Saudi women's understanding of modesty to an extent where avoiding being attractive is no longer a central construct in a visible identity. Yet, she also noted that the intention behind copying what is popular in social media might not be aesthetically driven. Rather, it is

fuelled by the need to appear modern (i.e., a synonym for Westernized). Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) noted that the act of copying celebrities on social media exceeds the copying of appearance to include lifestyle, food choices, and where to travel. Apparently, Ghada was raising a red flag about the possibility of Saudi women copying, whether consciously or subconsciously, trends that would replace traditional Islamic modesty standards with ones that could be described as modern, cosmopolitan, or contemporary. On a different note, Mouria (2018) argued that social media is used in Saudi Arabia as a means to mutually learn and share from different cultures, unlike Ghada's emphasis that depicted the flow of culture and "hype" as being travelling in one way from the West towards Saudi Arabia.

As Cohen (2004) argued, conservative societies prioritize copying over thinking, God's law over man's law, and the group over the individual. Besides, Cohen also claimed that these societies preserve and do not easily give up either tradition or identity. Contrarily, Hanan noted that the Saudi society has radically changed and started to accept the emergence of Saudi women's identities that do not conform to traditional modesty standards. Furthermore, she pointed out that some women are taking it too far, to a level where she yearns for a time when traditional modesty was the dominant ideology:

> *The issue is not about online or offline. It is about the lurking change which has happened because of social media. Currently, women are not just uncovering their faces. They are uncovering their faces, hair, and putting on heavy makeup. Ironically, the society has started to refuse the idea that a woman would uncover her face and put on heavy makeup, but slightly approve that a woman would just uncover her face without putting on heavy makeup. In the past [before social media], none of this would happen.*
>
> *Hanan*

It seems that social media has been indirectly – through Saudi women – introducing Saudi society to the principle of the 'foot-in-the-door' which was coined by Freedman and Fraser (1966), as once a trivial request has been agreed, the chances of agreeing to significant requests thereafter are high. By way of illustration, uncovering the face used to be a red line which a few women would go beyond. However, the red line has started to gradually move from uncovering the face to completely ditching the hijab and putting on heavy makeup. This finding goes in the opposite direction to Borgerson and Miller (2016, p.7), who state that "In other cases, we see two opposite elements of Muslim society, both of which are exacerbated by the possibility of the social media. The conservative element has gotten more conservative, there are liberal elements that have got more liberal". Unlike the previously described Muslim society, the Saudi society is currently experiencing a surge of modernism and diminishing conservatism, and the role of social media in such change is quite noticeable, as Razan stated:

> *If things keep going this way, it won't be long before we lose our Islamic identity. Sometimes, I ask myself why we always consume what the West produce, fast food, clothes,*

movies, knowledge, and the list goes on. What have we produced for them to consume? If social media isn't regulated, then we should not be surprised when Saudi women start to look, act, and live like Western women.

Razan

Razan's words echo Kipling's (1895) lines, "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, till earth and sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat…", to reaffirm the concept of eternal rivalry between West and East. She depicted social media as the arena where Islamic identity is defending itself against Western consumer culture. Interestingly, she suggested that Islamic countries should control social media according to Islamic laws. Otherwise, Islamic identity would be transformed to a Western identity which by default would adopt non-Islamic modesty standards. In addition, she used what many would consider as a cliché, which is the rhetorical question of why Muslims are consumers rather than producers. A conventional answer that emerges from an orthodox Islamic mindset would mostly attribute such backwardness to being far from God's path. However, Warraq (2011) attributed the superiority of the West to being led by logic, observation, and empiricism rather than being led only by religion. Aside from the challenge of finding an answer to Razan's question, she added interesting insights to the subject matter of this study. For instance, contrary to Shehu, Othman and Osman's (2017) proposal that social media brought many positives and negatives to the Islamic world, Razan argued that it is a matter of being rather than having. To put it differently, she was arguing that unless social media is Islamically contained, the yield to the West will not only be on Muslim women's identity, but also on every aspect of their lives. Consequently, Saudi women would move from being occasional consumers of Western cultures to frequent reproducers.

4.4.2 Importance of covering

Attracting men's attention, sheltering from men's gaze, and ensuring they remain unidentified are among many reasons that Saudi women choose, whether voluntarily or forcefully, to fully veil (AlMunajjed, 1997). Although these reasons were cited in AlMunajjed's (1997) book in an era where internet was not accessible to the public in Saudi Arabia, they have proven to withstand the winds of change that came with the internet and its applications (i.e., social media), as Abrar said:

Some of my fellow teachers wear a niqab and truly believe that Islam requires it, although they are like addicts to Instagram and Twitter, just like me. So, I do not think that they have been influenced by social media, yet. We have had many conversations about the niqab, until we reached a decision that in order to maintain our friendship, we must totally stay away from that kind of discussion. I know their accounts on social media, and their attitude there is the same as it is offline. You know, deep in my heart I know that they are right…

can we move to the next question.

Abrar

It can be inferred from Abrar's confused, emotional, and sincere words that there is a segment of Saudi women whose belief about covering is impenetrable despite their intensive exposure to social media. Furthermore, their stance is solid on this issue whether online or offline to a point where the possibilities of them rethinking their conception of modesty is nearly impossible. In other words, it seems that the conception of modesty for some Saudi women is so extremely firm that even spending numerous hours on social media would not result in changing their traditional modesty standards. Surprisingly, social media could be the 'safe' portal for those who are extremely conservative about their appearance to spread their Islamic ideology about modesty (Piela, 2017). Consequently, their influence is not limited to women since gender segregation is not enforced in the virtual world (Makboul, 2017), and could indirectly affect other women considering the residual patriarchal values in the Saudi society. Abrar is an example of the previously mentioned phenomenon of some participants demonstrating mixed feelings. During the interview, the sudden and inexplicable narrative shift – as well as her facial gesture – astounded the researcher. Abrar's justification for such a dramatic shift was irrelevant to the scope of the study, thus it was omitted. Before proceeding, it is worth reiterating that in each interview, the researcher and the participant sat on opposite sides of the fairly big boardroom table which was in a meeting room with a glass wall. The researcher's seat was on the side where he was facing the glass wall.

Unlike Abrar, Tala firmly and decisively expressed her perspectives about what she called the intentional negligence in terms of wearing the hijab, which is becoming a pervasive phenomenon among Saudi females:

> *I believe it is forbidden for Muslim women to uncover any part of their hair to strangers. No need to complicate it, it is God's order, and we must obey. So, the hijab must completely cover one's hair. In terms of social media's influence, a lot of females have started to neglect the importance of it because they think that the hijab makes them a little boyish. That is why many have started to intentionally put it on in a loose way or are even not putting it on at all.*
>
> *Tala*

Dealing with the hijab carelessly, according to Tala, has become noticeable among numerous Saudi women. To Tala, the hijab is doubtlessly God's command to all Muslim women, and should not be ignored, let alone distorted. Tala indicated that social media has contributed towards distorting the true meaning of the hijab. In effect, it has created a false conviction that femininity and the 'traditionally modest' hijab, which completely covers the hair, cannot be seated on the same table. As a result, the hijab was gradually slipping from the hairline to half of the hair, until it became a stole, or simply ditched. When reflecting on these

findings in light of the literature, we can begin by saying that Siraj (2012, p.196) noted that a woman's appearance contributes significantly to her femininity; "through clothes, make-up, weight and sexuality". Furthermore, Song (2018) noted that signalling shyness was a common factor among many Saudi women in the presence of unrelated men since it is embedded within the tradition rather than a character trait. On the other hand, Latiff and Alam (2013) concluded that social media plays a big role in creating confusion around why and how Muslim women should put on the hijab. Putting it all together, it can be argued that social media has relatively detached the concepts of shyness and passiveness from Saudi women's social constructs and replaced them with outgoingness and activeness. In addition, it has also interwoven femininity with the hijab to a point where the latter is used as an ornament instead of covering women's natural ornaments. This subsection will be concluded using Huda's response which supports the aforementioned lines:

> *In the past, women were modest here. However, now I would describe the change [of social media] that happened as deviation from God's religion and our traditions. For example, some would choose to intentionally show parts of their hair without shame or showing respect to us or herself, let alone to God.*
>
> *Huda*

The above participant argued that the hijab is neither a religion nor tradition. Actually, she believed that it is both, and it needs to be 'truly' embraced. Otherwise, going astray from God and culture would be the natural outcomes. Moreover, she made an interesting remark about women who deliberately make their hair visible whenever they put on a hijab. Huda considered them as women without self-respect, either to their society or to themselves. Boxill (1976, p.65) stated that "To say that someone has self-respect is certainly not to say that he has all the virtues". Consequently, it is safe to deduce from the aforementioned quote the following: to say that a woman who lacks self-respect is definitely not to say that she has all the vices. However, that sentence does not resonate with Huda's conviction.

4.5 Summary

In this chapter, the findings were analyzed and discussed in order to provide potential answers for the first research question. The final themes supported by their subthemes provided a narrative which could be summarized as follows. First, being constantly exposed to different levels of modesty in appearance on social media has influenced Saudi women to question and rethink their beliefs of traditional modesty with regards to their visible identity. That is to say, seeing numerous Muslim women, from different professions and cultural backgrounds, whose appearances are modern as well as liberal (when compared to the detailed definition of modesty in appearance published by the highest eminence of Saudi Arabia's clerics) has influenced the way Saudi women perceive modesty in a visible identity. Furthermore, the ongoing social

interaction in these platforms has helped Saudi women to explore different modesty-related interpretations and perspectives.

Second, women in Saudi Arabia were expected, whether they believed in the validity of such an expectation or not, to demonstrate their religiosity by maintaining certain modesty standards in their visible identity. However, the continuous prosumption of social media has weakened the attachments between religiosity and visible identity. As a matter of fact, many participants have expressed that social media has helped them to rationally realize that modesty standards are a personal choice which should not be imposed by others. Moreover, religiosity has started to be perceived as a spiritual concept instead of a material construct that should be incorporated into one's visible identity. Thus, it is no wonder that there is a growing inclination to accept different modesty standards than the traditional ones. Third and finally, although social media has changed the conception of traditional modesty in a visible identity to an extent where new modesty standards have been reconstructed, such change was perceived as alarming, especially among those who believe that the traditional modesty standards are the underpinnings of an authentic visible Islamic identity. To put it differently, there is a struggle to accept the fading of what is perceived by some as the Islamic truthful understanding of modesty, which social media is Westernizing.

CHAPTER 5: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON SAUDI WOMEN'S VISIBLE OFFLINE IDENTITY IN SAUDI ARABIA'S MIXED-GENDER SPACES

5.0 Introduction

After analyzing and discussing the influence of social media on Saudi women's conception of modesty in the previous chapter, the researcher will present hereafter how such influence is actualized in Saudi women's visible identity within offline mixed-gender spaces in Saudi Arabia. As presented earlier in Chapter three, the offline mixed-gender spaces referred to in this research are public places where unrelated men and women could intermingle, such as restaurants, cafes, malls, hospitals, and so on. Besides the participants' perspectives, the aforementioned places were fields that provided the researcher with ethnographic knowledge (Schembri & Boyle, 2013). Before proceeding any further, it is important to address again the timing of conducting the interviews with the participants, while considering the ongoing socio-cultural changes in Saudi Arabia. In other words, gender segregation's written and unwritten laws have dramatically changed, and the timetable in Figure 10 illustrates some of the unprecedented aspects of such change:

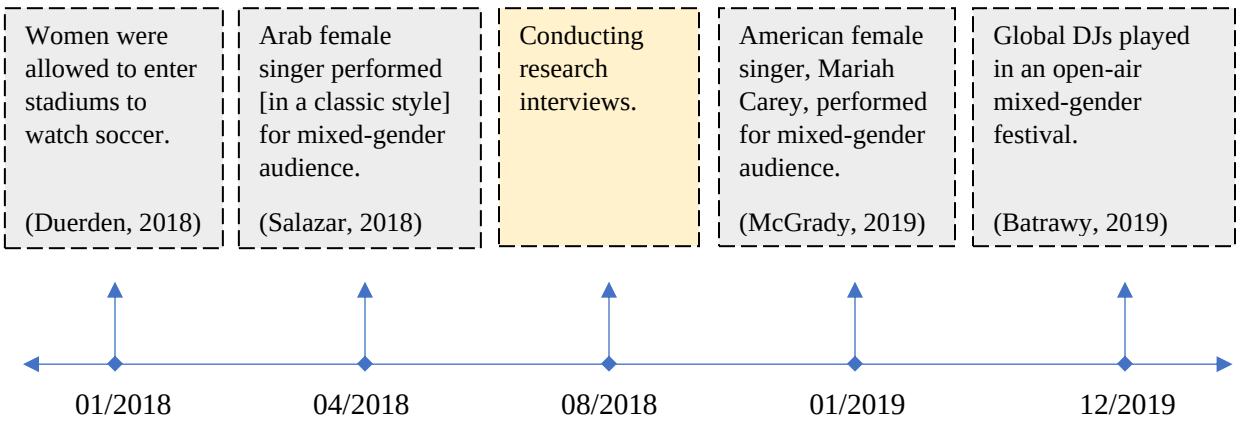

Figure 11: The timing of the research interviews with consideration to changes in the culture of mixed-gender spaces

The analysis of the interviews has resulted in three final themes (as demonstrated in Appendix 1) that address the second research question. The first final theme, dynamic visible identity, has three subthemes which are adopting trends, proactivity, and access to productive families. The second final theme, which is visible identity subcultures of style, is underpinned by the following subthemes: applying makeup, experiencing different abaya styles, and glamour. The third and final theme emerged as factors that limit the autonomy in reconstructing a visible offline identity. Its two subthemes are guardianship on identities and the culture of mixed-gender spaces.

"Consumers' identity projects" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.871) as well as all CCT theoretical perspectives are pivotal throughout this chapter. These perspectives will demonstrate how social media has influenced Saudi women's appearance in mixed-gender places, commencing with the factors that led to the creation of a vibrant visible identity, and then describing the emergence of subcultures of styles, and ending up with factors that confine the freedom of offline identity construction.

5.1 Dynamic visible identity

Although traditional modesty in the visible identity of Saudi women in Saudi Arabia's public places has been overwhelmingly preserved from change by many forces, the findings suggest that social media's influence has overpowered such forces to bring about an acceptance of change, whether willingly or unwillingly. In this scenario, such identity is constantly developing and evolving out of the socio-cultural territories which used to limit it, and social media's role is fundamental in the said development and evolvement, as many participants of this study have delineated. In the following subsections, the final theme of dynamic visible identity will be deconstructed, analyzed, and discussed.

5.1.1 Adopting trends

Raymond (2003) predicted that, as time goes on, consumers will become more knowledgeable and aware of their consumption to an extent where their behaviour could go against the dominant trend. This implies that consumers' taste will become more unique and self-expressive rather than conforming to what is pervasive on the market. As discussed earlier in Chapter two, social media has given consumers numerous advantages, such as exploring multiple markets from the comfort of their phones, tablets, and laptops, anywhere at any time. Thus, it can be said that although social media has made it easier for consumers to learn more about different trends, whether in their country or worldwide, some consumers would not adopt a trend unless they are convinced and content about it as Huda illustrated:

> *Sometimes, the trend agrees with my style and religious values, and sometimes it does not. For example, there was this turban hype on social media. However, that trend did not agree with my taste and I did not like it or wear it, although it was modest and Islamically fine. In contrast, a couple of years ago, modest Kuwaiti hijab styles were a thing on social media, and I really liked it so I spent a lot of time on YouTube learning how to do it.*
> *Huda*

The above participant is an example of a Saudi woman who held firmly not only to her personal aesthetic standards but also to her religious beliefs about appearance. Furthermore, she implied that her belief in maintaining a visible Islamic identity does not hinder her from pursuing trends to which she aspires on social media. However, whenever such trends contradict with her taste and religion, she will reject them, and vice versa. An interesting point made by Huda was her usage of the conjunction 'and' instead of 'or'

in the phrase ‘style and religious values’. Such word choice gives multiple indications, such as how some Muslim women’s identity-related consumption choices are not subject to negotiations if they are going to risk the underpinning of their religion or even one of its facades. To illustrate the previous analysis, Huda used the example of the turban, which could cover all her hair, but was rejected by her only because she thought it does not appeal to her style, although it is modest according to Huda’s understanding of the modest hijab (i.e., covers all her hair). On the other hand, she adopted the Kuwaiti hijab because it was modest and stylish according to her own standards. Putting it all together, it can be said that for some Muslim consumers, social media is an influential source where they can learn about trends to an extent where they would spend a lot of time trying to grasp the art/skill behind constructing a certain appearance. Nevertheless, physically adopting these trends is contingent on whether they comply with Islamic modesty and one’s personal taste in style.

Although Potts (2009) argued that Muslim women would adopt Western trends in clothing due to the scarcity of modest and trendy clothing in their markets, Huda demonstrated how social media has given her access to an Islamic market where she found modest and trendy clothing. Thus, it can be concluded that social media has provided Saudi women with multiple windows on numerous Islamic markets (e.g., the Kuwaiti market) which have modest and trendy clothes. As a result, the traditional Saudi Arabian visible identity has been influenced by other styles/trends from other visible Islamic identities from different Islamic markets. Nevertheless, Nawal’s perspectives about Islamic markets and their trendsetters has added a new perspective to this matter:

> *I have learned many trends from social media. For example, these scrunchies that funnily some people think of as a teenage trend, you will find many famous women on social media wearing them. These things I have mostly learned from non-Arabs… I mean by non-Arabs the culture. What I mean is, I do not feel comfortable watching a hijabi giving makeup tutorials, or someone hiding her identity and giving product reviews. I have followed some of them in the past, but I did not like how they associate almost everything with religion. For example, on Snapchat I unsubscribed from an Arab makeup artist because she was criticizing Muslim women who use their left hand [right hand is generally preferred in Islam in certain situations] whenever applying eye liner.*
>
> *Nawal*

Besides learning about trends, the above participant has attributed her decision to wear scrunchies to what she had experienced on social media from markets and trendsetters that do not fall within the traditional Islamic theme in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Nawal implied that she feels uncomfortable watching women on social media who cover certain parts of their visible identity whenever they are sharing their experiences/feedback about trends, whether through tutorials or reviews. Such discomfort was attributed

by her to how some of those women would engage in forceful Islamization. It would appear that the consumption experience that Nawal prefers to have on social media is the one where Islam is not physically showcased or ideologically permeated through implicit or explicit words. The previous sentence does not go in line with Wilson's (2012) argument which is that a large segment of Muslim consumers has the inclination to Islamize goods and services. In contrast, Nawal not only did not show her readiness to Islamize trends to make them fit with her appearance in public places, but also refused to be a follower on social media for women whose appearance as well as words implied operationalizing religion as a marketing tool. All in all, it can be suggested that social media has influenced some Saudi women to adopt trends that are considered peculiar to a traditional visible identity, without the need to Islamize such trends. Unlike Nawal, Amal precisely mentioned that she fills her reservoir of style and trends from what she described as average Saudi women on social media:

> *On Instagram, I am following many regular Saudi women who advertise themselves as personal stylists. Unlike the big names, these women are immersed in the culture, are natural, and not greedy. Honestly, I have learned a lot from them in terms of mixing and matching, and what the latest trends are.*
>
> *Amal*

The participant's description of Saudi women as 'regular' appears to echo Serrano and García's (2016) suggestion that having the ability to demonstrate one's style expertise on Instagram does not depend on being professionally expert in shooting videos or taking photographs. As can be seen in Amal's case, she learned many aspects of fashion and latest trends from average Saudi women who took their passion of style to social media in a relaxed, spontaneous, and consumer-oriented manner. Furthermore, it can be inferred from Amal's words that Saudi women stylists on social media are insiders to the culture and know the elasticity of modesty in appearance within mixed-gender spaces in Saudi Arabia, or at least in their cities. Thus, she conceives them as a credible source which provides her with information about trends that account for the changing standards of modesty in Saudi Arabia.

5.1.2 Proactivity

Although the traditional visible identity has been gradually changing in Saudi Arabia, the pace of such change for some Saudi women is not fast enough. Thus, the need for non-organic actions which rely on social media's capabilities has emerged, as the following participant demonstrated:

> *One of my close friends' parents are so not OK with her wearing a coloured abaya in public. Always, one of her brothers would be driving her to where we are meeting. She is really under intense supervision. Anyhow, she ordered from an abaya boutique on Instagram the abaya that she fancies, asking for it to be delivered to my home. Whenever we go out, I would put her abaya in a bag and leave it in the car with my driver, so after*

she is dropped off, she'll take it from him and go to a restroom or fitting room to wear it… She covers her face, there is no way she would be caught unless one of us snitched on her. Nada

There is a folk saying in the Arab world that has the following meaning: if a woman wants to do something, no one can forbid her. Nada shared a story of one of her friends who relied on social media to construct the appearance that she wants, despite knowing that the consequences of such a construction might turn out to be unpleasant. Regardless of the consequences involved, Nada demonstrated how a relatively trivial issue (i.e. wearing a coloured abaya for a couple of hours) could motivate a woman to initiate an intricate process of hidden consumption that significantly depends on social media. Moreover, despite the intensive family supervision on one's appearance, social media was a tool that facilitated the process of 'hidden' buying, delivering, and eventually consuming. When reflecting on the previous finding in relation to the literature, it can be said that Thomas, Jewell and Johnson (2015) proposed that consumers would involve in what they labelled as 'hidden consumption behavior', and the likelihood of such behaviour to happen is high when the chances of being caught are low and when the consequences of being caught are severe. Building on their proposal, it can be argued that social media has noticeably contributed towards facilitating identity-related hidden consumption behaviour for some Saudi women. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the literature is extremely scarce about Saudi women's hidden consumption behaviour, particularly identity-related consumption. Thus, it is recommended that, in the future, such an interesting and uncharted area should be explored by researchers.

Another participant did not involve in any hidden practice to construct her identity. Rather, Basma was blunt in terms of her identity-related decisions and specifically with her parents:

Although my father is open-minded, I would not take big decisions about my appearance or even my life without letting him know because I respect the freedom that he granted me. In addition, he is all that I have. Around a year ago, I decided not to wear a hijab in certain places here because I have realized it is nonobligatory. I anxiously spoke with him relying on the arguments that I have learned from Twitter, and to my amazement our dialogue didn't take long before him saying, you are big enough to decide for yourself on this issue. Basma

The participant's appreciation shown to her father for his tolerance and flexibility with regards to her visible identity has eliminated her hesitance whenever she wants to talk with him about issues related to her appearance. As a result, Basma approached him with her decision to give up wearing a hijab armoured with the knowledge which she acquired from Twitter. She was expecting to be in some sort of an intellectual process of attrition warfare where her arguments would be wearing down any potential resistance; however her father was understanding and did not resist her 'Twitter-supported' decision for long. An interesting

word that was used by the participant to describe her decision of not wearing a hijab was "nonobligatory". In the previous chapter, the same word was used by Lina when she quoted Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince statement "the abaya is not obligatory". However, Basma stated that her decision was made around one year before interviewing her in August 2018. Thus, it can be inferred that social media has influenced some Saudi women to be proactive in terms of constructing their visible identity, even before the proclamation that they are lawfully not obliged to wear a conventional black abaya or hijab (Sanchez, 2018). Such proactivity in appearance is not limited to the abaya or hijab. For instance, Mona demonstrated how her friends' Snapchat stories made her search for custom-made swimwear that would help her to fit in without completely forfeiting her modesty convictions:

> *One of my friends has a beach house, and she occasionally invites us to it. I wasn't excited about the idea of going there, but when I saw them jet skiing and tubing on their Snapchat stories, I started to revise my opinion. When it comes to appearance, they are extremely liberal, and I am not. So, I had to find something that would make me blend in while not sacrificing all my beliefs. It took me a long time and effort to find someone who would design and make swimwear according to my requirements.*
>
> *Mona*

Although the above participant was not enthusiastic to go with her friends to a beach house, her frequent exposure to what they are sharing on Snapchat made her have second thoughts, which did not take long before being upgraded to putting plans into action. However, the major obstacle for such action to be executed was Mona's struggle with balancing between her friends' liberal appearance and her conservative one. Thus, she took the initiative to find swimwear that would make her appear in a way that would make her fit in with her friends. Interestingly, Mona insinuated that she had sacrificed some of her convictions in order to construct a visible identity that is suitable for water activities in a mixed-gender space.

It appears that the practice of sharing sensitive content in Snapchat is not an alien concept among some Saudi women (e.g. Mona's friends). A potential explanation for such practice is Utz, Muscanell and Khalid's (2015) finding that some Snapchat users would involve themselves in sharing sensitive videos/pictures since they are self-destructive (i.e. users feel that whatever they share won't be immortal on the cyberspace). Furthermore, taking into consideration that Mona has the highest number of total hours spent on social media per day among the participants in this research, a conclusion could be deduced from Phua, Jin and Kim's (2017) suggestion that a Snapchat frequent user has the confidence as well as the emotional connection with her Snapchat friends to a point where her important decisions could be influenced by them. Thus, it can be concluded that being exposed intensively to Snapchat posts made by friends would have an influence on one's visible identity to an extent where some modesty-related beliefs might be relaxed, and eventually a new version of one's visible identity will be born.

5.1.3 Access to productive families

Considering the context of this research, productive families are generally women entrepreneurs who run their businesses from home, and considerably rely on social media to market their goods and services. The range of such goods and services includes, but is not limited to, homemade food, clothes, accessories, coordinating events, and beauty services. Elham shared her experience which shed more light on this issue:

> *When it comes to abayas, I am really picky. I bought my work abayas from a Saudi woman who was recommended to me by one of my relatives whose taste I trust. I contacted her on Instagram and found out that she studied fashion design in the US. Her abayas are a little pricey, and not like the ones you would usually see on the market, but she makes those unique sequin abayas and more than once I was asked from where I got them [the participant indicated that she had already bought them]. The abaya I am wearing is also from her.*
>
> *Elham*

Making a move to explore and gain more information about a product or a service based on a random recommendation or an online review is not an unusual practice, especially if it involves something with a relatively small cost or is of trivial importance. However, Elham sought an item on Instagram which covers more than half of her body and is known for its relatively high cost, based on the grounds of trusting her friend's taste. It was not an online store or a famous designer, instead, it was an entrepreneur Saudi woman who to Elham's amazement was a graduate of an American university in fashion design. Although Elham admitted that she is hard to please in terms of her abaya choices, she chose a slightly overpriced abaya because of its uniqueness in style that is hard to find in usual markets (e.g., malls).

The colour of the abaya that was worn by the participant during the interview was in shades of tiffany colour, and it also had zigzag patterns on the sleeves. In other words, it was an abaya that would catch one's attention due to its unusual style. As mentioned earlier in Chapter three, the researcher was extremely cautious during all the interviews to not make any of the participants uncomfortable whether because of a question or a request. Thus, the researcher refrained from asking the participant to be photographed.

Another participant highlighted how a free sample, which she was given for being a loyal consumer to a productive family business, has enhanced her appearance:

> *I used to order stuffed vine leaves from an account on Instagram that sells only food. Once, I was given a free sample of a nail dip powder when I made a big food order. Later I knew that they were two sisters, one was handling a food account while the other handled a cosmetics account. What really impressed me, when I started to become a regular for the one who sells cosmetics, was that she sent me a foundation as a gift. Obviously, I know how to apply foundation, but I was unsure how to use the dip powder correctly, so what is*

YouTube for? After trying it, I felt that it adds something to me unlike the regular nail polish, although it takes forever to put it on, in addition it has become one of my occasional going out rituals.

Lamiah

The indirect marketing strategy that was used by the two sisters has introduced Lamiah to an identity-related product with which she was not previously accustomed. As a result, her first destination to learn about that product was YouTube in order to get her questions visually answered. Eventually, despite the time and effort that are required to apply the nail dip powder as opposed to normal nail polish, Lamiah did not only like it but also included it as part of her rituals. Amazingly, only a few years earlier, the possibility that a Saudi woman would be expelled from a mall because of having coloured fingernails was pretty high (Vela, 2012). Nevertheless, Lamiah demonstrated how such prohibition has now become the subject of a passage that starts with the phrase 'once upon a time in Saudi Arabia'.

In addition, interestingly, her word choices seem to have different connotations. For example, we can consider the phrase "going out rituals". McCracken (1990) proposed that such rituals exemplify one's effort, dedication, and eagerness to create a visible identity that is constructed by one's top product choices in order to be prepared for going out and encountering the inspective eyes of society. Thus, it can be argued that although nails represent a small area of one's body, Lamiah would express and extend herself (Belk, 1988) via what appears to be a trivial part of one's visible identity. Another example of Lamiah's word choice is how she referred to the nail dip powder as a "sample", while referring to the foundation as a "gift". To explain further, it seems that she differently values these visible identity-related products according to their place on certain parts of her body, such as her face and hands. The product which enhances the aesthetic appearance of her hands was a mere "sample", while the product that aesthetically enhances her face was a "gift".

Finally, Alhothali (2020) recommended to further investigate social media's influence on expanding the phenomenon of productive families. The researcher would also extend Alhothali's (2020) recommendation by suggesting that future research should also consider studying how the expansion of productive families on social media would influence Saudi women's visible identity. In addition, an interesting potential area for future research that emerged from the findings is how Muslim women assign importance to products according to their place on different body parts.

5.2 Visible identity subculture of style

So far, the majority of the participants in this research have directly or indirectly illustrated that the mainstream culture with regards to Saudi women's appearance has undergone rapid change, and social media's role in this change is pivotal. The main aspects of such change were clearly visible to the researcher

when he conducted his ethnographic work in Saudi Arabia's mixed-gender spaces. For example, uncovering the face, wearing abayas that have some embroidery and colourful patterns, and taking off the hijab to uncover the hair were all scenes the researcher observed in such spaces. However, from time to time, the researcher would find a woman or a group of women whose appearance is peculiar in relation to the general theme of women's style in appearance.

5.2.1 Applying makeup

Makeup in Saudi Arabia is a highly gendered product that is mostly consumed by women. Not long ago, women who put on makeup in mixed-gender spaces, or even men wearing mascot dolls that have makeup, could be arrested (Naylor & Aldosary, 2016). However, since Saudi Arabia's leadership has enacted socio-cultural reforms, many aspects of Saudi women's lives have changed, including the decision to put on makeup without the fear of being arrested or even questioned. Considering these governmental reforms alongside social media's influence, which might be as simple as providing "tips and tricks", it will not be a surprise that some Saudi women have different makeup styles for different places, as Mai demonstrated:

> *You can say that I have learned many things such as tips and tricks about colour differences, blending, and different kinds of makeup brushes and the proper way to use them. Oh, I have also improved my skills in doing soft makeup which is close to the 'no makeup' makeup look… You can think of it as morning makeup. I know it is hard for men to get it, but some occasions and places require a certain makeup style. For example, when I go to shopping malls, beaches, or a condolence gathering, my makeup must be distinctive and appropriate.*
>
> *Mai*

The above participant highlighted that social media has contributed to expanding her makeup knowledge to an extent where her skills in doing different makeup styles have shifted. At a certain point in her response, Mai used the following expression "'no makeup' makeup look" which momentarily confused the researcher to a point where the participant noticed the impact of her expression on his face. As a result, she provided the researcher with a detailed explanation of what she meant. Furthermore, Mai emphasized that her makeup is mainly determined by two factors, which are occasions and places. That is to say, in a relatively short period of time, the makeup culture has dramatically changed for Saudi women from being potentially arrested because of wearing it, to creating multiple styles for different mixed-gender spaces. Mai precisely described her makeup style by saying that it needs to reflect her uniqueness without going beyond the common makeup culture of the place or the occasion.

Taking into account the changes to gender segregation laws in Saudi Arabia (e.g., as per the examples shown in Figure 11), it can be said that a new culture is being introduced to several places/events which were previously only for men or arenas that did not exist in the past. Saudi women are now becoming part

of the constructs that contribute to creating the culture of many places in Saudi Arabia. For instance, in December 2019, seating areas in restaurants are no longer segregated according to gender or marital status (Turak, 2019). As a result, mixed-gender spaces have stretched to include more places which has multiplied the possibilities for Saudi women to construct their visible identities in a distinctive and appropriate way that do not exclude makeup. Social media's influence on Mai's makeup was described by her as learning numerous things such as "tips and tricks". However, the following participant reported a different kind of influence:

> *As I told you, I spend around eight hours every day on social media, and I really love makeup. So, most of these hours are spent on things that have something to do with makeup. I can't say it is good or bad, except consuming my money, but I will tell you an incident that happened to me around two weeks ago. I went out with my family to a restaurant, and since I was in a rush, I didn't put on a single dot of makeup. I really felt insecure as if part of my femininity was not with me, and I was so anxious that I might coincidently be seen by any of my friends. Fortunately, I did not meet anyone that I know.*
>
> *Nada*

The participant's passion for makeup was her motive to dedicate considerable long hours in devouring makeup content on social media. She expressed how her 'accidental' makeup-free face was the source of her feelings of lack of femininity, besides anxiety which was relieved because no one from her friendship circles saw her no-makeup face. The previous line runs in parallel with Loegel et al.'s (2017) findings that feminine women buy a lot of makeup products as well as intensively applying it, as opposed to non-feminine women. However, considering Nada's relatively young age, which is 19, it seems that her insecurities from not applying makeup were not so much because she yearns for femininity as an abstract concept, but instead it was for womanhood and maturity. To illustrate more, Russell et al. (2019) concluded that make up would make the faces of women whose age is under 30 appear older, and above 30 appear younger. Putting it all together, regardless of burning a hole in one's pocket, one's obsession with makeup could be satiated in the realm of social media. However, the consequences of being overexposed to makeup content on social media might reflect on one's psychological wellbeing to an extent where femininity would be associated with excessive financial and physical makeup consumption, in addition to concentrating on achieving an appearance that adds or takes years off one's face. Nevertheless, when a woman's face is not fully unveiled, then why would she care to apply makeup, especially if the only visible part of her face is a narrow slit that only shows her eyes and a small area around it? The answer is explained by Hadeel:

> *I have learned useful information from makeup reviews and tutorials in social media. For example, the correct way for holding a blending brush, putting on eyeshadow, and widening the eyes… Just because I am putting on a niqab does not mean I have to put in*

effort to appear rough or ugly. I believe that God is beautiful and encourages us to make everything beautiful without obscenity.

Hadeel

The above participant demonstrated that social media's influence on Saudi women's makeup style is not limited to women who uncover their faces. Rather, it also includes those who only allow a small portion of their faces to be visible in mixed-gender spaces. Moreover, Hadeel highlighted a meaning which can be found in one of Prophet Mohammed's famous sayings "God is beautiful and loves beauty". Apparently, she is suggesting that although she wears a niqab, she is still obliged to appear beautiful but not sexually attractive. Sandıkçı and Ger (2005, p.72) explain the difficulties associated with this, as "in practice achieving a beautiful yet not sexually attractive look is a complex task that requires a lot of beauty work". Thus, social media is the source Hadeel uses to gain useful information that would assist her in creating an appearance that is beautiful but not sexy. It seems that she is using makeup to create an illusory effect, which Jones, Porcheron and Russell (2018) reported, of having bigger eyes. Fortunately for Hadeel, she was about 14-years-old when the chances were high that a member of the religious police would use his subjective analytical capabilities to decide and consequently force a woman to cover her eyes because he believed that she was endowed with a pair of 'sexy' eyes (Keyes, 2011).

One of the findings that struck the researcher happened during the side discussions, in which some participants referenced a handful of social media's male beauty influencers that they knew well. For instance, Nawal insinuated that she likes the art in Jeffree Star's content. Similarly, Basma clearly stated how she has started to accept and respect James Charles because of "his sincere passion and creative makeup work". One might argue that taking into consideration Saudi Arabia's traditional Islamic identity, the aforementioned examples are alarming and need to be immediately addressed. Otherwise, the chances that social media's influence would holistically disfigure the Islamic identity are considerably high. Yet a counter argument would be that taking into consideration the inevitable influence of social media, individuals are mature enough to choose for themselves how to construct their visible and non-visible identities, let alone what to see on social media. Interestingly, on the 19th July 2020, one of Jeffree Star's videos appeared among the trending videos in Saudi Arabia (refer to Appendix 11). All in all, one certainty is that individuals, precisely some Saudi women, are experiencing change in many of the most famous constructs of the visible Islamic identity, and the abaya is not immune to such change.

5.2.2 Experiencing different abaya styles

Traditionally, the fundamental purpose of an abaya is to modestly cover a woman's body from men's sight. In Saudi Arabia, the abaya and hijab had been lawfully forced on women as a public dress code that symbolizes the state's national identity as well as its version of Islam (Yamani, 2000), until recently when Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince said that the conventional black abaya and hijab are not compulsory for Saudi

women (Sanchez, 2018). Thus, many Saudi women's abayas have started to blush with a little colour, while others are totally detached from the black theme. It can be observed that social media's effect on the Saudi woman's abaya was influencing not only on its colours but also its traditional identity, as Amany demonstrated:

> *I am following several accounts on Instagram that sell custom-made abayas. It is more convenient to follow these accounts than going to malls and searching for what is new. Recently, I have ordered a colourful Japanese Kimono-style abaya that has half-sleeves with a gradient honeycomb pattern on its sides. Usually, I put it on whenever I go to shopping centres or fancy restaurants since I won't feel there like I am on another planet. The beautiful thing is that several women approached me there to compliment or ask about my abaya.*
>
> *Amany*

Among many advantages that makes Instagram an important destination for Saudi women, it provides a panoramic real-time view of the abaya market, thus saving abaya consumers the time and effort from physically jumping from one store to another. Moreover, it seems that Instagram is used by many Saudi women to purchase abayas, as demonstrated in the words of two earlier participants, Nada and Elham. However, Amany implied that her decision to buy the abaya was not for operationalizing it to be a mere body-covering garment. Instead, she contributed to the process of creating her own abaya that is more cosmopolitan than traditional. To elaborate, she required an abaya that has elbow-length wide sleeves, colours, and a honeycomb illustration. Such an unconventional abaya blends with mixed-gender places where the dominant culture would tend to be signalling one's wealth, beauty, and Western inclination whether by using clothes or words. Amany insinuated that in some places, she would feel like an alien (i.e., her identity does not match with others of the same gender) because of her unconventional abaya.

Contrary to Marifatullah's (2018, p.25) suggestion that the socio-cultural reforms made by Saudi Arabia's leadership "has left the Saudis in danger of losing their identity because now women in Saudi are free to wear any clothes", let alone considering the impact of social media's influence, it seems that Saudis do not perceive such change as dangerous. Rather, Amany highlighted how her abaya was the centre of attention and admiration by some women to a point where they sought more information about it. Furthermore, the said identity change is a natural outcome for women who until very recently could not appear in mixed-gender spaces without covering their faces, not to mention being religiously policed on the basis of not following a relatively unified abaya dress code. Thus, it is no wonder that coloured abayas with different styles are becoming more and more visible in mixed-gender spaces to an extent described by participants, such as Mona:

> *Only lately in the past few months, the number of women who wear what appears to be an abaya has grown rapidly. Sometimes you would find abaya styles that look more like a robe, while others are similar to a trench coat, let alone the variety of colours in them.*
>
> *Mona*

In parallel with Mona's lines, another participant enriched the data with detailed description of how social media did not only propel her to like an abaya, but also was the reason that led her to create a nonconventional one, as she explained:

> *I remember when ankle-height abayas became a thing on social media, and the more I saw them there the more I liked the style. I could not resist it for too long, so I ended up buying one. However, I asked the woman to make it self-belted and with pleated cuffs… the abaya is not more important than what I am wearing under it, the colours and styles should be complementary to each other.*
>
> *Nawal*

Although the ankle-height abaya was trending on social media, Nawal demonstrated how she took that abaya and transformed it into something that barely fulfills the characteristics of Saudi Arabia's traditional abaya. To clarify the previous lines, assuming that Nawal moderately belted her abaya, she would not be able to completely cover all the garments worn underneath it. As a result, she would violate one of the most basic attributes of a traditional abaya, which is covering the whole body. Interestingly, Nawal argued for the equality between her abaya and what she wears underneath it. To put it differently, she noted the fact that not all of her clothes are covered by the abaya, and she dedicates time and effort to make sure that her clothes and abaya go in harmony with regards to their colours and styles.

Belk (2019, p.221) reported how the abayas of many Muslim women in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, which are adjacent countries to Saudi Arabia and share numerous socio-cultural aspects with it, have started to be more "form-fitting rather than hiding the figure and their wearers often leave buttons undone on their abayas…And underneath they wear skinny jeans and red high heels". Thus, it seems that there is a growing tide of detraditionalizing the abaya whether in Saudi Arabia or other Islamic countries. For example, in late September 2019, a public decency law that addresses many social norms that include modesty in appearance was officially introduced in Saudi Arabia. According to Alhussein and Almohamadi (2019), this law acts as a method among many to reconstruct Saudi women's identity; however, it did not clarify the constructs of modesty in detail. To elaborate more, the articles in that law which address the subject matter could be summarized in the following sentence. It is a violation to publicly wear improper clothes (e.g., pyjamas), or clothes that display nude pictures or phrases that offend public decency (Sadek, 2019). Thus, it is unclear whether or not a woman who is wearing ripped jeans (i.e., jeans which have holes that show one's skin) under her unbuttoned abaya is violating the public decency laws. However, Basma's words provide a

potential answer to the aforementioned enquiry, besides drawing attention to social media's role in the ongoing process of detraditionalizing Saudi women's visible identity:

> *The abaya is not just a garment, at least for me, since there are endless stories to tell behind each of my abayas. I have a lot of abayas with different colours, styles, and qualities. One of my favourites is a sandy colour abaya with a side-slit because of the way I got it. I was lucky enough to be randomly picked by a famous Saudi female fashion influencer, who was doing a promotion for an abaya store on Snapchat, to receive it as a gift… Old women and mothers have a style in their appearance that differs from us [young childfree women]. For example, you would not see a lot of them in public wearing certain abaya styles, just like the sandy one I told you about earlier. On the other hand, many women from my generation including me would normally wear skinny cropped jeans, or jeans with small cuts [distressed jeans] underneath open abayas.*
>
> *Basma*

Costa et al. (2012) suggested that some stories reflect how people relate to one another, while other stories are too personal to be told. With regards to Basma, she does not relate to the abaya only as a personal garment that covers parts of her body. Rather, it is one of the centerpieces that contributes to delineating multiple aspects of her life. Even though each of her abayas have unique characteristics, besides being associated with a wide array of her different states of being, Basma chose an abaya that symbolizes good luck to her to use as an example to illustrate how abayas are more than just a garment. Interestingly, Basma did not choose either the colour or the style of the abaya that she got 'by luck' from a famous Saudi female fashion influencer. In other words, it seems that there is a growing demand for coloured abayas with modern styles to an extent where even influencers are being approached by abaya stores to promote such types of abayas on social media. Much to the author's amusement, Basma, who is in her early twenties, suggested that children would have an influence on their mother's style regardless of the mother's age. To put it differently, she insinuated that once a woman becomes a mother, some abaya styles would not be suitable for her. Moreover, Basma created two camps of abaya styles within which Saudi women would fall; old women and mothers were placed in one group, while young childfree women were placed in the other. In an attempt to understand the basis which made her come up with such a classification, the logical starting point would be identifying a common factor between mothers and old women. To begin, it seems that the signs which comparatively indicate one's age are not only on the face, but also in one's non-physical (i.e., not attached to one's body) possessions. According to Sartre (1943) and Belk (1988), individuals appropriate objects once they are controlled, created, and known. Since all the aforementioned appropriation requirements are relatively present in a mother-to-child relationship, it can be said that some people, such as Basma, would view children as non-physical possessions that add more age to their mothers.

As a result, she implied that certain clothes (e.g., skinny cropped or distressed jeans) that could be showcased from the opening of her abaya do not suit either old women or mothers regardless of their age. When reflecting upon the previous finding in association with the literature, Clark et al. (2009) found that motherhood responsibilities have affected some women to a limit where they no longer prioritize their appearance as they used to do before having children.

All in all, social media has contributed towards expanding the limits of Saudi women's visible identity to include cosmopolitan and unconventional abaya styles which are sometimes used to complement/accentuate the clothes underneath them, as it is shown in Figure 12. Villafañe (2013, p.38) proposed that Saudi women should embrace their traditional visible Islamic identity because "They don't need to spend too much time getting ready to go outside because with this dress appearance of women is concealed, whether or not they are well groomed". Nevertheless, it appears that her argument was constructed in an era when social media's influence was not clearly visible on Saudi women. To elaborate more, social media did not only change Saudi women's appearance in the public sphere through applying makeup and experiencing different abaya styles, it has also influenced them to construct a glamorous appearance, not to mention being well groomed.

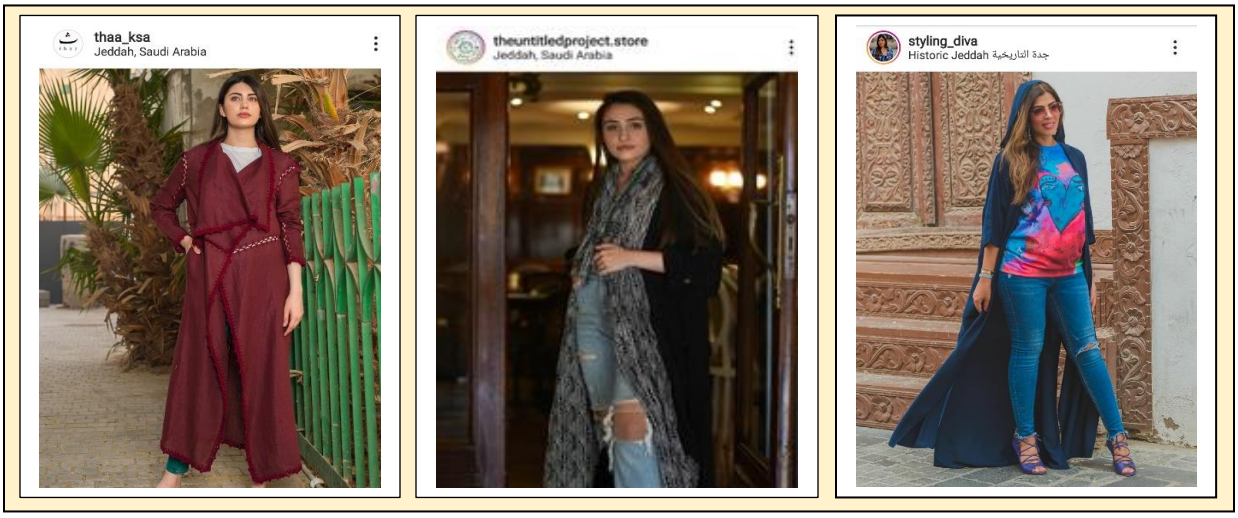

Figure 12: Different abaya styles featured on Instagram accounts (2019-2020)

5.2.3 Glamour

According to Dyhouse (2011, p.1) glamour as a term implies "a form of sophisticated feminine allure [that] has a history which is interwoven with changing constructions of femininity, consumerism, popular culture, fashion and celebrity". Nevertheless, considering social media's influence on shaping cultures, consumption, and even the political environment in several countries, it can be said that contemporary glamour is largely defined by social media. In Mai's words:

Attractiveness is now defined by what is popular on social media. For example, body figure and facial features are all what matters nowadays…. They will butcher my body [cosmetic surgeons], I would not go under their knives. However, lip fillers, eyebrow lifts, or doing laser [hair removal] are just like going to a drive-through. By the way, these procedures have become so popular among Saudi women. They used to say that in every Saudi house you'll find someone who got a scholarship to study abroad, but I believe that you will also find in these houses someone who has undergone a cosmetic procedure, which is a natural thing to have.

Mai

The participant highlighted how the constructs of present-time glamour do not derive from the classic sources (e.g., Hollywood movies or fashion and beauty magazines). Rather, they are constantly emerging from different social media platforms. In addition, Mai drew attention to what she believes are the ultimate glamour constructs, which are body shape and facial characteristics. There was not any disapproval by Mai for getting cosmetic work, whether on her body or face, unless it involves 'cutting' some flesh from her body. Indeed, although it cannot be asserted without doubt that Mai had undergone cosmetic work on her body/face, there is a slight possibility that she had experienced such work, especially when the context of her words is considered. Yet it should be emphasized that, due to the sensitivity of such issues to most women, not to mention Saudi women, the researcher did not try, whether directly or indirectly, to know if Mai had undoubtedly undergone any cosmetic procedures or not since there is a possibility that she might be offended or at least feel uncomfortable.

Mai divided cosmetic work into two categories: the first involves surgical procedures which she described as butchering, while the second covers nonsurgical procedures that would not relatively consume either a lot of time or a lot of money (i.e., she described it as a similar experience to getting fast food from a drive-through). She also ambiguously insinuated that she had at least one cosmetic procedure done either on her lips, eyebrows, or to remove unwanted hair by laser. Furthermore, she argued that the majority of Saudi women have had these procedures since she said it is not odd to do so. Reflecting upon the previous argument in light of the literature, Rice (2014) suggested that the normal – traditional – visible identity of women is socially created. Building on Rice's (2014) suggestion, it can be proposed that such creation is currently taking place on social media where unified glamour standards are being set as the ideal female visible identity. Thus, it seems that social media has significantly influenced Saudi women's glamour signalling in their visible identity, and one way of such signalling is through cosmetic procedures. For instance, in one study it was determined that 81.8% of Saudi women aged 14 to 57 had undergone cosmetic procedures (Alfayez et al., 2017). Moreover, Alharethy (2017) found that among the fundamental motives for having cosmetic procedures among Saudi women is to appear more glamorous than other ladies. In

addition, Arab et al. (2019) noted a positive relationship between the time spent on social media and the interest for Saudi women to undergo cosmetic procedures. With all things considered, it can be said that social media did not only affect Saudi women's appearance in mixed-gender spaces in terms of putting on makeup and experiencing multiple abaya styles, but also the effect includes undergoing cosmetic procedures to add more glamour to their visible identity.

Although it seems that glamour would go beyond identity-related items as discussed above, Lamiah's words show how social media has contributed towards expanding the concept of glamour to include non-visible aspects of one's identity such as voice and smell:

> *Imagine how a woman would be treated in public places if she was not wearing a niqab and left her facial hair unattended. Whether it is right or wrong, social media is spreading this way of thinking, which is that your appearance is your face value. Abaya, hijab, makeup, shoes, earrings, jewellery, perfume, and even my voice's tone are all factors that could give or take away from my face value. Thus, I must pay close attention to them.*
>
> *Lamiah*

The participant implied that women who wear the niqab would not have the same pressure as those who uncover their faces since the latter need to maintain one of many feminine face qualities – at least in Saudi Arabia – which is removing unwanted facial hair. The aforementioned implication is supported by Basow and Braman's (1998) finding that women whose body hair is visible were perceived as not glamorous, outgoing, and intelligent in comparison to those who maintain a 'hairlessness' socio-cultural norm. Furthermore, Lamiah used the term, which might insinuate worth rather than commodification, "face value", to describe the aspects of one's appearance which have been impacted by social media. Interestingly, although some of these aspects are not tangible parts of one's visible identity, they coherently form a woman's glamour. For instance, a perfume which could be perceived as a veil for body odours or as a trail that relatively uncovers one's gender is considered by Lamiah as one of the constructs that contribute in adding more glamour to a woman's presence. Even though many Muslim clerics do not approve the practice of women wearing fragrance in certain contexts, such as in the case of Shaikh ibn Baz who stated that it was not allowed for Muslim women to use either incense or perfumes whenever they go outside their homes to avoid being a source of temptation (Refer to question 255 in Al-Musnad, 1996), Lamiah appears to have another opinion. Another participant also has an opinion regarding certain identity-related symbols/practices that have been considered for a long time as against Islamic teachings:

> *I am surprised that until now people think it is forbidden in Islam to have a tattoo. I mean really, if social media didn't change them, I wonder what will. We've heard that hair extensions and eyebrow plucking are forbidden in Islam, but the majority of beauty salons here are doing them. They are even advertising these services on their social media*

accounts. However, when it comes to real tattoos [not stickers/temporary tattoos], they act fanatically as if they were protecting an Islamic fort…I am 100% positive that it is not forbidden, and when I see a decent post for a tattooing service here, I will do it.

Lina

According to Bukhari (2005, p.107), "Because Islamic religion prohibited permanent tattoo, considering it a type of human scarification, people abandoned it and sought methods to remove it effectively. Nowadays, nobody does permanent tattoo for that reason". Nevertheless, Lina suggested that those who believe that tattoos are prohibited in Islam did not utilize social media to explore different opinions with regards to the said issue. Moreover, she noted that beauty centres in Saudi Arabia are using social media to advertise beauty services that some individuals consider as forbidden in Islam, such as hair extensions and eyebrow plucking. Yet the same beauty centres do not provide, not to mention advertise on social media, the service of ink tattooing, for some reason that she cannot fathom. Thus, Lina expressed her intention to have a permanent tattoo whenever this service becomes professionally offered in Saudi Arabia's beauty salons. Interestingly, Lina implied that the way which she would know about the availability of what she called a 'decent' tattoo service is going to be through social media.

Tattoos in Saudi Arabia are not officially prohibited (McDermott, 2012), but they are traditionally unwelcomed because of certain Islamic perspectives that prohibit women from having tattoos, as well as plucking their eyebrows, or wearing hair extensions. Yet, it is possible to find a place where one can get a tattoo in Saudi Arabia, although it requires an exhausting search (Al-Sibai, 2013). Thus, it seems that there is an ongoing underground culture of tattooing. However, having a tattoo from a shady place is not an option for Lina who clearly declared that she would embed a tattoo without guilt on her visible/non-visible identity. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the literature that covers ink tattoos as a beautification practice within the context of Saudi women, let alone including social media's influence on their decision to have one, is extremely scarce.

As discussed earlier, getting a tattoo in Saudi Arabia is a complicated process. In addition, tattoos are not pervasively visible on Saudi women in offline mixed-gender spaces. By contrast, the process of getting coloured contact lenses is extremely easy to an extent that these contacts have become pervasive among Saudi women in mixed-gender spaces as Rahaf explained:

Sometimes I like to put in light blue or grey colour contacts, just because these colours suit my brunette skin tone. Anyone can buy them from Instagram, and that is what I've been doing for years. Actually, all my colleagues use Instagram to purchase them. What hit my nerve is how some women think that if coloured lenses looked good on an influencer, they will just buy it whether from her online store or any other place… seeing how some women

have perfect and white teeth on social media moved me to seek their smile, but it is different with lenses. I mean there is one standard for beautiful teeth unlike lenses.

Rahaf

The participant above demonstrated how one's skin tone controls what colours of contact lenses that she uses. To elaborate more, she is not solely relying on the coloured lenses to beautify her appearance without considering how the colour of her lenses would blend with her skin colour. In addition, Rahaf implied that unlike many Western countries, getting contact lenses in Saudi Arabia does not require a prescription; instead, they can be obtained by anyone who has access to social media and funds. Furthermore, she noted how social media is becoming a fundamental sales channel for cosmetic contact lenses, which used to be predominantly sold in the following sales channels in Saudi Arabia as Abahussin et al. (2014) reported: optician's shops, beauty stores, and drugstores. When Rahaf mentioned using valuable information, which is how some women would purchase contact lenses from an influencer's online store, the researcher asked her for more clarification about such stores. Rahaf, zealously, grabbed her phone and started to explain to the researcher the concept behind Boutiqaat which is an application that was installed on her phone.

Boutiqaat started in 2015 as a 'Kuwait-based e-commerce cosmetics website' which delivers only within Kuwait (Al Shatti, 2015). Currently, Boutiqaat operates also as a mobile application where almost all the prominent Middle East social media influencers as well as celebrities have their portal/virtual stores in which they endorse products according to their personal experience and taste (Paracha, 2018). In 2019, Boutiqaat's valuation doubled to $500 million, and there is optimism that it will reach $1 billion which would make it among the world's relatively few 'unicorns' (Al Sayegh & Azhar, 2020). Despite Boutiqaat's rapid success and its unique approach that relies on mixing e-commerce with social factors through influencers and celebrities, the researcher could not identify any study that addresses the phenomenon of Boutiqaat, except Al-Qatami's (2019) study. Thus, the researcher would recommend that future research should specifically focus on exploring the influence of Boutiqaat on women's consumer behaviour within Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

While Rahaf was scrolling through several pictures of influencers and celebrities on Boutiqaat, she suddenly started to reveal how she admired the perfection of some women's teeth to an extent where she decided to seek their smile, but not their teeth. Apparently, Rahaf was seeking the effect – a glamourous smile – rather than the cause – white and perfect teeth – although the former would not occur without the latter. Interestingly, she had argued that the chances for her to be influenced by a woman's artificial eye colour on social media was not high since there is no unanimous agreement about a specific eye colour that represents ultimate glamour (unlike having white teeth). The key parameter for Rahaf was her skin colour which controls what colours of contact lenses would suit her. In other words, with consideration to the context of her words, she is suggesting that social media would not have an influence on her visible identity

unless such influence involves a certain part of her appearance (e.g., teeth) where its beauty standard is universally agreed upon; instead, her choice is independently influenced by her skin tone. Apparently, Rahaf's claim is supported by Di Murro et al.'s (2020, p.57) findings: "a brighter tooth shade significantly affected the attractiveness of the smile independently from skin tone". Furthermore, in terms of the relationship between skin tone and one's eye colour, Goodman and Rhee (2014) reported how women with light eye colours and brunette skin are presented by the majority of cosmetic surgery websites as ideally glamourous. Putting it all together, it can be said that social media's influence on some Saudi women is not present for all their visible identity aspects; instead, some aspects have been directly influenced (e.g., whiter and perfect teeth) while others remained unchanged because of their dependence on natural attributes of the body (e.g., eye colour and skin tone).

Before moving from the penultimate theme in this chapter, the researcher would like to clarify some points about the subsections included under the final theme visible identity subculture of style. Even though applying makeup and experiencing different abaya styles are considered as tools which can be used to accentuate one's glamour, the researcher did not include them under the subsection (i.e., subthemes) titled glamour for several reason. For instance, both of them contain rich and deep information that need to be fully addressed. Otherwise, a lot of valuable information would be lost among the noise if they were compressed under the glamour subsection. On the other hand, data related to social media's influence on the hijab and niqab emerged in different contexts; thus, they were placed organically in the thematic coding framework rather than populating them in one subsection.

5.3 Factors that limit the autonomy of reconstructing a visible identity

As demonstrated so far throughout this chapter, social media has influenced numerous aspects of Saudi women's appearance in mixed-gender spaces. Nevertheless, such influence is not as smooth as it sounds since there are numerous factors which make it difficult for Saudi women to freely construct their visible identities. In this regard, despite the Saudi Arabia government's socio-cultural reformations, besides social media's influence, some Saudi women are still unable, whether willingly or not, to detach their visible identity in mixed-gender spaces from several factors such as their guardians' authority.

5.3.1. Guardianship on identities

According to Eldoseri and Sharps (2020, p.1286), "In Saudi Arabia, the institutionalized guardianship system elicits negative impacts on the egalitarian family relationships". Thus, although there are numerous efforts and initiatives in Saudi Arabia to gradually give Saudi women control over aspects of their life as well as their choices, the guardianship system is deeply institutionalized not only in organizations, but also within some people's minds, as Dana illustrated:

Usually, the first and last decision with regards to one's public appearance belongs to her family. Once she gets married, then the decision will transfer to her husband. In my generation, many of my married friends have permissive husbands who gave them more freedom than what they had at their parents' home. But some of my unfortunate older relatives have had husbands who used to control even what application they can install on their phones.

Dana

As it seems from Dana's words, guardianship is still prevalent in Saudi Arabia, including the decision of what to wear or not in public places for women. In addition, the chances that a woman would also be subject to such control does not diminish after being married, unless her husband is open-minded/liberal as Dana noted. Dana highlighted an interesting point which is the variance in operationalizing the concept of guardianship among different generations in Saudi Arabia. It seems that her generation (i.e., generation z who were born between 1993 and 2005) share certain characteristics including having educated parents, being culturally open-minded, and most importantly in the context of this study, displaying a strong attachment to social media (Turner, 2015). Thus, the concepts of guardianship as well as patriarchy are not as pervasive as they used to be among previous generations in Saudi Arabia. For example, Dana mentioned how some of her female relatives, who belong to an older generation, encountered difficulties with their ex-husbands whose dominance stretched to include whether Snapchat, Instagram, and other social media applications are appropriate for them or not, let alone controlling their appearance in mixed-gender spaces. Thus, it can be argued that younger generations in Saudi Arabia are more likely to enjoy relative freedom in constructing their visible identity as opposed to older generations. The previous argument is supported by Le Renard (2014) who reported how the generation gap between young Saudi females and their mothers is significantly wide. However, Abrar suggested that such a gap is being slightly narrowed due to social media:

With regards to my appearance within mixed-gender spaces, in the past my abaya was slightly conservative because my parents would not allow me to wear anything that they do not approve. Currently, they have loosened up with my appearance as a whole, and not just my abaya styles. Sometimes, my dad would throw a word or two about my appearance, but mom, who has become an Instagram expert because she likes to order homemade food from it, would close her eyes to me and ears to him.

Abrar

Sticking with a conservative abaya style used to be Abrar's only choice since her parents had the final word on the matter. Abrar's struggle was not with patriarchal practices, rather, both her mother and father were the ones who tightly controlled her public appearance in mixed-gender spaces. Nevertheless, her mother

transitioned from closely monitoring what Abrar was allowed to wear, to intentionally overlooking Abrar's visible identity and her father's occasional disgruntled comments. Abrar attributed the dramatic change in her mother's attitude to being hypnotized by social media to an extent where she is neither proactive nor reactive. Regardless whether Abrar's mother was right or wrong, it appears that social media has indirectly influenced the participant's visible identity through direct influence on one of her parents. As a result, it can be proposed that social media has an influence in terms of relatively loosening the grip of parental guardianship on Saudi women.

On a different note, Amal has a unique understanding of the concept of guardianship that she stated she found on one of the anti-feminist Twitter accounts:

> *There is mutual trust and respect between me and my husband to an extent that both of us have open access to each other phones. So, I don't feel offended or choiceless when being told by him before leaving home to change my abaya or lighten my makeup, because I know that he is doing something that was given to him by God as an assignment not as a privilege. For the sake of your research, I have read the assignment and privilege argument on a Twitter account that discusses how men and women are not equal, which I believe to be true.*
>
> *Amal*

Having nonrestrictive access to one's phone requires a trust level that rarely exists among friends. On the other hand, in the case of partners/couples, sharing credentials (e.g., usernames and passwords) is not a usual thing. Nevertheless, if it occurs, it could be an indication of paranoia or high levels of intimacy (Belk, 2013), of which the latter appears to apply to Amal who would not mind that her husband would alter certain facades of her visible identity. Interestingly, such alteration would take place after Amal invested time and effort to construct her appearance. In Amal's case, although the relatively convenient practice would be ongoing consultations with her husband while she is working on her identity project, instead she chose to show her husband the final view despite the high chances that he might instruct her to change a style, or lighten the shade of a colour. Amal highlighted how she sincerely believes that her husband is following God's order, which she conceives as a duty for her husband rather than a luxury, by rectifying her potential deviance from modesty in appearance. According to Pace (2017), faith is extremely powerful, to the extent that it could influence one's psychological state to a point where negative emotion would be conquered. Thus, it appears that what many women, whether Saudis or non-Saudis, might consider as a derogatory practice that could emotionally destroy them, for Amal her faith has constructed her a reality in which guardianship is not a source of distress. Moreover, she highlighted how a Twitter account, which promotes sexist ideologies, has assisted her in her response to the researcher's question.

In contrast to Amal's experience with Twitter, Alsahi (2018) noted how the campaign to *End the Male Guardianship System* on Twitter has resulted in creating and bringing to the platform numerous Saudi feminists who have started to form a coherent and large network. Alsahi also added that these feminists challenged the general belief among Saudis that feminism imposes a threat to the unity of families as well as jeopardizing morality. In addition, Thorsen and Sreedharan (2019) reported how the supporters of Twitter hashtags that address ending the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia were accused by their counter-campaigners as liberals, who don't believe in God, and are trying to pass a non-Islamic agenda. All in all, it can be said that social media's influence on Amal did not push her into the feminist camp. Rather, it seems that she is among those who would have an unfavourable attitude towards anyone demanding for an end to the guardianship system.

5.3.2 The culture of mixed-gender spaces

When a woman decides to dedicate a couple of hours to shopping in various places in a Western city, usually she would not be worried about how her uncovered hair or regular-fit jeans might provoke disapproval. Yet, there are certain places that have a culture of requesting certain dress codes from people in order for them to be admitted, such as some opera houses and restaurants. Likewise, a totally different culture of not covering one's body with clothes exists in certain places (e.g., nudist beaches). Apart from posing the philosophical query of whether places change people or whether it is the other way around, Nawal's words shed some light on this matter:

> *The place where I am going to has a major role in deciding whether I cover my hair or not. Unfortunately, a large segment of our society has not yet reached a stage where they treat a woman according to her personality, rather than her appearance. It will take ages before something like this happens…. social media by itself won't be enough. There must be governmental laws to protect us.*
>
> *Nawal*

Having a mother that wears a niqab does not indicate that her daughter would also put it on. Nawal stated previously that her mother wears a niqab. However, Nawal's issue here is not with her mother, but instead it is with a certain culture that is present within some places and adopted by some people. To put it differently, it seems that Nawal is struggling with a group in the Saudi society that judge a woman by her visible identity rather than her personality (i.e., a group that would most likely approve of her mother's appearance). This type of judgment has influenced her decision of whether to cover her hair or not at certain places, since she has made a link between the presence of certain people in certain places. In addition, she claimed that social media's influence on changing the mentality of some people is limited unless the government starts to intervene in order to ensure that she will not be subject to potential harassment just because her hair was not covered in some mixed-gender places.

Fortunately, the law for which Nawal had been hoping was published in June 2018, around two months prior to interviewing the participants. The law "Aims to protect individuals from words, acts, implicit behaviour or innuendo of a sexual nature by one individual against another targeting that individual's body, modesty or personal life by any means including modern technology and communications" (Khoja, 2018). A potential explanation of Nawal's unawareness of such law is the massive online and offline publicity of lifting the ban on female drivers by allowing them to be issued with a driving license, which occurred also in June 2018 (Van Sant, 2018) about two weeks after the anti-harassment law was issued.

Nawal did not explain the link between the presence of certain people in certain places; also she did not mention in which places she would feel safe to freely express herself through her appearance. Lamiah, however, did give more details about these two issues:

> *There is no need to get into a clash with the society, each place has its own culture of modesty. For instance, my appearance when I go to a haggling-style traditional market won't be as liberal as when I go to a high-end mall, it's just convenient and more practical to at least put on a lutma [using one of the hijab's ends to cover the lower part of the face] there. The shops, customers, sellers, and even security differs between these places since each of them fulfills the needs of a particular social class.*
>
> *Lamiah*

Avoiding confrontation was a strategy that Lamiah favours over challenging the dominant predefined place-culture that disapproves of any disturbance of its general theme (e.g., people's appearance and interaction manner). Lamiah demonstrated how her visible identity is following – rather than leading – to a large extent the culture of the place where she is going. For instance, in places where the prevalent theme is offering affluent experiences – whether through products or services – to consumers, besides a high-quality security system, Lamiah's appearance would be less restrained by tradition. On the other hand, in traditional markets where the focal targeted consumers are usually not those who would be classified as upper class, Lamiah would feel insecure about freely expressing herself through her visible identity (refer to Appendix 7 for information about lutma/letham). With all things considered, it appears that Lamiah is suggesting that the social environment as well as her consumption practices in Saudi Arabia's high-end malls are relaxed to a point where she would not feel worried about how her appearance might create negative reactions, unlike traditional markets where there is limited room for liberty in appearance.

According to Ahamed and Kumar (2017), shopping malls are unable to replace traditional markets which maintain their position as a safe haven for consumers who utilize money and other resources economically. Furthermore, Ahtola (1985) suggested that a consumer is neither wholly a hedonist (i.e., free from restraint) nor a utilitarianist; rather, she/he is both but with different degrees. From the previous two arguments, it can be proposed that in high-security luxurious shopping malls where price tags are non-negotiable, some

Saudi women would feel safe to construct their appearance as well as consumption practices in a hedonistic fashion without the need to showcase the traditional modesty labels (e.g., covering the face/hair). The previous finding was also reported by Quamar (2016, p.331) who said that women in three of the largest Saudi cities, which are Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam, are frequently seen without their niqab and hijab especially in "Primary business streets lined with cafes and shopping centers most frequented by the rich". In contrast, in traditional markets, some Saudi women would adopt a conservative approach that emphasizes utilitarianism whether in their appearance or consumption practice (e.g., haggling). A potential explanation for adopting such an approach is that people from different social classes and cultures can easily read facial expressions (Gladwell, 2002). Thus, in markets where haggling takes place, some Saudi women would choose to cover their faces in order to make it harder for the other party to read their facial expressions during the haggling process. The following illustrations show how offline visible identities vary in different mixed-gender spaces with different cultures:

Figure 13: At Medd Café, Jeddah. Photograph: Al-Dabbagh (2020) for *The New York Times*.

Figure 14: At marketplace, Jeddah. Photograph: Levene (2018) for *The Guardian*.

5.4 Summary

Throughout this chapter, the researcher analyzed and discussed the data in an endeavour to answer the second research question of this study. The potential answers are summarized below.

Social media has changed the visible identity of Saudi women in offline mixed-gender spaces in Saudi Arabia from being static and consistent with the traditional standards of modesty to being more dynamic and cosmopolitan. This is evident in how Saudi women have started to keep up with and, to a certain extent,

adopt trends which used to be considered as immodest, whether they emerged from Muslims or non-Muslims. The fact that social media has bypassed cultural restrictions in terms of exposing Saudi women to numerous styles is clearly visible in mixed-gender spaces. For example, the influence of social media has not stopped on the mere decision of uncovering the face. Rather, social media has contributed to creating subcultures of style among Saudi women. For example, many participants have attributed their embracing of the idea that makeup is an essential component of their visible identity within mixed-gender spaces to social media, which helped them to improve their makeup skills and taste. Furthermore, the traditional abaya has changed from being a unified garment that is used to fully cover the body, to a garment that expresses one's sense of style and sophistication. In addition, being glamorous was the aim of many participants, who delineated their offline identity construction practices to achieve glamour, such as putting on fake nails, accessories, coloured contact lenses, and eyelashes.

The plethora of changes that Saudi women have experienced in their visible identity due to social media has shifted their self-concept, and the ongoing process of identity reconstruction has made Saudi women unlock their potentials and aspirations. Several participants have declared that social media has given them confidence as well as contentment about themselves. Furthermore, they have expressed that social media has given them assurance in terms of embracing their true selves without fearing society's reaction. Such embracement and self-reconciliation have surfaced on some Saudi women's appearance within mixed-gender spaces to an extent where they will not hesitate to challenge Saudi Arabia's traditional culture.

Confronting Saudi society is not an easy task, nor a smooth process for Saudi women. That is to say, there are many obstacles that hinder autonomous identity reconstruction for Saudi women. For example, many participants have outlined their ongoing struggle with their families, precisely the ones who are lawfully considered as their guardians. Sometimes, they must seek their guardian's approval to wear a certain type of abaya, or makeup. Otherwise, they simply will not be able to leave the house unless they are granted approval. In addition, the culture of the mixed-gender spaces play a massive role in shaping one's visible identity. To elaborate more, several participants have outlined that their appearance style would follow the culture of the mixed-gender place that they are visiting instead of following the style they want.

CHAPTER 6: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON SAUDI WOMEN'S VISIBLE ONLINE IDENTITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA'S PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

6.0 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the researcher analyzed and discussed the influence of social media on the visible identity of Saudi women in Saudi Arabia's mixed-gender spaces. Succinctly, the findings suggest that social media has influenced many Saudi women to exceed the traditional limits on their appearance in mixed-gender spaces. This chapter will extend the enquiry, however, by shifting the focus from offline to online settings. "Consumers' identity projects" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.871) and all CCT theoretical perspectives are thoroughly considered throughout this chapter As mentioned previously in the early chapters, the platforms which this study is exploring are Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Saudi women's visible identity in such platforms will be the centre of attention throughout this chapter. In addition to the participants' experiences and perspectives, the said platforms were a valuable source which enriched the researcher with ethnographic knowledge that could be labelled as Cyber Ethnography (Ward, 1999), Computer-Assisted Webnography (Horster & Gottschalk, 2012), or even Netnography (Kozinets, 1998, 2002b, 2010, 2015).

Before moving on to present the final themes, it is important to reiterate the timing of when the interviews were conducted with the participants, while considering the ongoing socio-cultural changes in Saudi Arabia, particularly the ones that took place on social media. Figure 11 provides the contextual timeline:

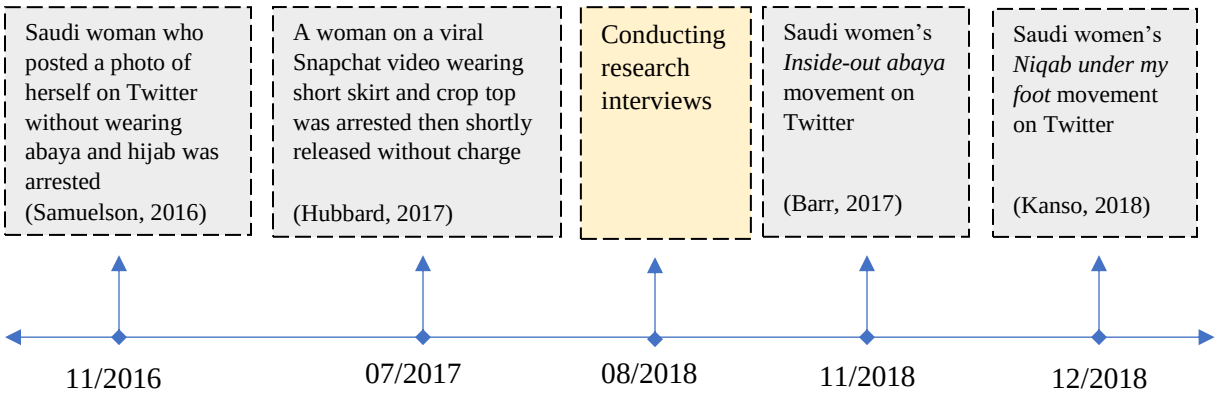

Figure 15: The timing of the research interviews with consideration to significant socio-cultural changes that occurred on social media

6.1 Postmodern online visible identity

The unfolding of individuals' ideas and values that do not abide either by a predefined belief system, or by markets and society's constraints, have been described using several terminologies, one of which is postmodernism (Cova, 1997). For consumers, postmodern consumption is not about drifting away from a

standard consumption style; instead, it is floating among one's numerous identities which are constructed through the reliance on a variety of consumption styles (Firat & Dholakia, 1998). In other words, it is a form of emancipation from being confined to a certain understanding and style of modesty in appearance.

6.1.1 Liberty

Social media has given consumers a gateway to move away from traditional markets as well as identities, besides enabling them to experiment with numerous identities which allow them to express themselves regardless of the potential societal consequences. The following participant illustrated how she is using social media to continue to do what she believes in, without considering what is being said about her:

> *It is up to me to decide how I present myself, especially at this point of my life. So, I really don't care what people might say about me whether to my face or behind my back. I have been ignoring them for a long time and will continue to do so. Do you think the situation would be any different with my online identity? Google my name and you'll understand what I mean.*
>
> *Sumayah*

The participant did not explicitly state what point in her life she had reached that she considers as pivotal in terms of taking control of the way she presents herself, but it can be inferred from the context of her words that she is referring to her age, or her academic/professional qualifications which are relatively associated with one's age. Furthermore, Sumayah expressed how she is neither resisting nor accepting what people may say about her appearance, whether she knows of their comments or not. She is simply choosing to pay no attention to them regardless, by keeping on with her identity choices, including her online identity. When Sumayah told the researcher to Google her name, he thought that she was figuratively stressing that Saudi women are facing difficulties in terms of constructing their online identity. However, after literally following her advice, the researcher found that the image results of her on Google were mainly from two social media platforms, Twitter and LinkedIn. In these images, there was no consistent pattern in Sumayah's visible identity. For example, in the LinkedIn image, she was performing the arms crossed on chest gesture while wearing a hijab placed firmly on her head, and a half-buttoned white lab coat that reveals a creamy white top under it. On the other hand, on a Twitter image, she was wearing a long-sleeve roll-neck top, and a beanie which does not cover some of her light-brown highlighted hair. Thus, it seems that she was portraying her online identity in two different frames that suit her own truths/beliefs rather than those of Saudi society. Before moving to the next point, it is important to mention that LinkedIn, which is a platform mainly concerned with professional networking, was not among the four social media platforms which this research is focusing on. However, the researcher believes that reporting the aforementioned LinkedIn-related findings would also contribute to expressing a clear picture about the subject matter of this study.

In Saudi Arabia, preserving the society's culture, especially in one's appearance, is not a trivial issue. Not long ago, there were 'official' people roaming the streets to make sure that women's appearance was modest to an extent where they are relatively unidentified. Considering the nature of social media, the social constraints on Saudi women's appearance will not be the same as they are offline. That is to say, some participants feel that they have relatively more freedom online than offline, as Elham explained:

> *Online, I get to decide the boundaries of modesty more than offline. No one would jump out of my phone and arrest me. I think that the absence of physical people has a big role in encouraging me to have more control over my online identity. This is funny, sometimes, I even suspect that I am talking to robots there instead of humans.*
>
> *Elham*

The participant expressed how her limits of modesty are stretched online more than offline because of safety issues. In other words, Elham indirectly referenced the absence of religious police, who used to be a frequent daily scene in Saudi Arabia but whom now are rarely seen on the streets (Wheeler, 2020), on social media. She used this point to illustrate how she is experiencing more freedom with regards to modesty in her appearance in the online sphere. In addition, Elham noted how the lack of bodily face-to-face interaction with other users on social media has given her more freedom to construct her online identity as she pleased. Such lack of interaction has made her feel that she is occasionally dealing with androids instead of humans. Interestingly, there is a high possibility that she has dealt with users that she thought to be humans while they are actually robots. To elaborate more, there are social robots which "have social media accounts that look like real people, act like real people and post content like real people" (Lightfoot & Jacobs, 2017, p.9). On the other hand, Nada did not mention any 'non-human' encounters on social media. Rather, she is alienating those who do not approve of her opinions or her visible identity:

> *To me, making friends on Instagram and Twitter is a joyful experience. There, I am finding people who would support my opinions and share similar interests with me. Look, I do not like to surround myself with negative people, especially online since I am spending too many hours there. It is true that my offline life is partially affected, but back to what I was saying, I do not need anyone to message me that I should put something on my hair or do this and don't do that. Believe me, some people you can't reason with and it's better just to push them off your accounts.*
>
> *Nada*

Making friends on social media is a process in which Nada prioritizes certain characteristics that she believes should be present in those who would be accepted as friends or not. Those who would share a similar position with her about respecting a woman's choice in constructing her online identity would be among her friends. Consequently, she is expecting from them to be either positive or neutral when it comes

to her own online appearance. By way of explanation, Nada argued that since she is spending around eight hours on social media on a daily basis, she does not want those hours to be filled with any kind of negativity, such as getting messages that criticize how she is projecting her online identity. Apparently, Nada is seeking to be emancipated from the traditional social control over Saudi women's online visible identity. Thus, she is searching for affirmation and validation from others who share similar perspectives with her on social media, even though such a search is affecting the social quality of her offline life. Nada also expressed how she has abandoned hope in terms of debating with other people on social media in an attempt to convince them to change their strict modesty perspectives. As a result, she uses several clicks to make sure that such people are deleted from her online life.

The above findings are consistent with Miller's (2017) argument about how social media is so pivotal in some vulnerable people's lives that they seek positive online validation for their identities through friendship. Moreover, in line with Nada's claim that her "offline life" was partially affected because of her social media use, Décieux, Heinen and Willems (2019) have reported how social media has largely substituted one's offline interactions. Using the aforementioned literature insights, it appears that some Saudi women seek affirmation from others on social media, especially those who share the same views about liberty in appearance. Furthermore, the role of social media in substituting offline interaction has resulted in relative isolation from being exposed to an offline environment where conservatism in women's identities still exist. Such isolation is compensated by spending more time in online interaction (i.e., being exposed to a tradition-free environment) on social media. As a result, it will not be shocking to know that one of the participants had thoughts of modelling as a career because of what she is seeing on social media:

> *I am following several famous Saudi fashion models on Instagram and Snapchat, such as Nada Baeshen, the model Roz, and the model Bella since I like their characters and styles. Also, I admire how they have stood for what they believe in regardless of the society's reaction. Sometimes I ask myself how my life would be if I chose to follow their path, every time the answer is beautiful and lavish…. I am not just learning from them about fashion, I am learning how to be proud in what I believe in. So, there is nothing wrong or to be ashamed of when I post my pictures on Instagram without an abaya and hijab.*
>
> *Amany*

The names that Amany mentioned belong to some of the well-known Saudi women whose online posts on social media frequently involve beauty and fashion. Interestingly, these Saudi women are different on many levels. For instance, Nada Baeshen is a successful mother, businesswoman, and a fashion advocate (Alblowi, 2019). Likewise, Bella is a mother of five, a model, and a makeup artist. On the other hand, model Roz, who is Saudi Arabia's 'first supermodel', went to America in 2013 to study before becoming a major face in famous brands' campaigns (e.g., Victoria's Secret) (Boniello, 2019). It seems that the lifestyle as

well as liberal appearance which these famous Saudi women are projecting through social media (refer to Appendix 5) did not just influence Amany's sense of fashion, but also her belief in her right to construct her online appearance according to her own understanding of modesty regardless of any other factors. In addition, Amany clearly stated how she occasionally compares her life with the influencers' lives, and how each time she is reaching a conclusion that her life would be more pleasant if she were in their shoes.

Chae (2018, p.257) argued that "People interested in information acquisition did not compare themselves with influencers and only obtained information from them. Thus, the type of content that arouses envy among ordinary females is daily life posting". In societies where a woman's visible identity is not strongly attached to following certain modesty standards, the previous argument would stand. However, in some societies, when a female influencer goes online wearing a cold shoulder top and shares simple information such as the sun rises in the East, many females would compare themselves with her regardless of their motives to follow her. That is to say, many Saudi women do not envy Saudi female influencers, instead, they look up to them as a source of empowerment and inspiration. As a result, they are learning from them not only how to construct their online identity, but also how to be proud of their identity-related choices.

On the other side of the coin, Razan enriched the research with her perspective about social media's influence on her online appearance:

> *My online identity follows real Islamic modesty, not any other false modesty definition whether on Twitter or any other platform. It is not like God does not see what I am posting on social media, or he has different rules for us there. I know that some women would relax their modesty in their online posts, those women fear people, but I fear God.*
>
> *Razan*

The participant started by assuming that there is only one authentic understanding of modesty, which she claims to follow, and whatever emerges from social media in this regard would mostly be untrue. In this respect, she is implying how social media is spreading false notions of modesty, whether in the form of words that provide different modesty interpretations, or as visual representations (e.g., photos/videos) of Muslim women whose appearance goes beyond Razan's modesty limits. Furthermore, she argued that some Muslim women think that whenever they go inside the online world, they would be outside of the Islamic society's traditions. Consequently, their appearance would not be constructed in accordance with the traditional Islamic modesty standards. Instead, it would be a reflection of a postmodern culture that revolts against the hegemony of traditions that require the demonstration of specific modesty standards on visible identities.

Holt (2002, p.82) argued that "Postmodern consumer culture was born, paradoxically, in the 1960s counterculture that opposed corporatism of all stripes". However, considering the context of this research, it appears that the first stages of postmodern consumer culture is going through labour on social media for

Saudi women. Furthermore, it appears that there is strong opposition to the way that some Saudi women are projecting their online identities on different social media platforms. Such opposition would most likely be muted by the tumultuous surge in the number of Saudi women whose online appearance does not follow the traditional visible identity. As a matter of fact, some participants have expressed how they are yearning to project their ideal identity on social media.

6.2 Digitalizing the ideal visible identity

Many people use social media as a place where they can demonstrate their identities as they wish they would be in real life (i.e., the physical world) by using social media tools. In other words, several individuals would project their ideal online identities which are constructed from what their actual identities lack (Kiziltunali, 2016), and such projection is not totally spontaneous and without any preparation. In fact, unlike the offline world, in the online world there are certain 'advantages' that give individuals more control over their projected identities, as shown in the following subsection.

6.2.1 Enhancement features

Among the popular features in Instagram and Snapchat are filters and lenses. Both of these features (i.e., social media tools) adjust and enhance images as well as videos, besides allowing users to alter their body features by, for example, smoothing their skin, changing the size of their eyes or the whole of their facial features (Astrup, 2018). Furthermore, users can provide more information by showing the temperature, time, and the location of the places where they are taking photos/videos. It is important to clarify that although Snapchat stressed on their support page that lenses (i.e., tools used to transform individuals and the world around them) are not the same as filters (i.e., design overlays which are added by individuals on top of their snaps), the majority of the participants have used these terms interchangeably. However, from the context it can be clearly determined what they mean. For instance, Lina used the term filter to indicate a face lens:

> *I was like I want to take pictures with the flowers filter like everyone on the beach, and I did that. This is how the filters push you to take pictures. For example, when I put on makeup, I want to see how the filters would make me look better and then I will take pictures. When I wear something beautiful it's the same thing. Even when I want to show where I have been, I will take a picture of myself and post it with my location on it…I would say that more than three quarters of these pictures are posted, and no one as far as I know is against it. Actually, more than half of my posted content is enhanced, everyone is like that and we all know it, and ignoring it with a smile.*
>
> *Lina*

From Lina's words, it can be inferred that seeing how others are using filters in various places has led Lina to follow their steps. Moreover, she suggested that filters are making her addicted to constantly taking pictures of herself in order to see how the filters affect her beauty, which is boosted whenever these filters are applied. Lina also noted that she is also using another feature in social media that allows her to tag the location in her posts. As a result, she can let her followers know where she has been, besides providing them with more information in case they want to seek more details about the tagged location. An interesting comment reported by the participant involves an online culture that involves refraining from bringing up the fact that filters were used. It appears that Lina is insinuating that some women have started to normalize the abnormal when it comes to one's online identity. This normalization, as she implied, is a culture that has newly emerged. To illustrate this point, before using social media tools that alter one's appearance became pervasive among women, it was relatively normal to point out to another woman that her appearance was enhanced by similar tools (e.g., photoshopping an image). Nevertheless, currently, as social media tools have become part of one's daily postings, a culture of ignoring such alteration has started to exist among some Saudi women. The previous finding extends Chua and Chang's (2016) claim that social media tools were positively perceived by young women in terms of making them closer to their ideal standard of beauty. However, this study adds that even if such a positive perception of beauty standards would lead to the constructing of an unrealistic online appearance, some women would not hesitate to conform to this model, besides not condemning anyone who would use excessively social media tools, nor mention being addicted to them.

Another participant emphasized an important aspect that pertains to her satisfaction with her online identity when she digitally enhances it:

> *Whenever I see myself online without filters, I feel that there is something missing from my face. Also, when I post videos with filters, I feel that I can express myself more, and consequently I would have greater influence on my followers. Filters are like makeup; they make us more beautiful. I hope that in the near future there would be a technology that allows us to take these filters offline.*
>
> *Basma*

Getting used to an enhanced online appearance that does not match her natural offline appearance has impacted Basma's self-esteem to an extent where she feels that she has lost an important part of herself. Whenever Basma is posting videos while using social media filters, she has observed how she became more fluent, expressive, and convinced that even her followers would be more greatly influenced as a result. Furthermore, she believes that filters serve the same purpose as makeup, which is to accentuate beauty and amplify attraction. Conversely, the absence of filters could affect some women's self-esteem, particularly about their faces, in a negative way which several plastic surgeons have reported as an alarming

phenomenon that is called ‘Snapchat dysmorphia’. This term describes those who try to adjust their body and facial features in order to achieve a look similar to that of digital filters (Rajanala, Maymone & Vashi, 2018). For example, Alghonaim et al. (2019) reported that 42% of females who go to a plastic surgery clinic in Saudi Arabia have undergone aesthetic procedures after constantly applying Snapchat filters. Furthermore, in line with Basma’s words “I feel there is something missing from [not on] my face”, Hess and O’Neill (2017) argued that social media’s beautification filters produce a situation in which individuals compare their visible online identity to an idealized version of themselves, rather than to celebrities and actresses. So far, the participants have indicated that they are using social media tools without giving details about how many accounts they have in a single platform. However, Abrar revealed the number of accounts that she has in Snapchat and how she is using filters differently on each of her accounts:

> *Everyone that I know has at least one Snapchat account. I have two phones, and in each of them I live in a different world. In one of my phones, my snaps would be the regular me because it is for my family and friends. On the other phone, which I spend more time on, I am being the free version of me since I always use filters to literally distort my face so no one would know me. Up to now, I have attracted a wide base of followers, and they are engaging with me as if I were a psychologist. In the future, in the right moment, I will reveal myself. By the way, many famous women here started like this.*
>
> *Abrar*

As of July 2020, Saudi Arabia is the fifth country worldwide with the highest number of Snapchat users at around 17.3 million (Statista, 2020b). Thus, it is no wonder that all of Abrar’s acquaintances have a minimum of one account in Snapchat. Abrar’s phones exemplify two different and unique portals where in each space she projects an online identity that is different from the other. In the account which she uses to communicate with people who know her real identity, she is maintaining her self-expression as well as presentation in a fashion that represent her as Abrar, since she is not anonymous in that account. In contrast, in the other account where she is anonymous because of the filter use that makes her unrecognizable as Abrar, she is experiencing limits that she could not experience on her other account, due to the anonymity features which some Snapchat filters add to her visible identity. Interestingly, although Abrar is concealing her identity in one of her Snapchat accounts and limiting the number of social cues that she is sharing there, she has managed to attract a sizable number of followers who admire her to an extent that they are sharing personal information with her, despite her anonymity. The previous lines do not resonate well with Hong et al.’s (2020) argument that providing more information and social cues about one’s self in online posts, such as revealing the face, would result in creating a positive attitude from other users. A potential explanation is that offline people tend to approach strangers (e.g., two passengers sitting close to each other

in a train or airplane) and disclose themselves intimately (Rubin, 1975). The situation is not different online considering Suler's (2004) online disinhibition effect.

All in all, it can be said that social media tools are not only used to beautify, but rather some users are employing these features to explore/express different aspects of their identity through anonymity which is among the online disinhibition effect factors (Suler, 2004). Meanwhile, some users are employing another feature on social media which enables them to be the director and the actor of the produced content.

6.2.2 Staged photos and videos

When the word stage is mentioned, usually the image of a theatre with tall red curtains and well-dressed actors comes into one's mind. In theatres, the audience expects to observe a continuous performance that is carried by the actor, without the ability to rewind, forward, and pause (Hogan, 2010). To elaborate more, unlike traditional theatre, Hogan (2010) argued that social media (i.e., exhibition sites) has enabled people to find an individual whenever they need instead of waiting for her/him to perform. Nevertheless, the current features of some social media platforms (e.g., live streaming) has changed some of the points in the previous argument as Mai explained:

> *I am struggling with simple photos and short videos; I wonder how directors are creating movies. I would not ever post a picture or a video after I wake up. I believe that I should look presentable, my dress should be nice, and the overall environment should be perfect because I do not want to blame myself in the future whenever I go back to such posts. The same applies when I do live stream on Instagram, however, live streaming is more thrilling because anything could go wrong if I don't prepare well for it.*
>
> *Mai*

The participant emphasized that the amount of time, effort, and preparation that she dedicates to producing an online post, whether it is a photo or a video, is extremely lengthy and exhausting. Moreover, Mai suggested that all the details must be handled with precision in order to produce a perfect photo/video. Such details do not only pertain to her visible identity, but also to the place where she is going to take a photo or shoot a video. The fundamental reason for her stance is maintaining a 'positive' digital footprint in order to avoid feeling resentful whenever she looks in the future at her digital trail. According to Malhotra et al. (2012) one's digital footprint includes her/his online behaviours such as posts, likes, watched videos, visited webpages, comments, not to mention identity. Thus, it is logical that Mai would also try her best to maintain her digital trail whenever she is doing live streaming, which she perceives as more exciting and challenging than posting staged videos and photos. A potential answer for Mai's claim that she feels more thrill when she does live streaming is because of the genuine nature of live streaming in which one's projected identity is not subject to the same level of control as it is on photos/videos (Tang, Venolia & Inkpen, 2016). The level of control on photos/videos before posting them is extremely detailed. For instance, another

participant, Dana, provided an explanation of how she has control over her videos to a point where she even would reshoot them just to make sure that her laugh is convincing:

> *I will be careful that I am focusing on my phone's camera. In addition, I would not walk or talk in a fast way. I mean everything I am considering, and when I finish recording the video, I will watch it with full concentration before posting it. If I found anything that I do not like, I would start from zero and record again. For example, I remember that I had to redo a clip for my Snapchat story because the sound of my laugh was a little funny.*
>
> *Dana*

Unlike Dana, another participant, Amal, is following a simple approach that does not involve a convoluted process to project her online identity. However, her approach does not mean eliminating the staging factor. For instance, Amal would mostly post her photos/videos after she prepared herself to go out, as she stated:

> *Usually, I do not post any pictures or videos publicly of myself…. Before going out, I will spend some time to put on makeup and create my style. So, it has become a habit for me to take several pictures of myself before going out. Even when I go to weddings, I would take pictures of myself, although definitely I would not post these pictures either publicly or privately.*
>
> *Amal*

Amal noted an interesting point about weddings, at which in Saudi Arabia usually men and women do not intermingle because of religious reasons. To elaborate more, the visible identity of Saudi women when they go to weddings would be glamourous (e.g., wearing an evening gown, with full makeup, different lavish accessories, and styled hair). Such an appearance would not go beyond Amal's phone as she implied, although some Saudi women have publicly shared such glamorous images as demonstrated in Appendix 5. Interestingly, some participants argued that appearances can be deceiving, especially when they are behind the phone's lens:

> *People now have started to realize that what they see on their phones does not always reflect reality. Social media is different platforms where people present their best and hide their worst. That is why I don't always believe what I see there.*
>
> *Hadeel*

Therefore, Rahaf attempted to make herself more organic in the digital world by including a photo of herself where her table manners were not at their perfect state:

> *I do not have to give the impression that I am natural and spontaneous because I am natural and spontaneous. Once, I was with my family in Fuddruckers eating a hamburger in a slightly uncivilized way. My sister took a photo of me without any notice, and this very*

photo has the nicest comments among my other Instagram photos.

Rahaf

Unlike the previous participants who were trying their best to control and employ every detail to construct an online identity that mirrors their ideal self, Rahaf demonstrated how projecting her actual self in one of her online posts is a practice that she considers as natural. In Rahaf's case, it seems that her online identity is not always staged, but instead she is trying to maintain the non-artificial theme in her online identity, reflecting how the online identity of numerous women around the world has shifted toward a more natural focus (Victoria, 2017). Furthermore, Rahaf seemed to be happy with the quantity and quality of the comments which she received about her unstaged photo. As a result, it can be argued that the unstaged presentation of one's online identity could be positively received online, unlike the general notion that such online identity would cause negative reactions (Engeln, 2019).

6.3 Online identity in a competition for perfection settings

In sports, usually athletes and teams compete in relatively fair and impartial settings. For instance, two football teams would have the same number of players, there are two players on each side of a badminton court, or a handful of bodybuilders flex their muscles on a stage in a straight competition. However, in social media, the rules as well as the competitiveness of activity is totally different. For example, a woman who is posting a makeup tutorial on social media will not be competing in a one-on-one style, neither is she subject to a specific timing to post her content. Instead, she is competing against every other woman, not to mention some men, who have posted a makeup tutorial on the platform. Furthermore, she has the access to post her material as she pleases without the need to be subject to the opening time of social media's gates.

6.3.1 Challenging environment

The amount of stress that is associated with achieving what an individual believes to be the perfect post is significantly intense, and what adds fuel to the fire is the association of one's life quality with producing a mistake-free post as Amany demonstrated:

I try to make my pictures and videos as perfect as possible. I don't want to make any single mistake because it will really annoy me and make my life harder to fix it. As stressful as it sounds, it is enjoyable. I am paying close attention to the angles of the camera and what I want to focus on. It's a skill that you accumulate subconsciously because you are always seeing the posts of social media influencers.

Amany

Seeking perfection to an extent where one's emotional state as well as her/his general wellbeing is potentially affected might not be the preferred lifestyle to some. However, Amany's aim to project a flawless online identity has put her under constant pressure but is a process in which she finds joy. To

elaborate, Amany is dealing with her online identity not as just a pixelated image of herself; instead, she is considering it as a masterpiece of art where she is responsible for showing its best aspects from multiple perspectives. In other words, as Zappavigna (2016) proposed, the subjective perspective is accentuated in such photos. Amany also implied that such subjectivity is a culture that goes on among social media influencers, and it is a culture that focuses on a constant search for the best angles to project certain aspects of one's visible identity. In line with this idea, Baranowski and Hecht (2018) argued that different camera levels (e.g., eye-level angle and above or below it) contribute towards how individuals are perceived. However, Suha was not worried with the camera level as she was happy with her 'gaze' into the camera:

> *It took me a while to master several techniques such as controlling my gaze. I believe that a photogenic face is all about the ability to express feelings using eyes and mouth. I have noticed that whether in social media or in magazines. There are certain facial expressions that almost every famous woman does to appear pretty. For instance, as I said the gaze and also opening the lips slightly to make the face taller which I have personally found to be true.*
>
> *Suha*

The participant is arguing that learning how to effectively control her eyes' gaze (i.e., speaking to the camera through them) has made her online identity more attractive. By mastering this technique, she is insinuating that she managed to convey different emotions without the need to open her lips to speak, although she acknowledged that slightly opening her mouth would also positively influence her online identity. Interestingly, Suha suggested that parting the lips would result in achieving a beautiful look as a result of accentuating the cheekbones which would give the illusion of having a taller face. However, contrary to her suggestion, it seems that parted lips or 'the fish gape', which is the new 'duck face' (Markovinovic, 2015), is used by numerous women to appear sexy (Elliott, 2015). Thus, it can be proposed that social media has influenced the online identity of some Saudi women to be constructed in a way that focuses on demonstrating attractiveness by relying on accentuating certain bodily features. This proposal goes in line with Veldhuis et al.'s (2018) finding of how social media and women who appreciate their bodily features are interconnected. It is worth reporting that the researcher was extremely careful to provide his participants with an atmosphere where they feel comfortable, besides considering the cultural 'etiquette' in terms of raising certain topics with the participants. For instance, when Suha was talking about her gaze and parted lips, more interesting information could be extracted from her about sensitive subjects that are related to this research such as sexuality in online identity. However, the researcher refrained from pursuing that angle as it is more appropriate for female researchers. For instance, five Muslim female participants taking part in the qualitative research by Al-Mutawa (2013), who is a female researcher, explicitly mentioned the word 'sexy' in different contexts and various connotations.

So far, the participants did not explicitly state with whom they are competing against or challenging. Nevertheless, Nada provided a potential answer:

> *Just like when you submit a piece of homework, you'll challenge yourself to submit excellent work to be the best among your classmates. The same thing applies to my online identity, I want it to be the best among my friends' online identities that is why I work hard on it.*
>
> *Nada*

Nada clarified the previous points by claiming that the ultimate goal of her diligence in submitting homework to her schoolteacher is getting ahead of her friends. Similarly, she is aiming to be constantly one step ahead of her online friends by making sure that her online identity excels their identities. Unlike school homework, where students usually do not know their classmates' marks until the teacher grades them, online identities are graded every second. Adopting Vogel et al.'s (2014) stance to elaborate more on the aforementioned sentence, identity comparison on social media is pervasive since the quantitative information (number of followers/comments) is seen in almost every social media platform. Thus, it is no wonder that some social media users would envy their online friends (Appel, Gerlach & Crusius, 2016), and would not spare an effort to work as hard as they can in order to keep their online identities above their friends' online identities. Yet, some users have introduced other dimensions that influence the way they construct their visible online identity.

6.3.2 Attention and followers

Some individuals would prefer to be unnoticed for several reasons, such as fear of being rejected, ignored, or negatively evaluated. At the other end of the spectrum, some individuals would go to extreme limits, especially online, to seek attention. For instance, one example is a model who dangled from skyscraper scaffolding holding only the hand of her assistant while he used his other hand to take photos and videos of her (Bose, 2017). Avoiding attracting men as well as shielding the self from men's looks are reasons that used to be followed by many Saudi women who chose to veil (AlMunajjed, 1997). Interestingly, many clerics used to reference the following words, which belong to a classical Egyptian poet, to emphasize several points, of which the danger of drawing men's attention is one of them; a gaze, a smile, a greeting, a talk, an appointment, and a meeting. However, such clerics would mostly not welcome the justification made by Rawan:

> *It is not wrong to draw attention, I mean everyone likes to get attention, but the critical thing here is from who and how I am asking for attention. For example, we used to be told that drawing men's attention is wrong. However, online, I am drawing the username not the gender. And eventually, more usernames equal more followers, likes, and comments…. My husband knew my mentality and the culture which I was raised in before marrying me.*

So, going publicly online with a hijab and normal makeup is not something that we would fight over.

Rawan

The participant is proposing that seeking attention is a natural instinct which is stimulated whenever she goes into the online world. Furthermore, she emphasized that the need for attention has many motives, which could be revealed by knowing from who and by what the attention is sought. To elaborate more, Rawan admitted that she is an attention seeker on social media; in addition, she does not perceive such attention seeking as being directed towards men or women. Instead, she wants to be noticed by usernames per se (i.e., she uses a genderless approach in dealing with usernames). After succeeding in attracting 'usernames', the cherry on the cake for Rawan would be appreciation in the form of being followed by them, and eventually getting complimented either by a comment or a like. Rawan noted that her online identity does not clash with her husband's mentality. In the interview, she implied that although she is not covering her face online, not to mention putting on light makeup, her husband does not mind her online appearance.

It can be proposed that the notion that an online identity with a hijab would not receive attention or positive evaluation from other users, whether from men or women, is not solid. For instance, Simorangkir and Pamungkas (2018) found that the hijab was to some Muslim women a statement of not seeking attention, while other Muslim women use it as an attention seeking tool. Furthermore, in their study, Simorangkir and Pamungkas (2018) found that, on social media, the scene of a Muslim woman who does not 'properly' put on a hijab could evoke negative reactions. Nevertheless, Ghada provided a contrary experience:

I want to be distinguished online, and I have read many materials on how to become an influencer. The first thing is to produce different content than what is out there, and different content should come from a different person. I used to wear a hijab like the majority of other women, but once I started wearing hoodies [online], I have noticed an increase in my followers.

Ghada

By investing in learning more about the science behind attracting individuals on social media, the return was fruitful in terms of growing Ghada's number of followers. As she noted, in order to be noticed online, one's appearance should not be mediocre. That is to say, a hijab whether it was properly or improperly (i.e., loosely) fitted is a hijab at the end of the day. Thus, the need for a 'catchy' appearance emerged through replacing the hijab with a hoody, which relatively serves the same purpose of a traditional hijab in that it can cover all the hair, ears, and neck. Ghada suggested that the cause was replacing her hijab with a hoodie, and the effect is attracting more people to follow her online. In a similar vein, Lamiah was straightforward in terms of stating the reason which she believes is the significant game changer in the online world:

The more followers that I have, the more status that I have within my social circles. No doubt, producing unique posts will positively reflect on the number of followers to my accounts, but in general, women who do not wear a hijab are followed more than those who put it on, and those who put it on are followed more than those who put on a niqab… it is not about the more you uncover the more you are followed. Think of it in this way, people prefer to follow someone who would be as a family member to them, not someone putting up barriers.

Lamiah

The above participant is proposing that having a large number of followers would improve her social status whether in her professional or personal life. Her proposal matches Scott's (2014) finding that being popular on social media would positively influence one's social attributes such as attractiveness and being highly sociable. Furthermore, Lamiah argued for creating a distinctive online appearance to stand out from the crowd. More specifically, although a vast number of Saudi women are in the process of negotiating the cultural limits on their visible online identity (Guta & Karolak, 2015), Lamiah believes that the time for such negotiation has elapsed, and it is time for concluding such negotiations. Otherwise, those who are still going back and forth between whether or not they should unveil their faces online would lose a significant number of potential followers for many reasons. For instance, online, people tend to follow women whose identity is not hidden by a niqab because they want to feel that whoever they are following is identifiable, not distancing herself by concealing her face. Moreover, the same would apply to women who uncover their hair on social media and those who do cover it, where the latter would not be as close to the people as the former. It appears that Lamiah is implying that liberty in a visible online identity would yield positive results for those whose aim is to attract followers to their account. The researcher tried his best to find a reliable source where the top Saudi female influencers on social media are listed, along with which platform they are mostly active in, besides their number of followers. Unfortunately, the researcher was not able to identify such a source. Nevertheless, Ghantous (2020) listed a handful of the top Saudi social media influencers, in which the vast majority of the female influencers are not wearing a hijab.

Unlike the three previous participants, Tala believes that the fastest and most effective method to draw attention on social media is by showing off, which she is against as she states below:

My posts are limited since I do not like to show off. The majority of people here who constantly post their pictures or videos are showing off. For example, you will find that they are in a vanity contest to demonstrate their makeup skills and bodies. I mean they are continuously changing themselves to gain more followers or to compete with each other just for fame.

Tala

Demonstrating excessive pride in the self by frequently posting materials on social media that highlight one's visible identity in order to harness attention is something that does not resonate well with Tala. She believes that such actions are strong indicators of showing of, or more accurately narcissism, which is fed by seeking online attention through showcasing a woman's beauty by makeup/liberty in appearance. According to Chester et al. (2016, p.1036) "Narcissism is characterized by the search for affirmation and admiration from others". Moreover, Weiser (2015) found that narcissism is significantly associated with the frequency of posting visible identity depictions on social media. Putting it all together, it seems that some Saudi women make a link between frequent posting of one's self on social media with vanity and narcissism, although the majority of the participants emphasized that the ends (i.e., getting more followers) justify the means (i.e., seeking attention). On the other hand, Huda's perspective, which is used to provide concluding words to this subsection, demonstrate a moderate stance in the subject matter:

> *Once I post my pictures or videos whether publicly or privately on social media, they will remain there for eternity. I believe that they are stored somewhere. Thus, I am extremely careful on what I post, even with my tweets. In short, I would not post anything unless I am confident that it would not harm me either in the present or in the future.*
> *Huda*

6.4 Struggling with different versions of modesty in an online visible identity

In the last few years, Saudi Arabia's socio-cultural milieus have dramatically shifted compared to what they used to be. Consequently, such a multi-aspect shift has resulted in confusing some of the modesty-related concepts. For example, the chances of being arrested because of posting a photo on social media without wearing a hijab and sticking to the traditional visible identity modesty lines were high (Samuelson, 2016). To elaborate more, a Saudi woman in her twenties posted the following photo of herself on Twitter:

Figure 16: Saudi woman photo posted on Twitter. Reproduced by Alhurra.com (2017).

Later on, she was arrested for violating general morals (Schmidt, 2016). On the other hand, in the first quarter of 2018, the media propagated that the conventional black abaya and hijab are not something that would be imposed on women in Saudi Arabia (Sanchez, 2018). This propagation was part of a massive systematic 'shock therapy' that is intended to modernize the socio-cultural environment in Saudi Arabia (Ignatius, 2018). However, some of the participants appear to have a resilience to the said therapy, at least at the time of interviewing them.

6.4.1 Ambassadors of Islam to the world

Saudi Arabia is considered for many reasons (e.g., having the two holiest cities in Islam) to be the distinguished leader of the vast majority of the Sunni Muslim world (Naghizadeh, 2019). According to Denman and Hilal (2011, p.304) "The Islamic religion is considered as much a part of the Saudi identity as the country's long-standing history as part of the greater Arab Peninsula". Thus, it is no wonder that some Saudi women believe that in social media, the whole world looks up to them to learn what Islam is about, whether they were showing their faces or just sat with a crossed leg that follows the beat of music, as the following participant illustrated:

> *What would non-Muslims think when they see a Saudi woman on social media with full makeup? The whole world knows that Islam is Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabia is Islam. I would not defile my country's reputation by posting anything of me that does not follow Islamic modesty…. Anything that would attract is against Islamic modesty, even if the face was not shown. A lot of women would post videos showing only the movement of their crossed leg to music, especially when they attend an all-female party. I was in a wedding, and my relative asked me if I could join her in the crossed leg thing but I refused, although I knew that my face would not be shown.*
>
> *Hadeel*

Apparently, the above participant is assuming that whoever sees a Saudi woman with full makeup on social media would immediately jump to a conclusion about Islam and Muslims, instead of judging the woman's personal interpretation of Islam. Furthermore, Hadeel suggested that Islam and Saudi Arabia are two sides of the same coin which she dearly respects by paying close attention to her social media's posts. That is to say, the traditional understanding of modesty in women's appearance is not conceived by Hadeel as traditional. Rather, she implied that such an understanding is valid in every place and time. Her modesty conviction stands on the conventional premise of avoiding being the source of attraction. This attraction is not limited to beautifying the face, it even stretches to encompass a social media video of a woman's dangling crossed leg. The participant did not provide detailed description of the amount of skin that is exposed in such a post. However, from the researcher's online observations, usually the part of the leg that would be visible starts from the mid-shin which leaves a little amount of skin uncovered. Although it seems

a silly concept that such a scene would cause sexual attraction, the French psychologist Alfred Binet (1887, cited in Block, 2015) suggested that materials that are attached to one's body (e.g., a shoe or nail polish) would evoke such kind of attraction, which he labelled as plastic love, in some individuals. Putting it all together, it can be said that some Saudi women have a strong sense that their national and Islamic identity are not different, and their appearance on social media should follow the conventional modesty, regardless of which part of their visible identity is shown. Moreover, one of the participants went so far as to argue that the national identity which is incorporated in the Saudi flag should not be publicly presented by women who do not abide by the traditional modesty standards in the Islamic identity:

> *I was at my relative's house on the past National Day, and I felt extreme anger when one of the guests started to take selfies without wearing neither an abaya nor hijab while wrapping the flag [of Saudi Arabia] around her shoulders. I would never do such a thing because of what the flag symbolizes…. If I am going to post anything of myself with the flag, I would at least wear a hijab and abaya, unlike those who are deforming our national identity and Islam.*
>
> *Tala*

Not long ago, celebrating National Day, Mother's Day, not to mention Valentine's Day, was not something welcomed among the clerics of the prominent official Islamic organizations that are responsible for issuing fatwa in Saudi Arabia (Al-Atawneh, 2010). However, the general attitude in terms of such celebrations has gradually changed in recent years to a point where such occasions would be freely celebrated, whether in public, or in private just like Tala did at her relative's house. In the said celebration, Tala was provoked when she witnessed the Saudi flag, which has the Islamic creed written on it, being used in vain by a Saudi woman who not only did not respect the implication of the words on the flag, but also the unmistakably Islamic identity of the flag. The last straw for Tala was when the woman started to take selfies with the flag without demonstrating the required modesty by covering the hair with a hijab or the body with an abaya. Apparently, Tala believes that once the national flag of Saudi Arabia is associated with Saudi women's visible identity in social media photos/videos, modesty should not be compromised to a level where the national identity is misrepresented. Otherwise, such misrepresentation would affect Islam's image because Islam, Saudi Arabia's flag, and Saudi women's visible identity are all significantly interlinked.

On the other hand, Razan stretched the aforementioned interlinking to include all Saudi women. From her perspective, she believes that for Saudi women, public online appearance should not be signalling individuality or openness to globalization and Western styles. Instead, it should signal affiliation to Saudi Arabia's Islamic identity:

> *I represent myself when I tweet or when I comment using a pseudonym, but when I go there [to social media] using my real name and showing my face, I will be representing myself,*

my family, and my country. That is why I wish that those who brag about being Saudis and display themselves in a cheap way would be prosecuted because they are giving the world a wrong impression about us and about Saudi Islam.

Razan

According to Véliz (2019, p.643) "Anonymity promotes free speech by protecting the identity of people who might otherwise face negative consequences for expressing their ideas. Wrongdoers, however, often abuse this invisibility cloak". Razan suggested that whenever she goes into such a cloak, no one should face the consequences, if any, of her posts other than herself. On the other hand, once she starts using or showing her real name or face, respectively, the effects of her posts would extend to include her country as well as its women. The previous lines match Abokhodair, Hodges and Vieweg's (2017) findings that individuals in the Arabian Peninsula are inclined to preserve their collective self instead of autonomous self on social media. Thus, it is not surprising that Razan would go to an extreme where she would call for legal actions against Saudi women who favour their autonomous modesty conception without considering what Razan labelled as "Saudi Islam". Unlike Razan and the other participants in this subsection, the following pages present a different perspective from what have been presented so far.

6.4.2 Contributing to changing the stereotype about Saudi women's online identity

To say that a Saudi woman with red lipstick and blonde hair was seen at a movie premier does not seem unrealistic, nor does it sound strange. Similarly, if someone said that a Saudi woman posted a picture of herself on social media wearing a crop top that shows a little cleavage, the credibility of such a statement would be only relatively questionable. However, when a news report describes a Saudi woman as showing 'major' cleavage at a movie premier in Los Angeles (Albawaba, 2020), and that woman posts a photo of herself that matches the newspaper description on her Instagram account, this indicates a radical shift in Saudi women's visible online identity. Such a shift can also be sensed in Amany's words:

I can be a philosopher on Twitter, a singer on Snapchat, a fashionista on Instagram, and all these characters won't change the fact that I am a Saudi woman. There will be haters of course, but the majority of Saudis would either accept or ignore what I am doing because we are living in a new Saudi Arabia that allows women to be themselves.

Amany

Not so long ago, the conservative clerics who used to have a substantial influence on Saudi women's education had preached that the fundamental purposes for Saudi women's education are to make them "good wives and mothers, and to prepare them for 'acceptable' jobs such as teaching and nursing that were believed to suit their nature" (Hamdan, 2005, p.44). Currently, Amany argues that in different social media platforms numerous taboos have been broken. For example, Amany's commentary explains that she can use social media to question existence, use her voice to make musical sounds and be a model. Furthermore,

she argued that her national identity will not be affected since there is a new Saudi Arabia that envisions modernity as a path for its citizens. Interestingly, Amany used the phrase "new Saudi Arabia", which up to the moment of typing these words is still circulating in the media. One of the indications of such a phrase is that there are some old and new rules, just as there are old and new modesty standards. However, transitioning from the old to the new Saudi Arabia is a process in which social media plays an essential role in underpinning a 'new' visible identity for Saudi women, as Rawan delineated:

> *I sympathize with those who attack me by saying that I am not a Saudi woman because of my Twitter profile photo. Here is the thing, I am among a huge number of Saudi women who were fortunate enough to have a scholarship to study abroad. Currently, I think the majority of those who have scholarships have returned to Saudi Arabia with a new paradigm. I won't say all of them, but the majority of us are cornerstones in the upcoming change in Saudi Arabia, and social media is accelerating the process of change.*
>
> *Rawan*

In 2005, the Saudi government started the most comprehensive overseas scholarship programme worldwide (Bukhari & Denman, 2013). Many voices raised concerns that such a programme would affect the traditional national identity, especially when students return to Saudi Arabia and bring with them Western ideologies (Denman & Hilal, 2011). It appears that such voices had foreseen Rawan's attitude, which implied that she is aiming to change the stereotypical image of Saudi women using social media. Moreover, Rawan implied that the majority of the Saudis who have returned to Saudi Arabia after earning their degrees from abroad would contribute immensely in building the new Saudi Arabia, and social media would be the appropriate platform for the construction of new visible identities. However, Rawan's argument is supported in the literature, but with a degree of uncertainty. For instance, in their research, Hilal, Scott and Maadad (2015, p.264) concluded that the 688 Saudi international students whom they surveyed "seem to deny that studying overseas may affect their cultural and Islamic identities when the question is asked personally or in a direct way but the results are inconclusive when asked about the overall national and cultural identity". Furthermore, in terms of Saudi women, Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) reported that the time which Saudi women spent in the USA for studying had affected them on many levels, such as being more accepting and open-minded towards different cultures. Putting it all together, it can be proposed that social media is being used by some Saudi women, particularly those who studied overseas, to conspicuously express their aspiration in forming a national identity that accounts for individuality, instead of a standardized collective one. Along these lines, Areej shared how she believes that Saudi women will have higher opportunities in social media for following their dreams without being hindered by dress codes that need to reflect a certain understanding of modesty that limit women's professional progression:

Many Saudi women are successful TV show hosts, and their appearance whether on TV or social media is extremely liberal. In the past, I had a dream that I would be working in the media. I used to imagine myself as Ellen or Oprah [US talk show hosts], but obviously there was no way back then. However, with social media I am seeing that the future is promising for young Saudi women to be themselves without the need to follow certain codes in dress.

Areej

Around a decade ago, the Saudi Ministry of Information mandated that a modest abaya and full-head hijab should be worn by all Saudi female presenters, and that is why several Saudi women who work in the media moved to other Arabian countries (Mellor, 2009). Surprisingly, in less than a month after interviewing Areej, history was made when a Saudi female co-anchored the main evening news with a male colleague on Saudi Arabia's state channel (Malm, 2018). It is worth mentioning that she appeared with light makeup, red nail polish, and wearing a hijab that was positioned slightly behind her brownish blonde front hair line. Apparently, Areej's prediction was not limited to social media, which she believes offers a world where modesty is constructed differently than in the offline world.

Before moving to the next section, the researcher would like to report an interesting finding that occurred after concluding the interview with Areej. When the researcher tried to indirectly and cautiously understand Areej's position in terms of looking up to the American TV host Ellen DeGeneres, whose sexual identity is not widely acceptable among Muslims, Areej answer was revolving around the concept of "we should hate the sin not the sinner". The conversation then took interesting turns; however, one of the many indications of Areej's answer is that she is detaching the action from the actor. To put it differently, she is relieving individuals from being judged based on their actions. During the researcher's online observation, several Saudi women responded to comments which criticize them for appearing without an abaya or wearing relatively revealing clothes by relying on the following concept: if you don't like what I am doing, then simply don't follow me. That is to say, they are imposing the concept of follow me only if you approve my actions.

6.5 Participants' different perspectives between online and offline visible identities' consistency and inconsistency

One of many differences between the online and offline worlds is that there is more freedom in the former. The online space offers freedom from physical laws, countries' restrictions, and in some cases one's own principles, especially if such principles exist to satisfy social norms instead of fulfilling one's own beliefs. In a country where social norms are still controlling many aspects of its citizens' lives, and especially the

lives of women, the online world would function for some as an escape haven. In contrast, to some, going online would not be any different from being offline, particularly appearance wise.

6.5.1 Consistent online and offline visible identities

Maintaining an online appearance that does not differ from an offline one for some of the participants was a serious issue. Even though it might be tempting to experiment with different styles due to the relative freedom which a Saudi woman would find in the online world, the concept of having two different visible identities in the online and offline worlds was considered as a mental illness by Rahaf:

> *I didn't reach a stage where I have multiple personalities [the participant used the word schizophrenia]. Inside social media or outside it I am the same Rahaf. Maybe on Twitter my words are more organized, but the way I look won't be different since I am wearing an abaya and hijab whether in social media or outside it. I consider those who have a big disparity between their online and offline appearances as mentally ill. Sometimes I can tell that a woman is mentally ill by going through her profile…. I can't describe it, but it is something sensed; for example taking a selfie and looking away from the camera is one of the signs.*
>
> *Rahaf*

Depicting the situation as two worlds, where an individual would experience more freedom in her/his visible identity in one world than the other, it was clear that this position did not impress Rahaf. In her estimation, she believes that the only change that she is personally experiencing in social media is when she gets to think profoundly about her tweets before tweeting them. Otherwise, her visible identity there would not be different than her identity offline since she considers such differences as a signal for psychological illness. Interestingly, Rahaf considers women who intentionally turn their heads away when taking selfies of themselves as women with questionable mental health. It appears that Rahaf used such an example to demonstrate that women who avoid looking at the phone's lens when they take selfies are avoiding the confrontation of reality. Similarly, those who have contradictory online and offline visible identities are looking away from – ignoring – the fact that they are escaping their offline reality. Forming a conclusion about someone's mental health based on her/his online posts is not a new concept. For instance, Inkster et al. (2016) argued that data from a social media platform could possibly assist with detecting early signs of psychological problems. Taking an alternative view, another participant considers online and offline differences in visible identities as social hypocrisy instead of mental illness:

> *This is a growing phenomenon that indicates weakness and social hypocrisy. My rule of thumb is presenting myself online in the same way that I would present it offline, excluding filters which I consider as part of my face though. I mean if I can't wear something out in mixed-gender spaces here in Saudi Arabia, then I won't wear it online. Otherwise, people*

would conclude that I am a hypocrite. Unfortunately, hypocrisy is becoming a normal thing on social media.

Basma

Lacking the courage to stand up for their beliefs, as well as using the features of the online world to project a visible identity which they would not project offline, are aspects of a phenomenon that is snowballing among Saudi women on social media, Basma implied. In addition, she noted that social media filters are the only change which she applies to her online visible identity when comparing it with her offline one. To put it differently, other than the filters, she is maintaining a consistent online and offline appearance through following the principal of appearing online as you would appear offline in public spaces. Interestingly, Basma stated that she perceives filters as part of her face. According to Sforza et al. (2010, p.149), "while it may be comparatively easy to induce illusory percepts concerning ownership of nonfacial body parts and even out-of-body experience, no similar effects can be found for faces". Apparently, social media has created similar effects. However, one of the effects that social media has not genuinely created is the effect of being in another country, yet:

In Saudi Arabia I am wearing an abaya and occasionally putting on a hijab. Outside Saudi Arabia, I do not wear an abaya or hijab. So, I would post pictures while I am in a foreign country without wearing an abaya and hijab. However, in Saudi Arabia, I would not post a picture without wearing an abaya. To make it simple, my online and offline identity would mostly follow the country I am in.

Nawal

It is not a strange scene to be on an airplane that has taken off from Saudi Arabia heading to a Western country and see several women taking off their abayas and hijabs. For example, on the researcher's last trip from Jeddah to London, he was not surprised when he saw a woman in her late twenties taking off her abaya and hijab during the flight; instead, it was the scene of her applying a face mask that caused surprise. Nawal's online and offline visible identity follows the country's culture. In effect, she is following the saying 'when in Rome, dress like the Romans do', whether offline or online. Interestingly enough, Nawal is maintaining parallelism between her physical location and her offline and online identities. For instance, a photo/video of her on social media without an abaya and hijab would indicate that she is outside Saudi Arabia. In contrast, once she appears wearing an abaya on her posts, then she is back home. Such consistency in online and offline appearance is not constant among the participants, since some of them have presented their views and justifications about such inconsistency.

6.5.2 Inconsistent online and offline visible identities

Although different countries in the world share the same map, each country has its own heritage as well as unique attributes. The same applies to the online world where different social media platforms share the

same Web 2.0 main feature which is allowing its users to produce and consume (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), but each platform has its unique environment. Likewise, Lamiah is arguing along the previous lines and proposing that the consistency between online and offline identity is not something to be expected:

> *I would not describe social media as the online world. To me, it's many worlds because each platform provides a different experience. I can't say for sure that my online and offline identities match each other due to the variance of social rules between offline and online. I will give you a real example, online, a Saudi woman can post a picture of herself wearing jeans and a sleeveless top without an abaya or hijab. However, the same woman can't go walking on the streets like that.*
>
> *Lamiah*

By navigating through different online platforms, Lamiah is constructing multiple visible online identities, so that matching them with her offline identity is not feasible due to the nature of each of those platforms. Expressed differently, Lamiah is proposing that her visible identity is mutually constructed by herself as well as each platform where different identities are projected. Her proposal resonates with Choi and Sung's (2018) finding that different social media platforms stimulate different identities. For instance, Snapchat is perceived as a platform where actual self is projected, whereas the ideal self is projected on Instagram. Yet Lamiah noted how the cyber definition of modesty is more fluid than the offline definition in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Bourdeloie, Gentiloni Silveri and Houmair (2017) proposed that Saudi women are creating online identities that are not identically congruent with their offline identities; instead, their online ones would be more liberal.

Another participant provided more depth to the said issue by highlighting how her online identity is not as 'guarded' as her offline identity, especially when there is involvement of the opposite gender:

> *Online, things are more relaxed. Let me tell you something, when I get inappropriate compliments from men on my photos, I would simply ignore them. My family sees such comments and knows their daughter's morals. On the contrary, if such type of comment occurred offline, my family would literally interfere to inflict physical injuries to the individual.*
>
> *Lina*

Unlike the majority of Al-Saggaf's (2016) participants who expressed that such cross gender communication on social media is not widely favourable in Saudi Arabia's culture, it seems that the governmental socio-cultural reforms and the social media environment have significantly relaxed such attitudes, to the point where these communications have become a normal and integral part of daily life. This is evident in Lina's words which indicate that in the online settings, cross gender communication is more relaxed than in offline settings. Furthermore, Lina emphasized how her family's reaction to negative

comments, which could be abusive, from men on social media is totally different than if such comments would occur offline.

Unlike Guta and Karolak's (2015) finding that Saudi women are concealing their online identity from their families to preserve their privacy (i.e., particularly when the other gender is involved), this study found that some Saudi women are reconciled with the fact that they are receiving comments – and friend requests – from all genders. Thus, the other gender is not an influential factor that would result in them concealing their visible online identity. However, the concealment motive for the following participant is about protecting her identity from the possibility of being 'captured' in the online world:

> *I am extremely careful about what I am posting online. So, if I decided to wear a hijab instead of a niqab, I would never show my face online. We all have whims, so if this whim ends and I decided to go back to a niqab, the impact of my decision would be less severe offline than online because who knows who had saved my photos, I might even be blackmailed.*
>
> *Hadeel*

Although there is a small possibility that Hadeel would decide to uncover her face offline, there is no possibility that her online appearance would match her offline one because once she backs off from her decision, the memory of the online world is developed to an extent where one's photos might not be easily erased. In this example, Hadeel's experimentation with her online appearance is hindered by her fear of not being able to fully control it, particularly whenever she decides to put on a niqab again. Moreover, she noted how she might be subject to blackmail if her photos were seen by the wrong eyes, let alone falling into the wrong hands. Such a high level of awareness was noted in Al-Saggaf's (2016) study where he reported that Saudi women are cautious as well as knowledgeable of the dangers of social media, which might result in exposing them to extortion. Nevertheless, an interesting remark made by Hadeel is that one's whims might overturn one's modesty beliefs as well as the practices in association with such beliefs, albeit on a temporary basis.

6.6 Summary

Since there is not as much restriction in the online world as the offline world, it is no wonder that the traditional modesty standards in Saudi women's visible identities are more affected online than offline. Many participants said that they do not wear an abaya, or cover their hair, whenever they are publicly posting photos or videos of themselves. Furthermore, the absence of physical people in the online world was an influential factor in terms of assisting Saudi women in overcoming their insecurities through exposing more skin/demonstrating their femininity. In a nutshell, social media is a portal where many Saudi

women experience postmodernism in their visible identity without the fear of being judged or stigmatized, not to mention being accused of moral corruption.

The process of digitalizing a visible identity and projecting it into the world is to a certain extent unspontaneous. The filters/lenses in Snapchat and Instagram were described by many participants as addictive tools, and some participants have even expressed that they would not feel satisfied with their visible online identities unless they were enhanced by applying such tools. As a result, it is no wonder that some participants have acknowledged that they are presenting an unreal and pretentious visible online identity. Such a presentation also involves being in an ungenuine disposition where emotions as well as actions are fabricated. However, it is not deception as many participants have argued. Rather, they believe that they are digitalizing their ideal visible identity, which has its ideal modesty standards, and such digitalization comes with many responsibilities, if not burdens. Multiple participants have emphasized that they feel like being in a competition for perfection whenever they are publicly posting photos or videos of themselves on social media. They are putting a lot of time and effort into figuring out the right angles and poses, primarily because they want to attract attention as many have noted. One of the outcomes of succeeding in getting attention is gaining more followers, who are usually interested in seeing the face (and the skin), not just the content. Consequently, the findings suggest that in order to increase the number of followers, there are concessions that need to be made in terms of modesty standards in one's online visible identity. For example, some participants have claimed that showing just the face is not enough nowadays because numerous Saudi women have done so.

Although social media has made a noticeable change in the general mentality and attitudes towards what constitutes modesty in a visible identity, the traditional understanding of modesty is still present. For instance, a handful of participants have expressed their consideration of the power of the conservative online communities. In other words, some participants were hesitant to state their beliefs online about modesty. Instead, they will just silently construct their online identities according to their own modesty standards without explicitly or implicitly stating their beliefs either orally (on Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube), or in written words (on Twitter). Otherwise, they would be bullied online to an extent at which they will be accused of treachery to Saudi Arabia's national identity, not to mention questioning their religiosity or being a Muslim in the first place.

Finally, the influence of social media on Saudi women's visible identity is strongly present whether online or offline. However, the consistency of such influence varies between online and offline identities for many reasons which include, but are not limited to, social media's emancipatory nature that has facilitated the construction of modesty standards that are more relaxed when compared with the expected modesty standards within the offline mixed-gender spaces in Saudi Arabia.

CHAPTER 7: GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

7.0 Introduction

This research explores the influence of social media on Saudi women's traditional modesty in visible offline and online identities within mixed-gender spaces and public accounts, respectively. Through the use of empirical research methods, the researcher identified the underlying mechanism of such influence which is going to be presented throughout this concluding chapter. With consideration to the findings of the thematic analysis discussed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this research, the following sections will reflect on these findings and provide answers for the three main questions of this study by proposing a conceptual model. This chapter, as well as this research, will close with the research's contribution, limitations, directions for future research, and some concluding remarks.

7.1 Developing a conceptual model

The proposed conceptual model, as well as the findings of this study, have demonstrated that the influence of social media on Saudi women's traditional modesty in their visible offline and online identities involves several processes. Each process will be discussed, however, in order to maintain clarity, the conceptual model will first be presented and then each of its components will be thoroughly discussed.

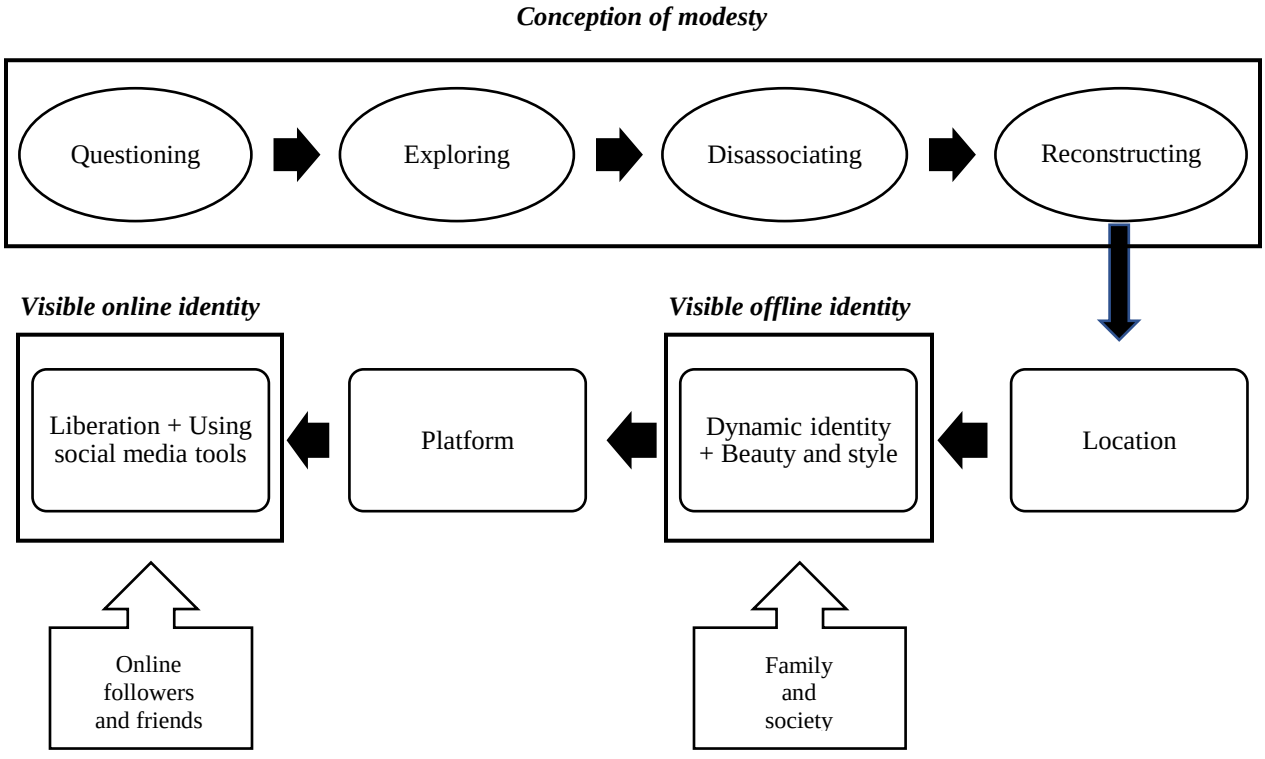

Figure 17: Proposed conceptual model

7.1.1 Conception of modesty

As demonstrated in Chapter two, the pertinent literature to this study did not sufficiently address the influence of social media on the conception of traditional modesty in visible identities within an Islamic context, not to mention within the context of Saudi Arabia. The findings of this study suggest that such influence involves a multi-step conceptual process where Saudi women question, explore, disassociate, and reconstruct the way modesty is perceived by them. In other words, with consideration to the researcher's philosophical stance, the reality of what constitutes modesty in a visible identity is created within the minds of the 23 Saudi women who were the crux for this research data. In the following subsections, each construct of the multi-step conceptual process will be presented and discussed.

7.1.1.1 Questioning

According to Peter Abelard, "Constant and frequent questioning is the first key to wisdom… For through doubting we are led to inquire, and by inquiry, we perceive the truth" (cited in Giussani, 2020, p.1226). In line with Abelard's words, the findings of this study suggest that social media's influence on the conception of modesty starts with seeding doubts and raising questions about one's preconceived and justified beliefs about modesty in the traditional visible Islamic identity. Such influence is not limited to being exposed to a certain single platform on social media; instead, all the platforms in this study contributed inclusively to the questioning process. For instance, Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube's fundamental contribution was through photos, videos, and comments, whereas Twitter's contribution was mainly through discussions that revolve around certain modesty issues that are related to Saudi women's socio-cultural environment.

Being constantly exposed to photos and videos of Muslim women who are from different Islamic countries other than Saudi Arabia has a significant influence on Saudi women. In essence, witnessing how other Muslim women define their modesty standards through their visible identities, in a way that is considered to be liberal in comparison with the traditional/religious interpretation of modesty in Saudi Arabia, has propelled many Saudi women to question their underlying beliefs about modesty. Such a force would not gain momentum if these photos and videos were limited to Muslim women from all over the world. To elaborate more, the findings suggest that the participants were influenced not only by seeing the visible identities of Muslim women from different countries, but also by seeing other Saudi women who took the initiative to contribute to changing the traditional borders of modesty. For example, numerous Saudi female influencers on different social media platforms are posting photos and videos of themselves in a fashion that would not be possible to imagine just a few years ago when they would have faced severe repercussions that included but were not limited to receiving serious threats (Aarts, Roelants & Gardner, 2015). In such posts, the borders of modesty which they have explicitly adopted would uncover new territories that were previously uncharted because of socio-cultural factors that include religion.

The suggestion that Muslim women, especially those who are interested in fashion, present themselves on social media in a liberal way that is significantly influenced by non-religious norms was noted by Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017); they emphasized that these Muslim women are market-oriented (i.e., always changing), although they are still signalling their Islamic culture through semiotics on social media. Thus, building on their argument, the researcher argues that Saudi women, who are immersed in the culture of fashion consumption (Assad, 2007), are being influenced to question their conception of modesty, especially whenever they see how other 'fashion-interested' Muslim women present themselves in a modern way on social media.

As mentioned earlier, questioning is not only ignited by seeing Muslim women. To elaborate in more detail, although a picture is worth a thousand words, it is the other way around when it comes to forming religious beliefs which are underpinned mostly by words instead of pictures. On Twitter, the discussions and arguments about modesty-related topics that challenge the mainstream beliefs about modesty were also a source that led some Saudi women not only to question but also to explore different religious interpretations about modesty.

7.1.1.2 Exploring

The subsequent step to questioning is exploring, which spans a wide range of modesty-related Islamic interpretations. To be precise, the findings suggest that once one's questioning capacity has started to be filled with imperative modesty enquiries, multiple sources will be approached in order to seek and explore different interpretations of several modesty-related issues. The primary platform that is used to explore these interpretations is Twitter which is, unlike Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube, mainly known as a microblogging or a text-based platform, although it can include photos and videos. What makes Twitter an interesting destination for exploration is its hashtags which could be "seen as a structural feature for public debates on Twitter, as it is often used as a symbolic anchor tied to a specific topic, and enables newcomers to join in on, as well as initiate new debates" (Enli & Simonsen, 2017, p.3). Thus, several Saudi women would approach Twitter to interactively explore potential answers (e.g., multiple Islamic interpretations) for their modesty-related questions.

On the Twitter platform, the interactivity feature as well as the potential for anonymity have facilitated the exploration process. For instance, by using a pseudonym, a Saudi woman is interacting with other users regardless of their gender and expressing herself without the fear of being judged. In this regard, the socio-cultural limits imposed by the society, which dictate the margins which Saudi women can explore, practically vanish on Twitter. As a result, such exploration is not limited to superficial modesty issues; instead, it stretches to include deep and controversial aspects of Islamic modesty. For example, different interpretations regarding the necessity of covering the body, hair, and face were among the prominent topics that several participants said they have sought to explore. Such interpretations were not limited to Saudi

clerics, but instead all the different interpretations that emerged from different Islamic countries and scholars were considered, particularly those who identified as Sunnis. Thus, unlike Orbe's (2012) argument that consumers search for and explore messages in the media that match their actual beliefs and attitudes, the findings of this study suggest that Saudi women's explorations encompassed different modesty interpretations that are not typically parallel with their actual beliefs.

Even though Twitter was reported by many participants as the primary source for exploration, a handful of participants emphasized that YouTube is their favourite destination for exploring modesty-related issues. However, it is important to underline that exploration, whether on Twitter, YouTube, or any other social media platform, could be intentional or unintentional. By way of illustration, the possibility of coming across information that would enlighten or change one's beliefs about modesty is high, especially within the current surge of modernism in Saudi Arabia's socio-cultural milieus which can be sensed even in the content produced by Saudis on social media. For instance, a participant noted how a video on YouTube made her realize that the analogy between covering a woman's body and covering a lollipop is illogical. Such an analogy had been widely used in Saudi Arabia, especially within conservative circles that underline the need for accentuating and associating religiosity with modesty in appearance.

7.1.1.3 Disassociating

The marriage between religiosity and appearance is not particular to Islam. Actually, in all Abrahamic religions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), religiosity to a certain extent is signalled whether through a man's or a woman's visible identity. Religiosity is defined as "the degree to which one holds religious beliefs and values both through an internal spiritual connection and external religious practices and behaviors" (Minton & Kahle, 2014, p.12). Succinctly, it could be perceived as a form of religious commitment to what consumers consider sacred in their lives (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989). As mentioned in Chapter two, religiosity could be intrinsic, extrinsic, or a quest. Furthermore, beliefs, affiliations, and practices are essential dimensions of religiosity which Saudi women have preserved by strictly committing to the traditional Saudi Arabian religiosity principles in visible identities. However, with social media, this study found strong signs of a divorce between religiosity and visible identity. Consequently, this research argues that after being influenced by social media to question traditional modesty beliefs and exploring different interpretations of modesty, a conviction that visible identities are not indicators of religiosity level is formed among many Saudi women. One of the factors that contributes to the formation of the said conviction is accumulated knowledge from exploration.

Building religious knowledge from social media might result in creating social movements that are underpinned by religion (Nisa, 2018). With consideration to the reformative acts that Saudi Arabia's leadership is implementing on many levels to modernize the country, these social movements would usually embrace and favour spiritualism over a fundamentalism which rejects secular and modern values (Emerson

& Hartman 2006; Antoun, 2001). As a result, this study proposes that the religious knowledge which is gained from social media would uplift Saudi women's spirituality to an extent where the association between religiosity and visible identity is replaced with a focus on maintaining a relationship with God that stems from the dogma of internal instead of external religiosity. That is to say, modesty standards are no longer perceived among Saudi women as unified, and there is a growing culture of accepting different versions of modesty in visible identities even if such versions originated from the West, which had previously been accused throughout history of planning to culturally invade the Islamic world (i.e., cultural imperialism).

In the realm of social media, there are no borders that would stop Saudi women from learning about different cultures. Contrary to the traditional culture of modesty in visible identities in Saudi Arabia, in Western culture (i.e., pop culture) accentuating a women's physical beauty is a popular practice on social media. As a result, the persistent exposure to such liberal culture has resulted in replacing the tendency to reject cultures that do not abide by the conventional Islamic modesty with the tendency to accept them. Such acceptance has gradually weakened the socio-cultural link between religiosity and appearance. In effect, countries that used to have relative immunity to Western ideologies and cultures are being infiltrated by such ideologies and cultures, not to mention lifestyles (Perloff, 2014).

Social media has become an integral part of Saudi women's daily lifestyle. Although Shehu, Othman and Osman (2017) argued that the swift expansion of social media use among Muslims has jeopardized Islamic values and standards, this research argues that such expansion has enabled Saudi women to explore new dimensions and multiple interpretations about modesty which could be perceived as updating and in some cases rectifying Islamic values instead of jeopardizing them. To elaborate more, to some individuals, covering a woman's face is a non-negotiable Islamic practice that must be adhered to by Muslim women in order to maintain a visible Islamic identity. However, the findings of this research demonstrated that covering the face is perceived by numerous Saudi women as a practice that originated from tradition rather than religion. Thus, it is no wonder that many participants have stressed that linking religiosity with the way a woman constructs her visible identity is an obsolete practice which social media has significantly contributed towards abolishing. Interestingly, one of the participants noted how social media has made her realize that veiling is a product of tradition instead of religion because of the strong similarities in the style of veiling among conservative (i.e., ultra-orthodox) Jewish and Muslim women, besides the geographical proximity among countries where veiling is depicted as part of religion.

Another interesting finding is how some of the participants argued that social media has unveiled the truth about some Saudi and non-Saudi clergy who used to preach about the importance of maintaining and signalling religiosity through visible identities. In other words, social media has exposed how these preachers follow double standards when preaching between their public and private lives. For instance, they

have frequently emphasized that the Western world is aiming and planning to allure Muslim women to adopt Western values, of which veiling a woman's body is not among them. Yet despite this stance, some of these preachers' daughters can be seen on social media studying at Western universities and living in an environment where Western values are central. Thus, several participants stood up not only against such preachers, but also against their essential ideologies which link religiosity with visible identity. According to Meijer (2010, p.94), "Many Saudis are fed up with the inordinate interference of religious authorities in their lives, and one can even speak of an anti-clerical movement". However, this research argues that such a movement has already taken place due to many factors, of which social media is a major cause. One of the outcomes of such a movement is reconstructing the conception of modesty in a visible identity.

7.1.1.4 Reconstructing

After questioning, exploring, and disassociating, this research proposes reconstructing as the last step in social media's influence on the conception of modesty. From a traditional viewpoint, the conception of modesty was a result of previous Muslim generations who interpreted modesty in visible identities according to their understanding of religious texts that address how Muslim women should appear within mixed-gender spaces. Obviously, their interpretations were suitable for their times and circumstances. However, with social media's influence, there is a growing awareness among Saudi women that some of these interpretations need to be reexamined through modern lenses which approach the religious texts from new angles that account for the rapid socio-cultural changes that have occurred in Saudi Arabia. As mentioned in Chapter two, the whole socio-cultural environment has been subject to dramatic reforms which are focusing on modernizing the country.

Although such a reexamination of traditional modesty interpretations usually requires the examiner to be scientifically (i.e., theologically) qualified, some Saudi women took the initiative to personally reexamine and reconstruct their modesty conceptions without referencing the clergy's interpretations, whether they were contemporary or historic. To provide context, numerous prominent clerics have emphasized that reexamining or criticizing the interpretations that were made by Muslim scholars, whether in the past or the present, needs to be performed by a qualified cleric who is knowledgeable in the literal and figurative meanings, and the contexts of religious texts (Zaman, 2009; Kechichian, 1986). Otherwise, each individual will theorize her/his position without sufficient knowledge and expertise with regards to religious texts. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that there is an inclination among the participants to rely on their knowledge, personal convictions, and reasoning instead of blindly adopting what others have said, even though such others could be clerics.

The justification for such an act was a conviction that some of the traditional modesty interpretations simply do not fit in the contemporary world. In addition, a handful of participants emphasized that they were moved by several calls on social media that urged them to rethink the differences **"**between the Islamic holy texts

that are the foundation of the Muslim religion and the explanations, interpretations, and inferences of the texts made by [medieval] religious legists, who lived in different times and under different personal and societal conditions" (Al-Houni 2005, cited in Zoubir, 2015, p.141).

One of the participants used an interesting metaphor to describe how social media, particularly Twitter, has enabled her to free herself as well as many Saudi women from the "parrots' culture", and eventually reconstruct her conception of modesty. By way of illustration, this metaphor was used to indicate how several Saudi women had been copying (i.e., similar to a parrot that imitates sounds) the modesty beliefs of their guardians, parents, and whoever has control and authority over them without either questioning or exploring the grounds upon which such beliefs stand. Nevertheless, when experiencing the processes of questioning, exploring, and disassociating on social media, such parrots' culture is being replaced with a culture where Saudi women would autonomously reconstruct their modesty conceptions without the need to copy not only their guardian or parent, but also clerics.

7.1.2 Visible offline identity

After discussing how social media influences the conception of modesty in a visible identity, this section discusses how such influence is expressed by Saudi women in their offline visible identity within mixed-gender spaces. Before starting, it is important to note that the influence of location, family, and society will not be discussed in a separate subsection. Instead, they will be introduced within the following subsections in order to demonstrate how such factors contribute in many ways in terms of influencing Saudi women's offline visible identities within mixed-gender spaces.

7.1.2.1 Dynamic identity

Social media has given consumers a window from where they can look at different trends that would contribute toward building one's visible identity. About two decades ago, Raymond (2003) argued that future consumers will start to be not only more aware about their consumption choices, but also selective about them. With consideration to the context of this study, such awareness and selectivity is attributed to many factors of which social media is among the most important. For Saudi women, after their conception of modesty was reconstructed, the new understanding of modesty will surface on their visible offline identity within mixed-gender spaces in numerous ways and different trends. In other words, social media's role does not end with the influencing of Saudi women's conception of modesty; instead it will continue to influence their visible offline identity in multiple ways that are marked by constant change, such as adopting different trends.

This study found that in order to adopt a trend from social media, Saudi women have certain criteria they wish to be met before deciding what to adopt and what to reject. For instance, satisfying the desire to appear stylish while maintaining a modest appearance that matches one's personal modesty standards is an essential criterion that is considered. That is to say, some Saudi women chose to decisively reject trends

that contradict their personal taste and modesty standards. On the other hand, some Saudi women chose to slightly relax their modesty standards in order to adopt a trend, especially if such trend was adopted by another Saudi women in social media. For instance, unconventional trends in abaya, hijab, and even makeup styles were adopted and employed to construct a visible offline identity within mixed-gender spaces.

The interviews as well as the offline field notes suggest that the location of the mixed-gender space plays a significant role in influencing the way Saudi women construct their visible offline identities. Therefore, in certain places, it can be visibly seen that the modesty levels in women's visible identities is not as conservative as other places. For instance, in traditional markets it is not a common scene to see women walking without a hijab or with relatively heavy makeup. On the other hand, in high-end malls and fancy restaurants, many women would appear in a modern and liberal way such as not wearing a hijab. These varying cultures of mixed-gender spaces significantly contribute to Saudi women's decisions regarding the styles and trends which they will adopt from social media, and eventually use to construct their visible offline identities.

According to Potts (2009), Western trends would be adopted by Muslim women for several reasons which include but are not limited to the lack of modesty and trendy clothing in Islamic markets (i.e., markets where Islamic modesty is central to the identity-related materials). Nevertheless, Potts' (2009) argument appears to be outdated when considering the outcomes of this research. In other words, social media has contributed to bringing several Islamic markets to Saudi women from the ease of their homes through their mobile phones. In these Islamic markets, modesty levels vary from one market to another. Furthermore, each of these markets reflects to a certain extent its national trend, and even international trends. Consequently, Saudi women would have a wide selection of different styles and trends which they can adopt, whether these trends and styles have a Western or Islamic theme. Interestingly, some participants expressed their resentment of the practice of 'forceful Islamization' (i.e., operationalizing Islam as a marketing tool) which is widely pervasive among individuals who want to market products, services, or even themselves.

In contrast to Wilson's (2012) proposal that many Muslim consumers are disposed to Islamize goods and services, the findings of this research suggest that not only do Muslim consumers avoid such Islamization, but they also despise it to a point where they might totally boycott whoever uses this strategy, regardless of the motives for using it. For instance, one of the participants unsubscribed from a Snapchat account because she witnessed its owner using such a strategy. Furthermore, numerous participants expressed their opposition and refusal to voluntarily Islamize their visible identities within mixed-gender spaces unless they are compelled to do so because of the culture of the place that they are visiting, or because of a family member who has the power to control the way they construct their visible identities. Nevertheless, the

control which a woman's 'guardian' can exert over her visible identity is diminishing due to many factors, of which social media is among them.

Although Saudi Arabia's government has recently made significant changes to eradicate the concept of guardianship and to empower Saudi women, that concept is still deeply interwoven in the minds of many Saudi men to a point where they would decide on behalf of the women who are under their control what to wear in public and what not to wear. Nevertheless, through social media, particularly Instagram, an interesting form of resisting guardianship on women's visible offline identity in mixed-gender spaces is being performed through "hidden consumption". For instance, this study found that a woman who is closely and strictly monitored by her family, which prohibits her from wearing coloured abayas, managed to bypass such monitoring through hidden consumption. That is to say, she used Instagram not only to find a coloured abaya that she desires, but also to pay for it, arrange for its delivery, and eventually wear it in mixed-gender spaces without her family knowing. Apart from the ethicality of her action, which is not within the scope of this research, it can be said that social media has greatly assisted some Saudi women in overcoming their family's guardianship and enabled them to construct a visible offline identity according to their beliefs and desires. This finding agrees with Thomas, Jewell and Johnson's (2015) argument that consumers would practice "hidden consumption behavior" whenever the chances of being caught are low and when the consequences of being caught are critically serious. Putting it all together, this study suggests that social media has fundamentally contributed to enabling and facilitating identity-related hidden consumption behaviour for some Saudi women. As far as this research has ascertained, the literature that addresses hidden consumption behaviour within the context of Saudi women is extremely scarce.

Among the interesting areas in Jeddah where the researcher observed radical differences in the level of modesty in visible identities is private beaches, where identities are constructed between traditional abaya with a niqab, and an appearance that is not so different from what is seen on a hot summer day on a beach in a Western country. One of the findings of this study suggests that the influence of social media would lead to concessions in terms of personal modesty standards in order to fit in with a certain group, not to mention the location's culture. To illustrate this point, the participant in this study who spends the highest number of hours on social media insinuated how being exposed to her 'liberal' friends' Snapchat stories has influenced her to give up some of her modesty standards in order to fit in among them. The previous findings resonate soundly with the literature. For instance, according to Utz, Muscanell and Khalid (2015), many Snapchatters would share sensitive videos/pictures because they are self-destructive. Moreover, Phua, Jin and Kim (2017) suggested that an individual who uses Snapchat intensively will be emotionally connected with her friends in Snapchat and has the confidence in their postings to an extent where her important decisions would be influenced by what she sees. However, one of this research findings is that intensive exposure to social media content made by one's close friends, particularly on Snapchat, might

result in influencing a woman's visible offline identity to an extent where some of her modesty beliefs might be given up, and eventually a new version of her visible offline identity will be constructed. Although such a construction would rely on a wide variety of identity-related materials, a common factor among these materials is how they are employed to project one's understanding of modesty that was influenced by social media.

7.1.2.2 Beauty and style

One of the most prominent identity-related materials that is used to construct a large part of Saudi women's visible identity in mixed-gender spaces is the abaya. The characteristics of the traditional abaya in Saudi Arabia have significantly changed in the past few years. Despite the fact that there are numerous factors that contributed to this change, social media is one of the most important among them as many participants of this research have explicitly reported. The findings of this research have shown that the abaya's traditional role of merely covering a woman's body from men's sight in mixed-gender spaces has developed to another role which is satisfying a woman's need to express herself through her abaya style. Such development was strongly attached to social media. For instance, Instagram accounts that sell custom-made abayas were approached by many participants who aimed to design a cosmopolitan abaya rather than a traditional one. The final outcome was abayas that incorporate styles from different cultures of the world (e.g., Japanese Kimono-style abaya). Interestingly, these types of abayas are gradually dominating the scene at certain places to such an extent that the traditional abaya is rarely seen on a woman in such places where beauty, wealth, and cosmopolitanism are signalled by many means which include but are not limited to a woman's abaya style. Although Marifatullah argued that "Saudis [are] in danger of losing their identity because now women in Saudi are free to wear any clothes" (2018, p.25), the findings of this research indicate that the said change is not perceived by Saudi women as dangerous. Instead, it is welcomed because almost all of the participants in this study expressed their enthusiasm and satisfaction with the government reformation acts which involve empowering Saudi women to decide for themselves how to decently construct their offline visible identities within mixed-gender spaces. In addition, several participants noted how they received compliments or were asked by random women in public places about where they got their abaya, especially when it was stylish and colourful.

As mentioned earlier in Chapter two, the dominant colour of the traditional abayas, hijabs, and niqabs is black, and these garments have been transformed over the years from being products of tradition to gain religious importance within mixed-gender spaces (Le Renard, 2014; Al-Rasheed, 2013). Nevertheless, the findings of this study suggest that there is a surging demand among Saudi women for coloured abayas and hijabs that have modern styles, or even exotic touches. This kind of demand has been reflected by Saudi women female fashion influencers on different social media platforms. For instance, several famous abaya designers as well as stores are approaching those influencers to promote colourful and stylish abayas. In

addition, the researcher had seen during his offline observation numerous abayas that would barely meet the traditional Saudi Arabian abaya standards. These findings go in line with Belk's (2019, p.221) conclusions about Muslim women's abayas in neighbouring countries to Saudi Arabia (United Arab Emirates and Qatar), where their abayas have become "form-fitting rather than hiding the figure and their wearers often leave buttons undone on their abayas….And underneath they wear skinny jeans and red high heels". Thus, it seems that there is a growing tide of detraditionalizing the abaya, whether in Saudi Arabia or other GCC countries, and social media's role is extremely pivotal in this detraditionalization process to an extent that it has contributed in changing one of the most basic roles of the traditional abaya, which is covering what is beneath it.

Interestingly, the findings of this study suggest that it is not only the abaya's style and colour that are considered by Saudi woman in mixed-gender spaces, but also how what is worn under the abaya would fit and blend with it. To put it differently, some abayas have a design and style that would allow the clothes worn under them to be visible (i.e., front-opening abaya without buttons). In such designs, the abaya and the clothes beneath it are of equal importance, and both of them are constructed in harmony in order to project a visible identity where the abaya and clothes complement each other. Similar to the location's influence on abaya style, the style of clothes worn under abayas and the amount of their visibility also follow the culture of the locations. For instance, skinny, cropped, and distressed jeans are frequently seen in certain mixed-gender spaces (e.g., restaurants) whereas in other spaces such as traditional markets, they are only occasionally seen. Whether an abaya was of a modern or conservative style, it is not abstractly perceived as an overgarment that has a single modesty-related role. Instead, this study found that the abaya is perceived by several Saudi women as one of the most significant communicators of a woman's taste, aspiration, and sophistication, or as one of the participants implied: each abaya has several stories to tell about its wearer's different states of being and interesting life's experiences.

One of the most interesting experiences that the researcher has experienced was while undertaking this research. During his PhD studies, each time the researcher went back to Saudi Arabia he would witness a change in Saudi women's visible identity within mixed-gender spaces. The nature of such change is more towards the liberal than conservative. For example, faces are unveiling, abayas are becoming colourful and patterned with embroidery. Furthermore, the hijab is placed over the head/wrapped around it in different ways which in some cases will totally cover the hair while others show hair bangs. Nevertheless, every once in a while, the researcher would find a group of women who had a distinctive style from the majority of other women. In other words, in such a group the culture of style and beauty is accentuated mainly through cosmetics which find their way even to those who wear a niqab.

One of the most gendered products in Saudi Arabia is makeup which is predominantly consumed by women. Until a few years ago, women who would wear makeup in mixed-gender places might be

approached by the religious police and be lectured, although in some cases the lecturing would take another – unpleasant – turn. However, currently, makeup has started to be an essential component of many Saudi women's visible identities for multiple reasons, of which social media is among the top of them. For instance, several participants argued that makeup trends are no longer set by Hollywood stars and fashion magazines; instead, the general trend in social media is that it has become the source where makeup trends as well as tutorials come from. Through these free makeup tutorials, several participants expressed how they have expanded their makeup skills to a point where they can do different makeup styles which suit different mixed-gender spaces and occasions/events. Interestingly, the link between makeup and femininity was emphasized by a 19-year-old participant who reported that she dedicates the majority of her time on social media to fulfilling her makeup passion. In addition, she admitted how being in mixed-gender spaces without putting makeup on had made her feel insecure, anxious, besides losing a fundamental aspect of her femininity. Similarly, Loegel et al. (2017) found that in contrast to non-feminine women, feminine women consume a lot of makeup products and apply them intensively. Thus, this research argues that social media has a noticeable influence on how some Saudi women establish connections between their femininity, makeup, and their visible offline identity within mixed-gender spaces, even for those who only uncover a small area around their eyes.

This research finds that even women who put on a niqab are also using social media to learn about makeup in order to improve their skills, which are used to beautify their eyes, eyelashes, eyebrows, and the relatively small area of skin surrounding the eyes which could be seen through their niqab's slit. Although one of the obvious and most basic features of a niqab is veiling a woman's beauty from men's sight, one of the participants insinuated that the niqab is intended to veil sexiness not beauty since "God is beautiful, and he loves beauty". However, Sandıkçı & Ger (2005, p.72) have highlighted how "in practice achieving a beautiful yet not sexually attractive look is a complex task that requires a lot of beauty work". Thus, building on the previous lines, this study argues that social media is comparatively used by some Saudi women who adopt the niqab to learn useful information about makeup which would help them in projecting an offline visible identity within mixed-gender spaces that is beautiful but not sexy (i.e., a hypothetical beautiful appearance that will not reach a point where it allures).

This study also finds that social media's influence on Saudi women's visible offline identities was not limited to abaya styles and makeup; rather, it has also influenced the perception and the adoption of different beauty-related products (e.g., coloured contacts, eyelash extensions, and tattoos). In addition, it has also influenced the way Saudi women perceive and adopt cosmetic procedures (e.g., laser hair removal, lip fillers, eyebrows lift). Putting it all together, it can be proposed that social media has contributed to creating new and revolutionary standards of modesty in Saudi women's offline visible identities within mixed-

gender spaces. Furthermore, these modesty standards are projected differently according to the culture of the location, and the family's control over a woman's autonomy in constructing her visible identity.

7.1.3 Visible online identity

In this section, the third and final main question of this study will be discussed and answered. Following the examination of how social media's influence on the conception of modesty is expressed by Saudi women in their offline visible identity within mixed-gender spaces, this section furthers and concludes the discussion by exploring the said influence on the way Saudi women's visible online identities is expressed in public accounts. The different platforms and the factors of online followers and friends will be discussed accordingly within the following subsections in order to maintain organization and clarity.

7.1.3.1 Liberation

Maintaining an appearance that has some aspects of Saudi Arabia's modesty culture is not a minor issue, especially offline where not long ago there were religious police searching for any signals of deviation from traditional modesty (e.g., nail polish) in a woman's visible offline identity. However, with consideration to the nature of social media, the online constraints on Saudi women's visible identities are not the same as those in the offline world. It can be observed that in the world of social media, consumers have more freedom in terms of constructing their identities with relative autonomy from their socio-cultural restrictions (Duan & Dholakia, 2015). For instance, one of the findings of this study suggests that some Saudi women are attributing the liberation they have experienced in terms of constructing their visible online identities to the absence of religious police on social media. As a result, the limits of modesty in visible identities are stretched more online than offline. Furthermore, interacting with people via a phone screen instead of face-to-face physical contact has also contributed in overcoming shyness, which to a certain extent affects one's modesty in appearance. The previous finding asserts Song's (2018) conclusion that whenever Saudi women are physically present with unrelated men, shyness would be a spontaneous reaction since it is one of the fundamental cultural elements that Saudi women are traditionally expected to follow.

It is important to emphasize that the number of daily hours spent on social media represents a considerably large portion of one's daily activities. Thus, numerous participants have underlined the importance of being considerate about the type of followers and friends they have online, and who should be pushed away from their accounts. One common reason for such consideration that repeatedly emerged from the data is the tendency to surround the self with individuals who would not criticize the way one chose to project her visible online identity. Furthermore, seeking affirmation (i.e., complimenting the style of the online visible identity) was also another reason for such behaviour. Interestingly, one of the participants has emphasized that she reached a point where having an online discussion to convince others about her unconventional modesty perspectives, which surface on her online visible identity, is not of any interest to her. As a result, whenever she comes across these mentalities, all that it would take from her is a couple of touches on her

phone to outcast them from her online life. The aforementioned findings are consistent with Miller's (2017) proposal of how social media is central to certain individuals to an extent where their social circles in social media are carefully formed in a way that is aimed to validate one's identity. However, such validation could also be achieved through competing with online friends in terms of producing a unique visible online identity. For instance, putting effort and time to construct a visible online identity that would outcompete one's online friends was a common practice among Saudi women. Putting it all together, the findings of this research extend Décieux, Heinen and Willems' (2019) argument that social media has replaced to a certain extent offline interaction. That is to say, this research argues that in societies where consumers' social restrictions on their autonomy to construct their visible identities are more acute in the offline realm than the online one, social media would be sought as a safe portal where they can freely express themselves through their visible online identities to/with other individuals with whom they have commonalities in terms of modesty standards in visible identities.

One of the insightful experiences which the researcher has experienced throughout this research was the gradual drastic change in the general theme of Saudi women's visible online identities in public accounts. To explain this phenomenon in more detail, in the very early stages of this research, the number of Saudi women who would project through their public accounts a visible identity that significantly differed from the traditional visible Islamic identity was relatively small. However, over the course of this study, where numerous socio-cultural reforms were undertaken and implemented by Saudi Arabia's government, the researcher has noticed that there is a gradual surge with regards to the phenomenon of Saudi women whose visible online identities are characterized by modernity and emancipation from traditional modesty standards. Furthermore, the researcher also noted that there is a growing phenomenon of Saudi women who publicly present themselves on their social media accounts as models and makeup artists. Interestingly, those Saudi women are not categorized under a certain age range, education level, or even marital status. Instead, they are from various different ages, backgrounds, and regions. In support of the previous claims, several participants highlighted how the growing number of Saudi female makeup artists and models on different social media platforms has influenced them to compare and occasionally copy some aspects of their liberally-inclined visible online identities, let alone envy their lifestyles.

The previous finding goes in the opposite direction to Chae's (2018) claims that if individuals were interested in acquiring information, then the likelihood of comparing themselves with social media influencers is extremely low. In addition, Chae (2018) also proposed that the daily life postings made by female influencers are one of the main sources that would result in triggering envy from other females. Within the context of Saudi Arabia where visible identities are attached to certain modesty standards that are underpinned by socio-cultural factors, a Saudi female influencer that is liberally constructing her online visible identity would be a source of inspiration to numerous Saudi women who are unable to freely express

themselves through their visible identities due to external factors. In addition, several participants have explicitly expressed their admiration and respect for Saudi female influencers, especially those who publicly construct their visible online identities in their daily life postings according to their personal modesty convictions, and regardless of how they might be stigmatized as being immodest by the society. Therefore, this research proposes that the daily life postings of Saudi female influencers who adopt a liberal visible online identity are perceived by numerous Saudi women as a source of positive inspiration instead of negative envy. Moreover, Saudi female influencers are also perceived by Saudi women as not only a source where they can learn fashion but also as a source where they can learn how to believe and be proud in their visible identity construction choices.

The researcher would like to conclude this section with another observation which he noted specifically during the coronavirus pandemic. Interestingly, the number of Saudi women who have started to produce content by mainly relying on the way they construct their visible identity (e.g., makeup artists, models) has significantly and noticeable flourished during coronavirus lockdown measures, which lasted for approximately a period of three months in Saudi Arabia where tough restrictions such as 24-hour curfews had been imposed (Rashad, 2020).

7.1.3.2 Using social media tools

Social media tools such as filters and lenses are distinctive features which exist in different social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram. These tools would enable social media users to enhance their visible online identities as well as the environment in which the photo/video was taken. For instance, altering the size of the eyes, changing skin tone, and contouring certain areas in the face are all enhancements that can be done using such tools. In addition, information such as the time and the temperature can be also added to photos/videos. This research finds that several Saudi women have relied on these tools to construct an ideal visible online identity of themselves. For instance, one of the participants argued that these tools would allow her to enhance her appearance to be flawless in terms of meeting her own beauty standards. In other words, these tools have facilitated the construction and projection of an ideal visible identity. This finding goes in parallel with Kiziltunali's (2016) suggestion that many individuals utilize these tools in order to project ideal (online) versions of their visible identities that fulfil what their real (offline) visible identities are missing (Kiziltunali, 2016).

Although the participants in this study expressed how social media tools have positively enhanced their visible online identity, they have also emphasized that these tools have serious drawbacks which have relatively affected their self-esteem. For instance, a participant noted that whenever she is applying these tools, she feels empowered on many levels (e.g., beauty, intelligence, and popularity). Furthermore, some of these feelings were asserted by her followers and friends who explicitly and implicitly gave her an impression that she would be more appealing to them whenever her online visible identity is enhanced by

social media tools. This research found that although social media tools contribute immensely in empowering Saudi women to experience new modesty lines in their visible online identity, these tools have significant side effects which include but are not limited to low self-esteem of one's bodily features and facial characteristics. The consequences of such low self-esteem could be extremely severe to a point of considering going under the knife. These findings are reflected in the literature under what plastic surgeons have labelled as 'Snapchat dysmorphia', which is the terminology used to describe individuals who want to change certain parts of their faces/bodies to achieve looks similar to their appearance while using social media tools (Rajanala, Maymone & Vashi, 2018). Within Saudi women's context, Alghonaim et al. (2019) found that among the total number of women who went to a plastic clinic in Saudi Arabia, 42% did an aesthetic procedure due to their continuous application of social media tools, particularly Snapchat face lenses.

Even though Snapchat face lenses might enhance one's beauty, some of these face lenses would relatively anonymize one's identity. Some participants reported that this kind of online anonymity had encouraged them to cross some lines that they would not go beyond when their identity is known. For instance, one of the participants reported how she had decided to experientially open another Snapchat account in which she would disguise her visible identity by using Snapchat face lenses. Despite the fact that Snapchat face lenses would limit her social cues (e.g., facial expressions), she noticed that she gained a fairly large number of online followers in comparison with her other Snapchat account where her identity is known to her followers. The participant argued that she felt relieved from numerous social constraints, such as the way she constructs her visible online identity. Putting it all together, this research suggests that social media tools have enabled some Saudi women to explore new standards of modesty in appearance, particularly when face lenses are applied. In addition, even though some face lenses would reduce the number of social cues which are shared with followers, such reduction did not create a negative attitude among them. Instead, this research finds a positive relation between limiting social cues shared with followers and increasing their number, especially clues about one's identity. The previous finding contradicts Hong et al.'s (2020) proposal that providing more social cues in one's online posts would result in more positive attitudes from followers. A potential explanation for such a contradiction between Hong et al.'s proposal and the present research findings is that within the context of this study, limiting social clues (e.g., revealing identity) resulted in emancipation from social constraints on one's identity-related consumption choices. As a result, in a society that is experiencing significant socio-cultural transformation on many levels, from which modesty standards are not excluded, it seems that new and liberal modesty standards are gaining more acceptance (or at least are being sought to be explored) especially on social media.

Despite modesty standards being projected differently in Saudi women's visible online identities, the general environment in social media in Saudi Arabia is competitive especially in terms of gaining the most

followers. In other words, this research found that there is a strong conviction among Saudi women that the fastest and most efficient way to get more followers is by adopting liberal modesty standards in a visible online identity. However, there was indecisiveness in terms of judging such an adoption. Interestingly, the majority of the participants expressed a neutral position and many of them emphasized that no one has the right to judge other peoples' morality or religiosity according to their visible identities.

7.2 Contributions and key conclusions

Although modesty is a central concept in Muslim women's visible identities, the influence of different social media platforms on the traditional modesty standards in offline and online visible identities within mixed-gender spaces and public accounts in a religion-driven conservative society has not been explored to date. Thus, this study offers a number of theoretical and practical contributions to the nexus of social media, religion, gender, and identity-driven consumption within a socio-cultural context that is underpinned by conservatism.

First, despite the fact that many studies have explored how consumers navigate through their religion-based negotiations to construct their identities (e.g., Mathras et al., 2016; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Sandikçi & Ger, 2010; Wattanasuwan & Elliott, 1999), the systematic mechanism of the internal negotiations of religious beliefs and how consumers externalize the results of such negotiations on their visible identities within spaces that are governed by conservative modesty laws have not been addressed in an interlinked way. Thus, this study theoretically contributes to knowledge by providing a conceptual model which essentially demonstrates social media's influence on the concept of modesty, and how that influence is externalized through visible identities in mixed-gender spaces and public accounts on social media. The influence of social media on the conception of modesty involves a multi-step process: *(a) questioning, (b) exploring, (c) disassociating,* and *(d) reconstructing.* This process provides researchers with an understanding of modesty-related negotiations that are methodically followed by consumers. In addition, each of the four steps provides researchers with an understanding of how different content on social media (e.g., texts, photos, and videos) contribute to changing consumers' perspectives about modesty. On the other hand, the model provides researchers with the most influential factors, *(a) location, (b) family and society, (c) platform,* and *(d) followers and friends,* that challenge consumers' autonomy in constructing their visible offline and online identities. Understanding how consumers strategically navigate through these factors to construct a dynamic offline visible identity and an online visible identity that is liberated from the offline socio-cultural restrictions would enrich the literature with new insights and perspectives about consumers' adoption of different modesty lines in (offline) mixed-gender spaces and (online) public accounts. Although the proposed model applies to consumers in a conservative Islamic society with unique modesty milieus,

its applicability in similar contexts that are underpinned by religion and conservatism needs to be established.

Second, the relevant studies which explored social media's influence on Muslim women's visible identities did not fully account for the capabilities of several social media platforms in influencing consumers' visible offline and online identities in an interconnected fashion (e.g., Alsaggaf, 2019; Qutub, 2018; Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017). Consequently, this study contributes to knowledge by exploring the influence of four different social media platforms, which have distinguishing features, on female Muslim consumers' visible offline and online identities. The dimensions of such contribution would enrich Islamic and digital marketing with multiple insights. For instance, it provides deep and rich analytical description of how different social media platforms uniquely contribute to the creation of multiple offline and online visible identities within an Islamic context. Moreover, this research calls attention to how Muslim women actively utilize the different features of numerous social media platforms in their visible offline and online identities quest.

Third, even though there are relevant studies that investigated traditional Islamic modesty as a construct in the visible identity of Muslim women in the GCC countries (e.g., Sobh, Belk & Gressel, 2014, 2012), and how a Saudi woman would mediate modesty in social media (e.g., Pahwa, 2019), the influence of social media on the way Muslim women in the GCC countries, particularly Saudi women, associate religiosity with their visible offline and online identities has not been addressed. As a result, this study contributes to knowledge by emphasizing how social media has gradually influenced Saudi women to separate religiosity from visible identities within offline mixed-gender spaces and public accounts on social media. This emphasis would provide researchers with a deep understanding of how religiosity and traditional modesty standards in visible identities are not perceived as synonyms by numerous Saudi women. Moreover, it would give researchers a detailed overview of how modesty is defined and implemented in Saudi women's visible identities whether in the offline or online realms.

Before providing the practical contributions, it is imperative to highlight how this research builds bridges between theory and practice. First, by accounting for the unique socio-cultural environment within conservative societies, this research links its theoretical contributions with the real world in a way that could be practically applied. For instance, the study takes into consideration the culture of offline and online (i.e., public accounts) mixed-gender spaces, which stretches beyond the social institutions to include the social structures within conservative societies. To elaborate, although there is more freedom in the online world as opposed to the offline one, such freedom is still subject to the society's scrutiny which, with consideration to the context of this research, places relative control on women's identity-related consumption choices. Second, the research focuses on the realistic applicability of social media's influence on visible identities while fully considering that modesty in appearance within conservative societies is strongly perceived as

an indication of one's religiosity, especially in the offline world where modesty in visible identities is more controlled by societal laws as opposed to the online world. For example, it has been noted how different versions of non-traditional modesty are suitable in certain offline locations where the dominant theme of visible identities is characterized by liberty in appearance. Third, by objectively relating the rapid socio-cultural reforms by the Saudi government, which have been occurring since the start of this research project, with the theoretical contributions of this thesis, a set of practical contributions that account for such governmental reforms (e.g., the Public Decency Law which was issued in September 2019) are provided.

From a practical perspective, first, this study demonstrates how social media has contributed to creating cosmopolitan, fashionable, and beauty-oriented Muslim female consumers whose visible identities are constructed to a large extent according to personal interpretations of modesty. Thus, marketers ought to consider the implications of such change on their marketing strategies in terms of approaching Muslim consumers. For instance, with consideration to the context of this study, abaya designers should consider introducing globally popular non-religious themes in abayas (e.g., Halloween/Valentine's Day) since this study has demonstrated how there is a growing acceptance, not to mention adoption, of non-traditional modesty standards among Muslim female consumers who live in a conservative society. These non-traditional abaya designs would allow marketers to forge connections with Muslim female consumers who are seeking to construct their offline/online visible identities in a cosmopolitan and non-traditional way. Such connections would enable marketers to understand and predict what these consumers need and desire in terms of their visible identities. On the other hand, famous fashion houses (e.g., Louis Vuitton, Versace, and Burberry) should consider entering the abaya market in a firm way, especially since the market has significantly transformed to become polythematic which provides promising opportunities for high-fashion brands. In other words, the abaya market, especially in GCC countries, would give high-fashion brands a competitive advantage in approaching a large base of consumers who are not only interested in constructing non-traditional visible identities, but also aspiring to associate their visible identities with abayas that are made by famous globally known fashion houses. Currently, the majority of abaya brands that are dominating the GCC market, particularly in Saudi Arabia, are locally based. As a result, global high-end fashion houses have promising potential in the abaya niche within the Saudi market where many females are inclined to demonstrate their individuality, exclusivity, and status through luxurious and authentic global brand names.

Second, marketers should focus on creating their marketing advertisements, specifically in terms of their visual representations of women, according to the location's culture. In conservative societies, certain locations such as high-end malls have a culture that is characterized by modernism and liberty in modesty standards, while in other locations, such as traditional marketplaces, the dominant culture is the one that prioritizes following traditional modesty standards. For instance, apparels that are loose and cover the vast

majority of women's skin are more suitable to be advertised in certain locations, as opposed to apparels that reveal skin and accentuate the body's figure, let alone uncovering large areas of skin. Nevertheless, in locations where the dominant culture is following traditional modesty standards, marketers can rely on words (e.g., those which have potential appeal) instead of visual representations of women. With reference to the conceptual model provided in this study, such advertising appeal would potentially influence consumers' religious negotiations to an extent where unconventional modesty standards would likely be adopted and actualized through one's visible identities. As a result, by relying on words instead of visual representations within such locations, marketers would be able to strategically engage with consumers despite the cultural barriers that surround some locations in conservative societies.

Third, social media has influenced the socio-cultural strictness in conservative societies with regards to intermingling and interacting with the opposite sex to an extent where the situation has relatively relaxed to become part of daily life, whether in the offline or online world. Thus, incorporating both sexes in a concurrent way in marketing campaigns ought to now be considered by marketers, especially when social media platforms are used as a means instead of local TV channels. Interestingly, such gender incorporation has numerous societal implications that could be strategically employed by different social institutions within conservative societies. For instance, governments in such societies could start relying on social media's capabilities to attempt to initiate co-education (e.g., using Zoom and Microsoft Teams) as a preliminary plan to eventually introduce co-education in the offline realm. In addition, women's employment in conservative societies, particularly within mixed-gender milieus, would not only become a quotidian scene, but also the criteria for women's employment selection would be impacted. That is to say, in parallel with the rapid socio-cultural modernization which social media has infused within conservative societies, jobs criteria for women could include a criterion that mandates one's visible identity to be modern rather than traditional (e.g., the face is not covered with a niqab).

Fourth, this study illustrates how social media has helped in creating an unprecedented and unique phenomenon with the arrival of modelling, whether as a profession or a hobby, among Saudi women. Thus, women's global fashion, cosmetics, and beauty related brands can start relying on Saudi women models, particularly on social media, in their regional advertisements in order to appeal to a large segment of Saudi female consumers who look up to those models as a source of inspiration, or even as idols. Moreover, these Saudi models have adopted unconventional modesty standards in their visible online identity. For instance, glamourous makeup, dresses, and hairstyle – in addition to showing skin – have started to gradually spread among Saudi female models. As a result, marketers from various industries can approach these Saudi models in order to promote their products, services, or even information, without the need to seek 'Western' female models because of modesty-related issues. However, it seems that the most effective as well as efficient method of such promotion is through social media platforms, where some Saudi models have

already succeeded in creating a large base of followers to an extent where these models could be considered as pivotal constructors of the modern Saudi Arabian culture. Such culture is characterized by improved social capital, especially through the reliance on social media's capacity in terms of formulating social ties through one's online followers/friends. These social ties are underpinned by sharing information and experiences, as well as providing emotional support and encouragement to stand up against the social stigma of not abiding by the traditional modesty standards. To put it differently, social media has empowered some Saudi women to embark upon modelling as a career/hobby while forging online interpersonal relationships with other Saudi women who are social media users. As a result, the social ties among these women are reciprocally strengthened to form an ongoing mutual support with regards to detraditionalizing modesty in visible identities, particularly their online identities.

Fifth, marketers need to realize that social media is a powerful marketing tool that can induce change in consumers' religious beliefs which in turn steer their consumption choices. However, the marketing strategy in approaching Muslim consumers through social media should be formed based on the grounds that although contemporary Muslim consumers have an inclination to modernity, not to mention postmodernity, there are certain religious beliefs that are considered as red lines that must not be crossed, such as the five fundamental principles (i.e., pillars) of Islam. Thus, as much as social media is an effective marketing tool in approaching Muslim consumers, it should be utilized in a politically correct fashion.

Before presenting the key conclusions of this research, it is important to highlight how this research impacts the practice of two of the most relevant areas to this study, which are digital marketing and Islamic marketing. Digital marketers should focus on creating coherent and consistent systematic marketing messages in multiple social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat) instead of relying on a single platform. In other words, this research demonstrated how each social media platform has its unique influence on consumers' self-negotiations and actions. Thus, by creating and strategically spreading marketing messages on several social media platforms, marketers would efficiently and effectively convey their messages. In terms of Islamic marketing, practitioners who are dealing with this area ought to realize that contemporary Muslim consumers' beliefs as well as practices are evolving due to numerous factors, of which social media is one of the most pivotal. Such evolvement has significantly fragmented the classical conception that Muslim consumers are homogeneous in their consumeristic preferences, not to mention practices. Consequently, it can be said that although Islamic consumption is underpinned by maintaining Islamic teachings, the interpretations of these teachings vary among Muslims. Such heterogeneity of interpretations would open new channels for practitioners to approach Muslim consumers in novel ways. For instance, it would be possible to emphasize the concept of individuality over conformity, especially in identity-related consumption which is the key component in constructing visible identities. However, it is extremely important to re-emphasize that Muslims have five foundational

principles in Islam that are of high value to them, and marketing practitioners need to carefully pay attention to these principles in both their offline/online practices.

Finally, putting it all together, it can be concluded that social media has an immense influence on Saudi women's visible identities within offline mixed-gender spaces and public accounts. This influence is systematic, and the multi-step process begins with changing Saudi women's conception of traditional modesty in a visible identity. Although all social media platforms relatively contribute towards such change, Snapchat and Instagram were among the top platforms which influenced Saudi women to question the traditional conception of modesty, whereas Twitter and YouTube's influence was primarily through assisting Saudi women to explore multiple interpretations of modesty. Consequently, the traditional conception of modesty is affected to an extent where non-traditional modesty standards are accepted before being adopted and externalized through visible offline and online identities.

Within offline mixed-gender spaces, social media has contributed to creating fashionable and cosmopolitan visible identities in which makeup and beauty are now essential building blocks. For instance, multiple styles of coloured abayas and hijabs have started to proliferate among Saudi women. However, within certain locations where Saudi women's sense of personal security is not jeopardized (e.g., high-end malls), the hijab – let alone the abaya – is still not a common construct of a visible identity. Even though social media has radically changed Saudi women's visible offline identities, there are several socio-cultural factors that limit the autonomy of visible identities construction such as one's family and the society. On the other hand, within online mixed-gender spaces (i.e., public accounts), these factors are of less influence due to the nature of social media platforms, which prompt a feeling of being emancipated from social and cultural restrictions, or as Suler (2004) described they promote the online disinhibition effect. As a result, Saudi women's visible online identities are constructed with more autonomy in public social media accounts as opposed to offline mixed-gender spaces. The limits of such autonomy in visible online identities vary among Saudi women. For instance, some have constructed their visible online identities without covering their body and hair with an abaya and hijab, respectively. Moreover, others have even uncovered parts of their body (e.g., arms/below the knees). These unconventional and revolutionary modesty standards, which social media has significantly contributed towards creating, are perceived differently among Saudi women. For example, some perceive this transformation as a threat to the national/Islamic identity of Saudi women, whereas some deem it to be a positive change that would empower Saudi women to construct their visible identities according to their individualistic understanding, belief, and conviction about modesty instead of following traditional modesty standards regardless of whether they believed in them or not.

7.3 Limitations and future research

According to Bryman (2016) limitations are present in all academic research because bias cannot be completely eliminated from research methodologies. Thus, after demonstrating in the previous section the contributions of this research to knowledge, this section presents and discuss the limitations of this research, as well as directions for future research.

The first limitation relates to the choice of limiting the platforms used in this research to Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Although the main reason for specifically choosing the said platforms was that they are among the top web applications used by women in Saudi Arabia (CITC, 2015), including other platforms such as Facebook and TikTok, of which the latter has become extremely popular among young Saudis, would have enriched the findings of this research. Thus, further research could start exploring how other social media platforms, specifically TikTok, would influence Saudi women's visible offline and online identities.

The second limitation is concerned with the research methods used in this thesis. In other words, the researcher decided to rely on a qualitative approach due to the nature of the research which is exploratory and not aiming to generalize its findings to all Saudi women. As a result, using a mixed-method or even a quantitative approach for generalizing the findings is recommended. Furthermore, when using such methods, the chances of including Saudi women from different regions are high, unlike this research which focused only on Saudi women from one Saudi city which is Jeddah. Thus, future research is advised to adopt a different approach than a qualitative one, besides sampling women from numerous regions and cities in Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, expanding the scope of this research to be conducted in a non-Islamic context where conservatism in appearance is pervasive is also advisable.

The third limitation is strongly attached with the researcher's gender. Although this research is among a few research studies in which a Saudi man delves into the meanings and perceptions of Saudi women about a culturally sensitive topic by using one-on-one face-to-face in-depth interviews, the fact that there are socio-cultural barriers between Saudi male and female interactions in Saudi Arabia is a limitation of this research. That is to say, the researcher had difficulties in terms of finding Saudi women who would not mind following the interview style of this research, not to mention finding a safe and professional place for such interviews to be conducted. Even after these issues were resolved, the researcher had to be extremely cautious in navigating the topics and constructing the questions during the interviews in order to refrain from crossing any cultural lines that would make the female participants uncomfortable. Thus, it is highly recommended that future research would consider such gender issues. However, an interesting study could be done by a Saudi woman in the context of Saudi men. To elaborate more, a study that is completed by a Saudi female researcher that aims to explore the influence of social media on Saudi men's visible identities within mixed-gender spaces is among the potential directions for future research.

The fourth limitation is about using complete observations in the offline and online fieldwork (i.e., the researcher's identity was concealed, and he did not take part in the activities). Due to the cultural sensitivity of the subject under study, the researcher deemed that this research method, which was used to triangulate with the primary research method (i.e., interviews), is the most appropriate observation style that can be employed within the context of Saudi Arabia. However, the shortcomings of such a style include but are not limited to being an outsider instead of an insider. Thus, it is advisable that future research would consider using other styles of observation (e.g., participant as observer), not to mention using different research methods.

The fifth limitation is related to Bryman's (2016) words about the inevitability of bias in research which commenced this section. In this regard, the researcher relied on his interpretation in terms of coding, grouping codes into subthemes, and constructing final themes. Moreover, choosing how these final themes are prioritized, presented, analyzed, discussed, and eventually conceptualized in a model was also subject to the researcher's subjective, although justified, judgments. The very findings of this research might be interpreted differently by different researchers because of numerous reasons, of which bias is not excluded. Nevertheless, this research employed several measures in order to minimize bias, such as triangulation. In addition, the concept of trustworthiness as well as ethical considerations were given the utmost attention in order to maintain the scientific rigour and cohesion in this research.

Finally, the findings of this research opened several windows on areas that need exploration, whether within the context of Saudi Arabia, Islamic countries, or other conservative societies. For instance, possible subjects include identity-related hidden consumption, productive families on social media, ink tattooing among Muslim women, and last but not least the influence of covid-19 on traditional modesty in female Muslim consumers' visible offline and online identities. Furthermore, future researchers should consider updating the scales that are used for measuring religiosity, specifically in Islamic marketing. For instance, Tiliouine, Cummins and Davern's (2009) Islamic Religiosity Scale which has been widely adopted, even in the context of Saudi female consumers (e.g., Abalkhail, 2020), does not account for the influence of using social media on one's religiosity, although it acknowledges 'mixing with opposite sex'.

7.4 Concluding remarks

At this point, the long journey upon which the researcher had embarked is concluded. Although such a journey has changed the researcher on many personal, professional, and academic levels, producing this research in its current form is a source of content that made this journey with all its pleasant and unpleasant events meaningful and worthy. The researcher hopes that this study will be beneficial and informative to the development of an unambiguous and contemporary understanding of social media's influence on consumers' visible identities, particularly for Saudi women in Saudi Arabia.

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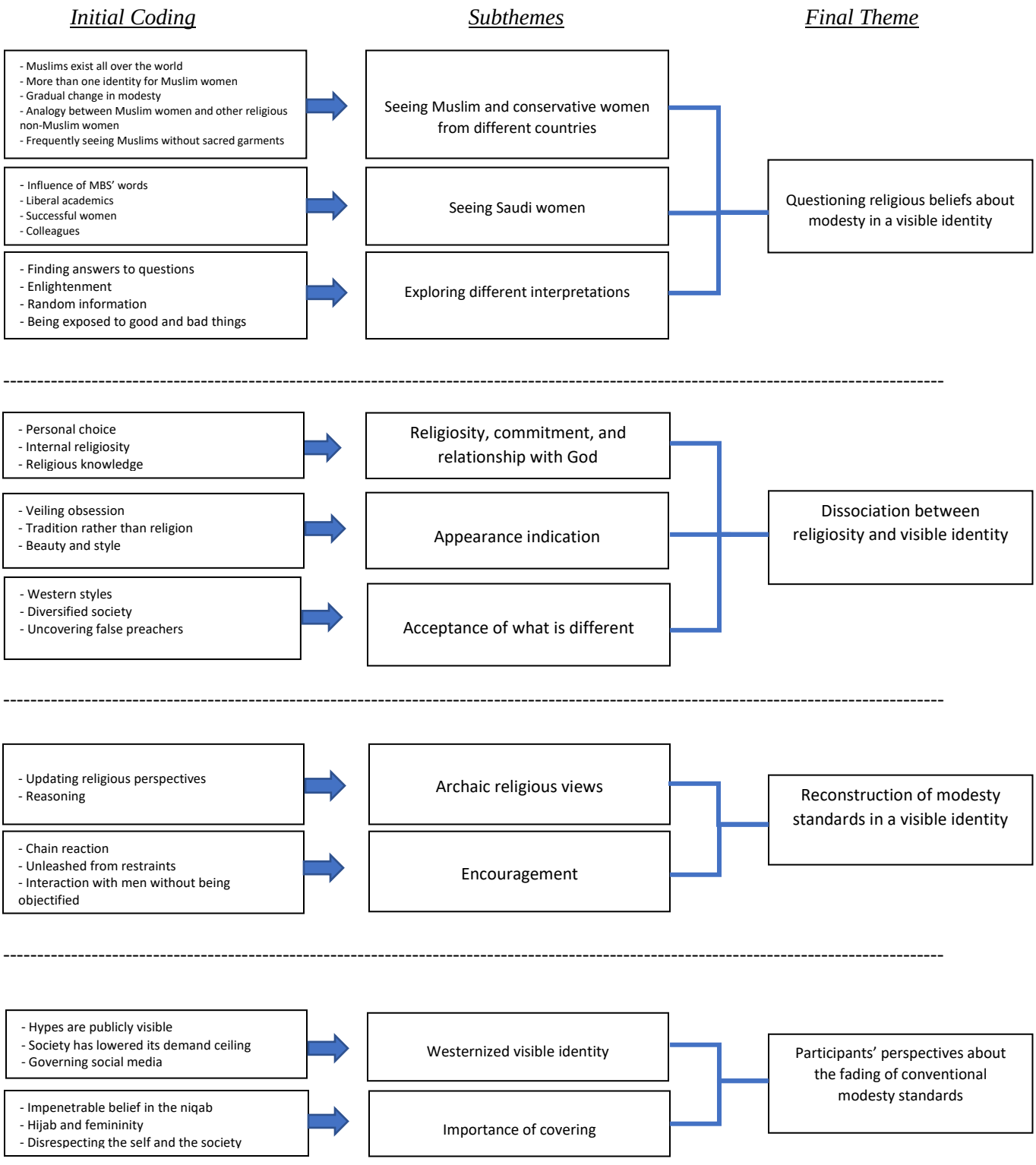
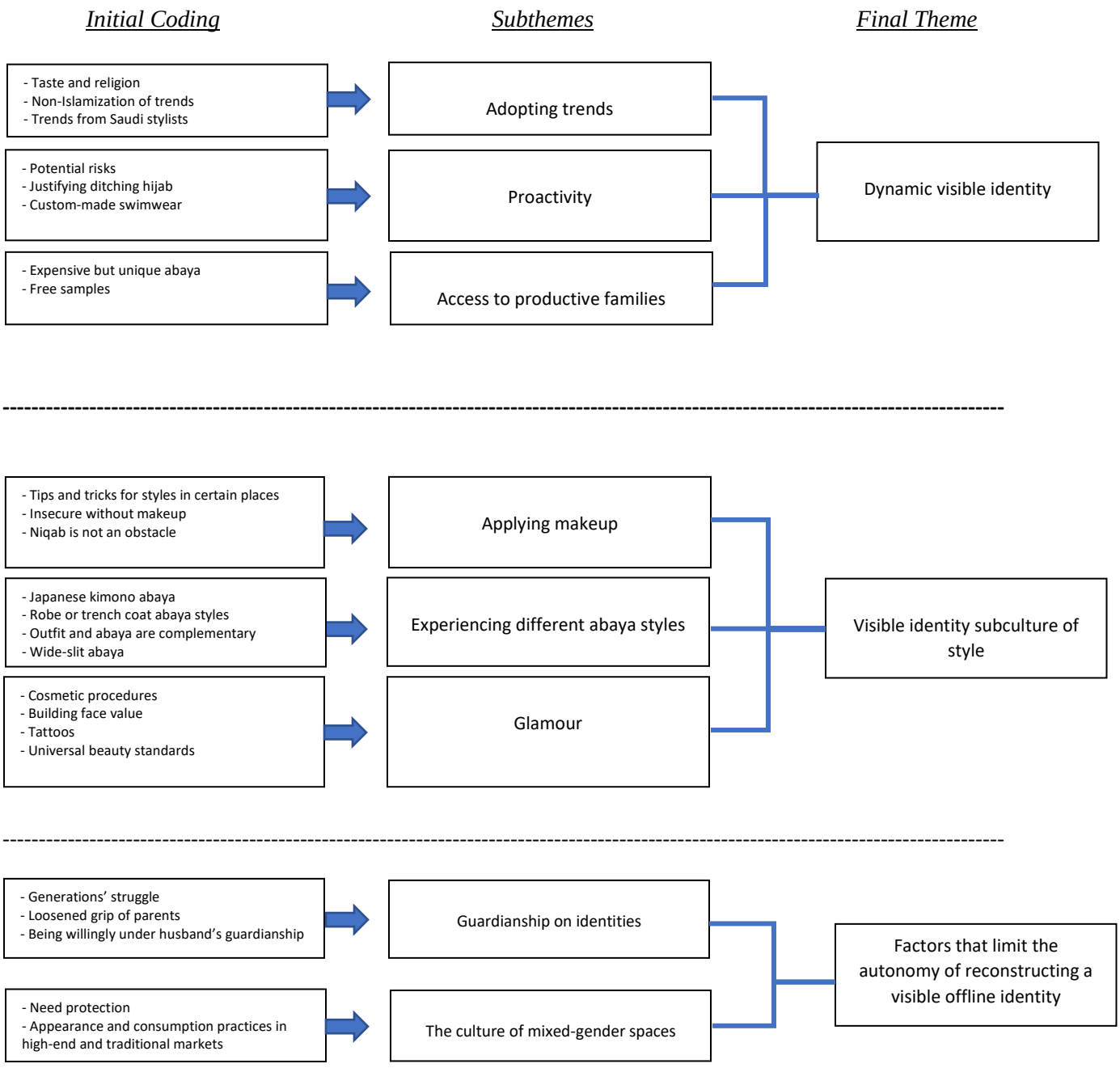
APPENDIX 1: THEMATIC CODING FRAMEWORK FOR QUESTIONS 1, 2, AND 3

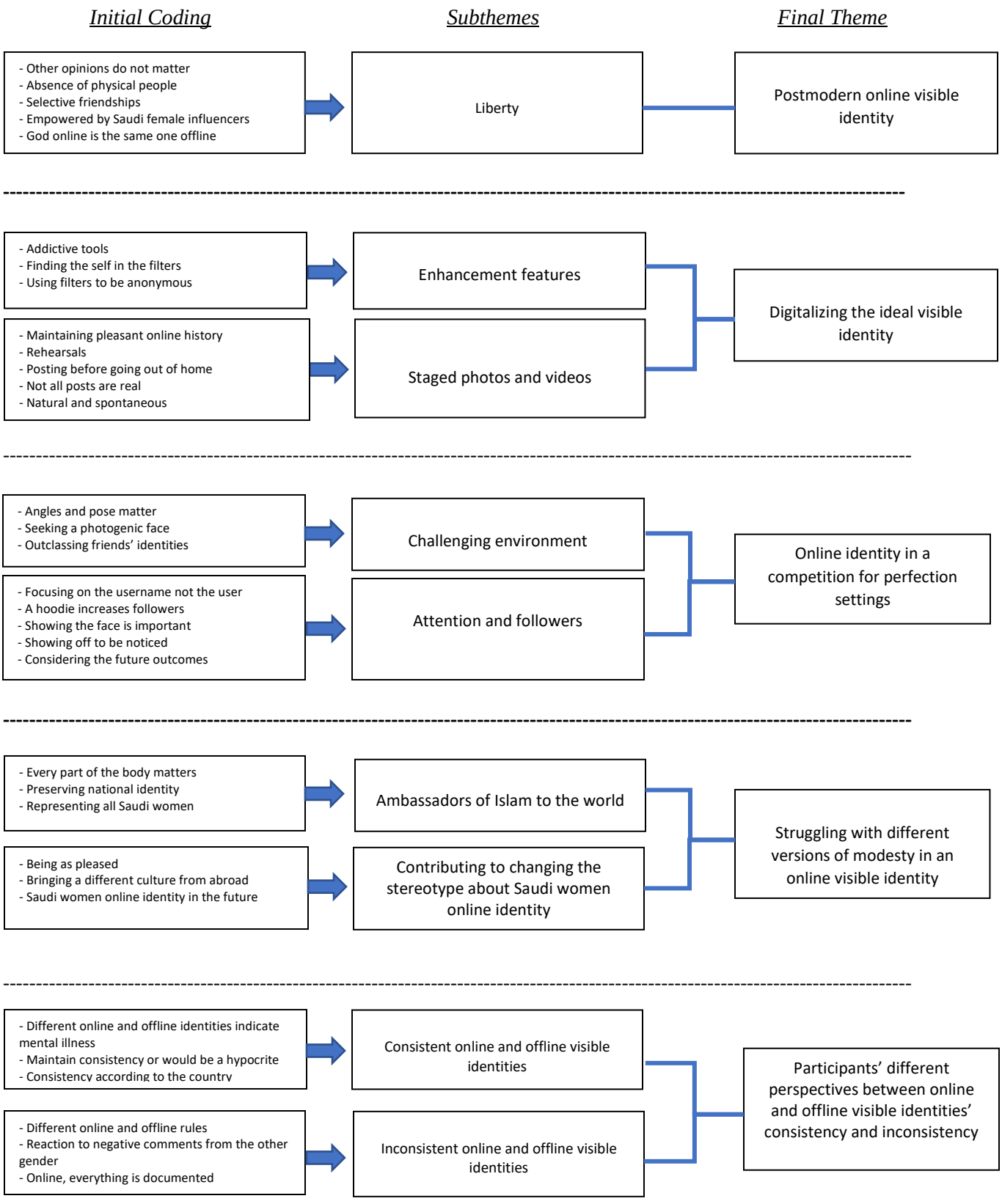
Thematic coding framework for Question 1



Thematic coding framework for Question 2



Thematic coding framework for Question 3



APPENDIX 2: TRENDING TWITTER HASHTAGS THAT WERE OBSERVED

	Translated hashtags	Original hashtags observed
1	Hijab is chastity and covering for women	#الحجاب_عفاف_وستر_للمرأة
2	Inside-out abaya	#العباية_المقلوبة
3	Banning the niqab	#حظر_النقاب
4	Abaya is not mandatory according to a famous Saudi cleric (Al-Mutlaq)	#المطلق_العباية_غير_الزامية
5	Burning the niqab	#حرق_النقاب
6	Disco in Jeddah	#ديسكو_في_جده
7	Taibah University graduation gown	#عباية_تخرج_جامعة_طيبة
8	Riyadh Halloween	#هالوين_الرياض
9	Abolishing abaya	#اسقاط_العباية
10	Al Yasmin Mall dancer	#رقاصة_الياسمين_مول
11	Niqab is under my foot	#النقاب_تحت_رجلي
12	Saudis refuse immorality	#سعوديون_نرفض_الانحلال
13	I have decided to wear on-the-head abaya	#قررت_البس_عباية_على_الراس
14	A female employee undressing in front of cameras	#موظفة_تتعرى_امام_الكميرات
15	Mixed-gender party in Ramadan	#بارتي_مختلط_في_رمضان
16	Saudi girls are the most beautiful	#بنات_السعودية_الاكثر_جمالا
17	God bless you with happiness and success	#الله_يسعدك_ويوفقك
18	We demand coeducation	#نطالب_بالاختلاط_بالمدارس
19	Yes for wearing jacket over abaya	#نعم_للجاكيت_فوق_العبايه
20	Saudi females without abaya	#سعوديات_بدون_عباءة

APPENDIX 3: MAIN POINTS FROM THE DESCRIPTIVE AND REFLECTIVE ONLINE OBSERVATION NOTES

Snapchat	Instagram	Twitter	YouTube
There is a tendency among many Saudi women to appear – and sound – stylish and fashionable, although such style might defy the stereotype of a modest and religiously devout Saudi women. Also, doing online reviews, particularly about makeup and food, was a common phenomenon.	Several phenomena were observed with regards to the way Saudi women express their identity in photos. For instance, "T-Rex selfie", "Selfeet", and "Duck-Face pose". In other words, apparently the mainstream of Western attitudes/trends resonate well with numerous Saudi women.	Although the debate about linking Saudi women's visible identity with their religiosity had been fierce, the recent words of a prominent Saudi cleric "we should not force people to wear abaya" * has noticeably influenced how Saudi women – as well as men – link appearances with religiosity.	The nature of the comments, which involve the Saudi female vloggers' visible identity, vary when comparing them chronologically. In other words, the oldest the date of the uploaded videos, the more misogynistic the comments. Whereas the more recent the date the less negative comments.
The majority, if not all, are wearing *abaya* that are either coloured or embroidered. However, when the snaps are taken in non-mixed gender spaces (e.g., homes or only female gatherings), several Saudi women discarded their *abaya* and wore different types of casual outfits (e.g., loose t-shirts). Also, temporary tattoo stickers would be occasionally applied.	Some Saudi women have publicly posted pictures of themselves while holding their spouse's hands in an affectionate manner. In such pictures, Saudi women put on full makeup, and sometimes they wore abaya and partially covered their heads with colourful hijabs. The hateful comments were not only directed to the woman, but also her spouse received a lot of hatred.	The *niqab* (which covers a woman's face except her eyes) is still perceived as an indication of piousness and chastity. The backlash against Saudi women who unveil their faces is not as strong as those who wear the niqab and aestheticize their eyes (e.g., coloured contact lenses, eyelash extensions, and heavy/dark eyeliner), although both are under fire.	The Saudi female vloggers' visible identity has changed over time to be more modern and less conservative. For instance, the way that the hijab is placed would make hair bangs clearly visible. In addition, although the face is still not fully uncovered, the style of abaya has radically changed from totally black to be colourful, and from tight sleeves to wide sleeves.

* See Agence France-Presse, *Saudi cleric says women need not wear abaya in public.* Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/11/saudi-cleric-says-women-need-not-wear-abaya-robe-in-public (Accessed 05 December 2019).

APPENDIX 4: MAIN POINTS FROM THE DESCRIPTIVE AND REFLECTIVE OFFLINE OBSERVATION NOTES

Airport	Several Saudi women started to wear abaya and hijab when the airplane that departed from London started to approach Jeddah. In contrast, when the airplane that departed from Jeddah approached London, the phenomenon was the other way around. Furthermore, interestingly, a Saudi woman was applying what appears to be a charcoal face mask after about an hour from taking off.
Restaurants	The phenomenon of taking off the hijab was not limited to Saudi women who sat in all-female groups. Instead, some Saudi women who were accompanied by what appeared to be a husband, parent, brother, mother etc. were also sitting without wearing a hijab.
Walkways	Some abaya styles were apparently custom-made for Saudi joggers. That is to say, the fabric material, which is colourful, as well as the design, which allows for wider steps, are all changes that can be witnessed on the joggers' abayas. However, some would still cling to the traditional solid black abaya and niqab despite the hot weather which occasionally hits 40 degrees and above.
Hospitals	Seeing a Saudi woman who is working in the front desk with full makeup is not an odd scene. Yet witnessing contradictions within one front desk is also a common scene. For instance, a front office Saudi receptionist whose face was totally covered except her eyes was working beside another Saudi woman whose hair bangs could be clearly scene dangling over the side of her face.
Coffee shops	Although being served by a female 'barista' was a new experience, what was astonishing is that the barista was a Saudi woman. In several coffee shops, Saudi women are working as baristas (i.e., makers and servers of coffee drinks) and wearing a loose-fitting uniform (not abaya) of thick material. Interestingly, some baristas are covering their face with a niqab while others are just wearing a hijab.
Malls	Black abaya and a concealed identity with a niqab is still something that would be seen. However, unbuttoned colourful abayas of different styles and colours are becoming pervasive, especially among young Saudi women.
Traditional marketplaces	The level of conservatism in visible identities is high in comparison with other mixed-gender spaces. However, such level varies according to the location of such marketplaces. For instance, in the northern part of the city, modernity in visible identities can be clearly witnessed as opposed to Eastern/Southern parts of the city.
Beaches	In public beaches, the scene of Saudi women swimming is extremely rare so that it will not be witnessed unless in remote parts of public beaches where privacy is relatively protected. That is to say, such remote parts are not as crowded as beaches within the city limits. On the other hand, in private beaches (i.e., beach resorts) Saudi women not only freely swim, but also take part in various water sports activities such as jet skiing.
Family entertainment centres	Saudi women of all ages would demonstrate different levels of traditional modesty in their visible identities. For instance, uncovering the hair is not limited to a certain age range among Saudi women, instead, many 'grandmothers' were seen without covering their hair.

APPENDIX 5: DIFFERENT POSTS FROM FAMOUS SAUDI WOMEN'S INSTAGRAM ACCOUNTS

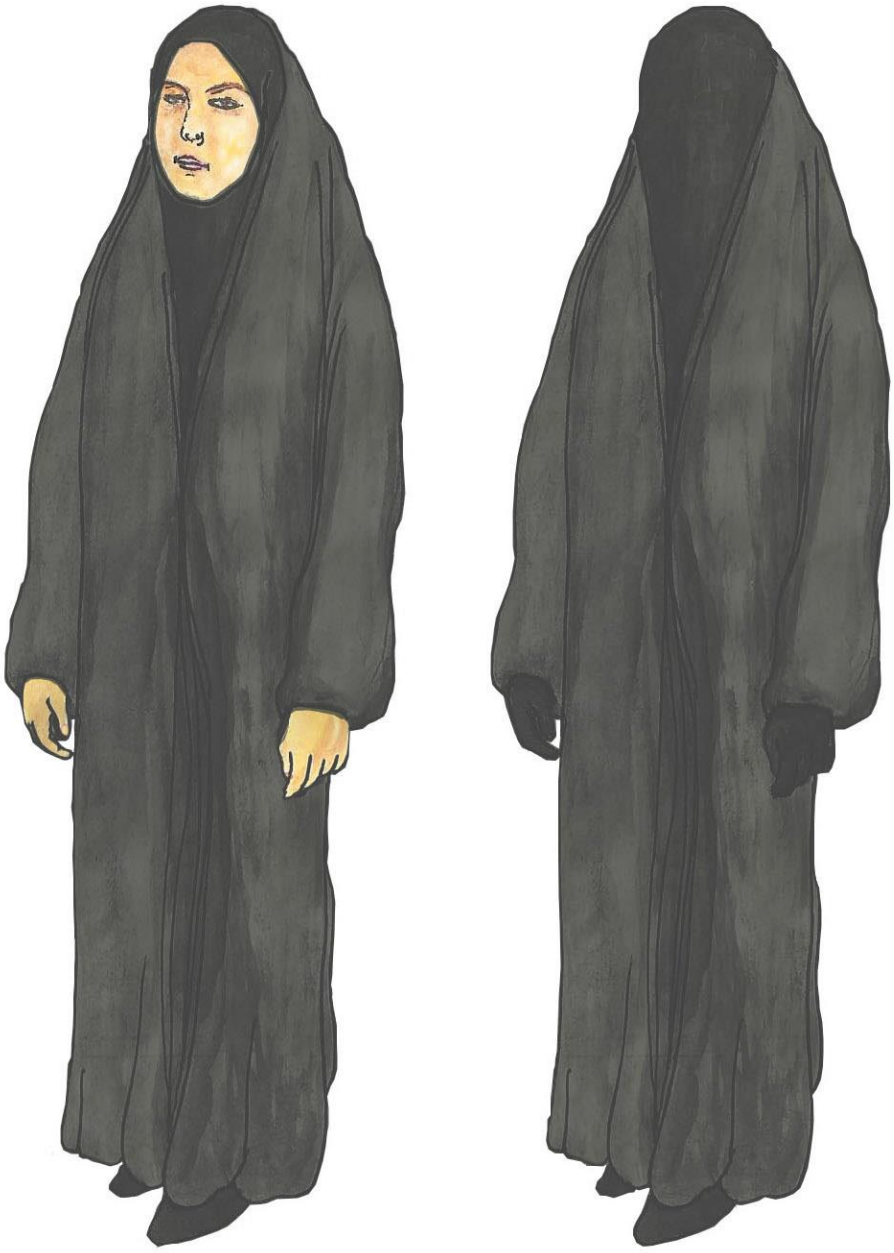
Post from Roz's Instagram, March 2020

Post from Nada's Instagram, March 2020

Post from Bella's Instagram, March 2020

Roz's photo retreived from https://www.instagram.com/p/B9MUqfAlTiL/ (Accessed 15 May 2020).
Nada's photo retreived from https://www.instagram.com/p/B99v3c6hqLq/ (Accessed 15 May 2020).
Bella's photo retreived from https://www.instagram.com/p/B95CsCOFJRv/ (Accessed 15 May 2020).

APPENDIX 6: MODEST TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC ABAYA



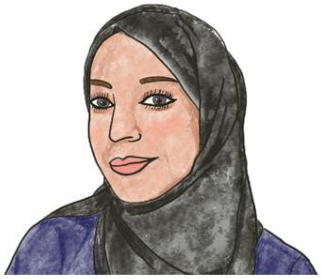
Source: Adapted from Fatwa Number 21352 issued by the Saudi Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and the Issuing of Fatwa (2000, cited in Al-Qasimi, 2010).

APPENDIX 7: DIFFERENT STYLES OF VEILING THE FACE

Ghatwa

Niqab

Lutma or letham



Different styles of hijab

APPENDIX 8: INFORMATION SHEET IN ENGLISH AND ARABIC

English version information sheet

The title of the study:

Exploring the Influence of Social Media on Traditional Modesty in Saudi Women's Visible Offline and Online Identities within Mixed-Gender Spaces in Saudi Arabia and on Public Accounts on Social Media

Introduction:

Dear participant, you have been invited to participate in this study, which is conducted mainly to fulfill the PhD requirements of the University of East Anglia. Since you are; (1) A Saudi woman (2) Have public accounts in at least two of the following; Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter (3) Spend a minimum of two hours on the said platforms (4) Publicly posted pictures/videos of your visible identity. Your participation will provide thorough insights and rich information into this explorative study. Please take your time in carefully reading the information in this sheet. In case you have any questions, concerns, or you would like more information, please feel free to ask.

The purpose of the study:

The main aim of this study is to investigate the influence of social media (Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube) on Saudi women's conception of traditional modesty, and how such influence is expressed in their offline and online visible identities within mixed-gender spaces and public accounts.

Interview procedures:

The face-to-face interviews will be recorded on a digital voice recorder, and later on will be transcribed into text and analyzed. Furthermore, the face-to-face interviews will be in-depth and semi-structured, and will last approximately 60 minutes. Moreover, the questions will be open-ended. Nevertheless, if you want to elaborate on the topic or discuss related ideas, please feel free to do so, more time will be dedicated. If you encountered any question that you would rather not answer, or do not feel comfortable answering it, kindly let me know and we will move on to the next question.

Taking part in this study:

Being in this study is totally voluntary. If you decide in the future to withdraw from the study, your information will be completely removed from my records and will not be included in any future findings. However, if you wish to participate, you will be given a consent form to sign. All information given, including organizations and your name, will be treated confidentially. Furthermore, a pseudonym will be used to protect your identity. In addition to submitting my dissertation, this study might result in published articles/presentations at academic conferences.

Researcher's details:

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Arabic version information sheet

معلومات عن البحث

عنوان البحث: استكشاف تأثير وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي على مفهوم الحشمة التقليدية في المظهر وانعكاسه على الهوية المرئية للمرأة السعودية في الاماكن العامة في المملكة العربية السعودية, و الحسابات العامة في مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي

مقدمة: تمت دعوتكم للمشاركة في هذه الدراسة والتي تهدف في الاساس الى استيفاء متطلبات شهادة الدكتوراه في جامعة ايست انجليا بحكم انكم (أ) نساء سعوديات (ب) لديكم حسابات عامة على الاقل في اثنين من مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي التالية: سناب شات, انستجرام, تويتر, يوتيوب (ج) مدة استخدامكم لوسائل التواصل الاجتماعي السابقة لا تقل عن ساعتين في اليوم (د) شاركتم على نحو عام هوياتكم المرئية في مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي. مشاركتكم سيكون لها اثر كبير في تزويد هذه الدراسة بمعلومات مهمة. الرجاء قراءة هذه الورقة بتمهل وبتمعن, وفي حال وجود اي اسئلة لديكم, الرجاء عدم التردد في السؤال.

الغرض من الدراسة: القيام باستكشاف تاثير وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي (سناب شات – انستجرام – تويتر – يوتيوب) على مفهوم الحشمة في المظهر وانعكاسه على الهوية المرئية للمرأة السعودية في الاماكن العامة داخل المملكة العربية السعودية (اسواق – مطاعم – اماكن ترفيه – الخ.), و الحسابات العامة في مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي المذكورة سابقا.

اجراءات المقابلة الشخصية: سيتم تسجيل المقابلة الشخصية على جهاز تسجيل للصوت فقط وذلك ليتم لاحقاً كتابة المقابلة كنص بغرض تحليل البيانات. الاسئلة ستكون ذات صيغة شبه معدة مسبقاً, وستكون ذات نهاية مفتوحة. الوقت المخصص للمقابلة سيكون حوالي ستون دقيقة قابلة للتعديل في حال رغبتكم ذلك سواء بسبب اضافة ملحوظات او الاستعلام عن اي شي يخص هذه الدراسة. في حال عدم رغبتكم عن الاجابة عن أي سؤال خلال هذه المقابلة, الرجاء اعلام الباحث وسيتم فوراً الانتقال لسؤال اخر.

المشاركة في هذه الدراسة: قرار المشاركة في هذه الدراسة هو قرار تطوعي في المقام الأول. بمعنى اخر, في حال رغبتكم بعدم المشاركة سواء الآن او في المستقبل, الرجاء اعلام الباحث وسيتم فورا حذف جميع المعلومات ذات الصلة بكم بشكل نهائي. في حال قررتم المشاركة, سيتم تزويدكم باستمارة الموافقة على المشاركة في هذه الدراسة لتوقيعها. جميع المعلومات ذات الصلة بكم او بالشركة سيتم التعامل معها بسرية تامة. على سبيل المثال, سيتم استخدام اسماء وهمية لحماية هوياتكم. ختاما, بالاضافة الى استخدام المعلومات الناتجة من هذه المقابلة كجزء من متطلبات الحصول على شهادة الدكتوراة, هذه الدراسة من المحتمل ان ينتج عنها مقالات اكاديمية او مشاركة في مؤتمرات.

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APPENDIX 9: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

The title of the study:

Exploring the Influence of Social Media on Traditional Modesty in Saudi Women's Visible Offline and Online Identities within Mixed-Gender Spaces in Saudi Arabia and on Public Accounts on Social Media

Participant's agreement:

I acknowledge that I have read the Information Sheet for the aforementioned study, and I am fully aware that I am voluntarily participating in this interview. The intent and the purpose of this study are clear and understandable to me. If I wish to stop the interview at any time for any reason, I may do so without giving any justification. Furthermore, I understand that my identity is concealed and protected, and all the information I give will be kept confidential and used only for academic purposes.

I completely agree to take part in the aforementioned study, and I am willing to (please tick):

☐ Be interviewed by the researcher

☐ Have my interview recorded on a digital voice recorder

☐ Allow the information that I provide to be used by the researcher in academic conferences, journals, and presentations

☐ Allow the information that I provide to be ONLY used in this study

☐ Allow the researcher to contact me in the future to discuss the findings of this study

I acknowledge that I have read and understood the Information Sheet, and the Participant Consent Form. I also acknowledge that I can withdraw anytime for any reason, and I consent to participate in today's face-to-face one-on-one interview.

Name: …….

Signature: ……....

Date: ……

Tel/Email (optional): …...……

A copy of the signed and dated consent form will be placed in the main study file which is going to be kept in a secure location.

APPENDIX 10: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Profile

Date:
Time:
Participant Name:
Age:
Marital Status:
Educational Level:
Employment:
Number of daily hours spent on social media:
Assigned Fictious Name:

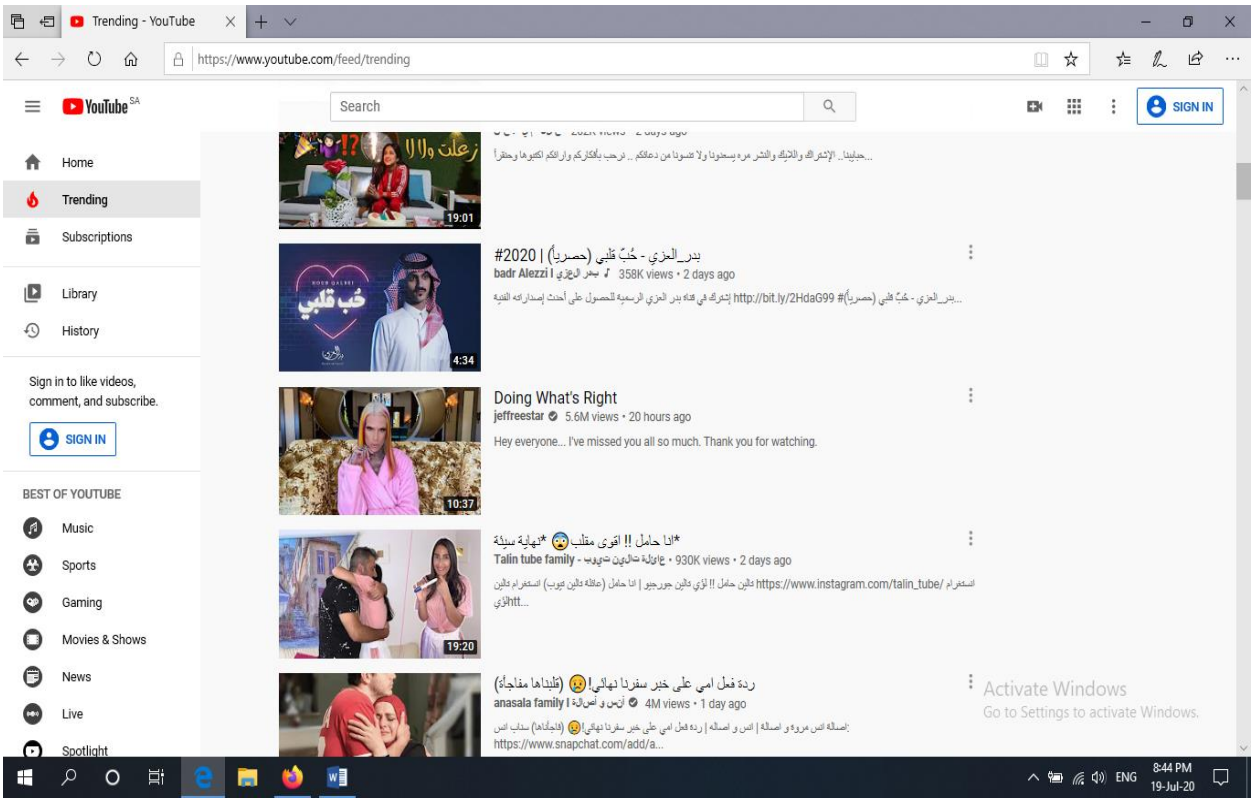
Brief Description

Before providing a brief explanation of the main points in the research, the researcher verified that each participant meets the selection criteria. Later on, the time of the interview and the confidentiality of the participant is highlighted by the researcher, in addition to emphasizing and clarifying several aspects, whenever needed, in the Information Sheet and the Participant Consent Form

Sample of open-ended Key Questions

- What constitutes modesty in a visible identity?
- How does social media contribute to changing the conception of modesty in a visible identity?
- How are the traditional abaya, hijab, niqab influenced by social media?
- To what extent has social media influenced Saudi women's offline visible identity in mixed-gender spaces?
- To what extent has social media influenced Saudi women's online visible identity in public accounts?
- How does each of the following platforms – Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and YouTube – individually influence offline and online visible identities?
- Why would there be any differences between online and offline visible identities?

APPENDIX 11: TRENDING YOUTUBE VIDEOS IN SAUDI ARABIA (19 JULY 2020)



Jeffree Star's video was the 10th video in the list of trending videos on YouTube in Saudi Arabia. Screen shot of trending videos on YouTube SA. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/feed/trending (Accessed: 19 July 2020)