Workshop 9

# Quotidian Youth Cultures in the Gulf Peninsula: Changes and Challenges

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## Abstract

The youth bulge registered in the Middle East in the past decade reveals how youth is becoming a crucial resource in the area. Described in world media primarily in terms of radicalisation or political mobilisation, youth is ambivalently torn between opportunity and challenge. In the Gulf Cooperation Countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE) young people enjoy an extensive welfare system, can access the latest technological advances, live in a globalised culture and display international consumption patterns. However, they have been affected by the drop of oil prices, have been hit by unemployment, and are experiencing challenges in terms of education opportunities and housing availability. Their demands for social and political change display potential instability, as evidenced by the uprisings in the region. Moreover, governments have alternated increased security measures and tighter provisions with *ad hoc* youth programmes to foster creativity, entrepreneurship and inclusiveness.

The workshop intends to interrogate quotidian youth cultures in the past decade, seeking to contribute to Gulf Studies by complicating and questioning the continuity with the literature; investigating the implications on *Khaleeji* identity construction and wider social, cultural and political processes; examining from a multi-disciplinary perspective the relationship with dominant narratives in a globalised society; complicating the framework of opposition and resistance. In so doing, the workshop

will bring a critical perspective on quotidian youth cultures in the GCC, unpacking the ambiguities and contradictions, and contextualising an under-researched topic.

# Description and rationale

Youth studies as an interdisciplinary field focuses on young people's cultures and their relationship with society at large (Benasso, Helve, Merico, 2018). Classical contributions like Karl Mannheim's *The Problem of Generations* (1952 [1928]) link youth with political cultures of the past, stressing the important role the new generations might have in social and political change as a 'latent resource'. Moreover, their flexibility allows them to adapt more rapidly to new societal and cultural patterns. Talcott Parsons further investigated youth culture as motivated by opposing forces, namely independence (from the previous generations) and conformity (to peer groups) (1942). Stuart Hall, then, operated an important link between cultural and youth studies, concentrating his scholarship on youth culture and subcultures (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). Traditionally, youth studies have investigated primarily youth in North American and European societies, while youth in the Middle East has attracted a growing sensationalistic interest in terms of terrorism, uprisings and protests, religious extremism, and migration emergencies. The effects of globalization on youth have been addressed by Zygmunt Bauman as a condition of liminal drift (1976), a finding further reiterated by Guy Standing with the notion of *precariat* (2011) and precariousness, while Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat have addressed Muslim youth challenges and political cultures in the Global South with their seminal work (2010). Last year, Linda Herrera convincingly called for a new engagement of scholars and researchers "as a collective means to better understand the current realities and challenges" facing youth in the Middle East (2017, 37). In a way, the present workshop seeks to take up the challenge to investigate this issue further.

## Objectives and scope

Demographics in the Middle East have shown a substantial population growth at an unprecedented rate in the past 70 years, and have increasingly highlighted the numerical significance of the youth population. In the Arabian Gulf, 60% of the population is below 30 years of age. Numerically significant and occupying an ambivalent social position, youth poses challenges to traditional Gulf societies. Official rhetoric recognises youth as the future of these countries and invests young people with great hopes of carrying on the Gulf way of life into the future. Gulf governments, thus, have increasingly promoted youth initiatives and creativity, like the Emirates Foundation Award for Arabian Gulf Youth or the Kuwaiti Youth Project. At the same time, the technologically savvy, better than ever before-educated, globally connected youth bulge presents problems and shows signs of a potential for instability in the demands for social and political change, as illustrated vividly in the course of the Arab Spring events. The fluctuation in oil prices in the past decade challenges the extensive paternalistic welfare systems put in place in these countries, evidenced by housing shortages, unemployment, education challenges, lack of direct political representation, gender divides, social and political exclusion. Demographic age group markers aside, however, Gulf Arab youth are far from constituting a homogeneous population. Youth cannot be disjointed from their socio-economic and ethnic background, their sectarian affiliation, gender and sexual orientation. In political terms, such diversity is expressed

in the way demands for reform can favour liberalisation or Islamisation, greater inclusiveness and tolerance or radicalisation and (re)tribalisation.

There is a need for a deeper understanding of Gulf youth beyond the much-discussed protests inspired by the Arab Spring, or momentous events that that are given great visibility in world media. Such deeper understanding can emerge from studying the quotidian lives and struggles, opportunities and contributions of youth who, in the process of developing their personal identities, are also actively contributing to the construction of a renewed *Khaleeji* identity. It is in the domain of everyday life that social relations are given routine expression and youth identities are shaped and negotiated. Focusing on the everyday, moreover, makes possible the exploration of micro-changes that are incrementally shaping relations in Gulf societies. By studying the quotidian, thus, larger social, political and cultural issues are brought into focus and can be explored from new perspectives.

The aim of the present workshop is to provide a comprehensive overview of the shifts that have occurred in youth cultures and youth identities in the past decade in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE). We aim at analysing the implications of quotidian practices and formations in the framework of growing social, cultural and political transformations.

**Contribution to Gulf studies**

The proposed workshop builds upon and contributes to youth studies in the Middle East (Herrera and Bayat, 2010; Bennani-Chraïbi and Farag, 2007; Bonnefoy and Catusse, 2013). In line with this literature, we interrogate the formations and manifestations of youth cultures in the everyday GCC countries, focusing on the developments and evolution of youth studies in the Middle East in the last decade.
In particular, we seek to:
1. Assess and complicate the continuity with classical theories while focusing on a specific geographical area, the GCC countries, in the past decade. Postcolonial and decolonial frameworks of analysis will contribute to a broader understanding of youth quotidian cultures.
2. Investigate the implications of youth cultures and quotidian practices in the GCC on identity construction and wider social, cultural and political processes. Our goal is also to expand these themes beyond the reach of the Arabian Peninsula. With a few exceptions, the topic remains largely under-researched.
3. By employing a holistic perspective to youth quotidian cultures in the GCC, the workshop opens up the thematic field to a multi-disciplinary approach, interrogating the ways youth identities and cultures conform and confront dominant narratives in a globalised society.
4. Focusing our thematic workshop on research developments and debates that occurred in the past decade, we intend to examine quotidian youth cultures in post-contention societies, complicating the framework of opposition and resistance. In so doing, the workshop will contribute to unpacking the ambiguities and contradictions surrounding youth and youth cultures in contemporary GCC countries.
The workshop directors intend to foster dialogue and discussion on the thematic issues, contributing to the field of Gulf Studies with the publication of an edited volume.

## Anticipated participants

The workshop is intended to attract a variety of papers from the social sciences and humanities from a wide range of topics relating to youth in the Gulf. Research works based on fieldwork in the area are particularly encouraged. Topics examining youth cultures and identities in the past decade include, but are not limited to, the following:
- youth cultures and subcultures
- processes of *Khaleeji* identity construction
- socialisation processes and new socialities
- youth and social media
- participation, online (and offline) activism
- youth and civil society in the post-Arab Spring era
- youth and migration, nationals and non-nationals
- gender and youth
- family formation and divorce
- youth, identity and nation-building prerogatives
- demographics and economic challenges
- the right to the city and the built environment
- leisure and consumption
- youth and religion
- youth and disability
- challenges of education

We welcome qualitative and quantitative papers focusing on GCC countries, both as country-specific studies or in comparative perspective. Moreover, we seek to include theoretical contributions and practitioners' experiences on the topic.


**Workshop Director Profiles**

**Emanuela Buscemi** teaches at the University of Monterrey (Mexico). She holds a doctoral degree in Sociology from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. She is affiliated as a research associate with CEFAS, Kuwait. She taught at the American University of Kuwait (AUK) and was a research fellow at the Center for Gulf Studies in the same institution. Her research interests include social movement theories, informal political activism and resistance, youth, gender and identity politics, narratives of communities and belonging, political transitions. Her geographical focuses are the Gulf countries and Latin America. Her publications have appeared in *AG About Gender-International Journal of Gender Studies*, *Contemporary Social Science-Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* (forthcoming), and in edited volumes (New York University Press, in print).

**Ildiko Kaposi** is a social scientist whose work focuses on issues of democracy from the perspective of media and communication. She holds a doctoral degree in Political Science from Central European University, Budapest. She has studied the roles of the press and Internet in fostering participation in emerging or transitioning democracies in post-communist Europe and the Middle East. Employing mainly qualitative but also quantitative methods she specializes in in-depth explorations of the intersections of democratic principles and their interpretations in specific social, legal, political, and cultural contexts. She has nine years of teaching experience at private universities in

Kuwait. Currently she is Assistant Professor at the Mass Communication and Media department of the Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait. Her most recent publication is the co-authored book *Media Law in Kuwait* (2018).

## Selected readings

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# Quotidian Youth Cultures in the Gulf Peninsula: Changes and Challenges

**Paper Presenter Abstracts:**

## "Abu Dhabi is my sweet home:" Arab youths, interstitial spaces, and the building of a cosmopolitan locality in Abu Dhabi

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Abstract:

Most scholarship on Gulf countries focuses on migrants' trajectories in these "transit states" (Khalaf, AlShehabi, and Hanieh 2015), leaving aside the effects of the urban experience on their lives. Although some immigrants were naturalized during the first few years after the foundation of the UAE in 1971, the attribution of nationality was in practice restricted to the right of blood by the late 1970s, excluding most residents from Emirati citizenship: foreigners thus constitute the majority of the population (88%). Like elsewhere in the Gulf, whereas citizens benefit from a series of rights and privileges associated with the redistribution of oil revenues, foreigners are managed through a system of sponsorship (kafāla); residence in the UAE is conditional on a work visa granted by a local sponsor (kafīl) and renewed every one to three years. For foreign residents, retiring or being fired therefore often implies having to leave the country.

However, the kafāla system ensures the precariousness of foreigners' status much more than it limits the duration of their stay (Lori 2012). Under certain salary conditions, foreign workers can become the sponsors of their direct family members, and many foreign families have settled in the UAE. Although few

statistics adequately measure these forms of longterm residence, available data shows that in Abu Dhabi, around 75% of children below 15 years old were non-citizens in 2015 (SCAD 2016). The 2005 national census – the only public survey, to my knowledge, whose data includes duration of residence – indicates that more than a third of foreign residents below 30 years old have spent all their lives in the UAE. These residents span a wide range of nationalities, occupations, and social classes: The divide between citizens and non-citizens is only one aspect of the intersectional relations that shape one's position in Emirati society.

In this context, it is crucial to understand what the city does to these generations who have grown up alongside each other in a diverse urban society. Neha Vora's research on Indians in Dubai addresses the question of belonging through two different concepts. On the one hand, she describes her interlocutors as exhibiting a "consumer citizenship" (2013: 135-141) in places such as shopping malls and franchised shops. Indian residents participate in Dubai's urban society through actual consumption (for the wealthiest) or through the mere experience of the "spectacle" of consumption for others. On the other hand, she labels her interlocutors – and specifically second-generation Indians – "impossible citizens" in regard to the contradiction between their claims of belonging to Dubai and the impossibility of a permanent or even long-term stay in the country. Vora's analysis justly demonstrates how the experience of Dubai significantly modifies the lives of migrants and their children. But while underlining that this belonging is always associated to Dubai itself, and not to the UAE as a country, she sees it as further proof of the city's South Asian character rather than as something emerging from Dubai's diverse locality; in other words, Dubai redefines Indian-ness, it but does not challenge it.

Such a description tends to disregard, among others, the non-commercial uses of commercial spaces, through which other types of identification can emerge (Assaf 2017). More generally, it leaves aside a significant part of the urban spaces of Gulf cities – precisely the ones which my young interlocutors occupied. The city is certainly a place where social hierarchies are displayed, performed and reproduced on a daily basis – especially in public or semi-public spaces where the diversity of urban society is most visible. But it is also a space where new forms of identification can emerge, and where the prevailing hierarchical order can be bypassed or shifted

Looking at second-generation Arab youth who grew up in Abu Dhabi, I suggest in this article that the de facto cosmopolitanism of the urban society becomes part of these identifications and constitutes an anchor for these young adults' expressions of belonging. I rely here on ethnographic data collected in the Emirati capital over 20 months, between 2010 and 2016. During that time, I met more than a hundred young adults of diverse Arab nationalities, between 18 and 30 years old, who were born and/or grew up in the UAE. Although my research included both citizens and non-citizens, this article focuses on the latter – that is on young Palestinians, Egyptians, Syrians, Lebanese, Jordanians, Yemenis and Iraqis who do not hold Emirati citizenship, but are natives of Abu Dhabi.

I argue that in the absence of access to formal citizenship, the generations who grew up in Gulf cities have developed forms of belonging which bypass the national scale in various ways. In this article, I focus on forms of belonging inscribed in the city itself and located in the material details of urban space. In particular, I look at their uses of what Andrew Gardner (2013) labels "interstitial spaces." The expression points to the residual lands and vacant plots that are very characteristic of Gulf cities' landscapes: these "unkempt, unplanned, open, and empty spaces [which] comprise the interstices" of planned developments. These spaces are particularly interesting insofar as they are connected to the diversity of populations occupying the streets and neighborhoods of the Emirati capital. Demonstrating their intimate knowledge of these interstitial spaces, and of the diverse populations who occupy them, offers to young Arabs a way to appropriate the city, to belong, which is anchored in its cosmopolitan locality – rather than in a national community from which they are excluded. Although these connections are rarely conceptualized as such, I argue that they matter in shaping young people's identifications.

## 'Facing life together': Everyday friendship and well-being among Indian Youth in Dubai

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Abstract:

In this paper, I build on the notion of the 'educated person' (Levinson and Holland 1996) to shed light on the life experiences, identities and trajectories of young Indian residents living in the Arab Gulf. The focus is on Dubai-born men and women with a long history of settlement in the Gulf region, who, in their early twenties, had recently completed their higher education in Dubai. I explore how young Indian residents generally view their lives in Dubai as a learning process, through which they have acquired specific forms of knowledge, dispositions, and skills in both institutionalised settings, such as schools and colleges, and the wider shared space of the city. In turn, I examine how this learning process featured prominently in the stories they told of themselves as narratives of their own identities as people 'exposed' to and suited to Dubai. My aim in the paper is to argue that education, broadly defined, constitutes an important basis for forms of cultural belonging in Dubai among the young Indian residents in my research.

# Youth and religion in a landscape of change: reflections on practicing Ibadi-Islam in Oman

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Abstract:

Ibadi-Islam is a less known branch, existing and practiced mostly in Oman. This study focuses on understanding the role of Ibadi-Islam in the contemporary Omani society, by looking at how Ibadi traditions are present in the daily lives of young Omanis. They are considered the most educated generation since Sultan Qaboos came to power in 1970. The discovery of oil, as in other Gulf countries, stimulated a profound development that had an impact on religion, mass religious education, which has brought new interpretations and challenges for the religious authorities. Subsequent discourses on religion were aligned with the sultan's vision in developing the country without mentioning the past. In official public discourses, Ibadi-Islam is absent, there is not explicit reference but there are implicit values and principles which are considered Ibadi.

Many young Omanis are now living in a time where they have unlimited access to technology and are using different social platforms for discussing, expressing and influencing other young people in the society. The fieldwork for this study provided data for analysis on how the Ibadi youth conceptualizes and practices Ibadi-Islam. The various Ibadi traditions that are daily selected, reinterpreted and reproduced by them, the political and the religious elite can provide insight on how new formations of Ibadi traditions. Many young people are living in a state of transition from a time when habits and traditions are not lived from simple cognition but are pondered and debated whether they make sense to be followed. This points out to the tendency of how youth conceptualizes religion in a more individualistic way of practicing, challenging the religious authorities' interpretations and opening the public discussion of religion in their lives.

# The Saudi YouTube Phenomenon: From Anarchism to Institutionalism

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Abstract:

There has been a revolution in media in Saudi Arabia, one that is tightly linked to Internet communication technologies. YouTube, in particular, allowed amateur Saudi youth to independently utilize popular culture and humor as potent vehicles to criticize sensitive socio-political issues developing a quasi-public sphere.

Several Saudi produced videos sparked an influx of YouTube videos rendering it a national phenomenon and turning this online platform into the cinema that Saudis were deprived of. Furthermore, these shows represented a radical shift in the participation of Saudis in media and entertainment production and the local social consciousness. This paper will investigate the rise of those Saudi YouTubers and how they were able to relocate Saudi Arabia in the global art map and simultaneously articulate feelings and experiences of the masses.

## "The Popularity of Japanese Culture: Comparing Kuwait and Singapore"

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Abstract:

In 2017, I launched a survey on the importance of Japanese and Korean popular cultures in Kuwait. I discovered a paradoxical pattern of resistance to the East through the adherence to another Eastern culture. I wanted to examine how other non-Western countries handle "Japanese culture" in comparison and decided to adopt Singapore as a sample case. Both Kuwaiti and Singaporean students stress the differences between Japan/Korea and their own country, but also insist on similarities. In both surveys there is a strong emphasis on ethics. Both are impressed by the Japanese politeness and their capacity to organize life, and most reasonings evolve around the theme of "conservatism." Singaporean students, when asked about Japan and Korea, point to conservative patterns predating what they perceive as the Americanization of Asia. The positive values located in this part of East-Asia correspond with precisely those values that Kuwaiti students (as well as Singaporean Muslim students) single out as particularly compatible with Islamic mindsets. In both countries, respondents see Korea/Japan as the "real" Confucian/Muslim nations harking back to more pristine values. Negative evaluations, for example of *hallyu* as a soft power for Korean economic interest, are almost absent.

## Love at First Glance: A Typology of Youth Ideals in Muscat

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Abstract:

In 1970, the sultan Qaboos ben Said began a process of construction of a modern state and built a new economy based on oil rent. On the one hand, the representative power tends to value modernity as the promotion of individual

11

freedom and on the other hand, tradition based on the model of the patriarchal and tribal social pattern (Allen 1987). Relations between young men and women evolve in this context. The number of marriages has decreased: women spend more time studying than before. This first change pulls back the moment of their marriage and makes them more independent, and they are sometimes reluctant to marry. Men, who suffer from the consequences of unemployment, have difficulties to pay the necessary matrimonial compensations. Therefore, new forms of relationships between men and women have progressively appeared, such as flirting online or in public spaces. Additionally, the population of Muscat is composed of several communities of belongings, be it religious, ethnolinguistic or tribal. In Oman, love affairs outside marriage are prohibited. Endogamic unions are favored, the law even obstructing marriage to foreign nationals.

The strong tribal structure, against which the ongoing state has attempted to establish its power since the second half of the twentieth century, also reflects individual family and tribal ties. Due to the strong presence of immigrants for work from Asia and the Indian subcontinent, almost 45 per cent of 4.5 million inhabitants are foreigners. Oman is composed of a majority of Sunnis and Ibadis1 (the Muslim affiliation associated with the Omani state), but also includes a minority Shiite population. These religious belongings correspond to several ethnolinguistic communities since Oman colonized parts of East Africa such as Tanzania in the eighteenth century. In the same period the country was involved in standing trade and political exchanges with Iran, India and Pakistan, from which significant numbers have migrated from Shiite, Sunni and even Hindu communities. Despite the sultanate's effort to build a new national identity, endogamic tendencies remain strong in marriage and love affairs. Love affairs and marriage projects intertwine identity issues in which an ideal of unconditional love appears. It is often defined as the search of acceptance of the other. A growing distinction appears between what people mean by love marriage (zawāj ḥubb) and traditional marriage (zawāj taqlīdī). The traditional marriage is defined as the result of family choices in terms of consent. In the opposite, the "love marriage" supposes to have been motivated by amorous feelings and is seen as "modern". This phenomenon of dichotomization has already been observed in other societies (Hart 2007; Jankoviak 2008). It has been analyzed in relation with the degree of individual autonomy in a critical perspective of the past. The traditional marriage is seen as its persistence and a mark of backwardness (Padilla et al., 2007; Massad 2003). It witnesses of substantial changes in the perception of gender and conjugal roles, as well as a renewal of the importance of feelings in marriage, supported by institutional structures, such as marriage counselling, religious gatherings and university workshops. How do the different structures of the power of the Omani society and the social organization of Muscat affect the social construction of feelings? Love can be examined through a typology that distinguishes its interactional, relational and symbolic sides.

The particularity of the field stands in the importance of gender segregation in social life. It also stands in how one might think the possibility of meeting, as amorous encounters and the emergence of feelings. The way people talk about feelings or the way they keep them silent bring them to use strategies to preserve imperatives, such as the prohibition of female virginity outside the matrimonial frame, heteronormativity or the importance of family honor. My research takes

part in Anthropological gender studies and Anthropology of affect in MiddleEast, a region where this kind of topic is mostly forgotten because of the opacity of the spheres of intimacy. Except for the well-known monography of Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) the last works on love studies in the Middle-East have also tried to consider the evolution of the notion of love towards the social transformations, among which I integrate my work (Inhorn 1996; Joseph 1999).

# A Claim for integrated Spatial Domains by rethinking the Territory of Civic Institutions

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Abstract:

Rapid urbanization is a contemporary phenomenon that has influenced the growth of cities over the last couple of decades. The United Arab Emirates'economy, together with neighbouring Gulf countries, has been driven by oil revenue and foreign investment, leading 85% of the population to live in urbanized areas1 . Dubai and Sharjah, among other Gulf cities, have experienced rapid urbanization through major investment in infrastructure and real estate. The transport led process of planning and expansion brought about significant changes in the economic, social and spatial organization of the city. This in turn led to the formation of isolated compounds, introverted communities and internalized public domains. In order to analyse current conditions and highlight opportunities for urban development, the paper understands the city through social and spatial narratives of a certain group in the population. Narratives of a certain youth group reflect the experiential reality throughout Dubai and Sharjah, reflecting issues of fragmentation, isolation and segregation, both socially and spatially. The analysis proves that, planning processes and patterns of urban development have led to social issues of the youth, influencing society as a whole, causing it to become more isolated and segregated, as well as making such groups the norm rather than a marginal category.

The Emirati government is aware of certain issues within the society and the need for urban strategies to sustain the cities' development. However, government efforts focus on social and political dimensions of urban development, launching strategies to target the youth and the larger population. Such strategies are mainly programmatic, event-led and lack a spatial dimension. In order for a city to encourage and sustain urban development, it needs to think of urbanism as a spatial discipline, not just in social and political terms. By analysing narratives of the youth and reflecting on the city's pattern of development, the paper considers political, social and spatial dimensions in order to re-think urbanism in Dubai and Sharjah.

As a society that celebrates hospitality and social gatherings, the Emirati culture has developed and appropriated unique forms for collective space, of which the

Majlis is the most prominent. Used as both a noun (space) and a verb (time), the Majlis refers to a collective space in an Emirati house where males gather and socialize frequently. It also refers to a gathering in a nondomestic setting, such as a political Majlis, where the leader meets with the community, or a social gathering in a commercial space. The Majlis is one of the spatial types of phenomenon emerging from narratives of the youth, as collective leisure spaces, along with the Mosque, mall and transport systems. By analysing narratives socially and spatially, certain space, time and types of urban elements provide signs to learn from or sites to develop. Although these types of buildings are designed to be shared civic spaces, they are mainly dispersed, introverted and cause further segregation, leading to a retreat into one's own community. Perhaps by promoting truly shared space, allowing overlaps across distinct elements and encouraging social interaction between selfsegregated groups, certain issues of fragmentation and isolation may be addressed. In this respect, civic institutions have the potential to promote truly shared space and encourage social and spatial integration, redefining their boundaries, expanding their urban territories and rethinking their relationship to the urban fabric.

The paper explores the potential of Mosques as an example of a civic institution providing layers of urban elements, through sequencing, overlapping, integrating and negotiating. The territory of the Mosque can be re-thought as a cultural and historic element that has social, spatial and political dimensions, which can promote urban development in multiple scales. By rethinking the internal relationship of civic institutions with neighbourhoods and their external relationship to the larger network in the city, the Mosque becomes a tool that can redefine social narratives through a sequence of overlapping spaces, instead of through fragmented and isolated destinations. The paper emphasizes the significance of spatial planning in the discourse of urbanism and its potential to promote integrated spatial domains in Dubai and Sharjah.

## Is the modern Arab woman an entrepreneur? Exploring the capabilities and constraints among young Kuwaiti female entrepreneurs

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Abstract :

Kuwait offers a powerful context for investigating the quotidian youth cultures developing in the GCC in response to the concurrent trends of pursuing economic diversification and efficiency on the one hand, and the constraints posed by cultural narratives that maintain inequality between the sexes. Further, such trends have "created barriers to and opportunities for the economic empowerment and inclusion of women" (Young 2016). Kuwait exemplifies many of the paradoxical experiences of women in the region; despite high educational achievements for women and boasting the first C-level Inclusion and Diversity

Officer, Kuwait ranks 125th out of 144 countries on gender equality in economic participation and opportunity (GGGR 2017). This makes Kuwait an apt location within the GCC to explore entrepreneurship as an tool for building women's economic and social empowerment.

The UNDP in Kuwait reports a growing number of female entrepreneurs who "are transforming the image of Kuwaiti women into that of successful entrepreneurs" (UNWomen 2015) and the Kuwait government has set up small and medium enterprise (SME) funds and incubators to promote the diversification of the private sector and create new jobs for the youth (Al Sharekh 2018). Despite the growth in entrepreneurial activities as a tool for economic diversification, little research exists that applies a gender analysis to Kuwaiti women's entrepreneurial experiences or their role in effecting the impact of a growing population of entrepreneurs on the economic and social institutions of Kuwait. One previous study (conducted without a gender lens) strongly concludes that "educational, social, and governmental practices must be challenged and upended because a piecemeal approach focused solely on SMEs will not be enough" to open the private sector for innovation by the younger generations (Al Sharekh 2018). This paper seeks to address these knowledge gaps by asking what spaces entrepreneurship is opening for young women in Kuwait and what factors motivate their decision to leave or avoid wage employment. The 2016 Arab Human Development Report equates youth empowerment with enhancement of their capabilities across the fields of economic opportunities, political rights, and social justice. Especially for women in the GCC, awareness of such capabilities "collides with a reality that marginalizes them and blocks their pathways to express their opinions, actively participate, or earn a living" (UNDP 2016). This research utilizes a capabilities framework (UNDP 2016) to analyze of entrepreneurship as a tool for Kuwaiti women's empowerment and presents a multi-disciplinary perspective that engages with dominant narratives of Arab women in a globalized society. Further, this analysis seeks to interrogate the ways that young Kuwaiti female entrepreneurs conform to and confront dominant social and economic narratives through their enterprise. Qualitative interviews are used to determine women's development of an entrepreneurial identity within their individual, household, and cultural narratives and the perceived opportunities offered by starting a small business. The institutional, economic, and social constraints that impact their ability to build and operate their enterprises are also analyzed to investigate the findings that larger experiences of gender inequality are related to decreased economic opportunities among women (UNDP 2016). In this way, the research seeks to reconcile the experiences of young women entrepreneurs, who are largely more technologically savvy and globally well-connected than previous generations, within the complex gendered spaces of modern Kuwait.

By exemplifying the experiences and voices of young Kuwaiti female entrepreneurs, this research seeks to show the ways in which young women in the Gulf Peninsula are negotiating for enhanced capabilities and finding diverse, creative, and transformative ways to interject their own narratives of empowerment as part of a globalized society.

# Reshaping Political Participation in Nondemocratic Regimes: Youth Initiatives and Urban Practices in Kuwait

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Abstract:

The present paper investigates youth initiatives and urban practices in Kuwait with specific reference to the post-Arab Spring period. I argue that youth initiatives and urban practices in the city contribute to reforming dominant narratives quietly defying the nationalistic rhetoric: the boundaries between private and public spaces become porous, new forms of socialities and socialization are made possible, and (political) engagement shifts to informal venues. The multiplicity of practices exemplified by quotidian youth cultures, and the creation or repurposing of urban spaces such as itinerant farmers' markets, community gardens, art galleries, parks and cinemas, transform the city and give its inhabitants renewed possibilities of living the urban fabric beyond the strict religious, social and cultural prescriptions.

The challenge to the status quo takes up urban practices signalling youth engagement as the reaffirmation of the Lefebvrian "right to the city". However, Kuwaiti youth urban practices also seek to bridge the past and present by appealing to the local and regional cultural politics. Youth cultures are influenced by global processes and new media, producing a *transculturation* as a process in which "an innovative, composite and complex reality emerges; a reality that is not a mechanic agglomerate of attributes, nor is it a mosaic, but a new, original and independent phenomenon" (Malinowski, 2009, p. 5). It is precisely the originality of the merging and transformative process that attests for the vitality and creativity of a culture (Rama, 2009, p. 33) and, thus, contributes to the deparochialization of local cultural and narratives.

Kuwaiti youth geographies of belonging were also profoundly affected by the local Arab Spring-inspired protests (Buscemi, 2016). The demarcation of national identity and *nationness* (Bhabha, 1994) within the protests has both marked allegiance to the regime and, simultaneously, has informed the demonstrations with a need to readjust the current relations of power. However, the criminalization of activists and the crackdown on individual freedoms has shifted youth engagement to more informal venues, while encouraging subdued cultural forms of expression.

The present paper relies on two ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Kuwait through participant observation between 2011 and 2016.

## Are You What You Eat? The Vegans of Kuwait

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Abstract:

Food has an identity value. Food preferences are inextricably linked to the social structure, geography and history of a culture, and when a comprehensive new diet appears, it brings with it the possibility of reshaping identities in novel quotidian ways. How has the diet of veganism been introduced in Kuwait, and what new values for identity have been created through it for young people in everyday life, is the focus of this paper.
Veganism as a diet and practice has been gaining ground globally in recent years, making inroads into mainstream culture. The Middle East is no exception to the trend, with hospitality industry newsletters predicting (Instagrammable) plant- based cuisine as one of the major restaurant trends for 2019.1 Kuwait as a culture that prides itself on its awareness of and readiness to embrace trends (hubba), was quick to follow suit. Driven by young Kuwaitis, citizens as well as residents, veganism has been a growing phenomenon in Kuwait: a Vegan Society was established in October 20142, vegan social media influencers emerged and gained online following3, and businesses began adapting to new customer demands. By 2017, mainstream media were publishing feature-length articles introducing veganism and its pioneers to the wider public, in largely complimentary tones.4 Enterprising young Kuwaitis opened vegan cafes and restaurants, vegan dishes were added to mainstream menus, and ever-popular fast food chains such as Taco Bell introduced vegetarian/vegan options.

## Islamic Education and Youth Culture: Exploring the Theme of Tolerance in UAE Islamic Education Classrooms

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Abstract:

The Unite Arab Emirates (UAE) is a nation composed of more than 200 nationalities with various religious and ethnic communities. In light of this reality, tolerance is essential for fostering a cohesive and peaceful society. Both Muslim youth who are expatriates and citizens in the UAE are required to receive Islamic Education throughout their primary and secondary education. Islamic Education instruction is

offered in English or Arabic, based upon students' native languages. Recent reforms to the Islamic Education program in the UAE have placed emphasis on the themes of tolerance, mutual respect, and acceptance of other cultures. As these are relatively recent reforms very little research is available regarding the views and perceptions of Muslim youth on these values and themes in relation to their Islamic Education instruction. This paper explores the themes of tolerance, mutual respect, and acceptance in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) senior secondary Islamic Education curricula. Through a process of observations of Islamic education classes in Arabic and English, along with open ended and semi-structured interviews, researchers were able to further gain insights on Muslim youth perceptions to inform their understanding on this field of inquiry. This exploration is of relevance as the status of the Islamic schools has been debated in relation to its possible influence on religious intolerance and the fueling of extremist views.

## Engaging Youth in Charity in the State of Kuwait

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Abstract:

Kuwaiti youth are often chided by their elders for growing up in the comforts of an oil-rich economy, unaware of the efforts and difficulties their ancestors had to endure for generations in order to make a living. However, contrary to expectations, such an apparently "spoilt generation" is increasingly being drawn to charitable activities. Although their involvement as donors might be constrained by limited access to individual resources, Kuwaiti youth are increasingly involved in all stages of charity campaigns, from planning to travelling to witnessing their charity achievements on the ground.

This paper will investigate Kuwaiti youths' modalities of participation in different forms of charity, their motivations, and their understandings of the role of Islamic charity in the contemporary world. Reflecting on semi-structured interviews with Kuwaiti youth involved in charity and participant observation in local charity activities and campaigns, this paper explores recent instances of philanthropic projects which have been planned and implemented by young people. It will highlight ways in which youths play roles in charities as donors, fundraisers, team leaders, and as 'charity travellers'. Moreover, the paper will explore the means through which the young are encouraged to become involved with and participate actively in charitable giving. This paper emphasises the need to understand the complexity of youth identity, positionality and subjectivity through the lens of charity and philanthropy in Kuwait.

# Saudi YouTube-Influencer as a window to Saudi Youth Culture?

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Abstract:

For the last eight years, roughly, a global and commercially oriented YouTube sphere has been emerging. YouTube is one of the most used social media platforms in the MENA-region and the hubs for the growing digital media industry are located in Dubai and Jeddah. MCNs (MultiChannel-Networks) play an important role in this "ecosystem" (Van Dijck 2013): As "digital intermediaries" (Lobato 2016) they operate between the Youtubers and the industry in order to bring them together for advertising and marketing purposes (content-marketing). In 2018, YouTube opened the "YouTube Space Dubai" in order to train and support the future generation of the so-called influencers in the MENA-region.

In Saudi Arabia, 50% of the population is younger than 24 and it is the country where the most high-level Arab speaking influencers come from (youtuber with over 1 Mio. subscribers). Those influencers are part of a, as I call it, global "YouTube-Youth-Culture." This culture (or sphere) is characterised by shared codes, styles, formats and subjects, a phenomenon that I refer to as the "Pool of Consensus". In my paper, I will discuss the potential of YouTube-Videos as a window to Saudi youth culture based on the female YouTube influencer Njoud. With the help of examples from Njouds and other channels, I will especially address consumerism, social relationships, and leisure.

I will further reflect the fact that those videos transport a certain representation of Saudi society for the Saudi public on the one hand and for the rest of the world on the other. From a more general perspective, I will discuss the pervasion of Youth and Popular Culture by consumerism and commercialisation.

# "The Sky is the Limit": Saudi Youth in a Changing Kingdom, Beyond Western-led Narratives, Interpretations and Misperceptions

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Abstract:

The world has become aware of a more assertive Saudi Arabia over the past two years, encouraged seemingly by the combined effect of two major events: the launch of Saudi Vision 2030 in April 2016, and the elevation of Prince Mohammed bin Salman (also known as MBS) to the status of Crown Prince in June 2017.The de facto ruler of the cradle of Islam and the Arab world's largest economy was born in 1985, and represents

a young country. According to the latest official statistics, 51% of the Saudi population in uder the age of 25, and if Saudis in their mid-30s are included, the number is nearer 75%. The Kingdom's rapid transformation at several levels is attracting considerable attention from the media worldwide, and the Saudi social agenda is taking foreign commentators and analysts by surprise. As a prominent Saudi royal stressed, while commenting on the inevitable Saudiphobia fuelled by Khashoggi's murder, the more criticism there is of the Crown Prince abroad, the more popular he is in the Kingdom, especially among the globally connected and technologically savvy Saudi youthful population. Stating that "The crucial requirement for reform is public willingness to change traditional society" and "If the Saudi people are convinced, the sky is the limit", MBS is projecting a young and dynamic image of the Kingdom whose full potential has been subjected to very limited meaningful evaluation and analysis at scholarly level in Gulf studies to date. Drawing on official documents, facts and figures, press reports and recent literature rather than on field research, in the belief that changeable expectations and aspirations expressed by GCC youth may be influenced by readily accepted narratives forged both inside and outside Gulf countries, this paper will address the following questions, among others: what is the link between new organizations such as the MiSK Foundation, the King Salman Youth Center, the General Entertainment Authority, the General Sports Authority, and Saudi youth? How is the new young Saudi establishment - first and foremost MBS, but also several young royals - drawing on the impetus provided by Saudi youth, and how are Saudi youth expressing their political support? This paper also seeks to explore the nexus between higher education abroad and the social engagement of Saudi youth. In fact, Saudi Arabia has by far the oldest tradition among GCC countries of fully government-sponsored scholarships for study at foreign universities. In particular, in 2005 Saudi Arabia launched one of the largest scholarship programs in the world (KASP), which is still nowadays the most ambitious government-sponsored study abroad project in the Gulf. As reported by the National Budget Statement for the fiscal year 2019, just as in the fiscal year 2018, education comes first among the 9 key sectors covered by the budget, followed by the military. Are young Saudis who graduated abroad willing, able and ready to make the difference in terms of social engagement and qualified employment? If so, are they regarded by the Saudi leadership as particularly effective and meaningful resources for the social and economic development of the country? Is brain drain - i.e. graduated Saudis who decide to contribute to the betterment of Saudi Arabia, and the world, by living and working abroad on a permanent basis - a matter of official concern in Saudi Arabia? How are Saudi youth - caught between a traditionally conservative culture and the rapid macro-changes which are taking place in their country, perceived by the rest of the world as micro-changes, or long overdue changes, at best - influenced by the new "cultural diplomacy" promoted the young leadership? How is this new "cultural diplomacy" influenced by foreign consultancies, and what may be the expected impact on Saudi youthful population? Do Saudi youth's culture and identity differ from youth's culture and identity of the neighbouring GCC countries, especially considering that the Saudi leadership always clarifies that economic and social development and openness to the world will be achieved without rejecting traditional values and "strong roots"? By addressing these questions, this paper will hopefully contribute, with its special focus on Saudi Arabia, to unpacking the ambiguities and contradictions surrounding youth and youth cultures in contemporary GCC countries.

# Alternative Spaces: Forging Counter Narratives in Kuwait

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Abstract :

Kuwait's urban landscape is witnessing another wave of demolition while its cultural and artistic landscapes seem to be witnessing a revival. The first wave of demolition was after the discovery of oil, when the state had destroyed the mud houses in order to modernize the city leaving only parts of Kuwait's Soor/Wall as ornaments on roundabouts and displacing large numbers of the population outside city walls. The second wave was during the invasion, a time that is considered as a turning point in Kuwait's modern history and which lead to a period of increased conservatism. The third is happening today with the example of Sawaber Complex as the most obvious.
The demolition of Sawaber has created a ripple effect on social media among Kuwaiti youth. Photographers, illustrators, graphic designers, lawyers and architects have all expressed their frustration and disapproval through whichever medium they could use, including filing a lawsuit in an attempt to preserve the building as part of Kuwait's 20th century architectural heritage. "Built in 1981 with designs by famed architect and urban planner Arthur Erickson, Al-Sawaber represents a distinct architectural, economic and cultural period in Kuwaiti history. One of the first high density complexes in the country,"[1] an article in the *Kuwait Times* states. Asseel Al-Ragam, an architect, associate professor, and one among many who spoke out against the demolition and called for rehabilitation, states "In the late twentieth century, many voiced their critique of the apartment block as a suitable model for the Kuwaiti family […] It enjoyed a short period of success after which its lack of maintenance and demographic shifts in Kuwait City's population resulted in its deterioration and subsequent calls for its demolition"[2]. Despite all efforts, the demolition continues as I type this.

In recent years, Kuwait has attempted to keep up with neighboring countries like UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia in establishing cultural institutions and museums meant to lead "youth initiatives". Jaber Al-Ahmed Cultural Centre (JACC) opened its doors in 2016, followed by Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Centre (ASCC) in 2017, both under the authority of the Amiri Diwan. Another establishment under the Amiri Diwan is Al-Shaheed Park which opened in 2015, and is co-managed by Lothan Youth Achievement Center (LOYAC) – a youth-centered nonprofit organization that was established as a response to 9/11. The Amiri Diwan is "seen as one of the symbols of the State of Kuwait's sovereignty. It is the headquarters and the permanent centre of the country's

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[1] Kuwait Times. (October 1, 2016). *Al-Sawaber complex in heart of Kuwait City faces demolition – tenants belive compensation doesn't reflect true value*, https://news.kuwaittimes.net/website/al-sawaber-complex-in-heart-of-kuwait-city-faces-demolition/

[2] Assel Al-Ragam (2013). "The Destruction of Modernist Heritage: The Myth of Al-Sawaber," *Journal of Architectural Education*. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/11316519/The_Destruction_of_Modernist_Heritage_The_Myth_of_Al-Sawaber, p.243.

21

rulers"[3]; the managerial function of Diwan, however, in relation to the aforementioned centers is ambiguous even to people who have worked in the centers. In this paper, I want to problematize the narrative pushed by the Amiri Diwan through these institutions and their position as perceived "alternative spaces" and to show that despite the fancy façade, these institutions are meant to contain and recuperate potentially subversive movements or ideas and incorporate them within a framework that can benefit* and maintain the status quo. I will be addressing their activities and events as well as their "behind the scenes" in terms of management by interviewing current or past employees. I will also be looking at an older governmental institution, National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (1973), in an attempt to understand its position in related to the Amiri Diwan and the wider implication of its intentional marginalization. This is to show that despite state-imposed censorship and attempts at recuperation there are emerging counter narratives that offer alternative spaces for the youth to negotiate their definitions of statehood and nationality and allow for the construction of a more flexible identity (in the singular or the collective sense of the word) for youth communities in Kuwait. The conclusion I have reached is that the forging of a counter narrative is not being done through state-funded cultural institutions, but by independent youths, and employees within these institutions who try to push for institutional change but are faced with great challenges. Furthermore, the resistance youths experience when it comes to expressing their need for more freedom and social change both within the social and the political level have led to the creation of different clusters of youth that try to form connections with others of a similar mindset, both online and in real life. For example, one project called *Madeenah*, which is run by four women, curates walking tours around Kuwait City. "The importance of *Madeenah*," the group states on their website, "lies in its avid promotion of alternative spatial practices in the region by acting as mediators and critical agents between both private and public entities and other key stakeholders in the future development of the city"[4]. More examples in activist and cultural fields are, Save AlSawaber, Drawing Kuwait, Nuqat, and *Sheno Ya3ni* which I will be talking about in more detail later in the paper. It is important to note here that my analysis will be stemming from my own standpoint/social position as a Kuwaiti woman born in 1992, and as someone who comes from a conservative upper middle-class family and have witnessed the transformations that occurred in the post-war period, and more importantly, the changes after the 2011 protests. Also, as someone who did not witness what the older generation perceives as the "golden age" of Kuwait during the 60s and 70s.

I also come from a Cultural Studies background and currently work at a graphic design studio which was my practical introduction to people who work within the local cultural and artistic field. Therefore, I will not feign objective distance. I understand that someone else writing about the same subject matter from another position might have a different analysis/outlook on cultural institutions and their function within the social, economic, and political spheres in Kuwait. The inquiry in this paper is a qualitative one that is admittedly lacking and needs further research and analysis. I do hope, however, that my own experience can give insight on the subject matter and instigate more research. I envision that it will be interesting to do a comparative cultural study examining similar kinds of phenomenon in other GCC countries.

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[3] Al-Diwan Al-Amiri, "Historical Background." http://www.da.gov.kw/eng/diwnamiri/about-diwan-amiri.php

[4] Madeenah, "About." http://www.madeenah.co/about-1

# Joy in the Vision: The Formula-E Car Race and Music Festival in Riyadh

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Abstract:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, within the "Vision 2030" economic programme launched in 2016, is actively developing the entertainment industry. In this vision (ru'ya) primarily driven by the General Authority for Entertainment, more « permissive » ways to have fun are permitted and mainly targeted for the Saudi youth. The Formula-E Car Race and Music Festival held in Riyadh in December 2018 is an emblematic case.

This youth is a central challenge and an opportunity to diversify the country from a mostly based oil economy, as they represent the most important demographic category: nearly forty-nine per cent of the Saudi nationals are aged less than 24 years old . Nevertheless, they might remain mostly undifferenced under a blurry misconception of an oil rentier generation, as unified, gilded and idle. Most critics about entertainment development in Saudi Arabia focus on the Monarchy trying to polish and improve the country's international coverage, or the official entertainment possibilities being reserved for the most privileged ones. However, those critics rarely directly interrogate the first concerned. By listening to the people able to attend the Formula-E event and those who are unable or prefer not to, and by reviewing how the Saudi territory historically welcomed more « permissive » norms on its soil, this paper aims to draw a more optimistic perspective on these current changes.