Vogue of Arabia

Western Voices

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Vogue Arabia constructs and negotiates Arab identity through fashion discourse, focusing on the magazine's representations and how audiences interpret them. For this purpose, a theoretical framework combining representation, identity, and stereotypes is used alongside Barnard's (2008) theory of fashion communication, grounding the analysis in orientalism and cultural imperialism (Said, 1979; 1994).

This study's methodology is a mixed-methods approach that combines Critical Discourse Analysis and qualitative survey research, supported by a semiotic analysis of fashion.

The results reveal that Vogue Arabia's representations display significant ambivalence, oscillating between celebration and assimilation. Outsider perspectives shape both the magazine's discourse and audience responses, which reflect a costume-ised representation that does not translate well across cultural codes. The analysis confirms that hegemonic narratives surrounding Arab identity dominate Vogue Arabia's representations despite the effort to appear independent.

The resulting conclusion is that Vogue Arabia is a site of cultural negotiation and tension, where fashion mediates identity through a global lens, adhering to larger industry standards. Foreign editorial control and pan-Arab framing contribute to the orientalist restructuring of identity.

This thesis highlights the importance of local voices and audience engagement, suggesting a move beyond the pan-Arab model of cultural production to better reflect the region's diversity.

Keywords: *Vogue, fashion communication, critical discourse analysis, representation, orientalism, cross-cultural representation, identity performance.*

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1. Introduction

T.E. Lawrence claimed to champion Arab autonomy and immerse himself in the culture, fostering a deep admiration for the region. History, however, has shown that influence is rarely ever neutral, and even good intentions could have unforeseen consequences. Ultimately, Lawrence - nicknamed Lawrence of Arabia - was a key player in the undoing of Arab autonomy, painting the picture that those who mediate representation, regardless of intention, inevitably shape the narratives that endure.

Lawrence was a British Intelligence Officer sent to fight alongside the Arab forces in the First World War; before this, he worked as a photographer and archaeologist in the region, granting him valuable familiarity with the people and their culture (Imperial War Museums, n.d.). Initially, Lawrence's mission was to support the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire.

In his book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1991), he reveals that he developed a deep love for the region and its people during this time. Upon his return to Britain, he began campaigning for Arab independence. This was a failed campaign since the region's fate had already been decided according to the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, and his role in supporting the dismantling of Ottoman control was a significant contribution to the consequent division and colonisation of the region.

Despite professing affection for the Arab world, in his book, Lawrence exoticises and fetishises the region, swinging back and forth from romanticised portrayals to depictions of savage, bloodthirsty warriors. This ambivalence is encapsulated by Said's (1994) description; "Lawrence of Arabia, at the head of his Arab warriors, living the romance of the desert, inventing guerilla warfare, hobnobbing with princes and statesmen, translating Homer, and trying to hold on to Britain's 'Brown Dominion'" (p. 133). This interaction and contribution are examples of the precedent shaping the region's narrative in relation to and interaction with the West.

This thesis will examine similar interactions where Western voices - or companies - contribute to shaping Arab identity through circulating representations. More specifically, I will explore the role of Vogue's regional edition - Vogue Arabia - in shaping Arab identity through fashion discourse. Vogue is particularly interesting

due to its longstanding authority in the fashion media industry, shaping the "ins" and "outs" for the community and holding significant weight in shaping narratives and identities in fashion on a larger scale. Additionally, Vogue Arabia is "also the first Vogue edition for an entire region" (Abuelgasim & Batrawy, 2017) instead of a single country. This grouping of 22 countries under the umbrella of *Arabia* is already heavy with colonial discourse that ignores independence and differences across the respective countries.

This thesis's venture into the world of representations in Vogue Arabia leans on Barnard's (2008) and Hall's (2013) theories of representation, communication, and identity performance, framed by Said's (1979) *Orientalism* and his (1994) conception of the role culture plays in imperialism. The comparison of Vogue Arabia to T.E. Lawrence contextualises Vogue Arabia's voice as that of an external player. Once this understanding is solidified, the application of representational theories and orientalist discourse becomes necessary for examining the publication's role and engagement within the region. Vogue Arabia's foreign ownership and editorial lead almost automatically deem the magazine as an outsider perspective, and the analysis to come will determine whether this outsider reinforces orientalist discourse of Arab identity, both textually and as interpreted by audiences.

My analysis is a mixed-methods approach incorporating Fairclough's (2013) Critical Discourse Analysis and qualitative survey research informed by Jansen's (2010) process. I will apply these methods to the titles and cover images of 6 articles from Vogue Arabia's online magazine and two editorials originally published in the print magazine but available online through Instagram. My discourse analysis explores the discourses and power relations at play in the articles' covers and titles, and the survey engages with the audiences to gain an understanding of their interpretations of four images from two editorials by Vogue Arabia. Said (1979) and Hall (1997; 2013) provide a heuristic process applicable to the analyses that facilitate the examination of *if* and *how* stereotypical and orientalist discourse is enforced through signs and representations. In parallel, I use Barnard's (2008) concepts of identity performance and fashion communication theory to better understand Vogue Arabia's choices and the resulting representations revealed in the analyses.

Additionally, I provide a brief semiotic analysis of the garments in the editorial images following Barnard's (2008) proposed process to consolidate the survey respondents' interpretations with a critical analytical approach.

The topic of this thesis is of great significance, particularly in the current media climate that sees 'Arab' identity at the centre of several topics, socially and politically, in the Arab world and the West. Fashion is historically a mirror that reflects the social context it operates in, illustrated by Barnard's (2008) example of printed cotton shifting from a sign of wealth and superiority to one of resistance to the dominant aristocracy when industrial development made it more affordable in the eighteenth century (pp. 42-43). Furthermore, representations made through or in the name of fashion can penetrate as large an audience as news media. This is evident in the comparable follower counts of Vogue's various Instagram accounts and those of major news organisations such as CNN or Al Jazeera.

1.1 Research Question

For my investigation into Vogue Arabia's role in the Arab world - engaging with, reflecting, or shaping representation – and the subsequent audience interpretations, I will answer the following research questions:

How does Vogue Arabia engage with representations of Arab identity within fashion?

What do 'Arab' and non-'Arab' audiences' interpretations reveal about the underlying discourses comprised by these representations?

2. Background

The term *Arabia* highlights the importance of defining and understanding the rationale for these terms and helps contextualise the research that makes up this thesis. Several terms are deployed to group all countries where Arabic is the primary or secondary language. These include the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council - Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE), the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan) - excluding Israel, North African countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, etc., as well as Yemen, Somalia and Sudan. The terms

include *Arabia, Middle East* or *MENA (Middle East and North Africa)* - here, Israel is included. In more modern contexts aiming to decolonise language, the new term *SWANA* (South West Asia and North Africa) has been gaining popularity due to its abandonment of the imperialist construction of the *Middle East*. For ease of communication, I will refer to the region as *the Arab world* - or *market* - for the remainder of the thesis, referring to the region that *Arabia* refers to in Vogue Arabia.

Regarding logistics, grouping the region under one term makes sense in serving the same purpose as *Europe*. Still, with the added baggage of colonial discourses and the lack of an open economic market within the region, it becomes less neutral and slightly more complicated when used for identity purposes. This is where employing a term like SWANA would be more sensible, both for its detachment from colonial discourse and actual geographical accuracy.

This reasoning motivates me to use 'the Arab world' in my thesis to specifically look at members of the region connected by the Arabic language rather than the several different identities often bunched together under the blanket terms of Middle East, MENA, or 'Arab'. Today, the Arab world sees several foreign players shaping its narrative through business ventures, media ownership, fashion, academia, and more. In the last two decades, the media landscape has seen a significant influx of foreign brands, specifically North American and European organisations, seeking to address and capitalise on the region.

Currently, the Media and Entertainment industry in the region is undergoing considerable growth and transformation. Several factors, such as the development and adoption of digital media, play a critical role in this growth, shaping the market into one that is highly competitive but with low market saturation (bin Alwaleed al Thani, 2025; Haque, 2022; Soar et al., 2025b).

This is a stark contrast to the media industries of the U.S. and U.K., where the market is very highly saturated, with a few dominant players having ownership of most media brands. The potential and low saturation of the market are undoubtedly attractive to any persons or entities interested in rapid exponential growth with considerably less competition for similar profit potential. The UAE's initiatives for boosting and centring cultural and creative industries have made Dubai the first choice for headquarters for companies within this industry. For

foreign and regional entities, Saudi Arabia's industries have slowly gained traction as a competitor in this category, but the industry there is still young relative to the UAE.

In the pre-2010 Arab media market, globalisation introduced U.S. media and infiltrated the landscape with imported programs and TV production models (Haque, 2022). Simultaneously, advertising transformed the region into a consumer market, spreading foreign values and habits and diluting regional identity and language (Haque, 2022). According to Abuhamad (2020), Western media brands rose to prominence in the region through partnerships with local companies, with the disguised intention of diplomacy rather than colonialist agendas.

In response, there was a rise of localised content and media forms blending global aesthetics with regional identity by local media in an attempt to assert agency. In the GCC, the digital media landscape was rapidly growing, supported by strong infrastructure, youthful populations and highly engaged consumers (bin Alwaleed al Thani, 2025), and significant investments in media hubs in the region connecting it to global markets (Soar et al., 2025b).

In the UAE specifically, regional governments were capitalising on this moment to formalise and expand the sector, positioning creative industries as a central focus of economic diversification strategies, particularly in response to the pressures of globalisation. The UAE's 2021 National Strategy for Cultural and Creative Industries focused on a 5% increase in national GDP by 2031 (U.AE, 2024b). Similarly, Dubai's Creative Economy Strategy aims to establish the city as a global hub for creativity, building on earlier infrastructure developments like Dubai Design District (D3), Dubai Media City and more (U.AE, 2023). These initiatives boast policies that offer financial support to the industry and bolster the community. A significant change in Dubai was the legal reform in 2021 that allowed for 100% foreign business ownership, where previously foreign persons or entities were required to have 51% local ownership (U.AE, 2024a); this paved the way for Condé Nast's 2025 takeover of Vogue Arabia from their local partner Nervora.

In 2017, Condé Nast, in partnership with Nervora, published the first Vogue Arabia with the Saudi Arabian princess Deena Aljuhani Abdulaziz as founding

editor. The magazine aimed to be a regional edition with a pan-Arab identity, targeting affluent, style-conscious readers (Abuelgasim & Batrawy, 2017). Princess Abdulaziz said the aim was not to produce another regional edition but to address global readers (Abuelgasim & Batrawy, 2017). The magazine's inaugural cover featured American-born, Dutch-Palestinian model Gigi Hadid, draped in a sequin veil that covers half her face. The English cover reads "reorienting perceptions" (BBC News, 2017). This cover was immediately met with mixed responses, with some Instagram users commenting on the beauty but expressing that they "[wished] they'd have used an Arabian model" (BBC News, 2017) and others expressing disdain at the "appropriating" of the hijab as "a fashion statement" (Blott & White, 2017). This first impression of Vogue Arabia sets the tone for the magazine's intention, *reorienting* perceptions, a powerful opening sentiment. With the change of ownership in 2025, following Condé Nast's takeover of licenses from its local partners, Manuel Arnaut, Abdulaziz's Portuguese successor since 2018, remained editor despite previously facing criticism for a limited knowledge of the region (Arab News, 2025).

In parallel, the region's fashion industry experienced significant growth and transformation, with the emergence of several initiatives supporting the community, such as Fashion Trust Arabia (founded 2018), FFWD (founded 2013), Arab Fashion Week (founded 2015) and the Vogue Fashion Prize (Cerini, 2021). However, challenges to the industry remain involving infrastructure, manufacturing, sourcing and funding gaps (Cerini, 2021). The UAE is "forecast to be among the fastest growing apparel markets worldwide to 2030" (Soar et al., 2025a).

As different industries develop in the region, change is fast approaching. Saudi Arabia is rapidly becoming a major player, holistically pushing for localisation, prioritising entirely local teams on the ground and in leadership roles. Additionally, with a shift away from the pan-Arab model seemingly approaching, with a step towards country-specific publications, where Saudi Arabia and Egypt lead the charge by bolstering their local creative industries (Hall, 2021), it seems the region is working to redefine the meaning of local representation.

Still, relative to global media, production in the Arab market is relatively undeveloped, especially in the fashion category, which has significant potential for growth and transformation.

3. Literature Review

My thesis will investigate how Vogue Arabia engages with Arab identities through representation in fashion media. For this, I have categorised existing literature into three categories. First, I synthesise studies exploring fashion media as an operating system of meaning construction and power dynamics shaping inclusion and identity. Second, literature on representation and cross-cultural media interactions further explores the construction, negotiation and interpretation of meaning. Finally, this literature review will examine the influence of media ownership and the resulting power dynamics, outlining the broader environment within which Vogue Arabia exists.

3.1 Fashion: Media, Systems & Identity

To understand the construction of meaning in fashion media, I will take a top-down approach, first looking at the 'space' of fashion within which all the different players operate. Pilyarchuk (2024), through a content analysis of Vogue U.S. editorials, demonstrates the "bounded space" within which fashion members operate, revealing the practice of inclusion and exclusion through editorial choices and language that work ideologically to reinforce the boundaries of in and out, and the positioning of insiders as gatekeepers controlling who is granted access (p. 620). This creates a closed space where individuals are denied or restricted based on different aspects of their identity. The result is a systemic underrepresentation of non-normative beauty and identities, normalising the marginalisation of certain bodies and identities (pp. 614-615). Pilyarchuk, therefore, effectively sets up the broader inquiry into global fashion media's tendency to allow or restrict differences.

Kopnina (2007) builds on this by exploring how cultural and national contexts shape fashion content. Kopnina details the cultural variation in tone, imagery and gender roles across different national editions of Vogue, connecting the localisation of content to align with national preferences (p. 370). Still, Kopnina

acknowledges that the persistent orientation towards elite, Western-oriented audiences limits these variations, maintaining the connection to the global (and predominantly Western) fashion imaginary, ultimately leading to lingering exoticism in representations of the other (pp. 374-377). These restrictions are made even more prominent when turning to cultural translations. This translation is a tool to highlight national style and navigate deeper ideological differences in interactions of greater cultural differences.

Rodriguez (2015) and Busnaina (2014) explore cultural translation done by fashion brands for advertising geared at Arab markets. Rogriguez (2015) observes that visual adaptations attempt to align with gendered and cultural expectations, ideologically shaping and reinforcing dominant narratives under the guise of cultural sensitivity (p. 244). Busnaina (2014) shows that consumers are not merely passive in their interpretation of localisation efforts and often perceive them to be superficial or misaligned, revealing a disconnect between intentions and interpretations (p. 13). Rodriguez and Busnaina highlight the maintenance of underlying power structures behind superficial localisation attempts.

This dynamic is heavily criticised by Narumi's (2000) study of Japanese representation in Western fashion and fashion media spaces, including Vogue Nippon. Through this analysis, Narumi reveals that representation does not necessarily equate to meaningful inclusion, noting that 'new' representations of Japanese pop culture, designers and models continue Orientalist traditions, reproducing exotic imagery and focusing on stereotypes (p. 319). Narumi shows how this process is taken even further through the practice of self-orientalisation by non-Western fashion practitioners (p. 321). Ultimately, the picture that Narumi paints is one where global inclusion is used as a mask for cultural appropriation and the sustenance of Euro-American ideological dominance.

While the aforementioned studies focus on representations within fashion media and marketing, there is value in considering how the audience - or consumers - negotiate the resulting meanings in more tangible, on-the-ground contexts. Kelly (2010) brings this perspective, focusing on the factors influencing Kuwaiti women's dress choices. Kelly discovers that for these women, choices are less about religious restriction and more influenced by class, cultural capital and social context (p. 235), demonstrating that choices are made to accurately

communicate one's social and cultural position, individuality and personal identity. This study highlights that while the media plays a role, it is not omnipotent; individual agency and cultural capital also shape expression.

Together, these studies reveal a red line that can be traced from the control of representation (Pilyarchuk, 2024) through the complex processes of localisation and translation (Kopnina, 2007; Narumi, 2000; Rodriguez, 2015; Busnaina, 2014) to the ways these meanings are negotiated at ground level (Kelly, 2010). This understanding crystallises fashion communication as a site of negotiation, repeatedly redefining power, culture and identity, allowing for a more nuanced, robust approach to my research on Vogue Arabia.

3.2 Representation: Cross-Cultural Media & Interactions

Diving deeper into representations as the construction of meaning will lead to examining how cultural and visual representations are shaped, interpreted and negotiated across different media landscapes and cultural contexts. Tayyen (2017) provides a historical foundation for the ideologically driven development of the representation of Muslim women. Tayyen traces this evolution from exoticised sexual objects to threatening, but also oppressed, figures of subjugation. Ultimately, the driving point of Tayyen's study is that despite shifting in function, the portrayal of Muslim women in Western media and literature is consistently framed through external gazes and heavily tied to context, culture, and geopolitical relations. This historical lens is essential for examining representations made in Vogue Arabia.

Taylor and Lee (1994) study the reductive representational practices within the U.S.'s hegemonic media system. They explore the flattening of cultural differences by analysing how Asian Americans are represented in Vogue U.S. Their analysis reveals narrow portrayals of Asian Americans, reducing their cultural identities to specific roles that fit within rigid stereotypes. Their argument that inclusion can function as containment and reinforcement of cultural hierarchies is a valuable point to carry forward when considering Vogue Arabia's framing of Arab representation.

Al-Jenaibi (2011) expands this conversation, demonstrating further that representation is not exclusively reliant on visibility but also on how this visibility

is practised and what it is allowing or constraining. The exploration of gender representation in UAE media reveals a complicated environment where Arab women navigate the dual pressures of modernity and tradition. The representation of Arab women filtered through religion, culture and global consumer imagery constructs an identity that is simultaneously restrictive and liberating, shaped by both global and local narratives. Al-Jenaibi shows the contradictions and negotiation involved in representation, heightened at the intersection of gender, religion and culture, informing my examination of Vogue Arabia by adding nuance to the tension between offering visibility and giving voice.

Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver (2006) broadened the lens from identity politics to semiotic interpretation, exploring how cultural reading results in different interpretations of visual advertising content. Their study demonstrates how different cultural backgrounds - even within a shared national context (like language) - can yield distinctly different readings of the same visual cues. Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver conclude that visual resources are neither neutral nor universal; cultural context is a key determining factor in shaping meaning. This revelation sets the stage for understanding the cross-cultural interaction and potential miscommunication between media producers and consumers, particularly in Vogue Arabia, a regional edition of a global magazine that is sure to receive mixed audiences.

Where Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver (2006) explore the decoding of representation as it is shaped by cultural differences, Al-Olayan and Karande (2000) focus on the encoding part of meaning construction in representations in response to those cultural differences. This content analysis examines how production responds to cultural and religious values, revealing how global brands follow a "regionalisation" strategy to adapt their advertising to align with Arab countries (where a homogeneity of cultural ideology is assumed). Religious beliefs are shown to play a significant role in how advertisers address the region, more so than legislation, reinforcing the argument that context plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning. This approach to regionalisation offers support for unpacking the ways Vogue Arabia may be responding to cultural expectations, both stylistically and ideologically.

Therefore, representation is revealed as a layered and negotiated practice, where meaning is not inherent but shaped by producers, consumers, and the cultural context. This negotiation of meaning strongly reflects the interests of this thesis, which seeks to analyse Vogue Arabia's representation, first, as negotiated by its producers and second, as interpreted by its consumers.

3.3 Media: Ownership, Power & Cultures

Finally, I will turn to analyses focusing on ownership and the structures enabling or constraining the aforementioned representations and systems. Wilkins' (2004) study offers a strong foundational insight into the topics of communication which are of interest to researchers of the "Middle East" concerning U.S. intervention. Wilkins reveals that many of the region's academic and political approaches to media development are based on problematic assumptions and Western-centric perspectives (p. 493). This insight provides a critical perspective of foreign media presence and the tension between media ownership and political agency, setting the stage for understanding the materialisation of these dynamics in the Arab world's media landscape.

Abuhamad's (2020) article for the Al Jazeera Journalism Review investigated foreign private media investment in the Arab world, questioning credibility, influence and what power a brand's recognisability holds. He argues that these entries and investments lean on brand prestige for traction, often sacrificing journalistic integrity. While this source is not academic, it offers a valuable insider perspective that directly addresses the region (in Arabic) and supports Wilkins' argument with empirical reporting. Given Vogue Arabia's association with the global Vogue brand, these questions of credibility, motivation and perception become central considerations for exploring the magazine's position.

Moving forward, understanding local media practices - from Arab voices - will reveal an added layer of complexity to the negotiation of culture and identity. Abd Allah Ahmad al-Nowaihi's (2014) writing for the Democratic Arab Centre examines how national media shapes culture and awareness among the youth. This study connects the state media's role to broader cultural identity formation, complementing the previous literature's focus on foreign players. Despite this paper being non-academic, it considers a crucial factor in media production that

is often not as blatantly reflected in Western media, contextualising the process of representation and operation for entities like Vogue Arabia.

Moving away from traditional media's ideological and cultural role in shaping public opinions, Alaa Al-Din Ali's (2021) paper traces the shift to the digital age through a meta-analysis of Arabic and international studies on e-marketing. Effectively, this is a regional, modern variation of Wilkins' (2004) study focused more closely on online marketing research. Overall, this comprehensive overview of research trends in e-marketing over the past two decades highlights a focus on purchase-centred research and an evident absence of research addressing questions of representation in online marketing within Arab media contexts. This gap underscores the contribution of studying Vogue Arabia, a media brand at the intersection of fashion, advertising and cultural representation in the Arab region.

The studies above show how power and ownership in Arab media are not rigid but a complex system where foreign ownership, national reform efforts and evolving digital landscapes interact, informing the context within which Vogue Arabia operates. To efficiently examine Vogue Arabia and the representations it produces, as well as its perception by audiences, understanding the landscape within which it operates, as told by local voices, is crucial. Continuing this thesis without incorporating Arabic research perspectives, in the sense that these perspectives exclusively address Arabic academics, would reinforce the dynamics being criticised.

The literature in all three categories above sheds light on the intersections through which representation in fashion media is produced, circulated, and eventually interpreted. Each layer, from editorial control and national or foreign media influence to cultural translation and digital marketing trends, provides valuable and critical understandings for my research on Vogue Arabia. Concepts like self-orientalising and fashion as a bounded space can even serve as tools for my analysis. The previous studies on Vogue as a player across cultures (Narumi, 2000; Kopnina, 2007; Pilyarchuk, 2024) add relevance to my topic as a new, specific perspective and emphasise the role of Vogue as a significant voice within fashion media. The moving parts above reveal that Vogue Arabia's role must be

critically examined as a global fashion actor operating in the Arab world and contributing to representational narratives.

4. Theoretical Framework

This thesis's focus on fashion, media, and cultural representation requires a theoretical framework grounded in theories of representation, representational discourses, and the tools of representation, such as language, imagery and fashion. Barnard (2008) frames fashion as a tool of communication rooted in cultural and social contexts. Hall (1997; 2013) offers a foundational understanding of how meaning is constructed through representation and how these meanings are produced within broader cultural signifying practices. Said's *Orientalism* (1979) establishes the basis and precedent for examining Western discourse on 'Eastern' representations. Finally, Said's *Culture & Imperialism* (1994) provides a framework that allows us to see how these representations and cultural artefacts are operationalised in the service of imperial power.

4.1 Malcolm Barnard

4.1.1 *Fashion as Communication* (2008)

Barnard (2008) establishes fashion as a form of communication that functions nonverbally (p. 29) but still manages to construct meaning through a negotiation between the wearer, designer and spectator (p. 33). The semiotic model of communication, Barnard explains, is one where "the process of communication [...] generates meanings", and the meaning generated relies on the reader's cultural context, where members of the same 'community,' or cultural background, could produce similar readings and therefore members of different communities, different readings (p. 32). Barnard continues to state that "fashion, clothing and dress are cultural phenomena" (p. 33), where culture is a "signifying system that [communicates and reproduces] social order" (p. 38). Within this system, fashion is a "signifying practice" that contributes to cultural production by facilitating the communication of feelings and ideology (pp. 38-39).

Barnard (2008) also demonstrates how this communicative, identifying practice of fashion allows for "establishing and [reproducing] positions of and relations

power" (p. 46), where most attempts made by inferior members within a culture to resist or challenge superiors will be made obsolete by those superiors through adoption, commodification, or re-establishing superiority in other ways (p. 43). Additionally, Barnard explains that if identity is understood as an "ongoing performance" of "one's gender and social identities", then fashion is not "referring to or reflecting some original and authentic identity" but rather a "masquerade" wherein the "mask" or clothing, garments, accessories are used "to change, create, hide or enhance" (pp. 166-168). This adds nuance to understanding fashion's communicative functions, contextualising it within understandings of representation and identity.

These understandings of the intersections of fashion, culture, communication, identity and power will support the analysis, framing Vogue Arabia as a participant in cultural production, identity negotiation and the potential reinforcement or disruption of power dynamics within its context. While Barnard explores how garment choices communicate identity on an individual level, I apply his framework to examine how Vogue Arabia uses fashion to communicate identity on a broader scale.

4.2 Stuart Hall

4.2.1 *The Work of Representation* (2013)

Hall's (2013) writings on representation frame the concept through the lens of constructionism, supported by Saussure and Foucault's work (p. 2). From the constructionist perspective, meaning is not fixed. The material and symbolic world of meaning exists exclusively, and representational systems - including conceptual systems, social actors, shared cultural codes, and linguistics - "construct meaning, [...] make the world meaningful and [communicate] about that world meaningfully to others" (p. 11). Representation - according to social constructionism and Saussure - is therefore explained to be a system of signs that are made up of two parts: the signifiers (words, images, sounds) and the signified (the concepts those signifiers represent to the reader[1]) (p. 16). This is a crucial

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[1] Not reader in a literal manner, but in a general understanding encompassing the viewer, consumer, reader, listener - the audience

foundational understanding for any attempt to understand representations and deconstruct the messages in daily life.

Hall (2013) explains that producers *encode* meaning into signs by selecting signifiers and associating them with signifieds. Readers then *decode* the signs to extract meaning (p. 45), relying on cultural codes that shape their associations between signifiers and signifieds. The alignment of meaning extracted and meaning generated then depends on whether the producers and consumers share cultural codes (pp. 7-8), exemplifying the idea that meaning is not fixed and the relationship between signifiers and signifieds is arbitrary (p. 9), reflecting Barnard's (2008) premise of social agreement.

Hall (2013) connects his ideas of representation, signs and encoding/decoding with discourse as a system of representations shaping knowledge, understanding and action influenced by power dynamics (pp. 26-28) and with semiotics as a method of analysis that proposes any object or practice (including fashion) communicates meaning through signs and can be analysed as such (pp. 20-22).

4.2.2 The Spectacle of the 'Other' (1997)

After unpacking Hall's (2013) writing on representations and signs, I venture into Hall's (1997) exploration into concepts of the *other* and *stereotyping* and how these function as signifying practices. The resounding understanding is that the construction of the *other* is used to establish a *difference* to facilitate meaning construction and interpretation. It is easier to understand raw food when information about cooked food is provided.

While difference and the construction of the *other* are necessary for meaning, Hall iterates that it is not without dangers. (Hall, 1997, pp. 236 - 238). These dangers come to fruition in his explanation of stereotyping as the process of "[reducing, essentializing, naturalizing and fixing] 'difference' [...], part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order [... setting up] a symbolic frontier between the 'normal' and the 'deviant' [...] what 'belongs' and what does not [...] Us and Them" where everything that lies outside of belonging, outside of 'Us' is "considered as polluted, dangerous [and] taboo" (p. 258).

Most importantly, Hall (1997) points out that "stereotyping [occurs] where there are gross inequalities of power" where within this power is *ethnocentrism"*, the assumption that one's own cultural norms apply, with the same authority, to other cultures (p. 258). Hall refers to Foucault, claiming that "stereotyping [is a] power/knowledge sort of game". It creates a classification based on norms and categorises those outside the norm as *other* (p.259). Hall ties this to Said's concept of orientalism: "a *discourse* produces, through different practices of *representation* (scholarship, exhibition, literature, painting, etc.), a form of *racialized knowledge of the Other* (Orientalism) deeply implicated in the operations of power (imperialism)" (p. 260).

This source provides a necessary framework for examining Vogue Arabia's role in participating in or disrupting these processes, particularly within global fashion discourses shaped by power and cultural hegemony.

4.3 Edward W. Said

4.3.1 *Orientalism* (1979)

Ostensibly the most essential foundation for my research, Said's (1979) concept of *Orientalism* is a discourse operating as the framing of 'Eastern' or 'Oriental' identity and reality by and in relation to the West - Said was particularly focused on the British and French cultural enterprise (p. 4), and to a lesser extent, the United States. Said proposes three interdependent definitions for Orientalism: (a) as an academic designation, where an orientalist "teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient", (b) as "a style of thought" based on the differences constructed "between 'the Orient' and [...] 'the Occident'," between the East and the West, and (c) a historical and material definition of orientalism as "the [West's] corporate institution" that deals with the East by "dominating, restructuring, and have authority over [it]" (pp. 1-3).

The writer, researcher or thinker who writes or frames the Orient from this outsider perspective, dominating and restructuring its representation, is what Said (1979) refers to as an orientalist (he primarily uses this term for Western academics that specialise their research in the Orient but extends it to writers and thinkers alike, like T.E. Lawrence). For the sake of my research, the most

appropriate or relevant definitions would be (b) and (c), but still, all three operate interdependently as a theory and practice on how the 'Orient' is understood and shaped by the West.

After contextualising Vogue Arabia as a Western voice in the Arab world, it is vital to understand orientalism as the overarching discourse through which Western voices have historically shaped representations and understandings of the Arab world — and to apply this lens to examining how the magazine engages with representations of identity. Building on Hall's foundation of representation (2013) and his concept of the *other* (1997), alongside Barnard's (2008) framing of fashion's communicative functions that can be analysed with semiotics, Orientalism contributes a critical dimension to the framework through which Vogue Arabia can be examined.

To facilitate my research, I developed a heuristic process for identifying orientalist discourse based on Said's (1979) exploration of different texts. For the orientalist, these are tools; for the examination of orientalism, these are markers of the discourse.

First, *exteriority*, as Said (1979) explains, "orientalism is premised upon exteriority, [...] [on the indication] that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, [existentially and morally]" (pp. 20-21). This exteriority results in a representation that is more akin to "a highly artificial enactment" of what an outsider has "made into a symbol of the Orient" (p. 21). This is crucial to the process of othering; the subject to be othered has to be outside of the subject that is speaking.

Second, there is the process of *restructuring*. Through the different elements that make up the discourse of orientalism, the orientalist effectively restructures and reproduces the identity intended to represent the Orient, mainly by selecting which "fragments" are most representative and in what order (Said, 1979, pp. 128-129). Selection is crucial to restructuring the Orient as it facilitates the orientalist's orchestration of that representation.

Third, and a very critical tool, is something I will call *theatrical framing*. This is when the orientalist paints "vivid portraits" with a "universe of representative discourse" and a "set of representative figures" that are like a costume-ised

version of what they represent (Said, 1979, p. 71). In other words, this is when the representation is sensationalised or stylised, creating a sort of cosplay or performance rather than a neutral representation. Therefore, the resulting representation is "[schematically incorporated] on a theatrical stage whose audience, manager and actors are for Europe, and only for Europe," where the Orient is "always symmetrical to, and yet diametrically inferior, to a European equivalent" (pp. 71-72). This mimics Barnard's (2008) description of *masquerade* as the use of clothing/fashion to perform identity.

Finally, the fourth marker is what I will refer to as the *voice of judgement*. This occurs when the orientalist frames his representation of the Orient as truth, giving it the same weight as scientific fact, by developing a "knowing vocabulary" that functions as a "*comparative* framework [that is ...] rarely descriptive [but mostly] evaluative and expository" (Said, 1979, p. 149). Essentially, this is when the orientalist uses comparative language to describe (or provoke a comparative understanding of) the Orient. This establishes an understanding that the Us/Them relationship is intrinsically superior/inferior, civilised/uncivilised, complete/incomplete. Said provides an example by Renan, where *Us* is a "painting" and *Them* is a "pencil sketch" (p. 149), materialising the identification of orientalist discourse.

These identifying markers function co-dependently, where, for example, a combination of voice of judgement, exteriority, and theatrical framing results in the restructuring of representation, but theatrical framing also requires exteriority and restructuring to be executed. Additionally, their employment in orientalist discourse can be observed visually, linguistically, and rhetorically through the chosen settings, colours, garments, vocabularies, and tone or intention of a text, image or other piece of discourse.

These markers of orientalism will significantly facilitate the analysis of Vogue Arabia's representations *as* a Western player and determine whether they reproduce '*Oriental*' representations.

4.3.2 *Culture & Imperialism* (1994)

Before moving on, I would be remiss not to acknowledge the relationship between culture and imperialism as the overarching concept tying together my theoretical

frameworks. As Hodson (2015) defines it, *cultural imperialism* is the "ideological infiltration that enables some dominant [actors] to impose their worldview, values, attitudes, behaviors, linguistic patterns, and lifestyle practices on others" (p. 243). The term became popular for describing "the ways in which multinational companies and the mass media" enforce their power by force or money on "social institutions and individuals to act in conformity with, or even to promote, the dominant ideology" (p. 243). So, from a distance, culture can be a tool for the imperialists to reinforce imperial ideas and capitalise on the discourses produced.

From Said's (1994) extensive writings on the topic, similar ideas to those in *Orientalism* exist, but at a larger scale concerning a larger 'other' that is "in need' of being dominated (p. 8). Here, culture does not produce imperialism, but culture and imperialism "are unthinkable without each other" due to the culture's (or Said's reference is the English novel) projection of a "'knowable community'" of imperialist figures and a relationship between this community, "'home' and 'abroad'" (pp. 84-85). This process of establishing the 'here' and solidifying it has the primary purpose of "[keeping] the empire more or less in place" and only "referring to" the *other* as "outlying territories [that are] available for use, at will" (p. 88). Therefore, the fortification of imperialist ideologies through cultural texts fortifies the empire; "imperialism and the culture associated with it affirm both the primacy of geography and an ideology about control of territory" (p. 93).

I would add that the motivation for territorial control, especially in modern contexts, is capitalising on the territory's resources and its consumers' purchasing power. This allows the understanding of the interconnectedness of culture and imperialism to make sense in a modern context where wars and power do not always involve fighting and battles but market share and control of dominant discourses - where "representation itself [becomes] characterized as keeping the subordinate subordinate, [and] the inferior inferior" (Said, 1994, p. 95).

With this perspective, all the aforementioned theories cooperate to control modern discourse (in the context of this research, discourse on Arab identity) through various communication tools such as orientalism, representation, fashion, and stereotyping.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Paradigm

Considering my theoretical framework, which is firmly rooted in meaning construction and power relations, my choice of paradigm was, in a sense, straightforward but also difficult. The focus on representation and how meaning is constructed made me consider a constructivist approach. The emphasis on power relations hinted at a lean towards a critical approach. Still, as my thesis unfolded, I realised my central concern lies in how those representations are interpreted and whether those power relations are visible.

Since the aim of my research, as understood through my research questions, is to understand Vogue Arabia's representations, in terms of Vogue Arabia's and the audience's meanings and interpretations, my logic of inquiry would most accurately be described as abductive (Blaikie & Priest, 2019, p. 112). As Blaikie and Priest (2019) note, "abductive logic incorporates what Inductive and Deductive logics ignore - the meanings and interpretations, the motives and intentions [...] and elevates them to the central place in social theory and research" (p. 118), reflecting precisely what the aim of this thesis is, and highlighting the importance of my theoretical frameworks on representation and orientalist discourse. However, there is a level of inductive logic in my research process as it seeks descriptions, not just understandings; since true objectivity is not achievable, an inductive approach would be insufficient (pp. 111-113)

With my logic of inquiry identified as abductive and the interest of my research focused on interpretations and producing qualitative data, my choice of paradigm became clear. My thesis takes on the paradigm of interpretivism, which aims to understand a topic from the perspective of social actors. It centres the connection between "a conscious meaning-making subject and the objects that present themselves to our perception" (Collins, 2010, p. 39), reflecting the *encoding/decoding* process that Hall (2013) discusses. This paradigm is closely fitted with an idealist ontology - assuming that shared codes (or interpretations) make up social reality - and a constructionist epistemology where access is

mediated by interaction with participants rather than "filtered through, or distorted by, experts' concepts and theory" (Blaikie & Priest, 2019, pp. 102-104).

5.2 Methods

5.2.1 Choice

My research paradigm and interest in qualitative data lead to an abundance of choice for methodology. My two-part research question and interest in both the representations and the audiences' interpretations resulted in conducting a mixed-methods approach.

My first chosen method, discourse analysis, establishes a close reading and in-depth analysis of the discourses and the power relations reflected. In Critical Discourse Analysis, discourse refers to the "broader ideas communicated by a text" (Hansen & Machin, 2019, p. 118). So, a critical discourse analysis would look at the choices made within a 'text' to reveal the discourses at play (p. 118). The discourses then "project certain social values and ideas, [contributing] to the (re)production of social life" (p. 119). Based on this understanding, looking at the use of language is an effective way to examine the potential underlying discourses and power relations in a text.

According to Fairclough's (2013) Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the three-dimensional analysis that consists of (a) *description*: a text analysis, (b) *interpretation*: a processing analysis, and (c) *explanation*: a social analysis, allows for an analysis of (a) the themes, discourses, linguistic and visual choices and social actors, (b) the process of production and interpretation, the intended reader, and the framing of the message, and (c) ideologies, beliefs, and power structures (pp. 131-132). This applies to my aim and works in cooperation with my theoretical framework, allowing for an examination of which discourses are at play and what power relations they reveal to achieve a deeper understanding of Vogue Arabia's engagement with representation.

My second chosen method is survey research. A method reliant solely on my interpretation, such as discourse analysis, will produce subjective findings that rely entirely on my experience and cultural codes, disqualifying my research from gaining a deeper understanding of representation in Vogue Arabia. Additionally,

answering my second research question necessitates a participant research method.

The survey research I will conduct seeks qualitative data, so in a sense, I designed the questions to be similar to interview questions, seeking more than just statistical data. If the scope of the thesis allowed, I would have preferred to conduct a focus group or several interviews. However, due to the time constraints and scope, the most efficient way for me to collect enough data that went into enough depth was digitally, by writing and sharing a survey. A qualitative approach to survey research is interested in "determining the *diversity* of some topic of interest within a given population, [...], [establishing] the meaningful variation [...] within that population" (Jansen, 2010). This allows for a structure that is interested, again, in interpretations.

The critical discourse analysis section is more focused and interpretive, delving deeply into a smaller sample of texts compared to the broader range of responses gathered from the survey. While the survey provides extensive insights from a wider sample, the CDA offers a detailed, nuanced understanding of the discourse, complementing the survey findings.

Finally, I incorporate a semiotic analysis to support the survey respondents' lay interpretations with a critical, analytical approach that focuses on the garments and the *fashion* in the image. Hall's (2013) concepts of representation, encoding/decoding, and his explanation of how cultural codes connecting certain clothes to certain concepts "converts the clothes into signs, which can then be read as a language" (p. 22) provides the conceptual framework for leaning on Barnard's (2008) application of semiology to fashion. Analysing the garments and the syntagmatic and paradigmatic choices made by Vogue Arabia allows for the identification of embedded cultural signs and could reinforce or challenge respondents' interpretations from a critical perspective.

Combined, the three methods form a strong approach that aims to understand both the encoding and decoding of meaning in Vogue Arabia's content that incorporates audience interpretation. The discourse analysis provides a deep, three-dimensional reading and identification of how discourses of identity and difference are constructed. The survey data complements the examination by considering how audiences receive and interpret Vogue Arabia's constructions.

Finally, the semiotic analysis allows for a systematic and analytical decoding of the signs in the images provided to survey respondents, complementing their interpretations with a critical lens. This combination allows for a synthesis that can be analysed as a unified entity through the different markers of orientalism identified in section 4.3.1.

Most importantly, the combination of survey research and a semiotic analysis of the garments offsets the subjectivity that comes with the interpretive method of CDA. This mitigation is supported further by the heuristic, systematic process of analysis developed based on Said's (1979) *Orientalism*.

5.2.2 Sampling

<u>Discourse Analysis</u>

I wanted to have variety in the data for the discourse analysis, so for the sake of feasibility, I had to avoid analysing full-length articles from Vogue Arabia. Instead, I chose to analyse the titles and cover photos selected to accompany the title.

My data sampling for the articles was non-probability to support my "exploratory purpose" and my need to "provide an illustrative example" (Daniel, 2012, p. 69). I chose to do a purposive non-probability sample where I identified inclusion and exclusion criteria for the articles, then went to Vogue Arabia's website and chose the articles that fit. The subtype of purposive sampling I chose was theoretical sampling, wherein I utilised my theoretical framework to inform my inclusion and exclusion criteria (p. 90). The criteria for sampling were the following:

Inclusion criteria:

- The title has the word 'Arab' in it

- The article is under the *Fashion* or *Beauty* sections

- The title involves an interaction between the 'Arab' person(s) and other subjects

- The article was published in 2025

Exclusion criteria:

- The article is about brands or products, not a person or persons

- The cover feature does not show the person's face

I developed the criteria to ensure relevance to the aim of the thesis and the theoretical framework.

Survey

I used the same process employed for the articles for the images featured in the survey. Therefore, the inclusion criteria for the images were:

- The images were part of an editorial

- The editorials feature a 'local' model

- The editorials were shot in a 'local' setting

- The editorials were published in 2024 or 2025

- The images feature culturally situating visual cues (i.e. no abstract, decontextualised background)

- The word 'Arab' or similar (Arabic, Arabia, etc.) is in the title of the editorial

- From each editorial, two images, one featuring a model on her own and one with another subject in the shot

Exclusion criteria

- Abstract backgrounds (studio settings, sky only, etc.)

- Too much visual similarity between the two images per editorial

For the participants, the sampling method was also non-probability due to feasibility, but in this case, the only criterion the participants needed to meet was to be in the same social networks as me, either as direct acquaintances or through degrees of connection. Instead of using a purposive sampling method, however, I conducted a combination of a convenience sampling procedure and a snowball sampling procedure, where, for convenience or availability, I shared the link to my survey on Instagram stories and in WhatsApp groups. For a snowball effect, I encouraged my followers and WhatsApp group members to share the link with

their friends and acquaintances. However, due to the anonymity of the participants, I cannot be sure if the participants were from the convenience or snowball procedures. Ultimately, I collected answers from 27 respondents.
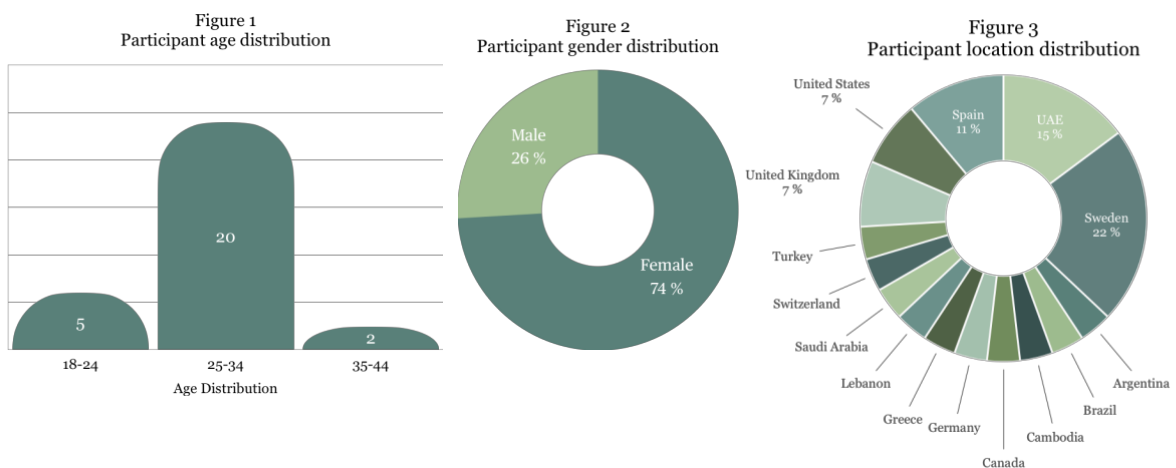
5.2.3 Process

I decided to systematically conduct my analyses separately before converging them in the analysis section later on. For the discourse analysis, my sample consisted of six articles, and I applied Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional analysis to each article's titles and cover images. Referring to Appendix A, a table detailing the analysis, with links to the articles (also available in the reference list), shows the different findings for each article for each level of the analysis. See Appendix B for the systematic independent discourse analysis, separate from the orientalist markers.

I drafted my questions for the survey and published them to close friends to assess what needs to be adjusted. The questions were intended to gain an understanding of respondents' reflections on images produced by Vogue Arabia for two editorials: images A and B from *All Eyes on Arabia* (Vogue Arabia, 2025) and *Made in Arabia* (Amine Jreissati, 2024) (see Appendix C).

Following Hansen and Machin's (2019) checklist for things to consider when formulating the questions (pp. 214-215), I did my best to keep the questions clear and succinct. Initially, I had a set of questions for the editorials that I repeated for each editorial, following Hansen and Machin's suggestion to keep "each question [focused on] a single dimension" (p. 215). However, I learned in the pre-testing that the participants felt overwhelmed by having more questions to answer, so I combined the editorial sections. Instead of looking at images A and B and answering questions and then repeating the process for images C and D, I reformulated the survey so that the participants looked at all four images and responded to the question with an answer box for each question. I made sure to let participants know that the amount of detail they use in their answers is entirely up to their discretion, to mitigate the line between encouraging detailed responses and encouraging participants to complete the survey all the way through.

I began the survey with questions to help identify the participants, as I initially thought knowing specific details about them would be valuable. However, upon reviewing the responses and conducting my analysis, I realised that the age and gender were unnecessary. The most valuable identifiers were participants' preferred language of communication and how participants identified culturally. I was meticulous in formulating the latter question as I did not want respondents to confuse nationality with identity; I wanted them to understand that I wanted to know what terms felt representative to them. The resulting question was "How would you describe your cultural identity? (E.g. Someone who is a U.S. citizen with Dominican heritage might identify as Latinx)", ensuring that the example provided does not lead the participants. Despite not being relevant to the analysis, it is still valuable to understand my respondents' demographics, so they are illustrated by Figures 1, 2, and 3 below:

Figure 1
Participant age distribution

Figure 2
Participant gender distribution

Figure 3
Participant location distribution

Additionally, 56% of respondents listed Arabic as one of their spoken languages, but 85% of respondents listed English as their preferred language of communication. Regarding participants' fashion media habits, only 4% answered "Daily" to how frequently they engage with fashion media, and 30% answered "Never". 11% of respondents chose "Weekly", 26% answered "Occasionally", and 30% said "Rarely".

When the participants reached the images, they would be asked to:

- Describe each image

- Describe what each image tells them about the model

- Describe what each image tells them "about the surroundings (location, other subjects, etc.),"

- If they think the editorial was intended for an Arab, Global or Mixed audience

- If they think the editorials contribute to Vogue Arabia's identity in the region

I then developed a codebook and coded the responses using NVivo, referring to Gibbs and Flick (2018), to develop analytic codes that are data-driven (pp. 59, 61). I identified two main codes amongst the responses, ***Perceived Dissonance of Culture*** and ***Othering Narrative Recognised***, and then identified patterns within each code to facilitate analysis. The codebook with definitions for each code and pattern is available for reference in Appendix D.

The reason I decided to code the responses was to simplify the process of analysis later on. I received a variety of different responses, both in size and content, and coding helped my process by allowing my analysis to be focused only on responses that held relevant information. I needed to categorise and exclude answers like "daily life", "idk", "dots", and "nothing". This allowed for a smoother, more streamlined application of the process I developed from my theoretical framework, where applying the markers of orientalism would be facilitated by already having my data organised into codes.

Semiology in relation to fashion, as Barnard (2008) explains, is applicable in that fashion - or clothing - "can be considered and analysed as signifiers" and not just in *what* is worn but also *how* it is worn (pp. 81-82). He explains that denotation[2], when conducting a semiological analysis of fashion or clothing, is "factual," referring to the material of the fabric, where and when production occurred, and even who is wearing it (p. 84). I applied this by considering the fabrics, fabric manipulation, silhouettes, and styling decisions. In this context, connotation refers to the ideological and emotional associations that arise for the spectator. This level is where context, cultural understandings and shared codes play a significant role in the decoding process (pp. 85-87). At the connotative level of meaning, I consider cultural codes in my analysis and combine this with

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[2] In semiology, this is the first level of signification, which is the literal meaning of a word or image.

respondent interpretations to understand how styling choices may reinforce or challenge dominant narratives.

Additionally, Barnard (2008) explains that "there [is] no communication without social agreement" p. 89) – meaning the socially assigned distinction between different signs results in meaning production. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the two kinds of difference between signs that Barnard refers to. The first, *syntagmatic*, refers to the different elements that make up the whole meaning. The second, *paradigmatic*, refers to the different items that can be chosen for each syntagmatic element (p. 89). With this guide, I examine the choices in styling and garments to analyse how meaning is constructed, through combinations of garments in an outfit (*syntagmatic*) and through styling choices as a whole (*paradigmatic*). These differences are further emphasised when paired with culturally contextualising visual cues. These principles guide my semiotic analysis of the images, adding a level of criticality to the survey respondents' reflections on the images.

6. Ethical Considerations

To ensure that my study is carried out ethically, I refer to Blaikie and Priest's (2019) code of ethics, Hodkinson's (2005) reflections on 'insider research' and PSU's Copyright Information page (Office of Scholarly Communications and Copyright, 2009).

Referring to Blaikie and Priest (2019, pp. 71-72), I designed a consent form that survey respondents were required to agree to before proceeding to the survey. The consent form explained the purpose of the study and ensured the anonymity of participants and their right to withdraw at any time. Additionally, the form reminded participants to contact me in case of any questions and that, upon request, a summary of the findings can be shared after publication.

Considering Hodkinson's (2005) writing on "insider research", I must address my affiliation with the participants. The time constraint of the thesis necessitated a sampling method that sought participants within my social circles; this could mean that participants felt more comfortable giving deeper accounts of their experiences (pp. 137-138). It could, however, limit the participant sample from being sufficiently representative and, consequently, the ability to make

generalisations based on the findings. As visible above in the participant demographic data, all participants are, in one way or another, Westernised, highly literate, and operate in urban contexts, which may amplify or limit sensitivity to orientalist discourse. Still, my position aligns with my interpretive paradigm due to my "access to the feelings, motivations and meanings" required to "[capture] social life as experienced and understood by its participants" (p. 141).

Similarly, my position as the researcher plays a significant role and could be classified as a "conflict of interest" (Blaikie & Priest, 2019, p. 72). I am a Syrian woman who has matured and pursued education in Western institutions, which may result in amplified or limited sensitivity to orientalist discourses. To counteract this, I ensured that my analysis processes were conducted technically and objectively, relying on the various tools at my disposal to inform my interpretations rather than my personal ideologies.

Following the "Four Factors of Fair Use" (Office of Scholarly Communications and Copyright, 2009), the images, articles, and editorial images included in my research (despite being creative work) are publicly available and do not require any purchase to access. They are used for educational, not commercial, purposes, in an amount "necessary to the transformative purpose of the use", and the use does not act as a substitute for the original works on the market. Insofar as these factors are considered, my use of the content complies with Fair Use.

Disclosure Statement:

While conducting and writing this research, AI programs have supported the work. The scope of AI use is limited and cannot be specified to certain parts of the thesis, as it does not cover any specific drafting use. Programs such as NotebookLM and ChatGPT have supported research and understanding by unpacking dense academic literature and providing support by translating my stream-of-consciousness writing into an organised list of my ideas. Additionally, Grammarly is used for proofreading and editing, and the newer version incorporates AI. In no way and at no point were any of these programs used to generate original content or ideas, analyse primary data or provide interpretations of the research. All final arguments, writing, and analyses are my original work.

7. Analysis

Referring to both Said (1979) and Hall (1997), it is understood that the process of evaluating whether a piece of representation (text, image, or discourse) carries orientalist discourse and/or narratives of stereotyping relies on examining how identity is framed. The markers of identity framing - as discussed in Section 4 of this thesis - involve several linguistic, visual and rhetorical tools. In this section, I will explore the presence and perception (by respondents) of these framing tools, first in the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (see Appendix A and B) and second, in the Survey analysis I have conducted. I will further complement these analyses by incorporating the semiological reading of the garments in the images featured in the survey and by deploying Barnard's (2008) theory of fashion as identity communication.

While Said (1979) and Hall (1997) provide a more technical application of their theories, Hall (2013) provides the vocabulary with which to discuss representations. Barnard's (2008) theory of fashion communication, beyond the semiological application, offers less of a technical function and more of a conceptual support for the analysis. His theory positions styling choices as active processes of communication and identity performance, contributing to cultural production (p. 39). This concept allows for examining the fashion imagery in Vogue Arabia's editorials and the subsequent performance and communication of Arab identity that considers how such communication interacts with "the operations and workings of power" (p. 40) and ideology.

My analysis will proceed as follows: I will demonstrate the CDA, then I will go through each marker, exploring its interpretation through the discourse analysis, and then through the survey responses. Finally, I will connect back to Barnard (2008). To conclude the section, I will address the data that challenges orientalist discourse. This organisation allows for an understanding of how discourses of identity and culture are constructed through the lens of the three-dimensional CDA framework, how these discourses are decoded and interpreted by audiences, and how fashion plays a role in the construction of identity.

7.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

Fairclough's (2013) three levels of critical discourse analysis are as follows; (a) a text analysis (description), focuses on interdiscursivity and linguistics (p. 7), (b) a processing analysis (interpretation), examines the processing and interpretation of a text by readers (p. 132), and (c) a social analysis (explanation) identifies the text's role in challenging or reinforcing power dynamics and dominant ideologies (p. 132).

The table below presents the six article titles and their corresponding cover images that will be addressed in the discourse analysis.

Table 1

Data Sample for Discourse Analysis

All the Times A-List Celebrities Chose Arab Designers This Awards Season	Everything Arab Women Taught Me About Fashion	Five Arab Creators That Fuse Fashion And Culture	Arab Excellence: A Guide to the Region's Designers at Haute Couture SS25	5 Arab Models We Will Be Seeing More of in 2025	Here's How I Learned to Embrace My Arab Curls

Before moving on to the markers of orientalism, I will detail the systematic critical discourse analysis carried out (see Appendix A and B).

At the descriptive level, recurring discourses included cultural identity, exposure and reach, cross-cultural interactions, and notably, Western approval signalling achievement. Linguistically, the texts featured empowering action verbs and structures that implied agency and exchange, with an overall tone that was optimistic, celebratory, and reflective. Arab social actors oscillate between active—fusing, teaching, demonstrating excellence—and passive, being "chosen" or serving as indirect sources of knowledge. Even when positioned as empowered, their Arabness was repeatedly emphasised, framing them as other. In contrast, Western actors are framed as tastemakers and gatekeepers at fashion's centre, with their recognition as markers of success.

Visually, this power dynamic is reinforced in the cover photos, which feature a predominance of Eurocentric features or mixed-heritage models with Western

aesthetics, and in some cases, outright dissonance—for example, in *Here's How I Learned to Embrace My Arab Curls*.

At the level of interpretation, this creates dual frames: to Arab audiences, these texts may signal empowerment and visibility, but also tokenisation; to global audiences, they offer cultural exposure and resource sharing. Ultimately, Arab identity is frequently framed through external validation, with some disruption achieved by showcasing Arab creatives as cultural leaders. However, mismatches between images and article content often undercut these intentions.

At the level of explanation, power relations are shaped by the dominant fashion industry's norms, with Vogue Arabia both reinforcing and challenging Western hegemony. Despite some articles showing a circular flow of influence between Arab and global fashion spheres, the default framing positions Arab identity as requiring external validation to be legitimised.

Not all levels of critical discourse analysis appear under every marker of orientalism, for example, *exteriority* is most apparent at the first level of analysis.

7.1.1 Exteriority

Exteriority is the use of authoritative descriptions that indicate being outside of what is being described, resulting in a symbolicised representation (Said, 1979, pp. 20-21).

The first level of Fairclough's (2013) CDA (*description*) demonstrate exteriority by the positioning of Western actors as tastemakers who occupy the centre of fashion's "bounded space" (Pilyarchuck, 2024). Their approval and choice are markers of validation within the industry being *given* to Arab designers, styles, or features. The discrepancy of the corresponding cover images amplifies this interaction. When the Arab social actors are validated through Western approval, the cover images feature Western models or women.

Moreover, the Arab social actors in the articles are othered, whether framed as active (fusing, demonstrating excellence) or passive (chosen, "taught me"). Their *Arabness* is repeatedly highlighted, creating orientalist framings of exteriority (Said, 1979, p. 21), where the audience reads about these actors and is reminded

that they are *Arab*. Their identities as women, designers and models are effectively reduced to being *Arab* women, *Arab* designers, and *Arab* models.

This strongly mirrors Said's (1979) reflections of Lawrence and Bell's writing, where he observes that in those texts, "[...] 'the Arabs' have an aura of apartness [...] [that wipes] out any traces of [individuality]" and deems most other human experiences or attributes as "subordinate to the sheer, unadorned and persistent fact of being an Arab" (p. 230). In other words, a reduction of the subjects' identities to "abstract generalities" and "artificial entities" (p. 154).

7.1.2 Restructuring

Restructuring is the (re)production of identity where the producer selectively curates what is included and excluded from the representation, reconstructing the reality of the identity as told by the producer (Said, 1979, pp. 128-129).

Ultimately, all other markers of orientalism work to *restructure* Arab identity. While they could be incorporated under restructuring, I have separated restructuring to stand alone for the sake of analytical clarity.

On the second level of Fairclough's (2013) CDA (*interpretation*), the discrepancy of cover images not matching the cultural specificity of the titles (the choice of predominantly Eurocentric women) reveals both a conformity to dominant Western hegemony *and* a restructuring of the Arab identity. This is exemplified in *Here's How I Learned to Embrace My Arab Curls* (Sharawneh, 2025); the curls' Arabness is deserving of acceptance in principle, but in practice, visually, the curls we *accept* belong to Sarah Jessica Parker (as Carrie Bradshaw from *Sex and the City*). This is more ironic if I extend my analysis to the article itself, where the author even references Said and his concept of *Orientalism* to explain why the curls were not *accepted* to begin with, shedding light on the probability that she was unaware of the attached cover photo.

7.1.3 Voice of Judgement

Voice of Judgement is when the producer's tone implies that their judgements and generalisations are truths carrying the same weight as facts, developing a "comparative framework" (Said, 1979, p. 149) where "the designation of

something as Oriental" and therefore 'uncivilised' already carries a "pronounced evaluative judgement" (p. 207).

On the second level of CDA (*interpretation*), the voice of judgement centres the approval and validation of the global, Western fashion industry, marking it as a sign of a successful Arab designer or model. This also shines through the third level of analysis (*explanation*), reflecting Vogue Arabia's struggle to challenge *and* reinforce the global fashion industry's Western hegemony. Dominant fashion industry norms are reinforced by establishing the centre as dominated by Western actors and Arab models, designers, creatives are on the peripheral, pushing in.

Efforts to localise identity are still constrained by larger industry standards. The centre of fashion is established as dominated by Western social actors, with 'Arab' social actors occupying the periphery. However, on this level of analysis, it is also notable that the articles often demonstrate a circular flow in power relations and influence between the Arab world and Western industry. Still, the default flow positions Arab identity as dependent on external, global, or Western, validity.

7.2 Survey Research

To preface the analysis, please refer to the following images, which were shown in the survey and are what participants are responding to.

| Figure 4 | Figure 5 | Figure 6 | Figure 7 |
| Image A | Image B | Image C | Image D |

7.2.1 Exteriority

Exteriority is reflected in the survey responses, where respondents' language reveals a perceived exoticisation of the culture. Several responses used terms like

"down to earth and humble," "classist," "Arab context, civilised city," and "tokenising" in reflections on the setting. In contrast, words like "prop," "accessories," "contrast," "othered", "commoners", and "object" are used in reflections on the models and their comparison to the other subjects in the images (particularly the men in images B and D).

These interpretations reveal that the tone of exteriority shines through the images even to audiences without distinct media literacy due to the visual vocabulary at hand. Similarly, respondents described the images as reminiscent of the "[third] world" or "a national geographic campaign," perceiving this exteriority more absolutely by interpreting the perceived reductive categories – or stereotypes – they have observed in the images.

These responses demonstrate that, where Barnard (2008) explains identity performance through the choice of different garments to make up an outfit and, therefore, an identity, respondents interpreted the communication of fashion here to construct narratives of exteriority. The setting, the models, and the men; the decision-makers' choices here all appear to communicate an exoticisation, an exteriority to the respondents – or at least a self-orientalisation (Narumi, 2000).

7.2.2 Restructuring

In parallel, the survey data highlights how audiences easily interpret this restructuring. This is exemplified by one 'Lebanese' respondent's interpretation of the images as carrying different meanings in other magazine contexts (i.e. non-Arab) because "it would be more surprising […] to show and glamorize our culture." The word glamorise here is significant as it implies a perceived effort, from an outsider's perspective, to dress up the culture, to make it palatable. This *glamorisation* reflects a restructuring where the 'orientalist', in this case, chooses settings that can be glamorised or exoticised, not those that can be relatable. This interpretation implies that the setting would not be understood as 'Arab' had the photoshoot taken place in a 'regular' shopping mall, restaurant, or sea-side café because the restructured, orientalist understanding of an 'Arab' setting is limited to the images' visual elements; desert landscapes or busy "humble" streets.

Here, Barnard's (2008) theory facilitates the understanding of fashion photography as a visual cultural artefact that is not neutral; the choices made here

are working to generate a restructured representation of Arab identity that is rooted in dominant ideologies (Barnard, 2008, p. 99) – in this case, reinforcing orientalist discourse.

7.2.3 Voice of Judgement

In the survey responses, the voice of judgement is observable when respondents attribute positive visual elements to the West and negative or lesser elements to the Arab context. For example, the garments in images A and B, described as "modern western clothing" and "[influenced by the model's] time abroad", are defined favourably with adjectives like "fashionable," "high fashion," "privileged," and "contemporary."

In contrast, the localised Arab setting is described as "humble", "common", and "broken down". This draws on Said's (1979) claim that "Orientalism is […] anatomical and enumerative: [using] its vocabulary to [particularise and divide] Oriental [things] into manageable parts" (p. 72), and to do this, there is first the vocabulary of things that are *not* 'oriental'.

We see an interpretation of and resistance to this voice of judgement, for example, when the 'Levantine-Arab' respondent describes images C and D with "Moroccans are North Africans not Arab, so I'm not sure if this was done on purpose?" revealing an unwillingness to accept the reductive nature of a blanket term like *Arabia* or Arab that aims to construct an identity based on colonialist vocabularies (Said, 1979, pp. 203, 301).

This sentiment is echoed by a respondent's (identified as 'Arab/Diaspora') interpretation of what image A communicates about the setting, claiming that "the creative director is trying to […] include a cultural touch, but I don't see culture presented anywhere, as this street could be seen in any arabic street," revealing that the ambiguity of the culture being presented reflects an exteriority and voice of judgement from the decision makers of the editorial.

A voice of judgement interpretation is made quite blatantly by a 'German' respondent's description of image D, conflating "the grates at the windows" with "a country with at least some degree of violence," revealing an interpretation based upon preconceived stereotypes, generalisations and judgements. Bars on

windows can have several functions, such as regulations for child safety or security; in Victorian-era England, window guards became popular architectural ornamentation (Hughes, 2024). The interpretation of violence reveals a tie to the learned colonialist discourses, mainly since the image implies in no other way any semblance of violence.

Just as the markers discussed above work in tandem to reinforce orientalist discourse, Barnard's (2008) fashion communication theory reflects this interplay; every editorial choice contributes to the performed identity.

7.2.4 Theatrical Framing

Theatrical framing is the stylisation and staging of identity through representative choices that more closely resemble characterisation and theatricality rather than realistic representation, tailored and designed specifically by and for the West (Said, 1979, pp. 71-72).

Theatrical framing is about the visual construction of identity by stylising representation; for this reason, the discourse analysis did not reveal any theatrical framing, at least not in a concrete manner where it could not be classified under a different marker, and due to the cover images being sourced rather than produced for Vogue Arabia. Therefore, the selection of cover images is addressed through the CDA. However, the styling and setting of the images were not Vogue Arabia's responsibility and cannot be analysed under Theatrical Framing. After all, the markers developed and deployed in this analysis are interconnected and codependent - none can exist independently, and each one either functions in tandem with or is produced by another

In the survey, several respondents observed theatrical framing quite blatantly. A respondent, who identified as 'Swedish citizen, Afghan ethnicity', responded to the question on the images' potential for carrying a different meaning had they been shown in a different context (such as Vogue France or British Vogue), expressing that interpretation would depend on "whether or not [one] has an understanding of arab culture". Similarly, another respondent, identified as 'mixed raced', notes, that understanding in different contexts would depend on the history of colonialism of the viewer's country. This reveals that the respondents perceived the overall composition of the images as a theatrical

framing, perceiving its communication of preconceived understandings surrounding the cultural identity.

This is reflected in a 'Swedish' respondent's description of the surroundings in image A, "Arab context, civilised city", revealing a combination of theatrical framing and voice of judgement. In this orientalist decoding, the previous point is exemplified in how the sensationalised, particularised, theatrical setting, to an uninformed, outside eye, results in a reading reliant on preconceived colonial understandings of a civilised West vs. an uncivilised Orient (Said, 1979, p. 207). Despite some experienced interpretations perceiving the setting as charming, the cultural mistranslation is undeniable. This respondent mirrors the aforementioned 'German' respondent's interpretation of the window bars signifying violence.

This loaded reflection on location persists when respondents (one identified as 'Arab/Diaspora and the other as 'Swedish') express a perceived theatrical framing describing the locations as intended for non-Arab audiences because they are not "realistic [or] relatable locations," but rather that the editorial team seems to be "trying too hard" to contextualise the images by "[emphasising that] they are in a '[culturally] foreign' surrounding". This is mirrored by a 'Lebanese Swedish" respondent who claims that images C and D seem to be intended for global audiences because they "[make] the culture 'cool'," but that the images would carry different meanings in other contexts because they might be interpreted like "national geographic [style] photos of '3rd world countries'".

Once again, this interpretation alludes to that perceived voice of judgement. This sentiment is even extended to the presence of the men in images B and D, with some respondents claiming that they serve to emphasise that the model is Moroccan (image D) or that her belonging; her Moroccanness and her non "eurocentric-type of beauty", serves to conceal the sense of exoticism from the background.

In parallel, another respondent identifying as 'Swedish' explains that they believe that images A and B are intended for a global audience because "the emphasis on the '[culturally] foreign' background is trying to convince [them] that 'this is Arabia, LOOK HOW BEAUTIFUL' right??". This is echoed by another respondent, 'Mixed: White and Black Caribbean' in their answer to the question

on what images C and D communicate about the model: "I think the pictures are meant to look quite quirky and abnormal like they give me the sense that they're characters in a play or something," - an unambiguous interpretation of and allusion to the intended theatricality of the images.

7.3 Barnard's (2008) Semiotics & *Masquerade*

Identical to theatrical framing is the premise of masquerade as a tool of identity performance through fashion and visual artefacts to create "a spectacle" (Barnard, 2008, pp. 166-168).

The theatrical framing identified by respondents is amplified through the masquerading of the garments in the images. The novelty fez and formality of her garment in image A, the blue-collar/white-collar contrast in image B, the (theatrical *and* literal) playfulness of using a carpet for a dress in image C, and the identical 'uniforms' and hats in image D that have clear distinctions in quality and price.

These syntagmatic and paradigmatic differences (Barnard, 2008, pp. 89, 94)in the garments reflect the power relations at play, where the cost of production for the garments is easily interpreted to be higher due to fabric manipulations (visible in the models' garments in images B and D) and bespoke pieces (such as the hats worn in images A and D). The signified formality of the garments (in images A and B), through the use of signifiers such as the heels worn, the white collar in contrast with the man's blue-collar in image B, or the blazer and co-ord in image A, communicates the informality of the surroundings, further reinforcing her position within the power dynamics, and at a larger context, within the culture and industry.

7.4 The Outliers

My overarching argument is complicated by the responses coded under the patterns *Model Misinterpreted* and *Setting Misinterpreted* (see Appendix D for the codebook). While some respondents identify the setting and the models' 'belonging' and view this as a tool to reduce the orientalist framing, others (one "Lebanese Swedish", one "Russian", and two "Arab") find the model (in images A

and B) to be "out of place," even perceiving the models as "[tourists] and [...] unfamiliar with the area."

Similarly, the 'Russian' respondent notes that the setting "could've [been] another country" [...] "if it weren't for the trolleys in the corners of the frame and the Arabic writing". This is an interesting and complicated observation, as the signifier (trolley) is more closely associated with the signified of 'an Arabic country' than other elements in the image, going back to the voice of judgement of underdevelopment and disorganisation in contrast with 'Western' contexts.

Another respondent ('Arab/Middle Eastern') misinterpreted the location of the shootings as Egypt or Turkey, despite being provided with names and ethnicities of the photographers and the location of the photoshoot. This misinterpretation demonstrates how visual cues play a defining role in interpretation.

While this Pattern points to the outliers of the interpretation, the frequency chart (see Appendix E) clearly shows that it is the exception, not the rule (together accounting for 34% of the frequency in comparison to the other patterns [66%] under the same Code). While these interpretations skew the dominant argument, their relative scarcity diminishes their significance.

8. Discussion & Concluding Remarks

In this section, I will discuss the results of my analysis, my concluding thoughts, and the implications of my study. Finally, I will discuss future research agendas.

Before diving into the discussion, I would like to briefly summarise the thesis as a whole. Vogue Arabia launched in 2017 as a regional edition of the Vogue brand in a media context shaped by several factors, such as local regulations, globalisation interests, and commercial motivations. I drew a parallel between the magazine and Lawrence of Arabia, highlighting the complex position of a Western voice championing Arab representation in the colonially made-up context of *Arabia*.

The literature review revealed several tensions at the intersection of fashion, representation and power in media, revealing a site of cultural negotiation, complex representational practices and cross-cultural interactions in post-colonial contexts.

The theoretical framework combined Barnard's (2008) fashion communication theories, Said's (1979) premise of orientalist discourse, and Hall's (1997; 2013) foundational work on representation under the blanket of cultural imperialism as explained by Said (1994).

The methodology combines Fairclough's (2013) CDA, survey research, and Barnard's (2008) application of semiotics to fashion through an interpretive paradigm. This results in an analysis that reveals tensions between representation and perception and Vogue Arabia's struggle to challenge and reinforce Western representational hegemony.

8.1 Addressing the Research Questions

How does Vogue Arabia engage with representations of Arab identity within fashion?

What do 'Arab' and non-'Arab' audiences' interpretations reveal about the underlying discourses comprised by these representations?

My analysis reveals a layered and complicated representation of Arab identity.

A visible cognitive dissonance by producers is apparent through the confusing and misleading discourses in the articles. Intentions are centred on the celebration of Arab identity and aesthetics. Still, final editorial choices suggest that the magazine struggles to position itself within the Arab world, maintaining an outsider perspective. This outsider perspective is evidenced by the repeated use of 'Arab' as an identifier in the titles, showing that the magazine does not identify as Arab and reflecting Said's (1979) concept of exteriority to establish orientalist discourse. If orientalist discourse were absent, the titles would read *Five Creators that Fuse Fashion and Culture* instead of *Five **Arab** Creators that Fuse Fashion and Culture*.

The oscillation between passivity and activity by Arab social actors, revealed in the first level of CDA, demonstrates a willingness to centre the Arab experience but not the Arab voice. Ultimately, the discourse analysis exposes Vogue Arabia as a site of cultural negotiation constrained by global hegemonic structures, exemplified in the mismatching of images to article titles, and the referring to 'Arab' actors, rather than hearing their experiences first-hand. Moreover, Arab

success is validated through Western approval, producing a commodified representation that constructs Arab identity for global audiences, weakly disguised as an attempt to relate to local readers.

The survey respondents, along with the application of Barnard's (2008) theory of fashion as communication, reveal a poor cross-cultural translation of representations that creates, maybe not in such a blatant manner as Hall (1997) explains, a stereotype of the 'Arab' woman. Respondents recognise the theatricality and performance of identity in the images, identifying the dilution and exoticisation of cultural references. This poor translation resulting in exoticisation is highlighted by the division of audiences; Arab (Arabic-speaking) respondents found the imagery intriguing but were not unaware of the potential for misinterpretation by non-Arab viewers, explicitly stating that interpretation depends on cultural understanding. Meanwhile, non-Arab viewers *did* interpret the images using their cultural codes, which lack an understanding of the context, and are rooted in orientalist discourse of the region, resulting in a perception of "violence" and characterisation of identity. This stereotyping also shines through the application of Barnard's (2008) semiotics, where the models' identity compared to their surroundings is constructed through the styling and garments (that respondents interpreted as signifying Western influence) to communicate a superiority and difference of power.

Of course, in the case of survey research, I must acknowledge the potential observer effect, where the respondents may read the images differently if they were not in a research setting. Still, the reflections reveal that when provoked to think critically, viewers are aware of the cultural tensions occurring even in the seemingly uncontroversial context of fashion photography, which the average reader expects to be selling products rather than ideologies.

This difference in interpretation is a crucial point for Vogue to consider as it operates within '*Arabia*' since, as one respondent mentions, Vogue, in its various forms, always addresses a global fashion audience. This persistent address of global audiences to stay within global, Western hegemonic interests reflects Said's (1994) connection between cultural production and the reproduction of imperialist ideologies. With this in mind, it becomes clear that what is essential for Vogue Arabia may not necessarily be to address the region directly but to

represent it fairly, free from orientalist (and in some cases, self-orientalising [Narumi, 2000]) discourses. Vogue Arabia must make a more conscious effort to present Arab identity on the global stage without attaching or reinforcing harmful colonialist narratives by ignoring the role cultural codes play in the decoding of representation (Hall, 2013).

My personal interpretation (which I have actively made an effort to exclude from the analysis) of the content I analysed - as a Syrian woman in a European context - is a highly commodified and costume-ised representation of Arab identity that has elements of celebration *and* imposed assimilation. Visibility is a valuable first step of representation, but the next step, agency and autonomy, carries more weight. The lack of definitiveness in Vogue Arabia's representations, where audiences are divided, not just culturally but also individually, leaves room for misinterpretation and stereotyping. As shown in the analyses, the mismatching of images to titles, the mixed interpretation of images ranging from "third world" to glamorised, and the clear communication of power dynamics through fashion choices have resulted in this unclear and ambivalent representation that highlights the need for editorial sensitivity.

Ultimately, this ambiguity reproduces the orientalist gaze and its attendant ideology, regardless of the producers' intentions, indicating a need for more local voices to mediate the cultural translations and avoid potential misinterpretations.

8.2 Future Research

While the limited scope of the thesis allowed for a deep and focused examination, future research that benefits from a larger scope of work and time to execute could improve on several fronts that I found challenging in my process. Generally, considering the intersectionality of results was something I would have loved to incorporate, but due to time and size constraints, I decided to specify my focus on cultural identity. Considering how gender, class, race, and religious identities play out in similar research contexts would shape the research results. Additionally, magazines tailored to male audiences are under-researched and could be a fascinating topic of exploration. How is cultural identity represented

when the target audience is male? Alternatively, a comparative analysis could give valuable insight into representational practices across different organisations.

While my current methodology has proven effective considering the scope of this thesis, future research could expand and enhance the research design. Methods and logics not centred on interpretation could result in more generalisable results. A study with the benefit of time should seek a more diverse, representative sample, both in terms of the participant sample and the discourse/visual sample.

If this study were replicated with a similar paradigm and subject (Vogue Arabia), surveying audiences uninfluenced by Western ideology would be the most important change. Additionally, my limited time and scope forced me to tailor the survey to make it quick and easy to answer rather than focusing on quality and encouraging more profound, critical reflections. Ideally, focus groups or interviews would produce more valuable interactions with the participants and allow for a better-controlled collection and analysis process. A quantitative approach could be helpful, but perhaps not in audience research on this topic.

This study's sample also poses limitations, relating to its size and diversity. A study with a larger sample of text to analyse and more organisations to consider would yield more interesting, representative results. The current sample of six articles and four images cannot truly represent the underlying discourses of the magazine as a whole. A longitudinal study that follows the development of such organisations parallel to the global context would also prove to be beneficial.

Additionally, a significant limitation of the study is the theoretical lens that is focused on orientalism, resulting in a neglect of considering other factors such as socioeconomic class, gender, or race in the construction of Arab identity. In particular, religion plays a significant role in the communication of Arab identity to global audiences, and incorporating theories or perspectives that consider religion would add valuable nuance.

Finally, as discussed in different parts of the thesis, my position as the researcher plays a significant role in the collection and analysis of the data. A collaborative effort incorporating voices from different backgrounds would contextualise the research and alleviate cultural sensitivity.

8.3 Implications of this study

Concluding my thesis, I can see that Vogue Arabia operates as a space for the simultaneous celebration and commodification of Arab identity. When considering the implications, similar research I conducted earlier this year on Dazed MENA's role in the region comes to mind. That research (Kalai, 2025) revealed that Dazed MENA operated with a more culturally grounded editorial model, resulting in a nuanced representation and a lack of orientalist framing. This contrast highlights how editorial approaches rooted in local perspectives can lead to more nuanced and culturally sensitive representations. Therefore, this thesis contributes to the understanding of how regional fashion media negotiate identity in postcolonial contexts and emphasises the importance of local voices and decision-makers being at the forefront of such organisations.

More importantly, in a perfect world, a regional magazine would be dismantled or rebranded to address the more specific region intended. Perhaps a sub-regional level within what is labelled as *Arabia* would result in better resonance, such as the Levant, North Africa, the Gulf, etc. However, no harm would be done in further specificity (e.g., Vogue Egypt, Vogue UAE, Vogue Lebanon). This, of course, could have adverse financial effects with increased production and distribution costs, but I did preface this with 'in a perfect world'. I imagine it would be difficult to make a publication that addresses such a specific identity if the editorial team lacks the lived experience that allows them to account for the cultural differences between the various 'Arab' countries.

If the decision-makers at Vogue Arabia were ever to read this thesis, I would hope that the (realistic) takeaway would be that while they have a strong and captivating visual identity that is well-composed and showcases unique talent, they would benefit from incorporating more regional 'filters' in the editorial process. These 'filters' would allow decision-makers to discuss and understand if the content could carry harmful discourse.

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10. Appendices

Appendix A

Table of Systematic Critical Discourse Analysis

Article Link —>			All the Times A-List Celebrities Chose Arab Designers This Awards Season https://www.voguearabia.com/article/celebrities-arab-designers-awards-season	Everything Arab Women Taught Me About Fashion https://www.voguearabia.com/article/everything-arab-women-taught-me-about-fashion	Five Arab Creators That Fuse Fashion And Culture https://www.voguearabia.com/article/arab-creators-that-fuse-fashion-and-culture	Arab Excellence: A Guide to the Region's Designers at Haute Couture SS25 https://www.voguearabia.com/article/arab-designers-haute-couture-ss25	5 Arab Models We Will Be Seeing More of in 2025 https://www.voguearabia.com/article/arab-models-2025	Here's How I Learned to Embrace My Arab Curls https://www.voguearabia.com/article/embrace-my-arab-curly-hair
Level One: Description Analysis	T e x t	Discourses	Cross-cultural interaction / Validation through "status"	Cross-cultural interaction / Exchange of resources	Cultural Identity / Visibility	Cultural identity / Craftsmanship	Diversity / representation	Self Acceptance / Cultural Identity / Beauty standards
		Linguistic: word choice, metaphors, tone	A-list = status. Chose = agency.	Taught me = author gained something	Fuse Fashion and Culture: agency, creativity	Excellence: empowerment, greatness	Optimistic tone	Empowering
		Social actors	Celebrities: active. Arab designers: passive	Author: passive (?) Arab Women: active	Arab creators: active	Designers: active	Models: active	Speaker: active
	I m a g e	Subjects	Sara Sampaio - Portuguese model	Imaan Hamaam - Dutch-Egyptian-Moroccan model	Sarah Taibah: x Influencer	Unidentified model wearing a dress by Elie Saab	Malika Elmaslouhi - Italian Model with Moroccan father	SJP as Carrie Bradshaw.
		Composition	Red carpet press photo	Full body, from instagram, model is wearing a loose dress that could fall into the "abaya" category. Model has predominantly european facial features.	Formal wear, looking up at the camera, power pose	Runway photo - Model looks european origin.	Selfie, blurry, close up, direct eye contact, dreamy. Model has predominantly european facial features.	Image from Sex and the City, SJP is centered and smiling, looking away from the camera
Level Two: Interpretation Analysis		Interpretation	The designers gain status by being chosen. Critical interpretation: The agency of the celebrities outshines the achievements of the designer.	The author has learned from her interaction with Arab women. Critical interpretation: Another interaction where the marginalised is giving or serving the centre	To Arab readers: empowerment, achievement. To global readers: exposure to Arab creators,	To Arab readers: empowerment, achievement. To global readers: exposure to Arab creators,	Empowerment and rise of these Arab models, gaining traction in the global industry. Still they are validated by their recognition in the greater, dominant global fashion narratives.	Photo is a direct contradiction to the title, creating confusion, Arab curls, white, blonde woman on the cover. While SJP is a cultural icon of beauty and style she is unrelated to the "Arab woman" experience of having curly hair
		Framing	The sentence frames the celebrities as tastemakers and their choice as a sign of achievement. This reinforces the hierarchy where western recognition is legitimising. This is emphasised by the photo of the model.	The interaction between the Swedish author and Arab women as one where Arab women's knowledge as a resource is benefitting the author who is positioned as an outsider. However, the title also gives authority and status to Arab women as influential member of the fashion space.	Arab creators as safe-keepers of cultural heritage but also innovators	Arab designers are leaders and tastemakers	Models are trailblazers supposedly breaking in to the scene they typically are not a part of - however the cover photo shows a beautiful brown woman who does have european beauty features. None of her facial features are typical to Arab, North African, South West Asian faces.	"Innocently" or "Unintentionally" centres SJP - Euro-American cultural figure - as the visual reference, contradicting the title's claim of celebrating Arab identity - undercutting the cultural specificity.
		Ideologies	Ideology of Western cultural imperialism is reinforced. The West (celebs) are using the Arabs.	On one hand challenging the norms of who is the authoritative figure, on the other, reinforces ideologies of colonial discovery, otherness and reinforcing a gaze dynamic where the Arab women in question don't really have a say.	Modernity and tradition can coexist	Challenging Fashion's centre as dominated by the West. The image complicates this as the first thing you are met with is the european model's gaze. Also the ideology of western hegemony in fashion is still reinforced through the demonstration that Arab designers are still operating within the global mainstream fashion industry.	Promotion of diversity - within the dominant global fashion industry. Fitting in, assimilating.	Lingering influence of white femininity as aspirational and the difficulty in de-centring dominant aesthetics and beauty standards.

Article Link —>		All the Times A-List Celebrities Chose Arab Designers This Awards Season https://www.voguearabia.com/article/celebrities-arab-designers-awards-season	Everything Arab Women Taught Me About Fashion https://www.voguearabia.com/article/everything-arab-women-taught-me-about-fashion	Five Arab Creators That Fuse Fashion And Culture https://www.voguearabia.com/article/arab-creators-that-fuse-fashion-and-culture	Arab Excellence: A Guide to the Region's Designers at Haute Couture SS25 https://www.voguearabia.com/article/arab-designers-haute-couture-ss25	5 Arab Models We Will Be Seeing More of in 2025 https://www.voguearabia.com/article/arab-models-2025	Here's How I Learned to Embrace My Arab Curls https://www.voguearabia.com/article/embrace-my-arab-curly-hair
Level Three: Explanation Analysis	Who is empowered/marginalised?	E: A-list Celebrities M: Arab designers	E: both, author and Arab women	E: Arab creators	E: Arab designers	E: Arab models E: Global fashion industry	Complicated: Visually E: SJP/White representations of femininity and beauty. Textually: Arab women. Overall the image of SJP renders the Arab woman - *and her curls* - invisible.
	Power structures: Critiqued or Reinforced?	Reinforced	Both	None	Both	Both	Both
	Dominant narratives: Upholding or challenging?	Upholding	Both	Challenging	Both	Both	Both
	Site of Cultural Negotiation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Power Flow	From the Centre (West) to the Margins (Arab World)	Mutual/Circular	From the Margins (Arab World) to the Centre (West)	From the Margins (Arab World) to the Centre (West)	Mutual/Circular	Mutual/Circular

Appendix B

Systematic CDA Independent From the Markers of Orientalism

Description - Textual & Visual level

Discourses

- Cultural Identity
- Exposure
- Cross-cultural interaction
- Western approval as signs of achievement
- Diversity & Representation
- Beauty standards

Linguistics:

- Empowering action verbs
- Structure suggesting agency and resource exchange
- Tone: optimistic, celebratory, reflective

Social actors:

- Arab actors: active in some (fusing, teaching, demonstrating excellence), passive in others (chosen - or in the "taught me" exercise, referred to but not given voice. Which Arab women taught you this? Why can't they teach us directly?) Regardless of passivity or activity, they are Othered. This is a magazine 'for the Arab region' so why is it still necessary to highlight these actors' arab-ness?
- Western/global actors: tastemakers, occupiers of fashion's centre where their approval, choice, and benefits are representative of success and validity in the industry.

Visual composition of images:

- Predominance of Eurocentric beauty features/standards or mixed-heritage models with European features.
- Blatant dissonance (for example in the article discussing Arab curls but showcasing Sarah Jessica Parker as Carrie Bradshaw)

Interpretation - Framing and Processing

- To Arab audiences: empowerment, pride, visibility, tokenisation
- To global audiences: Cultural exposure, insight, resource sharing

Framing:

- Arab identity framed through external approval & validation. Success = being chosen, noticed, celebrated or included by the global (western) Fashion industry.
- Some disruption to this framing by positioning Arab creatives as innovators and cultural leaders.

Discrepancies:

- Images don't match the cultural specificity of the titles, suggesting marketing choices that appeal and conform to dominant western beauty standards.
- This dissonance undermines the representation

Explanation - Social Context & Power Structures

Power relations & cultural hegemony:

- Dominant fashion industry norms are reinforced - the centre is established as dominated by Western actors and Arab models, designers, creatives are on the peripheral pushing in.
- Occasional critiquing of these narratives.
- VA both challenges and reinforces Western fashion hegemony, with efforts to localise identity still constrained by larger industry standards.

Site of cultural negotiation

- Sometimes: power relations and influence flow in a circular manner between the Arab world and Western industry, however the default flow positions Arab identity as dependant on external, global - or Western - validity to be legitimised.

Appendix C

Chosen Images From *Made in Arabia* and *All Eyes on Arabia* Editorials

IMAGE A

ALL EYES ON ARABIA

IMAGE B

ALL EYES ON ARABIA

IMAGE C

MADE IN ARABIA


IMAGE D
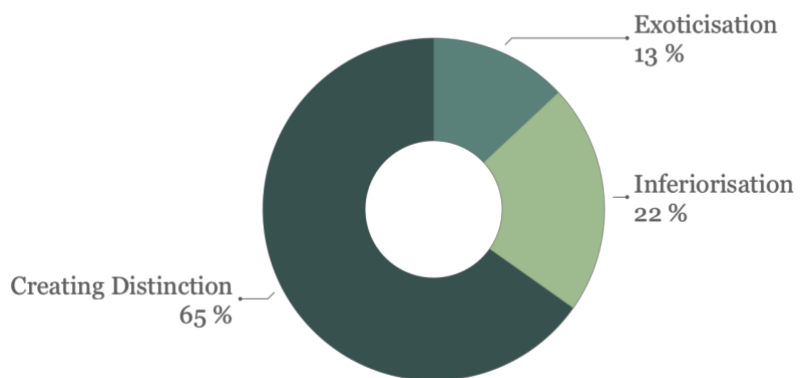
MADE IN ARABIA

Appendix D

Survey response Codebook

Othering Narrative Recognised	Respondents perceived signs to be othering, or that the respondent's interpretation shows an "othered" perception of subjects, location, clothing, etc.
Creating Distinction	(Between Arab world and the West, Subjects in the images, etc.)
Exoticisation	Language of othering that is typical of discourses of "exoticisation."
Inferiorisation	Language that shows respondents have interpreted the image to show an inferiority to the West.
Perceived Dissonance of Culture	Respondent's answer shows a perceived disconnection or misinterpretation.
Cultural Perception Unclear	The signifiers in the image are unclear or misinterpreted as belonging to other cultures.
Emphasised Culture for (Western) Audiences	The respondent identifies a clear effort to emphasise culture through signifiers, thereby deeming this intention performative and unsuccessful.
Identified Potential for Cross-Cultural Misinterpretation	Respondent identifies that the representations made could carry different meanings for audiences with different cultural codes.
Identified Signifier of the West	Respondent decodes a sign as pertaining to Western values, visuals, objects, etc.
Model Misinterpreted	As an "outsider" within the setting she is photographed in.
Setting Misinterpreted	As pertaining to another culture or location.

Appendix E

Code Frequency Charts
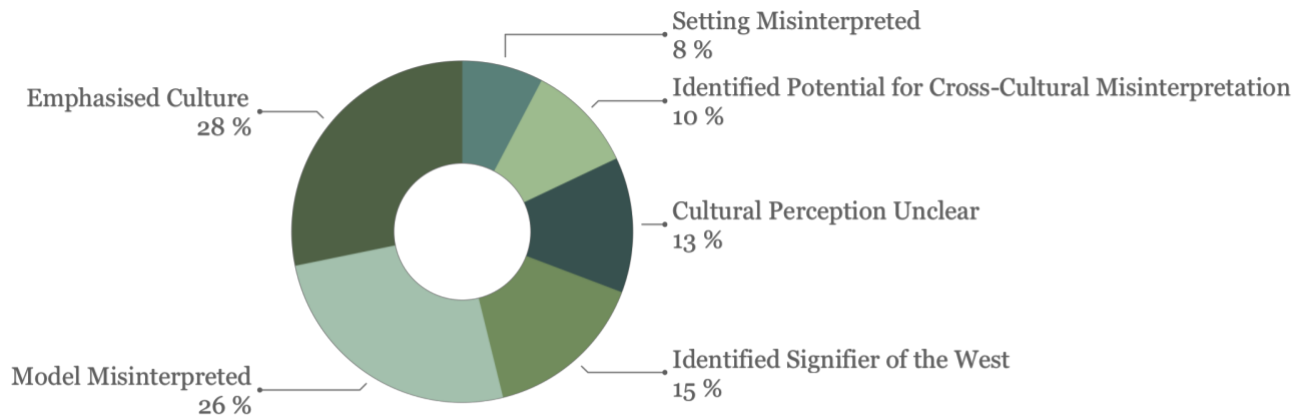
Code: Perceived Dissonance of Culture

Code: Othering Narrative Recognised