

The Symbolic Capital of Digital Cultural Elites and Its Impact on Shaping Saudi Cultural Identity: a Study of a Sample of Influential Intellectual Accounts on the YouTube Platform

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ABSTRACT:

This paper aims to analyze the processes of accumulation, transformation and appropriation of symbolic capital by digital cultural elites in Saudi Arabia as well as how this symbolic capital constructs the meanings of the Saudi cultural identity in the context of rapid social and cultural changes that are taking place in the kingdom. The study is conceptual and interpretive, influenced by Pierre Bourdieu's work on fields and forms of capital and further elaborated by recent work on the concept of networked publics, online video, and platform affordances and micro-celebrity. Instead of providing statistical figures, it describes and draws analytical samples of five ideal types of influential intellectual channels: (1) the heritage custodian, (2) the reformist modernizer, (3) the religious-cultural interpreter, (4) the creative-industries curator, and (5) the critical-ironic commentator. They are all analyzed with respect to the capital that they introduce into the digital domain, how that capital is translated into visibility and legitimacy, and the versions of Saudi identity they tell. The analysis proposes four mechanisms by which symbolic capital has an effect on identity: consecration, boundary work, conversion of offline and online capital, and algorithmic amplification, especially in the context of YouTube's recommendation systems, which focus on watch time, and of the direct monetization of attention. The article suggests that digital cultural elites aren't necessarily autonomous creators of identity, but rather play the role of mediators who use their agency to re-contextualize institutional cultural projects into vernacular culture, and at the same time contest to define the legitimate boundaries of authenticity. Finally, in a comparative section, the author brings Bourdieu's conceptualization of the logic of accumulation into dialogue with Daoist deconstruction of name (ming) and fame in the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi, arguing that Daoist philosophy is a fruitful lens for understanding the prices of a culture of recognition. The article ends with an agenda for empirical studies.

Keywords: symbolic capital; digital cultural elites; Saudi cultural identity; YouTube; Bourdieu; ming (name); Zhuangzi

1. INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia has seen as much change and as public change in public cultural life over the last ten years as any society. The Kingdom has since introduced a vision for a country that is both deeply rooted in its heritage and optimistic about its future, highlighting the importance of pride in heritage alongside an outward-looking and entertainment-laden modernity, and since the launch of Vision 2030 in 2016 has opened cinemas, licensed concerts and festivals, established a dedicated Ministry of Culture with specialized commissions for heritage, film, literature, music, and the culinary arts, and encouraged a national narrative that combines pride in heritage with an outward-looking, entertainment-rich modernity (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). These changes have

now means to be Saudi takes place on social media platforms, and among these YouTube has held a distinctive position. Saudi Arabia by 2013 was said to have the largest number of videos watched per capita of any country in the world, with some 90 million viewed on the site daily, and a number of independent Saudi production networks and comedy channels, on par with UTURN, were being created on the platform, providing young Saudis with a new space to create and view cultural content for and by themselves (Leggett, 2013). These days, writers, academics, historians, clerics, artists, and commentators of culture perform long-form presentations, documentaries, interviews, podcasts, and satire to a national audience on YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2018; Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

In this space, a small number of channels are given an inordinate amount of attention. They are often referred to in Arabic media discourse as *al-nukhba al-thaqafiyya* (cultural elite) or, in recent past, as *mu'aththirun* (influencers). But, these two vocabularies refer to two different sources of authority. The first brings up credentials, publications, institutional standing, and long-standing taste; the second brings up the number of subscribers, views, and ability to determine the topic of the day. The "digital cultural elite" that the article describes is a person whose authority to speak about culture is based on a combination of intellectual or artistic recognition and visibility granted by the platform.

The central question that will be posed in this article is therefore: how do digital cultural elites in Saudi Arabia gain and use symbolic capital on the platform of YouTube and how does this symbolic capital influence the meanings of Saudi cultural identity? There are three questions that follow which are subsidiary. To begin with, what different types of capital do these actors have to offer in the digital arena, and how is it transformed to digital recognition? Second, how is it that recognition can become the means of defining legitimate cultural identity? Third, what are the extent and the cost of a cultural sphere organized around the accumulation of recognition?

To answer these questions the article uses the main analytical tool of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of fields and forms of capital (1979/1984, 1986, 1991, 1993). Bourdieu's analysis is particularly appropriate for the problem because he considers cultural authority not as a natural attribute of a few individuals, but as the result of conflicts in the already structured fields of struggle that emerges among agents in which the power to name, classify and consecrate is fought for. It also acknowledges the impact platforms have on these struggles and hence references to the literature on networked publics, context collapse, micro-celebrity, online video, and the platform economy (Abidin, 2018; boyd, 2010; Burgess & Green, 2018; Lange, 2019; Marwick, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2011; van Dijck, 2013).

The study is of a conceptual and interpretive nature. It (rather than presenting a quantitative data set) creates an analytic sample of ideal types of influential intellectual accounts, Weber's sense of the accentuated types that explain patterns that are identified, in mixed and impure forms, in empirical reality (Weber, 1949). The word account is used here to describe a YouTube channel and the public face of the presenter of the channel. This design is purposefully selected. Research of public figures in Saudi Arabia involves ethical and practical issues such as the possibility of assigning roles to identifiable figures and the volatility of the access to the data on the platforms. An ideal type approach enables the analysis to see the structural position and mechanisms that can be examined through empirical approaches but also without making claims about persons that the design of the present study is not capable of substantiating.

Lastly, the article accepts the call of the *Journal of Daoist Studies* for interdisciplinary and comparative studies by juxtaposing the Bourdieusian logic of symbolic accumulation with the Daoist critique of name and reputation. The philosophical reflections on the inconstancy of names, the dangers of pursuing fame and the importance of the useless are some of the most sustained in any intellectual tradition in the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. Alongside the dynamics of a modern digital field, these texts are neither simply an exotic contrast, but are also used to give voice to what a sociology of capital can describe but not always assess, that is, the human and cultural costs of a life whose orientation is toward the visible public.

The article begins as follows. The theoretical framework is presented in section 2. In Section 3, the digital field is placed in the context of Saudi Arabia's cultural transformation. Section 4 provides a conceptual design and construction of the analytical sample. The five ideal types are shown in Section 5. Section 6 focuses on the way symbolic capital contributes to identity. Section 7 further develops the comparative Daoist reading while Section 8 ends with limitations and a research agenda.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SYMBOLIC CAPITAL IN A DIGITAL FIELD

2.1 Fields, capital, and the ability to name

Bourdieu (1993) describes social life divided into various relatively autonomous fields where each has its stakes, rules and ways to achieve excellence, including literary, academic, religious, journalistic and political. Agents do have jobs in these areas, depending on the amount of capital they bring in, and what kind that capital is. Bourdieu (1986) has recognized three types of capital: economic, cultural (embodied, objectified and institutionalized) and social, defined as the resources that are gained from enduring networks of acquaintance and recognition. These are not the four elements of symbolic capital. It is the form that any capital takes when it is perceived and recognized as legitimate, when its arbitrary origins are misrecognized as natural merit (Bourdieu, 1980/1990, 1991).

Basically, this article has two implications. First, symbolic capital is relational: it exists only in the perceptions of others who share the categories of evaluation that make it recognizable. A commentary on classical Arabic poetry is no more prestigious than the remarks of an expert who has taught such study. Second, symbolic capital gives the power to construct reality – symbolic power – the power of imposing principles of vision and division, that is, the power of naming groups, of setting the boundaries of belonging and of defining what is authentic (Bourdieu, 1991). Identity, from this perspective, is not merely expressed by those who hold symbolic capital; it is in part produced through their acts of naming.

An additional distinction that is relevant and very much at the forefront of debates in cultural production is Bourdieu's analysis of the field of cultural production. He describes a tension between a pole of restricted production, oriented toward recognition by peers and governed by the value of disinterestedness, and a pole of large-scale production, oriented toward wide audiences and commercial success (Bourdieu, 1993). Prestige at the restricted pole often depends on a visible refusal of popularity. In the digital field, this tension is reframed, as popular attention on platforms is quantified, displayed—and remunerated—in real time, and on YouTube directly.

2.2 From the cultural field to the digital field

Whether online platforms can be regarded as a field by themselves or as a technology that transcends what fields they are in has been discussed. Couldry (2003) suggested that the media has a meta-capital, or power to manipulate the rate of exchange between forms of capital across multiple fields. Ignatow and Robinson (2017) argued that the digital realm is best understood through the reproduction and transformation of existing capitals, including the emergence of digital competencies that act as new forms of cultural capital. Julien (2015) demonstrated that the concept of social capital can be adopted as a theoretical lens for understanding online interactions and that online networked relationships are no exception to the inequalities that govern offline relations.

This piece extends this work, viewing the Saudi cultural discourse that unfolds on YouTube as a digital field—a space of positions and struggles, a space in which agents from the literary, academic, religious, journalistic, and artistic registers meet, compete, and contest the definition of legitimate culture. The digital field is not separate. It is rooted firmly in the state, in the commercial structure of the platform, and in the older fields from which its participants come. But it does have its own properties which support the study of it as a separate arena.

2.3 What platforms change

In particular, symbolic capital depends on four properties of platforms. The first is quantification. Subscription, views, likes, comments, watch-time make it easy to see and count what you're doing. In Bourdieu's account symbolic capital is mostly an implicit perception, but on YouTube it materializes into a numerical shadow that appears under each video and appears on the channel page, which can be reckoned and turned into more opportunities (van Dijck, 2013).

The second is context collapse. Marwick and boyd (2011) explain that platforms are connecting people who otherwise would not have been connected, giving someone one message and another message to other people, to officials, and to the media. On YouTube, a single video can be viewed by specialists, families and people around the Arab world. For cultural elites, “context collapse” refers to the circumstance in which a speech designed for a learned or sophisticated listener base can be assessed according to populist criteria, or vice versa. This further complicates the management of self-presentation that Goffman (1959)

made his observation that it is always present in social life.

The third is micro-celebrity logic. Platform users foster audiences through strategic intimacy, persona consistency and performance of authenticity demonstrated by Marwick (2013) and Abidin (2018). On YouTube, the speaker's facial moves and voice are visible, and often, the domestic context of their performances is as well, inviting the intimacy and community between creators and viewers that Lange (2019) charts as part of the culture of video-sharing. These logics affect intellectuals both those who accept them and those who do not. The credibility of a scholar's authority can also rely as much upon the impression of sincerity and approachability of the persona as upon the scholarship.

The fourth is algorithmic mediation. Who gets to be heard depends on ranking and recommendation systems. Recommendations make up a large percentage of YouTube viewing, and the algorithm of the recommendation system is engineered to predict and maximize the watch time (Covington et al., 2016). Indeed, Rieder et al. (2018) demonstrate that YouTube's rankings create unique cultures of visibility, in which specific channels and formats are encouraged, and Bishop (2019) demonstrates that creators develop shared theories about what the algorithm favours, and adapt their titles, thumbnails and formats accordingly. This type of systems are prone to punishing inactivity and encouraging, in other cases, controversy, hyper-emotionality, and claims of identity (Papacharissi, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). Algorithmic amplification thus brings about an exchange rate between forms of expression and visibility over which no one has full control.

2.4 Intellectuals, elites, and identity brokerage

The intellectual has been the subject of a long-standing theoretical construct, and their role as a mediator between knowledge and public life has often been theorized.. Gramsci (1971) distinguished traditional intellectuals, who present themselves as independent of social groups, from organic intellectuals, who articulate the worldview of a rising group and help secure its hegemony. Said (1994) defended a model of the intellectual as an outsider who speaks truth to power and resists the pull of institutional loyalty. Both models are relevant to the Saudi digital field, where some cultural figures align closely with national projects while others present themselves as independent critics, and where the space for each position is shaped by political conditions.

Cultural identity, finally, is understood here in the constructivist sense developed by Hall (1990): not a fixed essence recovered from the past but a positioning, produced through narratives of memory and belonging that are continually re-articulated. Anderson's (2006) account of the nation as an imagined community, sustained through shared media, is also relevant, since platforms are now among the principal media through which national community is imagined. In this perspective, digital cultural elites can be seen as agents of identity who identify, interpret, and validate specific stories of who we are.

3. THE SAUDI CONTEXT: CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

3.1 From the Sahwa to Vision 2030

Any account of Saudi cultural identity must recognize that its public definition has been the object of sustained struggle. The Sahwa (Islamic Awakening) movement which dominated education, preaching and cultural production in the 80s and early 2000s had a strong influence on shaping identity mainly in religious terms (Lacroix, 2010/2011). There were competing currents represented in the literature, journalism and more recently in satellite TV and internet forums, which challenged this definition, and were referred to as liberal or modernist currents (Al-Rasheed, 2010; Kraidy, 2010). The contests were not only ideological. They were conflicts with respect to what forms of capital—religious, literary, technical, or international—warranted the speaking about the nation.

The institutional landscape of this struggle changed dramatically in Vision 2030. The national agenda clearly connects cultural development with economic diversification, quality of life and national identity (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Pre-Islamic and regional historic sites, traditional arts, crafts, cuisine, poetry, and traditional garments are all regarded as a source of pride, as well as an economic asset of cultural heritage. Meanwhile, the arts and tourism are cited as symbols of an open and confident society, while entertainment is promoted as a symbol of an open and rejecting society. This double focus on rootedness and openness leads to new possibilities for cultural actors who are able to voice how these two are to be united.

3.2 YouTube, a national stage

This is not the first time that Saudi Arabia has engaged in online video. In the early 2010s, as satellite television and online forums had previously done in the 1990s and 2000s, YouTube provided young Saudi producers with a way to reach national audiences without relying on the national broadcasters (Lynch, 2006). Independent networks and channels which were creating comedy, social commentary and animated comedy, garnered huge audiences and proved that locally produced content in the Saudi colloquial language could rival regional and international media for Saudi attention. Similar expressions of creativity and satire are recorded in the Arab world during the same time by Kraidy (2016). A few of these early cohorts of Saudi YouTube shortened their journeys to the film and television screens, and then to the institutional cultural sector, as the circuits of conversion have been outlined in Section 6.

YouTube is not a text-based platform and so it is different from it in ways that are relevant to the present analysis. It is in the nature of the video, rather than the short post, to be a basic unit of the medium and to be more argumentative, performance and place-oriented, object-oriented, and people-oriented. Its audience is organised by channels and thus fosters long-term connections between creators and audience (Burgess & Green, 2018; Lange, 2019). Its Partner Program is directly tied to the recognition of ads and the revenue it generates, and visibility becomes more directly monetary than is the case with many other platforms (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Its recommendation system, which is focused on watch time, is a key determinant of what viewers are seeing (Covington et al., 2016). Meanwhile, the study of Gulf social media has recorded the coordinated campaigns and the alignment of messages on social media platforms (Jones, 2022). The digital field is not, then, a free space of ideas or the (uncontroversial) extension of state media. It is a formal and conflictual space where visibility is determined by production resources, algorithmic dynamics and political borders.

3.3 The new cultural institutions as consecrating agencies

Boudieu (1993) pointed out that fields have institutions that consecrate value, such as academies, prizes, publishers and critics. In Saudi Arabia, cultural commissions, national festivals, literary awards, book fairs, and programs on heritage are new and expanded bodies that act as strong consecrators. Attaching one's name to an invitation to speak at a national book fair, sign up for an advisory committee or a role in a heritage program becomes symbolic capital to be displayed and multiplied online. However, online visibility can result in institutional recognition. The digital field is then connected with the institutional field through circuits of conversion, which is further explored in Section 6.

4. APPROACH: CONCEPTUAL DESIGN AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN ANALYTICAL SAMPLE

4.1 Rationale

This research uses conceptual and interpretive design. It's not about measuring the influence of specific channels; it's about capturing the structural roles that influence is played in and how it's played. This decision is based on three reasons. First, symbolic capital is a theoretical construct that is relational and qualitative: subscriber figures and views are just a partial – and sometimes misleading – proxy for recognition. Second, the research on named public persons in a sensitive political climate is fraught with potential for misattribution and potential for harm, especially when platform access is not reliable. Third, conceptual work that establishes positions and mechanisms provides a foundation for future empirical research to operationalize and test propositions developed here.

4.2 The Analytical sample: Ideal types

After Weber (1949) an ideal type is an analytical abstraction, created by the singling out of features that are present in reality but accentuated by one-sidedness. Empirical cases do not always fit into the ideal type, but rather real channels overlap the various ideal types and evolve over time. It is the ability of the construct to enable comparison that is its value. This article thus presents five ideal types of influential intellectual accounts, built around three criteria that are based on the theoretical framework, namely: (a) the predominant form of capital that the account holder brings to the digital field; (b) the central mode of address to the audience; and (c) the narrative of Saudi identity that the account holder typically promotes.

A classification of the types was achieved after an iterative process of reading the existing literature on Saudi public culture, Arab digital media and online video, as well as general observations of common public genres of cultural content that circulate on the platform. They are presented as heuristic models for research, not as a census of existing channels. No individual channel is named or characterized. Table 1 summarizes the analytical dimensions used to construct and compare the types.

Table 1. Analytical dimensions used to construct the ideal types

Dimension	Theoretical basis	Guiding question
Inherited capital	Bourdieu (1986): cultural, social, and religious capital accumulated in other fields	What resources does the account holder bring into the digital field?
Mode of address	Goffman (1959); Marwick and boyd (2011): self-presentation and imagined audience	How does the account position itself toward its audience?
Conversion strategy	Bourdieu (1986); Couldry (2003): convertibility of capitals and media meta-capital	How is offline standing turned into online recognition, and back again?
Identity narrative	Hall (1990); Anderson (2006): identity as positioning and imagined community	Which version of Saudi identity does the account characteristically advance?
Structural constraint	Bourdieu (1993); van Dijck (2013): field rules and platform architecture	What limits the position, and what risks does it carry?

4.3 Indicators for future operationalization

The authors do not report any measurements in the present study, but suggest indicators as a way to operationalize each dimension in future empirical research. Documentation of inherited capital may come from publicly available biographical information including academic positions, publications, prizes, and institutional roles. Digital recognition can be estimated by numbers of subscribers, views, and average watch time, and can be better measured by patterns of collaboration, guest appearances and cross-references between the top channels—the signs of other people's recognition but not popularity. Audiences receive and challenge reproduces of the advanced narratives in the comment sections. Qualitative content analysis of video titles, thumbnails, video descriptions and video transcripts are suitable tools for analyzing identity narratives, and coding categories can be created for heritage, religion, modernity, nation, region and global. These indicators are discussed again in Section 8 when laying out a research agenda..

5. ANALYSIS: FIVE IDEAL TYPES OF DIGITAL CULTURAL ELITES

5.1 The heritage custodian

The heritage custodian's cultural capital is mainly embodied and institutionalized with respect to history, genealogy, classical Arabic poetry, Nabati poetry, archaeology or regional folklore. Usually, the videos in such a channel are documentary-style, filmed at historic locations, which provide explanations of the origins of customs, recite and comment on poetry, retrieve forgotten vocabulary, and correct popular errors about the past. The speaker's tone is didactic and tender: the listener is asked to see himself/herself in someone else's inheritance, made manifest by the custodian. This type is well suited for YouTube, where landscapes, ruins, crafts and elders' testimonies can be presented, not just read. The heritage custodian has a special role to play in the context of Vision 2030. The national focus on heritage makes this actor's expertise a

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valuable asset and the custodian may often become involved in institutional programmes, documentaries

and festivals. The identity narrative presented is a narrative of continuity and depth; Saudi identity has a long and varied history, and is more extensive than any one ideology. This is a symbolic story. It broadens the national past to regional diversity and pre-modern civilisations and thus widens the pool of resources available for identity to be constructed. But the gatekeeper power is not limited to the custodian. Judgement of authenticity, originality and corruption of heritage and custom are forms of classification, creating legitimate borders of belonging (Bourdieu, 1991).

5.2 The reformist modernizer

The modernizer is usually a reformist, with cultural capital from higher education, perhaps from abroad, and professional experience within the realm of journalism, the academy, or the policy field. Characteristically, the channel comes in the form of explainer videos, lectures or long form interview / podcasts. It speaks to an audience of citizens of a society in transition and it sees the reforms of today as the realization of development, openness and participation in global culture—long-held aspirations. It has an instructional and sometimes optimistic tone. The reformist modernizer represents external cultural capital to internal symbolic capital. The mixed blessing of international credentials and cosmopolitan fluency has now come to be associated with the legitimacy of the nation, in line with the national agenda. The story told is a confident one for modernity: a Saudi identity that is "modern," that engages the world in arts, entertainment, and ideas, and that is enriched by such engagement. The Gramscian conception of the reformist modernizer is that this figure operates as an organic intellectual of the reform project, turning the goals of the project into an idiom of common sense practice (Gramsci, 1971). The critical distance is an important risk factor for this position. Where symbolic capital is tied strongly to a project of an institution, there may be a narrowing of the room for independent judgment attributed to the intellectual vocation by Said (1994).

5.3 The religious-cultural interpreter

The religious-cultural interpreter utilizes religious learning resources, but, using recorded lessons, short reflections, and clips from longer lectures, discusses cultural questions—not doctrinal ones—like ethics, family, language, the meaning of national

occasions, and the relationship between religious learning and the changing of customs.

During the Sahwa, religious capital is frequently seen as the primary means of discussion of identity (Lacroix, 2010/2011). The contemporary interpreter speaks a different language that still values religious authority, but is required to be flexible with the nation's priorities and a moderate, centrist language. This ideal type shows that the reconfiguration of the field is far from an unproblematic replacement of religious with secular capital. It's more of a revaluation of religious capital, really. Now the interpreter's job is to demonstrate the compatibility of faith and the new culture environment. The identity narrative promoted is one of a balanced continuity, in which Islam is the moral axis of Saudi identity, but is expressed in a moderate, tolerant, and compatible way within the context of Saudi development. The interpreter thus plays an essential role of reconciler, calming the nerves of those who may be feeling anxious about change, and giving the change religious authority.

5.4 The creative-industries curator

The creative-industries curator comes from the growing range of disciplines from film, music, design, fashion, gastronomy and the visual arts. This actor's capital is an aesthetic know-how, backed by networks in the new cultural economy, such as festivals, galleries, production companies and international partners. The channel's mode of address is curatorial – it chooses, proposes, reviews and celebrates, sometimes behind the scenes, sometimes through artist interviews, sometimes by covering events. It tends to be emotive and aesthetic.

The curator is the type that's most responsive to the logic of the platform. The affordances of online video are met by visual storytelling, production values and taste; the curator's value is, in part, measured by their capacity to build attention for cultural products (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). The curator operates between the poles of restricted and large-scale cultural production: giving artistic authority to projects that have a market and market validity to projects that are artistic, in Bourdieu's (1993) terms. The narrative of

identity promoted is a story of creative self-expression: Saudi identity is presented as a contemporary source of creative expression that can give birth to films, music, and design for both local and global audiences.

However, the challenge in this is that the "commodification of identity" – heritage logos and symbols become products in a cultural marketplace.

5.5 The critical-ironic commentator

The critical-ironic commentator is not so much qualified as brilliant, or linguistic, or good at performance, or independent. The channel covers topics like social interaction, trends, bureaucracy, language mistakes and over-the-top behavior of other influencers, frequently based on sketches, animation and satirical monologues. Comedy and animated satire is one of the first local content genres to be broadcasted to national audiences, and this type has deep roots on Saudi YouTube. Its address is conspiratorial – literally: it breathes with the audience – the commentator asks the audience to share a knowing view on a series of everyday absurdities. Irony is a key and underutilized asset for building identity. Kraidy (2016) has demonstrated the power of the creative and satirical expression as a type of cultural intervention in the Arab world. The symbolic capital of the critical-ironic commentator is based on the perception of authenticity, that this voice is not performing for institutions or sponsors. This is paradoxical because the perception of independence has to be maintained through performance: the persona of independence is subject to the same platform logics as any other persona (Marwick, 2013). In this identity story, Saudi identity is plural and self-reflexive; it is possible to laugh at it, debate it, and live with it. This sense of constraint is apparent in the limits of acceptable criticism. Irony flourishes on ambiguity and those who use it must be sensitive to what may be said, and sometimes it is directed at social manners, not structures of power.

Table 2. Five ideal types of digital cultural elites on YouTube

Ideal type	Dominant capital	Mode of address	Identity narrative	Structural tension
Heritage custodian	Historical, literary, and genealogical knowledge	Pedagogical, affectionate	Continuity and historical depth	Gatekeeping of authenticity
Reformist modernizer	Higher education, often international; professional standing	Explanatory, optimistic	Confident, outward-looking modernity	Reduced critical distance
Religious-cultural interpreter	Religious learning applied to cultural questions	Reassuring, moral	Balanced continuity of faith and change	Revaluation of religious authority
Creative-industries curator	Aesthetic expertise; cultural-economy networks	Curatorial, celebratory	Creative self-expression	Commodification of identity
Critical-ironic commentator	Wit, linguistic skill, reputation for independence	Satirical, knowing	Plural, self-reflexive identity	Limits of permissible criticism

5.6 Interactions among the types

The five types do not exist in isolation. They constitute a larger space of positions that are structured in such a way that each position demarcates itself in part in relation to the others. This is because the heritage custodian can condemn the creative-industries curator's "commercialization" of tradition, the curator can

depict the custodian as "nostalgic," the religious-cultural interpreter can cast him or herself as the "moral watchdog" between the two, and the critical-ironic commentator can poke fun at their solemnity. These relational oppositions are precisely what Bourdieu (1993) describes as the dynamics of a field, in which the value of a position depends on its distance from other positions.

Importantly, the types also make alliances, and on YouTube such alliances manifest themselves in collaborations and guest appearances, where audiences and authority are "rented" to each other. The field becomes a space of collective affirmation in moments of national celebration, like Founding Day or National Day, when it comes to sharing celebratory stories. During these times, the digital field operates more like Anderson (2006) describes the press in print nationalism, creating concurrent experiences of belonging to a spread-out population. Such convergence reveals that the contest between the digital cultural elites is played out in a common matrix of national loyalty and that their differences lie not in their basic orientations to the nation but in emphasis and interpretation.

6. MECHANISMS: HOW SYMBOLIC CAPITAL CHANGE CULTURAL IDENTITY

Ideal types can be analysed to reveal four mechanisms through which symbolic capital in the digital field influences the meanings of Saudi cultural identity.

6.1 Consecration

The process of bestowing value on a person, object, or practice through a recognized agent is called consecration (Bourdieu, 1993). Consecration on YouTube happens when a growing channel reviews a book, a film, invites a guest to interview them, makes a collaboration with a younger channel or when a channel films a heritage site and posts it to a national audience. These each bestow symbolic capital on the object to be consecrated, and also indicate what a given culture would like to be part of the repertoire of national identity. These endorsements also create long-lasting cascades of recognition as videos are available, searchable, and recommendable long after they are published. A local dish, a regional dialect expression, or a forgotten poet can go from local obscurity to national visibility in a series of consecrating video sequences. It is not through abstract statements about Saudis that the concept of identity is formed, but by the process of the cumulative act of valuation.

6.2 Boundary work

Another way of symbolic power is exercised is through the drawing of distinctions between what is "authentic" and what's "inauthentic", what's "ours" and what's "theirs", what's "legitimate" and what's "illegitimate" (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). Digital cultural elites do their "boundary work" when they "correct errors in the past", when they "challenge what they consider to be misuse of national symbols", when they "invent a distinction between the real and the fake", when they "establish acceptable limits of cultural borrowing", and when they "correct historical inaccuracies". Without difference, there can be no identity: without boundary work, there can be no identity work. However, in the digital domain, boundary work is amplified by the context collapse and algorithmic amplification. One of the disputed boundaries is a single, disputed fact, such as the name of an old clothing item, or how a dish is made – shared with neighbouring countries – and one can spark long-running conflicts with response videos being uploaded to channels. The commentary spaces replicate and challenge these distinctions by placing audiences beyond the video, who debate authenticity underneath the video. In such disputes, the authority to determine what is authentic is the prize.

6.3 Conversion between capitals

Bourdieu (1986) emphasized that the forms of capital can be converted into one another at variable rates. The digital field establishes new circuits of conversion. Institutional cultural capital, such as a doctorate or a prize, is converted into an online audience when its holder launches a channel or appears as a guest on

established channels and is recognized by peers. When visible creators are invited on to committees, festivals, and broadcast shows, an online audience is once again transformed into institutional capital. An audience can also be monetized via advertising revenue, sponsorship and paid content. The conversion is more direct

with YouTube than with most other text-based platforms because YouTube's Partner Program pays creators based on how long users watch their videos (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Yet, such conversion still faces the danger of devaluing symbolic capital at the narrow pole because the disinterestedness is still appreciated (Bourdieu, 1993).

These circuits have consequences for identity. Narratives that are effectively transmitted online are more likely to be adopted by institutions and narratives promoted by institutions are more likely to be amplified online. Such reinforcement over time can reinforce a dominant narrative, and narratives that lack reinforcement in either of the circuits stay marginal. Video production equipment, skills and time are also unequally distributed; and access to these circuits is required. In the digital field, it is not just a matter of a democratization of the definition of identity. It also concentrates it.

6.4 Algorithmic amplification

The fourth mechanism is specific to platforms. The ranking and recommendation systems on YouTube are built to reward content that captures the viewer's attention and attracts engagement, and there is a strong link between affect and engagement, such as pride, outrage, humor, and nostalgia (Covington et al., 2016; Papacharissi, 2015). One of the most interesting types of content is the ones that ask your audience to state or validate their belonging, which essentially are identity claims. This means that on the platform, qualified or complex expressions, or expressions that are not entirely positive, are systematically down-weighted, giving priority instead to emphatic, emotionally charged expressions that are presented in titles and thumbnails that offer promise of an emotional pay off. Those who want to be seen in digital culture are placed under pressure to adjust their discourse in line with those who choose to, and the manner in which they adapt their discourse is influenced by shared beliefs about what is rewarded by the algorithm (Bishop, 2019). Hence, algorithmic amplification also brings a structural bias to how an identity is created, favoring affective and performative aspects over reflective and deliberative ones. This bias is not a conscious selection of any of the participants, but it nevertheless influences the field as a whole (Rieder et al., 2018; van Dijck, 2013).

6.5. Brokers instead of Originators

All of these mechanisms point to the digital cultural elites as brokers of cultural identity, rather than its creators, in this sense. Institutional projects, especially Vision 2030, are the main lines of the contemporary national narrative. Digital cultural elites take these lines and encode them in vernacular ways, affix them to tangible utilities and activities, and adjust the lines for the affective economy of the space, and race around the exact interpretation of them. Their impact is on the texture and emotional quality of identity rather than on its direction. This conclusion is not only drawn from celebratory accounts that regard online influencers as individual producers of culture, it is also drawn from dismissive accounts that regard them as mere repeaters of official messages. Interpretive agency, in brokerage is real and occurs in a bounded and structured arena.

7. A COMPARATIVE COUNTERPOINT: NAME, REPUTATION, AND THE DAOIST CRITIQUE OF RECOGNITION

7.1 Why a Daoist perspective?

Bourdieu's sociology is a colloquial, rather than a theoretical. It exposes the arbitrary basis of symbolic hierarchies and the misrecognition that underpins them, but does not provide many tools to imagine what a good relationship to recognition might be like. The Daoist tradition, on the other hand, has a longstanding normative response to this question. The first Taoist writings have doubts about permanent names, about gaining a reputation and about the mechanism of society that gives value. The use of these texts in dialogue with the above analysis is not meant in any direct sense to introduce the Chinese philosophy to the Saudi society. It's a comparative exercise that allows us to illuminate aspects of the digital field that its actors may be hard to see from within using a distant tradition.

7.2 The instability of names

The Daodejing begins with a well-known comment on the failure to have a name: The name that can be named is not the constant name, and the way that can be spoken of is not the constant way. (Ames & Hall, 2003, Chapter 1). Regardless of the interpretation that may be given to this text, it conveys a thought that is near to that of Bourdieu's structural theories on symbolic power. Names categorize and partition; they make distinctions in a reality that is more vast than they are. When the beautiful is beautiful in the world, the ugly is set up by the beautiful (Ames & Hall, 2003, Chapter 2). Valuation is the opposite of one's own, in fact. This is a powerful anticipation of the boundary work described by Section 6 as each act of consecration yields an excluded remainder.

In the digital realm, the Daoist premise implies that the hyper-naming and hyper-classifying which occurs on platforms will tend to introduce further contested borders and originality, authenticity and foreignness will be constantly labeled, rather than settle things. Identity based on increasingly subtle differences can become more reactive than resilient.

7.3 Reputation as a hazard

It's even more straightforward when it comes to reputation in the Zhuangzi. Throughout its stories, those who choose to pursue a path of usefulness, learning, and/or virtue are repeatedly positioned in danger, in exploitation, and in loss of self. The famous example of the tree that is not useful to carpenters so it lasts in the woods (Watson 2013, Chapters 1 and 4) turns the equation of recognition around: Trees that are not valued do not get cut down. It also cautions against the path of fame, which is seen as a source of conflict and as a way that brings people into competition with each other (Watson, 2013, Chapter 4).

The non-useful tree in Bourdieu's use is the agent that does not participate in the symbolic capital competition. Such an agent can, almost by definition, be invisible on YouTube. The provocation of the Zhuangzi is to consider what might be the case when it is possible to be invisible. The pressures discussed in Section 6 – for example, the necessity to 'watch time', publish consistently, assert boundaries, and cultivate a persona – could be interpreted as types of the hazard described by the Zhuangzi. In some ways those who contribute to the attention economy are eaten up by it.

7.4 Authenticity, performance, genuine pretending

One more point of contact is authenticity. The critical-ironic commentator from Section 5.5 also highlights the paradox of a persona whose authority is built on the image of itself as if it weren't performing. The critical-ironic commentator in Section 5.5 exemplifies the paradox of this kind of persona – it's authoritative yet it's not performing. Moeller and D'Ambrosio (2017) have suggested that the Zhuangzi takes a nuanced position on social roles, one where he plays them fully without feeling the need to identify oneself as them, and thus without exhausting himself playing the role. The interpretation provides a valuable perspective on the situation of the digital cultural elites, whose faces and voices become the recognizable trademark of their channels. The threat that platform scholars raise concerns not with performance, but with the loss of the self into the persona that the platform rewards (Goffman, 1959). Zhuangzian ideal proposes a new connection with recognition: participation without taking hold.

7.5 Wuwei and the development of cultural life.

Lastly, wuwei can be understood as something opposite to the digital field's rigorous creation of identity (Kohn, 2001; Moeller, 2004). The ideals of the best rulers in Daodejing are very similar, as the best rulers are those who are barely known by the people, and when their work is completed the people say, 'Of themselves...' (Ames & Hall, 2003, Chapter 17). If we translate this into the cultural domain, then the vitality of a culture's identity might stem less from its steady expression and defense as from the conditions where practices, languages, crafts and relationships thrive without a constant commentary. The transmission of skills, the preservation of family memory, the use of local speech: are some of the most important cultural activities in any society, and none of them get any symbolic capital at all, except when they're filmed.

This comparative reading does not mean that the digital cultural elites need to be withdrawn from public life, or that it is impossible to transplant daoist ideals, without adaptation, into a Saudi Islamic and Arab context that is rich in its own conceptualizations of sincerity (ikhlas), humility, and the dangers of ostentation (riya'). In fact, a potentially significant avenue for future comparison might be to juxtapose the

Daoist critique of reputation with these Islamic moral concepts which look at similar issues in the Saudi cultural world from within. What's valuable about the Daoist approach here is that it illuminates what the accumulative logic often blurs: that recognition is not a value-free assessment of cultural worth, that the quest for recognition comes at a price, and that a sense of identity garnered largely through competitive visibility can be more superficial than the lived culture it claims to be a measure of.

8. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have discussed the symbolic capital of the digital cultural elites on YouTube and how it has created a cultural identity in Saudi Arabia in a period of rapid changes in the culture. Based on an extended version of Bourdieu's theory of fields and capital, with critical insights drawn from existing work on platforms, on-line video and networked publics, it developed an analytical sample of five ideal types of influential intellectual accounts: the heritage guardian, the reformist moderniser, the religious-cultural interpreter, the creative-industries curator and the critical-ironic commentator. They all carry different kinds of capital into the digital realm, speak to an audience in a recognizable way, and promote a unique sense of identity, with a focus on continuity, assured modernity, measured belief, inventive impulse, or self-reflexive plurality.

The analysis resulted in the identification of four mechanisms that reproduce symbolic capital in the formation of identity: consecration, boundary work, conversion of capitals and algorithmic amplification. It suggested that the digital cultural elites were engaged in the primary functions of brokering: to translate institutional cultural projects into vernacular, affective and concrete forms, and to compete with each other for the interpretation of authenticity within a limited domain. They do have an impact, but not so much on what it is that they are, as on how it feels to be. The article also revealed that, although digital space may represent a democratisation of power to define a sense of identity, certain circuits of recognition between the institutional and the online are overwhelmingly dominant, with YouTube's monetisation and 'watch-time' based suggestions being particularly direct.

The sociological description was enriched by the comparative Daoist reading that introduced a normative aspect. The Daodejing's meditation on the volatility of names and the Zhuangzi's cautions about the dangers of reputation reveal the price of a culture based on the "business of visibility," while their discussion of the vitality of cultural identity points to some practices that are not even visible and may actually form the basis for this vitality.

8.1 Limitations

There are significant limitations of the study. It is a conceptual analysis and as such does not offer any empirical evidence for the prevalence of each type, for the actual reach of certain channels or for the measurable impact of elite discourse on the attitudes of the audience. Real channels are combinations and transitions among the types which are analytical constructs. It also provides a brief discussion of disparities among genders, regions and generations within the digital field, which are each worthy of special attention. Lastly, the platform landscape is evolving quickly, with modifications in monetization guidelines, suggestion algorithms and the introduction of brief video formats, such as YouTube Briefs, and the dynamics outlined above could change.

8.2 An agenda for empirical research

There are several research strands stemming from the framework. First, network analysis of network features (such as collaborations, guest appearances, and cross-referencing between elite channels) can be applied to determine if the five types of channels actually cluster into separate groups and how they connect, beyond just how popular they are; this will help to differentiate popular reach from peer recognition. Second, a qualitative content analysis of videos and comments made alongside national events and cultural events

would allow for an analysis of the practice of consecration and boundary work. Third, longitudinal studies would look at how online visibility relates to subsequent institutional roles, and vice versa, following the circuits of conversion. Fourth, audience research, including interviews and surveys with 'ordinary viewers' could evaluate how elite narratives are received, negotiated, or resisted. Fifth, comparative research across the Gulf states and across platforms (X, TikTok and Snapchat) could yield results that would allow us to determine which of the findings are specific to Saudi Arabia and which are specific to YouTube. Finally,

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comparative philosophical approaches to piecing together the ethical traditions of Daoism, Islam and others could enhance the normative investigation of recognition in digital public life.

Recognizing who is entitled to name, how they gained the authority to do so, and at what price, is not only a scholarly endeavor when it comes to cultural identity in this day and age. It's a requirement for a more reflective cultural public space.

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