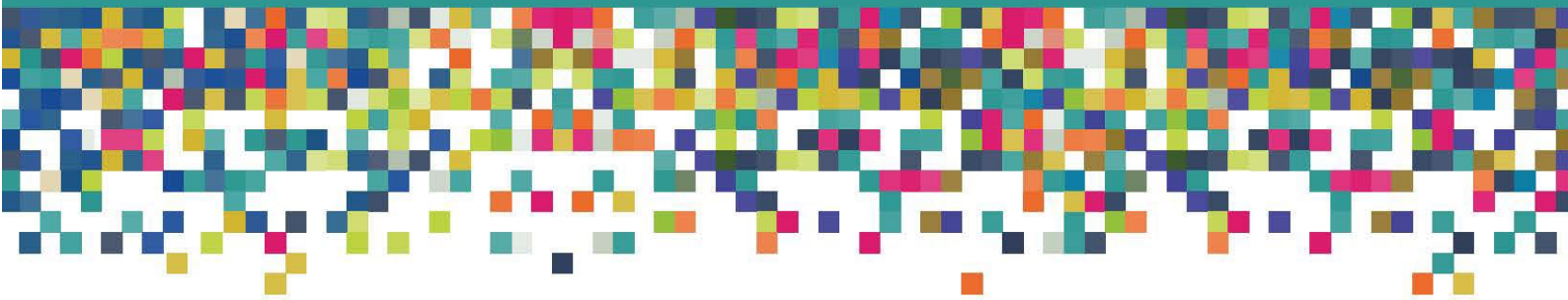


Media@LSE MSc Dissertation Series

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The Representation Of Women In Saudi Arabian Cinema During Vision 2030 (*2016-Present*)

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Arabian Cinema during Vision 2030 (2016-
present)

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Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the representation of women in Saudi Arabian films that were released during a period of transformation for women in Saudi Arabia under the country's national development program called Vision 2030. Using a multimodal approach to discourse analysis and semiotic analysis of scenes from three Saudi films, this study examines representational practices in film, primarily film genre conventions and gender stereotypes. Drawing on theories of representation, discourse, power and feminist film theory, the study seeks to illuminate how women as a gender identity are constructed in film, and how representation reinforces or challenges the patriarchal discourse that historically dominated Saudi Arabian policies and views of women. The study finds that the films largely perpetuate the patriarchal gender stereotypes of passive, emotional and domestic care-taking women, which scholarship shows to exist in the media representations of women in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. However, the traditional stereotypes and genre conventions were subverted in one film that was analysed in the study, which reveals the heterogeneity of gender representation in Saudi cinema and the potential of alternative representations that align with the discourse of women's empowerment under Vision 2030.

INTRODUCTION

Background

In April 2016 ("Overview of Vision 2030", n.d.), the Saudi Arabian government launched the Vision 2030 reforms, which scholars say has been undoing several legal and social policies and restrictions on Saudi society (Alharbi, 2022; Grand and Wolff, 2020). For women in Saudi Arabia, life before Vision 2030 was dictated by the ideologically socially-conservative policies such as gender segregation in public (Al-Atawneh, 2009; Al-Ghanim, 2012; van Geel *et al.*, 2012) and the male guardian system, which meant a Saudi female couldn't travel, marry, or study without the permission of her male guardian (Potter, 2017). Women were also banned from driving (Potter, 2017). Under Vision 2030, the Saudi government says "Saudi women are fulfilling their dreams" ("A Vibrant Society", n.d.). Government initiatives that strengthened women's rights and participation in Saudi Arabia include implementing "gender

discrimination protocols” (Grand and Wolff, 2020: 26) in hiring procedures and in the workplace in 2019, and lifting the ban on women driving in 2018 (Grand and Wolff, 2020). Women’s rights in Saudi Arabia remains an evolving and debated topic among Saudi authorities, religious scholars, in Saudi media and Saudi society (Alharbi 2022; Al-Ghani, 2012; Grand and Wolff, 2020; Potter, 2017).

Rationale

Amid the changing policies and government views regarding women in Saudi Arabia as part of Vision 2030, several research studies examine the representation of Saudi women in different media, such as in editorial cartoons (Alasmari and Almohammadi, 2023; Hambuch *et al.*, 2024), advertising (Boero and Greco, 2022), news media (Karolak and Guta, 2020) images (Albawardi and Jones, 2021), and film (Alardawi *et al.*, 2023; Foley, 2025; La Caze, 2020). In Alardawi *et al.*’s (2023) study on gender representation in the 2018 Saudi film ‘Amra and the Second Marriage’, the researchers recommend further investigations into gender stereotypes in Saudi films. The bulk of the literature on gender representation in Saudi cinema analysed films produced prior to Vision 2030, while few studies have analysed films that were produced since Vision 2030 (Foley, 2025), which leaves a gap in the literature on the cinematic representation of Saudi women since Vision 2030 launched nearly a decade ago.

The Saudi film industry is also rapidly changing under Vision 2030. Cinemas were banned in Saudi from around 1979 until 2018 (Alamri, 2023; Yunis and Hudson, 2021). Under Vision 2030, the domestic film industry has been growing (Alamri, 2023; Foley, 2025; Shesha and Yusuf, 2021) and Saudi films are presented on global streaming platforms, in Saudi film theatres and at foreign film festivals (Alardawi *et al.*, 2023; Foley, 2025). The growth of the Saudi cinema industry vis-a-vis the expanding opportunities for women in Saudi society presents an opportunity for research on gender representation in film and exploring the new meanings about Saudi women being circulated in media, since “in the past, the image of Saudi women was strictly controlled” (Alharbi, 2022: 64). The proliferation of films amid social change brings to light the scholarly debate on the connected yet distinct contributions of film to national and cultural identity and state ideology. “Many Saudi filmmakers see their films as vehicles to explore their society and prompt debate about the challenges facing it.” (Foley,

2025:317). On the other hand, Yunis and Hudson (2021) argue that “Film is more important as a generator of revenue for a post-oil economy than it is as art or soft power.” (12) Saudi cinema plays a role in supporting the national goals of Vision 2030 to promote Saudi culture internationally and diversify the oil-dependent economy (Grand and Wolff, 2020; Yunis and Hudson, 2021). Additionally, film can serve an ideological purpose. Alamri (2023) observes that since 2018, Saudi Arabia’s regulatory body for audio-visual media, the General Commission for Audiovisual Media (GCAM) “aspires to mobilize the film industry economically and ideologically to fall in line with the Saudi Vision 2030 strategy.”(6) Since Vision 2030 is changing women’s rights and status in Saudi Arabia, I was inspired to conduct research on the representation of women in Saudi cinema during Vision 2030 to gauge how the social change discourse of Vision 2030 is impacting the representation of women in film.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Representation of Women in Saudi Arabian and Gulf Arab Media

Gender roles and stereotypes

Representational practices in the media have the capacity to construct gender identity (Hall, 1997). The representational practices regarding gender identity in audio-visual media, including film, adverts and TV serials, are discussed in the literature through the concept of gender stereotyping. For Hall (1997), stereotypes, which can be defined as the reductionist characterization of people, are essential to the “maintenance of social and symbolic order” (258), by signifying ‘difference’ between social groups and between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. In the context of Saudi Arabia, some scholars argue the representation of Saudi women as different in the media can influence audience’s perception of reality (Alardawi *et al.*, 2023; La Caze, 2020; Albawardi and Jones, 2021). Alardawi *et al.* (2023) argue that how the media represents Saudi women can “lead viewers from non-MENA nations to believe” (126) that these portrayals represent “the reality of Saudi women’s lives, and thus falling victim to gender stereotyping.” (126) Normative gender roles and stereotypes about women presented in Gulf Arab television and film productions include the ‘madwoman’ or

'hysterical woman' (Alshammari and Alshammari, 2021: 75-77) and female characters who are "emotional, but ultimately submissive, passive and non-confrontational" (Alshammari and Alshammari, 2021: 77). In Alardawi et al.'s (2023) analysis of the post-Vision 2030 Saudi film 'Amra and the Second Marriage', the authors argue that the majority of the film's female stereotypes "do not reflect the reality of Saudi culture." (131) The stereotypical Arab female depictions, characterised by passivity and patriarchal gender roles like homemaker, have been observed in films from other nations, such as Moroccan cinema (Namrok, 2024) and Hollywood cinema (Mulvey, 1975; Sutherland and Feltey, 2016).

Representation of women in Saudi film and TV before Vision 2030

La Caze (2020) argues that the pre-Vision 2030 Saudi film 'Wadjda', the first feature film that was filmed in Saudi Arabia (Turan, 2013; Valdini, 2012), resists the Saudi patriarchal discourse by depicting the film's setting and characters in a realist manner that highlights the oppression in Saudi women's lived experiences. 'Wadjda', released in 2012 (Valdini, 2012), centres on a girl who enters a Quran reading competition to buy her dream bicycle. The choice of a child as protagonist to discuss gendered political issues can be employed as a way to evade censorship (La Caze, 2020). However, La Caze (2020) also points out that the film presents Wadjda with a more hopeful narrative than that of her mother, the primary adult female character in the film. The film represents Wadjda's mother and Wadjda's female teachers as enforcers of patriarchal social norms by depicting them "imposing restrictions on other women" (La Caze, 2020:161). In AlShurafa et al.'s (2022) critical discourse analysis of 'Masameer', a Saudi animation series, the patriarchal discourse of women belonging in the kitchen and the depictions of female characters doing household chores were identified in several episodes aired before Vision 2030. Additionally, the study (AlShurafa *et al.*, 2022) collected quantitative data that showed women were vastly underrepresented in the series compared to men.

Gender representation under social change

Scholars have noted that under social change, representation of women in the media also shifts. Alshammari and Alshammari (2021) argue that the plotlines of female characters in Kuwaiti programs challenge patriarchal norms by portraying the female characters with

agency, such as the plot of a female character leaving an arranged marriage. Albawardi and Jones (2021) concluded after analysing 142 stock images, that after the driving ban was lifted in 2018, Saudi women were visually depicted in “agentive positions” (3). Part of the social change discourse found in news media representations of the first political elections involving women in Saudi Arabia (Karolak and Guta, 2020), portrayed Saudi women as agentic through their ability to participate in politics and decision-making. The concept of ‘agency’ emerges as a key scholarly debate about women’s representation in Saudi Arabia, such that some scholars (Alenaizi and Alshammari, 2021) argue the portrayal of agentic women signifies social change discourse, while other scholars (Mustafa and Troudi, 2019) caution that some types of female agency can occur within the confines of perpetuating the male hegemonic order of discourse. The concept of agency is particularly relevant to research on Saudi women in Mustafa and Troudi’s (2019) poststructuralist approach, which connects women’s agency to the socio-economic and political decisions happening at the national level. Mustafa and Troudi (2019) argue however, that we must pay attention to two forms of female agency in Saudi Arabia that exist to “perpetuate and consecrate male domination” (136), which are: ‘confinement agency’ (136), which allows women agency within the parameters of the domestic household, and ‘compliance agency’, where women challenge male hegemony while remaining compliant to their religious traditions.

Representational practices in the visual portrayals of women in times of social change have been observed in the context of advertising in Saudi Arabia (Boero and Greco, 2022) and cartoons (Alasmari and Almohammadi, 2023; AlShurafa et al, 2022). Boero and Greco (2022) observe that after 2017, which is in the Vision 2030 era, women are seen less often through the one-dimensional image of the veiled woman and are appearing in more multifaceted visual representations, such as unveiled. However, several studies show that stereotypes do remain in visual representations of Saudi women in the Vision 2030 era. One example that echoes ‘confinement agency’ (Mustafa and Troudi, 2019) is the image of the woman as a home-maker and cook in advertising material (Boero and Greco, 2022: 351). In Alasmari and Almohammadi’s (2023) study on the representation of Saudi women in cartoons between 2017 and 2020, stereotypes were found that depicted Saudi women as only wearing hijab and “subordinate, obedient” (17). Similarly, stereotypes of Saudi women in stocks images after the

driving ban was lifted in 2018 were found to reinforce gender stereotypes such as normative femininity and portraying Saudi women in a generic Arab ethnic appearance and dress rather than those considered specifically Saudi (Albawardi and Jones, 2021).

Women in Saudi Arabia: Competing Discourses

To clarify what is meant by the patriarchal and social change discourses about Saudi women that circulate in the media, two concepts emerging from the literature regarding women's status in Saudi Arabia emerge: 'male hegemony under the patriarchal system' (Al-Ghanim, 2012:350) and 'women's empowerment' (Alharbi, 2022; van Geel, *et al.*, 2012).

Patriarchy and male hegemony

The concept of patriarchy in feminist scholarship can be defined in its basic terms as the power system where men dominate women (Beechey, 1979). Saudi Arabia has a patriarchal social system observed in many Arab societies (Al-Ghanim, 2012) that operates on a hierarchical basis, giving men more "authority and decision-making power" (329) in the family unit compared to women. Some characteristics of the Arab patriarchal system in practice include the man's position as head of the family, the suppression of women's opinions in decision-making, and the allocation of domestic duties to women (Al-Ghanim, 2012:350-352). In terms of how patriarchal gender roles translate to gender representation of women, for example, women in patriarchal discourse are portrayed as the caretakers or servants of the family (Al-Ghanim, 2012: 354). On a linguistic level, patriarchal discourse could take the form of rhetorically expressing doubt about women's ability to undertake public decision-making and jobs. According to Karolak and Guta's (2020) observations based on interviews with Saudi participants in 2015, "Saudi society perceives women as more dependent and less qualified than male politicians and thus unable to meet the demands of politics." (91)

Women's empowerment

Vision 2030's social change policies regarding women adopt the discourse of women's empowerment, which in Arabic translates to 'tamkin al mar'a' (van Geel *et al.*, 2012). "Vision 2030 recognizes that a successful, modern nation must encourage and empower all members

of society, including women.” (The Embassy of the Kingdom, 2019: 1). Boero and Greco (2022) argue that in the framework of Saudi Arabia’s social change initiatives, the “female figure” (354) becomes tied to values that include women’s empowerment. The concept of women’s empowerment in the Saudi Arabian context can be defined by the scope of “participation in public life, education, and economic empowerment” (van Geel *et al.*, 2012: 71) Similarly, in Alharbi’s (2022) analysis of Vision 2030’s reform policies about women, the concept of ‘Women’s Empowerment’ is broken down into four dimensions: educational, economic, political, and personal empowerment.

In the context of cinema, Sutherland and Feltey (2016) critique how women’s empowerment is adopted by Hollywood for profitability and “packaged as individualism” (628) rather than challenging patriarchal structures. However, studies on women’s empowerment in the Saudi Arabian context present an alternative view of women’s empowerment on the lives of women in Saudi society. Representations of the Saudi woman as empowered in the political and economic dimensions can involve women in positions of leadership, decision-making and of impact in public affairs such as “a minister, a doctor, or a judge” (van Geel *et al.*, 2012: 71). Karolak and Guta (2020) found that women’s political participation was framed by Saudi and Western news media as a positive change for Saudi society. Additionally, the representation of Saudi women’s empowerment through political participation presents an opportunity for Saudi media to challenge the frequent Western media portrayal of Saudi women as “oppressed and lacking basic rights” (Karolak and Guta, 2020: 83).

In terms of personal and educational empowerment, van Geel *et al.* (2012) observe in their study on Saudi women’s perception of empowerment and modernity, that the empowered Saudi women’s two key characteristic are “cultured” and “well-educated” (77), which encompasses character traits such as independence, confidence, serving society while still keeping “in mind her religion” (77). The importance of religion to the empowered Saudi women (van Geel *et al.*, 2012) challenges the notion regarding Muslim and Arab societies put forth by scholars and feminists who associate veiling practices with male hegemony and Islamic values with repressive outcomes for women (Mohanty, 1988; Mustafa and Troudi, 2019; Russo, 2006).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Representation and Power

Hall (1997) defines representation as “the production of meaning through language.” (16). In Hall’s (1997) circuit of culture model, the scholar further explains that meaning about people and objects can be produced through various sites including narratives and stories, and how humans represent things creates meaning, which in turn “give us a sense of our own identity” (3). The concept of representation, therefore, ties language to meaning and identity in culture (Hall, 1997:15). Scholars differ in the approach to how meaning is created and circulated in the world. The constructionist approach to meaning in representation proposes that “social actors” (Hall, 1997: 25) construct meaning and communicate that meaning through concepts and signs. A benefit to this approach is the focus on language, broken down into signs and codes (Hall, 1997), which is influenced by the linguistic tradition of Saussure (Hall, 1997). Additionally, the semiotic approach takes signs as “vehicles of meaning in culture” (Hall, 1997:6). However, some constructionist scholars critique the focus on language in Saussure’s model (Hall, 1997:36). Foucault, for example, focuses on discourse rather than language as the source of meaning production (Hall, 1997).

In addition to semiotics, Fairclough’s (2017) approach to critical discourse analysis as a “critique of discourse as a part of top-down social change” (15) integrates the notion that discourse is part of the representational practices of social change. Since Vision 2030’s reforms are part of top-down social change initiative, this study adopts Fairclough’s (2017) approach to discourse in addition to Hall’s (1997) representation theory in the theoretical framework to investigate whether the films’ representational practices (Hall, 1997) challenge or reinforce the dominant discourse about women in society. Hall (1997) and Fairclough (1995) both cite the influence of Gramsci’s concept of ‘hegemony’ (Martin, 2023), which is relevant to understand how power is connected to representational practices in society. Gramsci argues that aside from the coercive methods used to maintain state authority, modern state power rules over the nation by eliciting consent from civil society (Martin, 2023). “Hegemony is a form of power based on leadership by a group in many fields of activity at once, so that its ascendancy commands widespread consent and appears natural and inevitable.” (Hall, 1997: 259)

Gramsci's concept of hegemony as operating through consent is influential in media and cultural studies (Hall, 1997) because it can be applied to approaching media texts, such as films, as tools for consent of competing ideologies and discourses in society.

Gender Representation in Film: Reinforcing Patriarchy?

The medium of film is recognized by scholars for its role in identity construction and reproducing or challenging reality's power structures (Mulvey, 1975; Oliver, 2017; Shohat, 1991; Sutherland and Feltey, 2016). Hall (1997) identifies the mass media as a site of meaning and cultural production and circulation. Similar to Hall (1997), Mulvey (1975) recognizes the role that the image has in influencing the viewer's self-identification. However, Mulvey's (1975) focus diverges from Hall because she looks at film representation primarily through a feminist and psychoanalytic lens, arguing that the mainstream film industry, Hollywood, reflects the dominant patriarchal ideology that places women as the object of desire and oppression by the male through offering the viewer a pleasurable viewing, a Freudian concept called "scopophilia" (9). Mulvey's (1975) seminal work in feminist film theory provides theoretically-informed knowledge for identifying the ways in which women are portrayed in film to reflect the patriarchal power. Firstly, Mulvey (1975) argues that women are sexualized in film to cater to male desire of both the characters on screen and the film audience. Secondly, the male protagonist pushes the film's narrative forward and is framed by film shots and editing as the central actor. On the other hand, the female character is shot by the camera through close-ups that focus on her body, thereby objectifying women for the male gaze (Oliver, 2017). The concept of the male gaze has been criticized, however. Snow (1989) argues that by framing the male gaze in cinema solely in terms of patriarchy, male satisfaction and power, feminists are serving the patriarchal ideology because they neglect possible alternative gazes and alternative functions of the male gaze.

Film Genre, Gender and Social Change

The ideological approach to genre views generic conventions as a tool that film studios use to influence audiences (Altman, 1984), which is a viewpoint shared by Marxist and feminist theorists (Chandler, 1977). On the other hand, scholars from the ritual approach say that it is

the audience's desires or the socio-political and economic conditions in reality (Chandler, 1977) that determine the genres seen in cinema. Nevertheless, numerous studies support the ideological approach by showing that genre and generic conventions, such as humour in comedy, are used to push certain ideologies, influence social change agendas and audience perceptions (Ellington, 2024; Feldman and Borum Chattoo, 2018; Meyer, 2006; Sutherland and Feltey, 2016; Walker, 2022).

In the action film genre, Sutherland and Feltey (2016) found that white female characters in 1980s and 1990s action films were given an androgynous appearance and portrayed with masculine power while Black female characters were sexualised. Yet, Sutherland and Feltey (2016) note that Black female characters were portrayed as powerful and agentic in some action films to challenge the patriarchal and racist view of Black women. In their study on female anti-heroes in action films, Ellington (2024) also note that masculine character traits like physical power were present in female characters, which challenge normative gender roles and stereotypes and the patriarchal representation of women as emotional and passive. Particularly, the scholars (Ellington, 2024; Sutherland and Feltey, 2016) highlight the role of agency in women's characterization in action films, which subverts the gender stereotype of the passive woman. The action/adventure film 'Thelma and Louise' has two female protagonists who take on elements of the male action hero, such as engaging in acts of violence, which subvert the cinematic stereotype of women as passive and the conventional roles assigned to women such as the mistress (Man, 1993: 40). Scholars (Ellington, 2024; Sutherland and Feltey, 2016) also highlight the absence of sexualization, which looks from and caters to the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), as a feature of female characters in action films that challenge patriarchy and gender stereotypes. For example, in the film 'Thelma and Louise', Man (1993) notes the female protagonists' sisterly relationship with one another, which acts as an alternative to the typical focal depiction of female characters' relationship with male characters.

Drama films in genre studies can be sub-classified into melodramas, which focus on emotion and spectacle (Williams, 1991), and into realist films, which, for example, stylistically recreate settings that exist in reality or shoot and edit scenes to give the effect of the natural passage of

time, such as long shots (Bazin in La Caze, 2020; Lakshmi, 1986). Melodrama and realist films can be further divided into sub-genres such as social realism (La Caze, 2020; Langkjær, 2011) and the “weepie” melodrama (Williams, 1991:6). Williams (1991) argues that two ways that the melodrama and horror genres execute the sensational and emotional aspects common to the melodrama genre is by using the female body as a spectacle and source of ecstasy (4), which akin to Mulvey’s (1975) analysis and the psychoanalytic feminist approach, argues that the woman on screen is portrayed through and for the male gaze. But Williams (1991) also acknowledges that melodramatic films target female audiences, using patriarchal characterizations and narratives focusing on the maternal figure, as well as depicting emotional female characters, most notably the excessive crying in weepie films. For La Caze (2020) and Langkjær (2011), realism film plots discuss social issues and focus on social relations (Langkjær, 2011: 47). In contrast to social melodramas, Langkjær (2011) argues that realist films depict characters with more complexity rather than in the binary of good and bad. In realist cinema, Lakshmi (1986) argues that we should question the presentation of film as reality, especially in its representation of women. Lakshmi (1986) provides examples of realist films that depict the gender stereotypes of the ‘bold woman’ or the sexually-repressed woman (114). Unlike the psychoanalytic approach that focus on women’s sexuality and the female body as tools in cinema to reinforce patriarchy, Lakshmi (1986) argues that films do not need to visually depict the female body to portray stereotypes about women and the gender differences in society. Conventions such as diegetic and non-diegetic sound and prop placement are also employed to this effect.

The comedy genre uses humour to challenge normative attitudes and social behaviour (Davies and Illott, 2018; Feldman and Borum Chattoo, 2019; Karlyn, 2008; Meyer, 2006) including attitudes regarding female sexuality and femininity (Porter, 1998). In comedy films, female and male characters can be portrayed with oppositional physical and personality traits for comedic effect and to convey sexual difference (Karlyn, 2008; Porter, 1998). Stereotypes regarding women in comedy include the matriarchal “career woman” (Karlyn, 2008:160) and the “dumb blonde” (Porter, 1998:70), which the scholars say function to satisfy the male audience and reaffirm the patriarchal view of women. This analysis aligns with the male gaze theory (Mulvey, 1975). And similar to scholars such as Mulvey (1975) and Williams (1991),

Porter (1998) views gender representation in comedy films and comedic conventions as tools for articulating “patriarchal fears and desires” (73). Since the comedy genre is historically male- dominant in terms of production (Porter, 1998), jokes made about women in a comedy film could be articulating real-life fears and anxieties about losing male hegemony in society. On the other hand, Porter (1998) notes that comedy can also highlight issues pertaining women such as menstruation and subvert normative gender roles to empower female audiences. Karlyn (2008) similarly points out in their analysis of romantic comedy films that the comedy genre can subvert the representation of women in melodramas as passive and tragic.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, RESEARCH QUESTION AND OBJECTIVES

In Hall’s (1997) approach to representation and the scholarly tradition rooted in the linguistic and semiotic systems, meanings are not fixed (Hall, 1997). Therefore, different interpretations of meaning are possible in viewing the representation of an identity group in a representational medium such as film. The research for this dissertation seeks to uncover the possible meanings produced about women in Saudi Arabia through the medium of film amid the Vision 2030 national reforms, which have changed women’s position in Saudi Arabia. Given that studies on gender representation in cinema and other audio and visual media emphasize that how women are represented is impacted by the patriarchal system (Albawardi and Jones, 2021; Alshammari and Alshammari, 2021; Mulvey, 1975; Mustafa and Troudi, 2019), and generic conventions (La Caze, 2020; Ellington, 2024; Langkjær, 2011; Williams, 1991; Sutherland and Feltey, 2016), the dissertation poses the following research questions:

RQ: How are women represented in Saudi films since Vision 2030 (2016-present)?

- a) In what ways do the films challenge or reinforce the patriarchal discourse about women in Saudi society?
- b) In what ways are generic conventions used in the films to challenge or reinforce the patriarchal discourse about women in Saudi society?

Sakr (2008) argues that analysing Saudi media is beneficial for following and understanding the “renegotiation of women’s personal and political status” (385) that occurs in reality in Saudi Arabia. The concepts of power and representation discussed in the theoretical framework, hegemony (Hall, 1997; Martin, 2023) and discourse through top-down social change (Fairclough, 2017), direct our focus towards the implications of cinema in supporting or challenging existing power structures and ideologies that play a role in women’s status. Considering Saudi women’s evolving social, economic and political status under Vision 2030 in contrast to the country’s traditional patriarchal system, the dissertation aims to find out how women are represented in cinema under conditions of social change, grounded by the concepts from the literature regarding discourses of patriarchy and women’s empowerment (Al- Ghanim, 2012; Karolak and Guta, 2020; Boero and Greco, 2022; Mulvey, 1975; van Geel *et al.*, 2012), gender roles and stereotypes (Albawardi and Jones, 2021; Alenaizi and Alshammari, 2021; Alshammari and Alshammari, 2021; Mulvey, 1975; Mustafa and Troudi, 2019), and the ideological functions of generic conventions (Altman, 1984; Ellington, 2024; Feldman and Borum Chattoo, 2018; Meyer, 2006; Sutherland and Feltey, 2016; Walker, 2022).

The dissertation aims to contribute towards genre studies and research on gender representation in film. More so, by focusing on films released since Vision 2030, the dissertation contributes to nascent research on the contemporary Saudi film industry, which is growing unprecedentedly under Vision 2030 (Alardawi *et al.*, 2023; La Caze, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Justification and Summary of Methods

To analyse how women are represented in Saudi cinema, a multimodal approach to methodology was chosen to address the audio-visual components of films. Multimodal discourse analysis (MMDA) considers the text to be made up of more than speech, it also includes other semiotic resources, such as visuals and music (Kress and Bezemer, 2023). Multimodality is applicable as a methodological approach to studies about cinema because film is multi-semiotic, combining visuals, sound, and verbal and written language. Previous studies on gender representation in Saudi Arabian visual media (Alasmari and

Almohammadi, 2023; AlShurafa *et al.*, 2022) use a multimodal approach in the methodology, such as multimodal discourse analysis, to analyse visual and linguistic modes of the text. In the multimodal approach, the multiple semiotic modes of a text are connected and contribute to meaning-making and knowledge production about identity (Kress and Bezemer, 2023; Ledin and Machin, 2018), which makes the approach relevant to the theoretical concerns of this study, which encompass power, discourse and social change in relation to representation of identity (Fairclough, 1995, 2017; Hall, 1997; Martin, 2023; Mulvey, 1975).

Given that the research questions seek to uncover how film representation support or challenge a dominant discourse in times of social change, Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (CDA) was selected over other CDA models because Fairclough's (1995) framework connects discourse analysis to social change and a Gramscian conceptualization of power. The three-dimensional model (Fairclough, 1995) structures the critical analysis of a text's verbal and written language into textual, discursive practice and sociocultural practice. Fairclough (1995) argues that texts should be interpreted in context of the discursive practices and sociocultural practices in which they occur, and that change in discursive practices indicates broader socio-cultural change (19). This framework supports the conceptual approach regarding how representation and discourse are shaped by the contestation of power and ideologies in society (Fairclough, 1995; Hall, 1997; Kress and Bezemer, 2023).

A pilot study was conducted for the dissertation using Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of CDA. The pilot study supported the scholarly argument for a multimodal approach to film and discourse analysis (Bateman, 2017; Kress and Bezemer, 2023). The pilot study's analysis was limited to the verbal and written language of the film, which hindered my ability as the researcher to thoroughly answer the research questions, specifically to interpret film genre conventions that are non-linguistic, such as lighting and sound design. "MMDA needs to encompass all modes used in any text and text-like entity," (Kress and Bezemer, 2023: 142). Similarly, Ledin and Machin (2018) say multimodality helps to shift the analytic focus of research from language to various semiotic modes. Nevertheless, in the pilot study I found that Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model helped find the connections between the

film's textual and discursive practices and sociocultural practices, so the model is retained as one part of the dissertation's MMDA.

To analyse the non-linguistic semiotic modes of film, the second model adopted in MMDA is Van Leeuwen's (2022) semiotic parameters, which are shape, colour, texture, movement, and timbre. Van Leeuwen (2022) argues that semiotic resources are ways to express our various identities. Van Leeuwen (2022) argues that social identity, which is defined as "identity in terms of people's relations to each other" (Van Leeuwen, 2022:6) in which "the social order mirrors the order of the real world" (7), can be expressed through signifiers such as the body and clothing, which is similar to the approach of gender and media scholars such as Mulvey (1975) who connect the representation of the female body and female appearance in film to ideological functions. In mapping out the five semiotic parameters, Van Leeuwen's (2022) semiotic approach supports MMDA's guidance to analyse semiotic resources in a text beyond the linguistic features (Kress and Bezemer, 2023).

The first parameter, shape, posits that visual symbols (Van Leeuwen, 2022: 58) such as circles, squares and lines carry meaning, or a denotation, that represent identity, values or societal relationships. The shape parameter focuses on the analysis of typography and geometric shapes, so analysis will be conducted on the visual designs of objects shown on screen. The second parameter, colour, signifies identity, values and emotions, which should be examined in context of the historical and societal significance assigned to colours (Van Leeuwen, 2022). Colour, in terms of the saturation and temperature, has been observed in psychology and marketing studies to have an association with gender identity (Dantas *et al.*, 2021; Van Leeuwen, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2025). Colour analysis includes examining luminosity and luminance (Van Leeuwen, 2022:8), which refer to the lighting of colour and source of light emittance, respectively. In analysing film, the lighting of the scene and source of lighting within the scene will be examined under the colour parameter.

The third parameter, texture, refers to the material features of an object that we can experience through the senses. Although the film viewer cannot physically touch or taste materials represented on screen, Van Leeuwen (2022) argues that texture can also be "an "imaginary" experience" (114). In a visual medium like film, the representation of textures, such as glass or

plastic, is connected to the shapes and colours shown on screen. The fourth parameter, movement, is strongly associated with films, because the film screen is a “medium of the moving picture” (Van Leeuwen, 2022: 118). In reference to body movements, Van Leeuwen (2022) argues that men and women are visually represented with different body movements to signify gender identity. Therefore, analysis of movement includes both movement in the film techniques, such as shot transitions, and movement of characters and objects within the shot frame. The fifth parameter, timbre, addresses sound and music in the film, ranging from sound effects to spoken dialogue (Van Leeuwen, 2022). The features of speech can be analysed in terms of how they articulate gender identity. For example, Van Leeuwen (2022) argues that a female character could be speaking in a low pitch to exude sexuality or assert authority.

Research Procedure

Sample Selection

The decision to analyse multiple films arose from reading studies that focused on one Saudi film or text (Alardawi *et al.*, 2023; AlShurafa *et al.*, 2022; La Caze, 2020), and finding that there is a gap in the literature for a study that analyses gender representation in multiple films. This is echoed in the study on the representation of women in the Saudi film ‘Amra and the Second Marriage’, where Alardawi *et al.* (2023) suggest, “As there are few existing studies investigating the representation of women in Saudi films, it would be beneficial if future studies further examined these stereotypes by investigating several digital Saudi films, to acquire a broader understanding of the portrayal of Saudi women in such films.” (131) The sample of films and scenes were selected using purposeful sampling (AlShurafa *et al.*, 2022), which in contrast to random sampling, involves “a premeditated, or purposive, intent” (Bullard, 2024) in sample selection. The films were chosen from a list of Saudi Arabian films on the film database platform IMDb (“Advanced title search”, n.d.). Three films were chosen from different genres to acknowledge the diversity of genres and genre conventions that impact the cinematic representation of women (Altman, 1984; Chandler, 1997; Goodwin, 1982). Since the research questions concern the representation of women during Vision 2030, the films selected feature a female character in a leading role and the films were released after 2016. Based on the sampling criteria, the following three films were selected for analysis: the

animated comedy film 'Masameer: The Movie' (2020), the action road film 'Route 10' (2022) and the drama film 'The Perfect Candidate' (2019).

The sample size from each film was finalized after I conducted a pilot study on the film 'The Perfect Candidate' (2019) using three scenes. For the dissertation, I narrowed down the sample size from three scenes to two scenes for conciseness. During the analysis of the sample scenes, I proceeded to note down the film techniques and dialogue in the scenes, as well as annotate frames (Appendices), guided by the framework of Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model and Van Leeuwen's (2022) semiotic parameters.

Ethics and Reflexivity

The challenges of purposeful sampling include bias and "over interpretation of research results." (Stratton, 2024) Bias is also a concern because as the researcher, I identify with the gender and national identity explored in the research. On one hand, my positionality aided in the research process due to my familiarity with Saudi Arabian culture and society. On the other hand, my positionality is connected to evaluating research bias and ethics, which Graham (2018) defines as "codified patterns of moral evaluations." (189) Fairclough and Fairclough (2018) argue that ethics is "concerned with the right things to do, what ought (or ought not) be done." (172) The aim of the research, rather than determining which discourses and representational practices about women in film and society are morally right or wrong, is to analytically connect the representational and discursive practices in film to socio-cultural practices. This is supported by the theoretical framework and the methodological approaches that connect between representation and discourse to power, ideology and identity (Hall, 1997; Fairclough, 1995; Fairclough and Fairclough, 2018; Mulvey, 1985; Van Leeuwen, 2022). To pursue an ethical critical analysis, Fairclough and Fairclough (2018) advocate for using critique to provide possible solutions to social and institutional practices. By conducting a multimodal CDA, this research will add to the knowledge about gender representation in Saudi cinema.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The Perfect Candidate (2019)

Synopsis: Maryam, a Saudi female doctor, runs in her local municipal council elections. Her campaign aims to fix the road adjacent to the clinic where she works.

Scene 1 (Al-Mansour, 2021, 0:36:11-0:37:00)

Summary: Maryam's father Abdulaziz is on tour with his band. On the phone with Maryam's sister, he learns that Maryam could not travel from Saudi to Dubai because her travel permit, which must be approved by Abdulaziz as her male guardian, was not digitally updated.

Text analysis

The questions in lines 1 and 2 (Appendix 1) convey how the male band players are distant from the issues facing the women back in the town, such as the restriction on women's freedom of movement under the male guardianship system. The second clause of line 2 is spoken as a warning and in a whispering tone, which conveys the male disapproval of Maryam travelling alone as a woman. The text's structure in lines 4 and 5 are argumentative between the two speakers, with Abdulaziz worrying over his daughters while his bandmate takes the position that Abdulaziz should not involve himself in the women's problems. The sentences in line 4 use metaphor and figure of speech, which have a foreboding effect due to the vocabulary associated with death.

Discursive practice analysis

Phone conversations are a film discourse convention that can "move the story along, provide crucial information, or create suspense," and can be technically and narratively executed in different ways, such as using split screen or having audible sound for the off-screen character (Filmmaker Team, 2023). In this scene, women are represented only through the dialogue of the two male characters, which supports Lakshmi's (1986) approach that gender stereotypes can be conveyed without the visual depiction of women. The patriarchal discourse allocates the head position of the family to the man and rhetorically questions women's suitability for

decision-making leadership (Al- Ghanim, 2012; Karolak and Guta, 2020), which is reinforced through the deployment of the gendered stereotype of the hysterical or emotionally unstable woman (Alshammari and Alshammari, 2021). In this scene, Abdulaziz is established as the symbol of the patriarch through his characterization as Maryam's father as well as the conventional use of parental reassurance (McMurtry *et al.*, 2010) such as in line 3: *I'll call her and get her to calm down. Okay, okay.* The discourse conventions are associated with patriarchy because they articulate Abdulaziz's authority to make decisions and his ability to be level-headed and rational in solving the travel permit issue compared to how Maryam is depicted as emotional, frantic and without agency, since she is unable to solve the problem without her father.

The scene is filmed outdoors at night (Appendix 2), which is visualised to the viewer through the evening sky's maximally dark scale of value (Van Leeuwen, 2022). The scene's colour design, including low lighting and blue temperature (Van Leeuwen, 2022), are dramatic conventions that create mood and convey character emotions (Nicholson, 2010; Sugiarto, 2020). Van Leeuwen (2022) notes that "darkness can engender fear, but also intimacy" (84). The foreboding effect of the night setting conveys the problematic nature of Maryam's desire to travel to Dubai and its negative emotional impact on Abdulaziz, which he rhetorically articulates as well in line 4 (Appendix 1). The steadiness of the camera movements, use of long shots and the absence of fast-paced action is consistent with conventions of realist drama films, which favour a natural approach to scene settings and the passage of time (Bazin in La Caze, 2020; Lakshmi, 1986). The semiotic parameters of movement, timbre and colour, such as the immobile stance of Abdulaziz, who is leaning against the bus, the diegetic sound of the low rumbling bus motor, and the blue temperature of the cinematography, convey calmness (Van Leeuwen, 2022: 87) and reinforce the portrayal of Abdulaziz as the calm figure, which contrasts the stereotypical depiction of the female characters as emotional. The darkness of the scene setting creates a contrast with the crisp whiteness of the traditional Saudi male dress, the *thobe*, worn by the two male characters on screen (Appendix 2). The shape of the male figures is outlined by the black background. Van Leeuwen (2022) notes that the colour of clothing conveys identity and values. In this case, the *thobe* signifies the social and national identities of the Saudi male and connects to the religious and cultural values of modesty and tradition

(Decoursey, 2019; Khan, 2015). The close-up and medium shots of the male characters, while women are visually absent, facilitate an intimacy between the viewer and male characters, intensified by the texture of the traditional Saudi male headdress, the *shmagh* and *agal* ("A Guide To Saudi Attire," 2010), which is visible to the viewer through the use of the close-up shot (Appendix 3).

Sociocultural practice analysis

In this scene, women are visually and sonically absent, which directs the audience's attention to the perspective of the male guardian, which reinforces patriarchy. The argumentative structure of the in-scene conversation establishes two debates pertaining women in Saudi Arabia, which are women's ability to travel and make decisions independently. The contradictory nature of the male characters' exchange, e.g. lines 4 and 5, reflects the tensions in Saudi society (Pilotti *et al.*, 2021) amid Vision 2030 between the traditional patriarchal social system (Al-Ghanim, 2012) and the social change developments that expand women's rights, such as the policy of women travelling without the approval of a male guardian (Potter, 2017). The discursive practices depict the daughters' independent actions as causing a negative effect on Abdulaziz's wellbeing (line 4). The scene's colour, timbre and movement support the negative connotation of Maryam's desire to travel, by reflecting Abdulaziz's sombre mood and creating intimacy between the viewer and the patriarchal figure.

Scene 2 (Al-Mansour, 2021, 1:38:03-1:41:07)

Summary: Maryam performs a check-up on Abu Musa, an elderly male patient. He reveals to Maryam that he voted for her in the municipal elections, which she lost. Maryam exits the clinic and drives her car on the unpaved road she advocated to repair during her campaign.

Text Analysis

The conversation (Appendix 4) is first dominated by Maryam. She asks Abu Musa multiple questions consecutively (line 1) while he replies in few brief phrases and the monosyllabic *No* (lines 2 and 4). However, the latter part of the text is dominated by Abu Musa (line 8), as he adopts a confessional style of speech that signals a shift in the two characters' relationship from doctor-patient to candidate-supporter. Abu Musa expresses praise and gratitude

towards Maryam in line 8, such as the metaphor: *My family would be carrying my coffin!* Lines 8 and 9 end the conversation on a sombre note because Maryam lost the elections, which is conveyed through the timbre of Abu Musa's frustration expressed in the rhetorical question: *why didn't you get into the municipal council?*

Discursive Practice Analysis

The dialogue (Appendix 4) represents Maryam as competent to take on a public political role. However, the semiotic resources and gender stereotype identified in the scene reinforce the patriarchal discourse. The patriarchal discourse often portrays women in a caretaking role (Al-Ghanim, 2012). The connection (Van Leeuwen, 2022) between Maryam's hands and Abu Musa's arms and face (Appendix 5) signifies caretaking. Maryam wears a black headscarf, which signifies the identity of a Saudi woman tied to her traditions and customs ("A Guide To Saudi Attire," 2010), yet it also fails to differentiate Maryam from the stereotype of the veiled woman existing in visual media (Alasmari and Almohammadi, 2023).

In film, props can be used to express sexual difference (Lakshmi, 1986). Maryam's pale blue car (Appendix 6) contrasts its surroundings in colour, signifying Maryam's identity as the only female candidate in the town's municipal elections. On the other hand, Abdulaziz and his bandmates tour on a white bus (Appendix 2). Even though the white bus is stationary in scene 1 (Appendix 2), the motor is constantly heard rumbling in the background. The mobility of the bus carrying the male passengers symbolizes the freedom of movement and opportunities for men in Saudi society, compared to the relative immobility of women in the patriarchal society. This is further evident in the shot of Maryam's car leaving the clinic road, where the wide shot reveals the shape of the road is geometrically curved rather than straight (Appendix 6). Visuals of driving and roads hold symbolic significance and meaning potential in film genres and sub-genres, including the Western and road films (Borden, 2012; Roberts, 1997). The smooth curved shape of the unpaved road and the movement of the car wading through the road (Appendix 6) signifies an unpredictable journey for women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia.

The wide shot (Appendix 6) shows the colour and texture of the sand and dust surrounding the street, which conveys roughness (Van Leeuwen, 2022: 108). The rough texture of the exterior shot (Appendix 6) contrasts the smooth white walls in the interior shot (Appendix 5).

The contrast between the clean and orderly clinic, signified through colour, shape and movement, and the rougher outdoor environment, suggests a difficult environment for women such as Maryam in society at large. The exterior wide shot (Appendix 6) is accompanied by the non-diegetic score, which is slow in tempo and soft in pitch (Van Leeuwen, 2022). In film, music's functions include reflecting the mood of the scene, the film's themes and the emotion of characters (Green, 2010). In this scene, the sombre background music signifies the defeat of Maryam's political aspirations, closing the film with a dejected rather than hopeful or empowered outlook for women's participation in politics.

Sociocultural Practice Analysis

Although Maryam gains the respect of her male patient, the scene's textual and discursive practices convey a less optimistic view of women's empowerment amid Vision 2030. By losing the elections and remaining confined to her job as a clinic doctor, Maryam's circumstances in the closing scene reflect the barriers set by the patriarchal norms regarding women's professional and political empowerment. Although Maryam is still able to work, she is figurately and literally portrayed as caring for a male (Appendix 5), rather than fulfilling her desire to fix the clinic road. Therefore, the scene supports the argument that some types of female agency, such as Maryam's ability to work as a doctor and drive a car, can exist within the confines of perpetuating male hegemony (Mustafa and Troudi, 2019).

Masameer: The Movie (2020)

Synopsis: Dana, a young Saudi robotics engineer, crosses paths with three unemployed male characters who are forming a superhero club.

Scene 1 (Nejer, 2020, 13:46-15:49)

Summary: Dana invents a helper robot called Fazzee'. During a test run of the Fazzee' prototype with Dana's boss and his assistant, Nawf, Fazzee' explodes the boss's car in the parking lot.

Text analysis

The male boss's decision-making and leadership capabilities are linguistically conveyed through the use of verbal commands to the female characters in line 3 (Appendix 7). In contrast to the punctuation marks and congratulatory language in line 1, lines 3 and 7 contain ellipses, which signal a shift in the boss's perception of Dana's capabilities. Whereas in line 1 the boss praises Dana, after the explosion he speaks with hesitation, signified through pauses and stutter in his vocal timbre, which signals his disappointment and apprehension of Dana's project. Line 2, spoken by Nawf, is a comedic expression spoken in a sarcastic tone, which is evidenced by the timbre of Nawf's laughter. Her response to the boss in line 6 is brief and is a common expression in military and radio communication (MacGillivray, 2019), which reflects the serious and tense atmosphere created by the boss's reaction to the explosion, and shifts Nawf's tone from playful to professional in reaction to the boss' anger towards her joke in line 2. The shift in tone during this exchange reflects the unequal power between the male character and the female character. On the other hand, the exchange between Dana and her mother in lines 8 to 15 is straightforward, reflected through the recurrent monosyllabic words and lack of interruption, which shows their agreeable relationship.

Discursive Practice Analysis

The force of the explosion, which is signified by the yellow burning fire and the shape of the broken glass framing the three characters standing inside the office building (Appendix 8), conveys the failure of Dana's project. The shape and texture of broken glass symbolises the fragility of women's position in the workplace and in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), which are male dominated industries in Saudi Arabia (Eltoum and Abdelsalam, 2025). The comedic genre convention of deadpan humour (Holm, 2021) is used in this scene through the back-and-forth shot transitions between Fazzee' standing idly and watching a blue butterfly fly around the flames, and Dana discussing buying incense and family dinner with her mother (Appendix 7). The use of deadpan highlights the dichotomy between the two roles of the female character, Dana. One role is doing domestic chores and the other role is being a robotics engineer. The discursive practices in the scene show women as more suitable for doing domestic tasks than STEM ones. This supports Mustafa and Troudi's (2019) concept of confinement agency, which the scholars argue affords women

agency but only within the parameters of the domestic household, in order to reinforce male domination.

In the scene, the male and female characters are portrayed contrastingly, which reflects the patriarchal representations of women in cinema that emphasize sexual difference between men and women (Karlyn, 2008; Porter, 1998). Due to the explosion, the *shmagh* and *agal* ("A Guide To Saudi Attire," 2010) of the boss falls over, exposing his shaved head (Appendix 8). Meanwhile, the black headscarves remain in place on the two female characters, which shows the endurance of the visual representation of the veiled Saudi female in public, which is not mandatory under Vision 2030 (Reuters, 2018). In line 2 (Appendix 7), Nawaf laughs and makes a sarcastic remark about Fazzee' actions. In contrast, Dana's boss gives instructions to the female characters and affirms to Dana that he will take care of the situation (lines 3 and 7). This shows that the male character takes initiative, responsibility and exhibits leadership qualities in a difficult situation, while the female characters either do not take the situation seriously or are unable to bear the burden of the problem.

In the scene, Dana's mouth is drawn as a straight line and an open gape, and her eyes are drawn wide open. This blank stare could be interpreted in addition to her lack of speaking lines as a portrayal of passivity, which is a stereotype of women in the patriarchal discourse (Alshammari and Alshammari, 2021; Ellington, 2024; Sutherland and Feltey, 2016). Although women are represented in the workplace and in STEM in this scene, Nawaf and Dana are professionally subordinate to the male boss. Another signifier of male hegemony in the scene is the shape and movement of Dana's boss grabbing the elbow of Nawaf to interrupt her laughter. In the comedy genre, violence against women has been observed by scholars to be portrayed as comedic or normalized (Gakkhar and Kulkarni, 2024; Gunning, 2020; Halffield, 2017). Therefore, the scene visually depicts physical force used by the male on the female, which normalizes male hegemony over women professionally and personally.

Sociocultural Practice Analysis

The textual and discursive practices of this scene reinforce the patriarchal discourse of women in Saudi society. The phone conversation between Dana and her mother (Appendix 7) maintains the association between women and domesticity, even when the characters are

outside the home and at work. This conveys the patriarchal expectation of women performing household chores and the stereotype of women as domestic labourers in the family (Al-Ghanim, 2012; Boero and Greco, 2022). Although two working women are represented in the scene, their depiction as agentic and empowered is hindered by the presence of the male character, Dana's boss, who applies his power over the two female characters, Dana and Nawf, both verbally and physically. The social change discourse of Vision 2030 calls for women's empowerment through increasing education and labour participation (Eltoum and Abdelsalam, 2025). By portraying the disastrous results of the Fazzee' prototype created by Dana, a woman in STEM, and associating Dana and her mother with the stereotype of women performing household duties, the scene aligns with the patriarchal discourse rather than the social change discourse of Vision 2030 that encourages women's participation in the labour force and in STEM.

Scene 2 (Nejer, 2020, 47:28-48:30)

Summary: Dana is in her family home with her parents and younger brother. She prints a poster of the proposed superhero club conceived the night prior with five male characters, after they all failed to gain membership into the Saudi Arabian superhero society.

Text analysis

The dialogue articulates Dana's mood and her father's wishes for Dana's mood to remain stable (Appendix 9, line 5), which conveys the stereotype of the emotional woman (Alshammari and Alshammari, 2021). In the scene's closing shot (Appendix 12), the Arabic text written on the poster that Dana prints in her room translates to "THE EXTRAORDINARY GOROOMS CLUB". Despite Dana's involvement in the conception of this superhero club, the plural word *goroom* means the 'great gentlemen' in Arabic (The Academy of Arabic Language, n.d), which excludes women from the club's identity. Additionally, the logo design above the club's name consists of a black silhouette of a male figure wearing a contrasting red cape, which visually associates being a superhero with the male gender. The club's name and logo design associate the male gender with power and heroism, while excluding the female gender from those qualities. The depiction of the superhero identity as male is evidenced in scholarship on gender representation in the live-action and animation superhero genre, which

scholars argue is a “male-focused” genre (Coogan, 2018) and depicts super heroic qualities as masculine (Baker and Raney, 2007).

Discursive Practice Analysis

The two female characters are depicted with long flowing brown hair and they are dressed in red and green loose-fitting clothing (Appendix 10). The diverse colours and silhouettes of the two female characters’ clothing and hairstyles create an image of the Saudi women that differs from the uniform appearance of the black *abaya* and headscarf that the female characters wear in other scenes (Appendix 8). The semiotics of style, colour and shape (Van Leeuwen, 2022) in Dana and her mother’s character designs provide alternative and diverse representations of Saudi women to existing representation in visual media (Alasmari and Almohammadi, 2023; Albawardi and Jones, 2021; Boero and Greco, 2022). However, the scene depicts female characters performing domestic chores, which reinforces the patriarchal stereotype of women being responsible for domestic work (Al-Ghanim, 2012). A study (AlShurafa *et al.*, 2022) found the patriarchal stereotype of women doing domestic chores for men in episodes of the animated series ‘Masameer’, which was aired prior to Vision 2030. In this scene, the physical space is utilised through multiple shot transitions to capture the contrasting gender roles of men and women in the household. Film props are also used to convey sexual difference (Lakshmi, 1986). The two male characters, who are seated on the living room couches, engage in leisurely activities such as playing video games (Appendix 11), while the two female characters are positioned in the kitchen, preparing food and drink (Appendix 10). The immobility of the two male characters contrasts with the movement of the two female characters, signifying the labour expected of women in the household (Al-Ghanim, 2012). For example, Dana’s mother prepares tea for Dana’s father (Appendix 10) and then serves it to him (Appendix 11).

The bright natural lighting emanating from the kitchen (Appendix 10) and living room windows (Appendix 11) create a calm ambience. The mix of cool and warm temperatures of the scene’s lighting conveys intimacy and serenity (Van Leeuwen, 2022: 107). The warmth, colourful yet orderly placement of objects inside the house, in combination with the reclining poses and smiles of the characters (Appendices 10 and 11), contrast the cool-toned and

artificiality-lit lab (Nejer, 2020, 12:50), which is Dana's workplace. The timbre adds to the relaxed ambience of the scene. The music is slow, soft and smooth (Van Leeuwen, 2022) since it is background audio and does not overpower the characters speaking. The depiction of Dana's home in this scene through semiotic resources that convey warmth and comfort, suggests that the household is a better environment for Dana than the lab.

Sociocultural Practice Analysis

The scene provides a representation of gender dynamics in the domestic sphere in Saudi Arabia, with Dana's family representing an urban Saudi nuclear family. The portrayal of the two female characters in the kitchen while the male characters are relaxing and being served reinforces the patriarchal view of the family's division of labour, which places the responsibilities of domestic duties on women (Al-Ghanim, 2012). The movement of the male character grabbing the arm of the female character to stop her from further speaking is repeated in another scene, between Dana's boss and Nawf (Nejer, 2020, 14:20), which suggests the normalisation of male physical power over women, and reinforces male dominance in both the workplace and in the home. Male hegemony is also established in the discursive association between superheroes and masculinity in the scene's closing frame (Appendix 12). Consequently, the textual and discursive practices of the scene reinforce stereotypes of women as emotional (Alshammari and Alshammari, 2021) and as homemakers (Al-Ghanim, 2012; AlShurafa *et al.*, 2022), meanwhile men are portrayed as dominant and powerful. These representational practices conform to the patriarchal social system (Al-Ghanim, 2012) that dictated gender roles in Saudi society, which clash with the social change discourse of Vision 2030 that empowers women professionally outside the household.

Route 10 (2022)

Synopsis: Siblings Maryam and Nasser drive from Riyadh to Abu Dhabi to attend their father's wedding. During the road trip, a dangerous stranger follows them.

Scene 1 (Naim, 2022, 10:17-11:17)

Summary: Nasser is driving the car on the highway to Abu Dhabi with Maryam in the passenger seat.

Text analysis

The dialogue (Appendix 13) focuses on Maryam applying makeup in the car, which reflects the normative gender ideals of femininity and the conventional female physical appearance in film (Tasker, 1993; Kac-Vergne, 2025). However, dialogue allows Maryam to challenge the feminine association of makeup by clarifying that men can also wear traditional eyeliner (lines 2 and 5), and she elaborates on the functional rather than cosmetic purpose of eyeliner in line 2. The male and female protagonists say the interjection “blech” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), which adds to the graphic nature of the dialogue. Nasser uses animated language of aggressive movements such as *stab*, *pop*, *splatter* in line 5, meanwhile Maryam calls Nasser a *moron* in line 2 and criticises his driving skills in line 6. The speech pattern the two characters use to refer to the other sibling indicates bickering (Boxer and Radice, 2018), which sets up tension between the two characters.

Discursive Practice Analysis

The scene uses props to convey sexual difference (Lakshmi, 1986), by associating the eyeliner bottle and pen visually and verbally with the female characters of Maryam (Appendix 14) and her mother (Appendix 13), while the car is associated with the male character Nasser, who visually holds the steering wheel. Studies show that cars have been associated with the male gender identity (Lei, 2023) and male hegemony in visual content such as memes (Dundes, 2023). For example, car features such as the sound of the engine rumble are argued to convey male power and aggressiveness (Dundes, 2023). In the scene, Nasser’s car engine creates a deep, rough and low-pitched sound (Van Leeuwen, 2022), which contrasts the high-pitched and soft sound of Maryam’s eyeliner bottle twisting. Nasser drives the car in the scene, which pushes the plot forward because it enables Maryam and Nasser to escape the mysterious figure following them and move closer to their final destination. On the other hand, Maryam has a passive role in this scene because her main movement is applying makeup. The scene’s discursive practices convey the stereotypical passive female (Ellington, 2024; Sutherland and Feltey, 2016) and the active male protagonist, which echoes what scholars argue is the representation of men as the heroes while women are relegated to being a spectacle (Mulvey, 1975) or “side-kicks” to the male hero (Tasker, 1993: 27).

The camera captures the female character through close-up shots that focus on her face and hands (Appendix 14 and 15), which objectifies the woman for the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). The close-up shots reveal colours and textures signifying Maryam's femininity, such as her grey nail polish, gold jewellery, and black eye makeup (Appendices 14 and 15). The darkness of the black eyeliner contrasts Maryam's blue eyes (Appendix 15), which creates a smoky eye aesthetic that carries cultural meanings of seduction and sexuality (Dana, 2023). Additionally, Maryam appears unveiled to the viewer. While the unveiled appearance avoids the stereotype of the veiled Saudi woman in visual media (Alardawi *et al.*, 2023; Alasmari and Almohammadi, 2023), given the camera's focus on the semiotic resources articulating femininity and female beauty (Albawardi and Jones, 2021; Mulvey, 1975) this uncovered appearance also functions as part of scopophilia (Mulvey, 1975). The isolation of Maryam's face and hands in close-up shots takes the focus away from the rest of her body. Although feminist film critique such as Mulvey's (1975) argue that the film camera isolates the female body as a sexual object, one study on gender and ageism in the action film genre (Kac-Vergne, 2025) argues that the camera's focus on the character's body rather than the face is a convention of action films which allow focus on movements and physicality. By isolating the details of Maryam's manicured hands and eye makeup (Appendices 14 and 15), the female character performs movements of normative femininity rather than performing the movements of an action hero (Tasker, 1993; Kac-Vergne, 2025).

Sociocultural Practice Analysis

The discursive practices in the scene reproduce the normative beauty, sexuality and femininity in representations of women (Albawardi and Jones, 2023; Mulvey, 1975), while the male occupies the role of the hero (Mulvey, 1975; Kac-Vergne, 2025; Tasker, 1993). The depiction of Maryam's physical features and the eyeliner prop (Appendices 14 and 15) contribute to the representation of women through the male gaze, which reinforce patriarchy (Mulvey, 1975). The male character, Nasser, performs the role of the driver throughout the scene and for the majority of the film, giving him qualities of leadership and agency through controlling the path of their journey. Given that the reforms under Vision 2030 afforded women the ability to drive and to travel without a male guardian (Grand and Wolff, 2020), the position of Maryam

as passenger and Nasser as driver in this scene are visually aligned with the patriarchal discourse of women in Saudi Arabia that restrict women's independent mobility.

Scene 2 (Naim, 2022, 1:08:19-1:11:13)

Summary: Maryam and Nasser engage in a physical fight with the mysterious stranger off the road in the desert.

Text analysis

The climactic scene features minimal dialogue that is solely spoken by the female character Maryam. Rather, the sound heard from Nasser and Maryam throughout the scene is heavy breathing and grunting, signifying their effort to defeat the film's antagonist (Appendix 18).

Discursive Practice Analysis

In the road film and Western film genres, the road symbolises an opportunity for transformation and is part of the plot's "dual journey" (Roberts, 1997: 53), whereby the characters embark on a physical journey on the road and a spiritual journey through character development. In the start of their physical journey, Maryam embodies the representation of women with normative beauty ideals and stereotypically passive, while Nasser embodies the male hero, characterised by conventions of the action genre protagonist, which include strength, aggression and stoicism (Roberts, 1997; Kac- Vergne, 2025; Tasker, 1993). By the end of the journey in this scene (Appendix 16), Maryam has developed into an active hero, saving her brother from the mysterious stranger. Maryam, as the female protagonist, becomes akin to the two female protagonists in another action road film, 'Thelma and Louise', who Man (1993) argues subvert the male identity of the action hero by engaging in violence. The close-up shot of Maryam's blood-stained and bandaged fingers around the kohl eyeliner (Appendix 17) parallels the scene of Maryam first using the kohl eyeliner in the car (Appendix 14). The contrast between the textures of her clean and manicured hands in the scene earlier in the film (Appendix 14) and the textures of red blood and grainy sand in the film's climax (Appendices 17 and 18) mirror Maryam's character development from stereotypical passive female to action heroine who engages in violence.

Subverting gender difference and conventions of the action genre in this scene are aided by the use of props (Lakshmi, 1986). The prop of the kohl eyeliner becomes a tool of violence when Maryam stabs the stranger with the thin and sharp pen (Appendix 17). The shape of the eyeliner pen is thin, which connotes delicate and precision. In contrast, the dagger held by the stranger is wide and curved, but the thin and lightweight eyeliner proves to be the dangerous weapon as it pierces the enemy (Appendix 18). The weaponization of a prop that has been so far in the film associated with femininity and beauty, challenges the film representation of power and violence as characteristic of the male gender (Roberts, 1997; Kac-Vergne, 2025; Tasker, 1993). This is significant because by showing the violence and strength in Maryam's movements and the prop that is associated with femininity, the film demonstrates that the female character has heroic capabilities (Roberts, 1997).

Sociocultural Practice Analysis

The heroism displayed by the female character in this scene challenges the patriarchal discourse and representational practices that presents the male as powerful and superior to women, both physically and figuratively (Al-Ghanim, 2012; Alasmari and Almohammadi, 2023; Dundes, 2023; Mulvey, 1975; Williams, 1991). The patriarchal discourse is manifested in the action and road film genre by portraying women in side-lined or sexualised roles (Lei, 2023; Kac-Vergne, 2025; Tasker, 1993; Roberts, 1997). This scene presents women as capable of defending themselves and others, resisting the patriarchal discourse that women are weaker than men and thus challenging the notion of female subordination in the patriarchal system (Al-Ghanim, 2012). By showing Maryam using a non-conventional tool as a weapon, the kohl eyeliner (Appendix 17), the film depicts a woman with intellectual as well as physical capabilities. This multifaceted portrayal supports the social change discourse of women's empowerment by placing them women in an agentic position outside the confinement of the domestic sphere and portraying women as decision-makers (Alharbi, 2022; Karolak and Guta, 2020; Mustafa and Troudi, 2019; van Geel *et al.*, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of semiotic features, dialogue and genre conventions in the scenes from the films 'Masameer: The Movie' (2020), 'Route 10' (2022) and 'The Perfect Candidate' (2019) reveal that across diverse genres and plotlines, films in Saudi cinema portray women through textual and discursive practices that reinforce the patriarchal expectations and stereotypes of women's appearance, mobility and personal and professional capabilities within Saudi society. This is despite the fact that these films were released during Vision 2030, which deploys the social change discourse of women's empowerment. The study's findings indicate that the social change discourse of the state authority is in a hegemonic struggle (Hall, 1997; Martin, 2023) with the patriarchal discourse. Future studies can expand on this conclusion by conducting audience research to investigate audience perception of the representation of women in Saudi films and how this impacts audience perception of women's identity and roles under Vision 2030.

The study's findings support the ideological approach in genre studies, because the films' genre conventions were found to play a role in the reinforcement of the patriarchal discourse. The findings also support the connections between representation, identity construction and power discussed in the theoretical framework. The dissertation illuminates how, through contrasting semiotic features and gender stereotyping, the films represent women as different to men and allocate physical and symbolic power to the male characters, affirming male hegemony. For example, the animation film 'Masameer: The Movie' (2020) perpetuates the superhero film genre convention of the superhero identity as male-dominated and the patriarchal stereotype of women as domestic care-takers. The depiction of working women in 'The Perfect Candidate' (2019) and 'Masameer: The Movie' (2020) resonate with the concept of 'confinement agency' (Mustafa and Troudi, 2019), because the analysis reveals that despite the female protagonists in both films being portrayed as working in STEM, the genre conventions and semiotic resources in these two films perpetuate the patriarchal stereotype of women as care-takers of men and the household. Therefore, this dissertation shows readers that the patriarchal discourse and gender stereotypes can still circulate in cinematic representations despite alternative discourses by state authority and social change occurring in reality.

The action film 'Route 10' (2022) was the only film in this study that used genre conventions to subvert the patriarchal gender stereotypes and roles that side-line women in action films, by developing Maryam into a heroine with agency and strength to defeat the antagonist, despite being portrayed through the male gaze earlier in the film. This is a divergence from the male gaze theory's (Mulvey, 1975) association between portrayals of women through the male gaze and propagating patriarchy, by showing that women can be portrayed with normative femininity and scopophilia in film yet still challenge patriarchal discourse and male hegemony. This finding also points to the potential diversity of the representation of women in Saudi cinema. Future studies can expand on this research by analysing gender representation in Saudi films using an intersectional approach to gender identity as was done by some scholars (Kac-Vergne, 2025; Sutherland and Feltey, 2016), such as examining how women of different ages and socio-economic classes are represented in film.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Scene 1 transcript from 'The Perfect Candidate' (2019) (Al-Mansour, 2021, 0:36:11-0:37:00)

Appendix 2

Still from scene 1 of 'The Perfect Candidate' (2019) (Al-Mansour, 2021, 0:36:41)

Appendix 3

Still from scene 1 of 'The Perfect Candidate' (2019) (Al-Mansour, 2021, 0:36:12)

Appendix 4

Scene 2 transcript from 'The Perfect Candidate' (2019) (Al-Mansour, 2021, 1:38:03-1:41:07)

Appendix 5

Stills from scene 2 of 'The Perfect Candidate' (2019) (Al-Mansour, 2021, 1:38:27, 1:38:47)

Appendix 6

Still from scene 2 of 'The Perfect Candidate' (2019) (Al-Mansour, 2021, 1:40:51)

Appendix 7

Scene 1 transcript from 'Masameer: The Movie' (2020) (Nejer, 2020, 13:46-15:49)

Appendix 8

Still from scene 1 of 'Masameer: The Movie' (2020) (Nejer, 2020, 14:17)

Appendix 9

Scene 2 transcript from 'Masameer: The Movie' (2020) (Nejer, 2020, 47:28-48:30)

Appendix 10

Still from scene 2 of 'Masameer: The Movie' (2020) (Nejer, 2020, 47:88)

Appendix 11

Still from scene 2 of 'Masameer: The Movie' (2020) (Nejer, 2020, 48:10)

Appendix 12

Still from scene 2 of 'Masameer: The Movie' (2020) (Nejer, 2020, 48:30)

Appendix 13

Scene 1 transcript of 'Route 10' (2022) (Naim, 2022, 10:17-11:17)

Appendix 14

Still from scene 1 of 'Route 10' (2022) (Naim, 2022, 10:31)

Appendix 15

Still from scene 1 of 'Route 10' (2022) (Naim, 2022, 10:55)

Appendix 16

Scene 2 transcript of 'Route 10' (2022) (Naim, 2022, 1:08:19-1:11:13)

Appendix 17

Still from scene 2 of 'Route 10' (2022) (Naim, 2022, 1:09:01)

Appendix 18

Still from scene 2 of 'Route 10' (2022) (Naim, 2022,1:09:24)