Gender and Invested Agency: Cultural Expressions in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

Based upon qualitative research with forty young Emirati women and men, this thesis explores the relationship between gender and nation within the United Arab Emirates. The study examines how this relationship affects young Emirati women in particular, and investigates the ways Emirati culture is being represented by young Emiratis to real and imagined audiences, and the implication of gender within those representations.

This thesis argues that cultural expressions—such as artistic work, volunteering for a cultural program and wearing national dress—are best described in terms of a feminist poststructural model of agency I term “invested agency.” This research theorises the relationship between gender and nation as an investment by Emirati women within the discourse of the UAE’s state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda. The term invested agency applies to the ways in which female participants’ subjectivities are shaped by the discourses around them, and speak both from within and to those discourses. The term also explains that agency is not always resistance against an oppressor, as in the liberal framework, but instead a strategic negotiation of contextualised choice from within available discourses. Participants’ subjectivities are embedded within the discourses of Orientalism, individualisation and cultural globalisation. These discourses fuel and create each other, resulting in female participants who demonstrate that “invested agency” means being attuned to and operating from within a multiplicity of discourses through embodied sites of cultural expression and representation.

Understanding invested agency requires critical analysis of conceptual binaries such as modern / traditional, agency / oppression, representation / expression, local / global, and
individualisation / collectivity. Considering these concepts as opposed and mutually exclusive is only a one-dimensional way to understand gendered subjectivity, the effects of globalisation, and cultural change. Instead, this research provides evidence that these apparent oppositions are entangled and mutually implicating, creating one another in new ways.

The UAE is not a well-studied area within Gender Studies scholarship, nor is the Emirati population, an elite, privileged and indigenous minority within their own country. By triangulating discourse analysis, qualitative interviews and participant observation, this research fills a gap in Gender Studies, Arabian Gulf Studies, and Middle Eastern studies scholarship. No other scholar has investigated the interplay of global processes that have shaped the way national identity is performed, considered and represented among young Emiratis who are undergoing radical cultural change. This research thus generates new meanings for the ways we consider the relationship between gender and nation.
Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Parts of Chapters Five and Six will appear in:


_____________________________  _______25/11/2013____________________
Jillian Schedneck  Date
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Introduction

Gender, Globalisation and Minority Cultures

This project stems from questions that remained with me after I left the United Arab Emirates in 2008, after living and working in the UAE’s two principle cities, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, for two years. The local Emirati university students I taught at Abu Dhabi University and the American University in Dubai often spoke about their cultural and national identity as being “lost” because of multiculturalism, modernisation and globalisation; many also spoke passionately about the ways in which their Emirati identities and traditions must be “preserved.” Their sentiments were justified: as a young country established in 1971, the local rulers brought in an influx of foreign workers to modernise the new country. As a result of the increasing expatriate workforce, Emiratis became a minority cultural group within their own lands of the UAE.

Because of these students’ unique situation, it was both easy and difficult to understand their point of view. On the one hand, they were similar to other disenfranchised minority groups around the world. These young Emiratis grappled with how to maintain their cultural distinctiveness amid the onslaught of Western-style development, and how to show outsiders that their minority culture is worthy of attention and admiration, rather than backwards or insignificant. The Emirati students I taught expressed feeling denigrated and discouraged by their minority status and the negative opinions of foreigners who often saw Emiratis as “backwards” and unsuited to modernity. For example, students were dismayed when

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1 At Abu Dhabi University, I taught English language and academic writing to female students, and also taught English language to male students for one term. At the American University in Dubai, I taught co-educational courses in Composition, Literature and Creative Writing. These were both private universities, and therefore the student body was a mix of nationalities. At Abu Dhabi University, most students were Emirati. At the American University in Dubai, Emirati students were in the minority.
Introduction

foreigners disrespected the holy month of Ramadan by wearing immodest clothes and complaining about not being able to eat in public during the day. Emirati religious and cultural traditions were not being honoured or even understood, students told me. The young Emiratis I met felt as though outsiders saw them as losing their culture and national identity, and as victims of Westernisation. Foreign expatriates often expressed feeling as though they were living in a place with no “culture” at all.

On the other hand, Emiratis hold positions of elite privilege. They are often wealthy, supported and subsidised by their government. This support puts young Emiratis in a very rare situation as both marginal and privileged. Because of their unique positions, the Emirati students understandably felt pride in their country’s development and success, as well as pleased by the governmental support they received in terms of free education, healthcare and employment support and benefits. Therefore, unlike many other indigenous minority groups, the Emirati population is not disenfranchised. They are not involved in fighting for their rights or identity recognition through their government, but are much more subtly seeking global recognition as a culture and nation worthy of respect.

Because of the Orientalist gaze (Said 1978), which signals to young Emiratis that their culture is not valuable, various assertions of Emirati “culture” and nationalism are taking place within the UAE. These assertions occur through national dress, artistic / creative initiatives, exhibitions, film screenings, and events at the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding in Dubai (which hosts events, such as cultural lunches and mosque tours, to help tourists and expatriates understand more about Emirati culture and the Islamic way of life). These events signalled to me that cultural assertions were present, and not being
Introduction

“lost,” but created and presented in prescribed and strategic ways to real and imagined global audiences.

Central to these imaginings and cultural expressions is the construction of Emirati national identity. Because of the majority expatriate population, a taken-for-granted discourse exists within the local media and among Emiratis about how to preserve not only their culture and traditions, but also their identity. Yet, questions remain over how to define this national identity, since the country united seven disparate emirates into one country in 1971. Before this time, these separate emirates maintained subsistence living ranging from desert nomadic life, to seafaring, to mountainous existence, with different tribes, leaders and “traditions” of their own. Yet nation-building efforts call for unity and cohesion of a national story and past. Young Emiratis are still searching for that cohesion as they navigate their newly globalised cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Such considerations of national identity would not have presented themselves so strongly without the overwhelming presence of foreigners, and the greater awareness of global processes. This awareness results in the need to demonstrate unique cultural distinctiveness and belonging, as well as convey Western modes of liberal agency and individualisation.

National identity as a popular part of national dialogue has also been made apparent to me through my own teaching experiences with Emirati students and through conversations with expatriate teachers and university professors in the UAE. Participants of this study have acknowledged this occurrence. For example, in Muneera’s response to my email request for an interview, she wrote: “Exploring Emirati identity feels like it's the topic du jour as it's being discussed/debated a lot across many areas at the moment.” This shows that the dialogue of national identity is very relevant among nationals and expatriates alike.
My interests lie in discovering how young Emiratis’ relationship to national identity is implicated within larger theories of globalisation from the social sciences, which variously argue that cultures are becoming more homogeneous (Fukuyama 1992; Ōhmae 2005) or more diverse (Held 1999), hybrid (Kraidy 2005; Pieterse 2004), in conflict (Huntington 1996), increasingly lacking in nationalism (Bauman 1998) and developing more complex connections and exchanges (Inda & Rosaldo 2001). Yet, within the UAE, I saw young Emiratis at once asserting their distinct cultural identity, and presenting themselves as global citizens, which none of these theories described.

Intertwined with the concept globalisation, the terms “modern” and “traditional” are significant to this thesis and within young Emiratis’ lives. In many Gulf Arab countries there is a clear divide between the time of “tradition”—before oil discovery—and that of “modernity”—after oil discovery. Longva (1997) acknowledges this situation in Kuwait, writing:

In Kuwait, everyone spoke of change as a fact of life. Usually, in the Kuwaitis’ discourse, time was divided into a ‘before’ and ‘after’ period, with the advent of oil as the critical watershed event. … The before-after mode of thinking pervaded the way Kuwaitis spoke of themselves and their country.

(190)

The same thinking occurs within the UAE. Many of the Emirati students I encountered spoke about how to preserve traditions while also living in the “modern” world; how to balance one’s cultural “tradition” and achieve success within globalised, multicultural Dubai and Abu
Dhabi. Students weren’t the only ones discussing these tensions between modern and traditional life, as local newspapers and television news, as well as international media, upheld a similar discourse of cultural tradition versus rapid modernisation. These media outlets seemed to conclude: you can’t have both.

I was particularly concerned with the ways these discourses affected Emirati women, as the presumed bearers of the traditional as well as markers of modernity. Within the local and international media, young Emirati women are praised for their education and employment achievements outside the home, which signals modernity. Yet, Emirati women were also well-aware that foreigners perceived them as oppressed, hidden beneath their black abayas and sheylas, the female national dress worn by most Emirati women. I saw that they were positioned between displaying modernity and cultural tradition, and that this position shaped their realities and creative expressions.

Relatedly, I was also interested in my own role as a white, non-Muslim, Western female university lecturer in the construction of Emirati students’ sense of national identity and cultural tradition. Even though the actual presence of Western expatriates and tourists are relatively small at less than 6% of the population (CIA 2013), the Western media, as well as the celebration of capitalism and consumerism, are ubiquitous. I learned that the Orientalist gaze (Said 1978) is ever-present, as nearly every young Emirati student I taught presumed that all Western tourists and expatriates believe Islam is an oppressive religion that inspires terrorism, and consider Arab and Emirati culture as cruel to women. These representations have been exacerbated by the sub-genre of recent memoirs by Muslim women about their captivity and oppression under patriarchal and religious authorities, the most prominent of which is Ayaan Hirsi Ali (2008) and her first popular book The Caged Virgin: An
Introduction

Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam. Other examples include Azar Nafisi’s (2008) *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Jean Sasson’s *Princess* (1992, 1994, 2000) series about the severely stifled lives of Saudi royal women from the perspective of an anonymous young Saudi royal woman. While none of these books are set in the UAE, the conflation of all Muslim women as trapped and oppressed is keenly perceived by young Emiratis within the UAE. After leaving Dubai, I remained curious about young Emirati women’s responses to Orientalist discourse. I set out to investigate their strategic challenges to this message through asserting distinctive differences from Western conceptions of femininity and equality. Thus this study focuses on the dialogue between young Emiratis, mostly women, and the Western audience, both real and imagined.

I endeavoured to focus on Emirati women’s responses to state-sponsored women’s empowerment, which is a term I use to describe the UAE government’s representations of its positive role in garnering opportunities for Emirati women. I wanted to examine what appeared to be Emirati women’s complicity with the UAE government’s strategy to promote itself as liberalised and “modern” through its empowerment of Emirati women in education and the workplace. The UAE official discourse on Emirati women’s empowerment is employed as a strategy to show outsiders that the UAE is in fact supportive of women. I sought to unpack the concept of empowerment as related to Emirati women by learning if it was an important term to them, as well as how they perceived the government’s role in their lives.

Through these experiences and observations while living and working in the UAE, I was compelled by the following research questions:
Introduction

• What is the relationship between gender and nation in the UAE, and how has this relationship particularly affected young Emirati women?

• How have global processes shaped the way national identity is performed, considered and represented among young Emiratis within the UAE?

• How is Emirati culture being represented by young Emiratis to real and imagined audiences, and how is gender regarded within those representations?

My findings present a fresh view on this topic by interrogating the process and intentions through which cultural distinctions are constituted, represented, gendered, and performed within a unique minority cultural group. This thesis focuses on women’s voices, experiences and negotiations within these expressions and representations.

There has been no other study investigating the various cultural assertions of this unique and privileged minority group, or the ways in which women of this group in particular assert their cultural and national identity. This research is therefore an important component and contribution to gender and nation scholarship, as this thesis theorises the relationship between gender and nation as an investment by Emirati women within the discourse of the UAE’s state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda. This research shows that the UAE nationalist discourse positions men and women differently in relation to modernity and tradition, global belonging and cultural distinctiveness, and this shapes their cultural assertions and subjectivities. To answer the research questions of this thesis, I investigated the strategies, negotiations and performances adopted to explain, assert and promote aspects of Emirati culture to imagined global audiences. Ultimately, this thesis arrives at an understanding of the role of globalisation upon this minority culture group, particularly the women of this group, through the conceptual frame of “invested agency.” This research
Introduction

shows that participants are invested within the official discourses surrounding them, despite its potential disadvantages.

This thesis is structured into eight chapters. **Chapter One** begins by framing contemporary scholarly understandings of Dubai as a global city and offers relevant background information on the history and unification of the United Arab Emirates. This chapter argues for the uniqueness of this research by examining the other pertinent theses and academic books focused on the UAE.

**Chapter Two** provides grounding for the key literature related to this thesis, including intersections of modernity studies, cultural globalisation, gender and nationalism, and identity and poststructuralism. I argue that a feminist poststructural framework is the most suitable way to explore the effect of dominant discourses such as Orientalism on young female Emiratis’ subjectivities and their cultural and creative expressions.

In **Chapter Three** I discuss the methods and methodology for my data collection during four and a half months in Dubai. I provide the framework for my poststructuralist feminist approach, and detail my triangulation of research methods: discourse analysis, participant observation and semi-structured individual interviews. I also reflect upon my role as a researcher and approach to data analysis. This chapter argues that analysing Emirati creative expressions and cultural assertions is an innovative and effective way to examine the impact of discourses and representations upon a minority culture group.

**Chapter Four** analyses the representations of Emirati women as a “bridge” between modernity and tradition within the UAE government’s official documents. In this chapter I
argue that modern and traditional constitute each other in the roles of Emirati women. I use the term “state-sponsored women’s empowerment” to describe the UAE government’s strategy of demonstrating their “modern” attitude toward “empowering” Emirati women, as well as women’s role as bearers of “tradition.” Here I apply and extend McRobbie and Gill’s postfeminist critique of representations of women’s empowerment and rights in order to demonstrate the ways this critique works in the context of the UAE. This chapter also lays the groundwork for why Emirati participants in this study demonstrate invested agency within this official discourse. Invested agency is a term I use to explain why participants are invested in the official discourses surrounding them, even though they are being used as a monolithic symbol by their government and the local media.

**Chapter Five** further examines the mutually entangled relationship between modern and traditional by analysing female participants’ responses to the government’s official discourse. I critique the agency / resistance model applied to Arab and Muslim women by building upon Hollway’s (1984) theory of “investment” to argue that Emirati women demonstrate “invested agency.” Female participants respond to the ways in which they are being spoken about within the UAE government and local media by investment in the real benefits the official discourse offers them. Emirati women respond to “being empowered” by the government in positive ways because of their investment in the real and promised benefits this gendered subject position provides. I propose that “Islamic feminism” aids in explaining female participants’ negative reactions to “feminism,” even though the language of feminism is used within the official discourse that they approve of.

**Chapter Six** is set in the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding (SMCCU), and explores SMCCU Emirati volunteers’ assumptions about how their mainly Western
visitors judge Emirati culture, and the ways volunteers attempt to challenge visitors’ misconceptions. Because of volunteers’ assumptions, they present a liberal model of agency, and use the language of second-wave feminism, such as “choice,” “equality” and “empowerment,” to convince visitors that Emirati women are not oppressed within the UAE, but are instead thriving, with free and equal treatment to men. Volunteers typically provide presentations that include declarations of Emirati women’s modern, liberal agency, as well as demonstrations of distinctive Emirati cultural tradition. At times, volunteers move beyond the expected language of feminism within their cultural presentations to reveal more than a one-dimensional representation of Emirati culture. Participant observation within this Centre and interviews with volunteers provides evidence for the ways in which the discourse of liberal agency shapes volunteers’ responses to guests who expect such answers. Using Mahmood’s (2005) critique of the dominance of liberal discourse, this research shows volunteers’ awareness of this powerful discourse when discussing women’s choice and empowerment. Volunteers demonstrate invested agency by going along with the “script” of the Centre, rather than attempting to convey different aspects of the lived experience of Emirati culture. However, they also demonstrate invested agency through the varied acceptable deviations from that “script” to exhibit Emirati culture as at times superior to Western culture.

Chapter Seven further explores the language of postfeminism in relation to Emirati women’s invested agency. Through the lens of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2000) conceptualisation of individualisation, I investigate the discourse of “choice” in relation to expressing national identity and wearing the abaya and sheyla. National dress is one site where the binaries of modern / traditional and agency / oppression are shown to be entangled and constituted by each other. It is the site of modern / traditional because it is “traditional” dress, and yet to wear it as a young Emirati woman, in its variety of styles, can also signal individualisation
Introduction

and modernity. Female participants “choose” to wear this dress to show that they are not oppressed by their culture. However, the nature of this “choice” is interrogated through a postfeminist critique to show that such choices are not clearly autonomous, but based upon the specific discourses Emirati women’s subjectivities are constituted within.

Chapter Eight explores Emirati artists’ investment within Emirati nationalist art projects designated to demonstrate the country’s “modern-ness” and cultural tradition. Participants’ creative expressions speak to, create and at times move beyond the aims of nationalist projects. Along with Moore’s (2011b) findings, evidence from these artists’ work and interviews shows that their visual art should not necessarily be considered as a hybrid of modern / traditional, old / new, local / global, or East / West. Instead, these artists show that their inspirations and their works have implications beyond these conceptual binaries. This chapter argues that the theory of invested agency can be applied to describe and explain the works and responses of artist participants, who are in many ways stifled by government censorship, but do not conceive of their creative possibilities in this way.

The Conclusion chapter describes this study’s contribution to the field of poststructural feminism, gender and nation studies, and area studies within the Arabian Gulf region.
Chapter One

Framing the UAE: Context and Cultural Change

This statue (Image 1), “Together,” created by Syrian artist Lutfi Romheim, was unveiled in 2011. It stands on Emaar Boulevard in downtown Dubai, overlooking the Burj Khalifa, icon of Dubai and the tallest building in the world. Created in the modernist style, the faceless man and woman stand 4.25 meters high. The female figure is all black, made from Swedish granite, and the male figure is all white, made from Italian marble. These colours evoke the Emirati national dress, where an Emirati woman typically wears a black abaya and sheyla, and an Emirati man typically wears a white kandoura and headdress. The statue was created to celebrate Arab dignity and individuality, and to exhibit downtown Dubai’s appeal as a cultural and artistic hub. It is indeed a popular statue where tourists often stop to take pictures. “Together” portrays progress, showcasing a “traditional” male–female couple in national dress emerging into the modern world, blending their traditions with the modernised Dubai surrounding them. The statue is a fitting image to begin this thesis, as the sculpture combines the themes of gender, nation, culture, and representation, which are vital to the following research.

As this thesis is set within Dubai, UAE, it is imperative to describe the unique historical and contemporary context of this country and its most famous city. This chapter will provide current popular and academic understandings of Dubai, as well as historical information about the formation of the United Arab Emirates into one country in 1971. This background explains the unique relationship between citizen and nation, and the contemporary fixation on demonstrating “Emirati identity” among participants. Thus, this background information lays the groundwork for understanding the context of this study’s research participants and the relevance of my discursive analysis. This chapter will consider how the UAE, and Dubai in particular, is viewed in popular international media as either a city that is successfully modern following the Western example, or as a poor imitation of Western modernity. This
chapter will then explain the key elements of the UAE’s history and unification into one country. I will then argue for the significance of this study in light of other relevant theses and books focused within the UAE.

**Constructing the Other: Dubai context and criticism**

Approximately 5,000 Emiratis gathered at Zayed Sports City in Abu Dhabi to celebrate the 40th anniversary of their country’s union. The all-day event featured an elaborate performance illustrating the rapid development of the United Arab Emirates. This performance was televised and aired the following day. To triumphant instrumentals, dancers tell the story of the ‘old days’ in the UAE: fishermen on dhow boats next to colourful fish on roller skates, farmers tending to date palms, men performing their traditional tribal dance in the desert next to women in bright jalabiyas (long, patterned dresses) swirling their long hair in wide circles. Loud applause erupts as a video clip of Sheikh Zayed, the founding father of the UAE and first president, appears on a large screen. More applause breaks out with the depiction of erupting oil wells during the late 1960s, sparks blazing out of their tops. Huge UAE flags are pulled onto the stage as the famous picture of the seven founding sheikhs appears on the screen to signal the UAE’s unification in 1971. More dancers depict builders constructing towers, followed by a giant mosaic of the flags of nearly one hundred countries. Smiling white children appear on screen, holding UAE flags, while a line of locals and non-locals hold hands below the screen, swaying to music: “You stand hand in hand, you made in peace and harmony. Looking for a brighter day, creating dreams for all the world to see.” Then a smiling Emirati boy appears on screen, signalling the end of the nation’s narrative *(UAE National Day celebration performance video).*
It is the official story of the UAE: cheerful, triumphant, welcoming, peaceful and optimistic about a bright future for Emiratis. The narrative inevitably leaves out any allusion to exploitation of foreign workers, the loss of local Emirati culture, the poor effects of the global financial crisis, the ‘growing pains’ of developing so rapidly, or any of the criticisms levelled at the UAE, the city of Dubai in particular, within the media. The performance portrays happy locals during the time before oil, living simply and working day to day, and happy locals in the present, living harmoniously with the overwhelming expatriate population. The performance shows that local Emiratis are pleased with and proud of the changes to their country, feel a part of its progress, hold onto their traditions and heritage while adapting to modern life. The performance is necessarily a lively encapsulation of all that is positive and worthy of celebration on the 40th UAE National Day. Along with “Together,” the statue pictured earlier, this performance highlights many of the themes of this thesis: modernity and tradition, constructing national identity, and the effects of cultural change. However, the performance significantly excludes changing gender roles and relations as part of the UAE’s modernisation story, and this is a key aspect of cultural change within the country, and the main focus of this dissertation.

I watched this National Day performance on television the day after National Day, after experiencing a rather different celebration on the Corniche in Abu Dhabi the night before. The car parade on the Corniche Road featured creatively decorated cars with the UAE colours of black, white red and green, along with portraits of the UAE’s leaders, the late Sheikh Zayed, the current president Sheikh Khalifa, his brother Sheikh Mohammed al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, and the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed Al Maktoum. Young Emirati men sprayed string foam from aerosol cans at the mainly South Asian labourers and Filipina domestic workers walking along the Corniche. Food stalls
punctuated the strip, while blasting musical entertainment played on a stage next to the beach. The scene became increasingly mobbed with foreign labourers and domestic workers. The Zayed Sports City celebration and the Corniche celebration were very different, the official and the unofficial, and illustrate an interesting picture of the UAE, both its intentional narrative and the alternatives it has also produced and unintentionally created. These narratives are in part derived from and serve as a response to international media interpretations of Dubai’s rise to modernisation. The varied media portrayals I describe below are inevitably reflected through the lens of Orientalist legacy, a concept that will be described further in the following chapter.

**Media representations**

It is important to understand the ways Dubai is framed and criticised by Western media in its attempts to be a “modern,” “global” city in the Middle East, in order to gain a broader awareness of how young Emiratis feel that they are viewed by outsiders. Dubai is a city warranting media attention because it has become known as a luxury resort, shopping and party destination. The city has built such iconic buildings and tourist attractions as the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world, the Burj Dubai, the tallest hotel in the world (and shaped like a sailboat), the famous Palm Islands, the ski slope in the Mall of the Emirates, along with scores of luxury, brand-name shopping venues, top restaurants and other potentially upcoming attractions, such as Dubai Land, a mega theme park. Dubai’s attempts to prove its “modern-ness” and global reach have met various reactions, all related to the Orientalist gaze of the West’s superiority over the East.

There are several media-constructed and academic versions of Dubai’s place in the world, which portray Dubai in contradictory, critical and judgmental ways. Journalist and political
commentator Thomas Friedman contends that Dubai’s rapid development from a small community of traders and merchants surrounding the Dubai Creek up until the 1970s to a multicultural business centre by the 2000s is “where we should want the Arab world to go” (Friedman 2006). Here, “we” refers to America, and the “West” generally. He states that the Middle East is a “civilization that is still highly tribalised and is struggling with modernity,” and that Dubai, the “Arab Singapore,” “is about nurturing Arab dignity through success not suicide” (Friedman 2006). His Orientalist view on the region is apparent here, as well as Dubai’s distinct difference from other countries in the Middle East. Since Dubai is not, in his view, struggling with modernity, but fully embracing it by building itself on capitalist success, rather than resisting development and encouraging “suicide” bombers. With its large shopping malls, financial centres and skyscrapers, the city has been called a model for the Middle East by commentators like Friedman. In this view, as Kanna (2007) points out, Dubai’s development is framed as “Westernization,” while the rest of the Arab world is cast as unruly teenagers who refuse to follow the rules (Kanna 2007).

However, Mike Davis (2006), American Marxist, urban theorist and historian, proposes that the city is not a model of modern success, but a grotesque example of hyper-capitalism and its detrimental effects. He sees Dubai as a science fiction dystopia, “an emerging dreamworld of conspicuous consumption” (Davis 2006: 49) full of “apocalyptic luxuries” (Davis 2006 55). It is a place of black markets, money laundering, arms deals and terrorist financing, an underworld of illegitimate trade and criminal activity underneath the veneer of shopping malls and glossy towers. As Davis (2006) puts it: “Dubai’s burgeoning black economy is an insurance policy against the car bombers and airplane hijackers” (62). His well-known article “Fear and Money in Dubai” focuses on labour exploitation and the UAE government’s
attempts to prevent protests from the South Asian majority population. Here, modernity has
gone too far, and is out of proportion with the expectations of the West.

A nearly opposite view, taken by literary author and non-fiction writer George Saunders
(2005), is that Dubai is a place of multicultural enlightenment, “quite possibly the safest great
city in the world” (2). Saunders’ view looks at the entanglements of modernity and tradition
within Dubai to provide an atypically personal account, showing another way the city can be
framed. While acknowledging that Dubai is “capitalism on steroids,” Saunders’ first person
essay portrays a more complicated view of Dubai and the small but important interactions
between the built environment and people of different races and classes, which in essence
affirm his sense of humankind’s goodness. He recognises the injustices surrounding him, but
still concludes that the city is not a malevolent place. He writes:

In Dubai, the leaders have plowed the profits back into the national dream of
the new Dubai—reliant not on oil revenue … but on global tourism. Whatever
complaints you hear about the Emirati ruling class … they seem to be
universally respected, even loved, because, unlike the Saudi rulers, they are
perceived to put the interests of the people first. (4)

In his reflective account, Saunders portrayed Dubai not as a model or a dystopian disaster,
but a “real” place, not very different from the “West.” These very different conceptions of
Dubai’s meaning to the rest of the world show the various intersections of globalisation,
modernity, tradition and Orientalist thinking. Yet, despite these differences, the majority of
these authors assume that it is the West’s duty to judge how well Dubai is “measuring up” to
Western standards.
Another conception of Dubai posits that the UAE, and the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Oman more generally, are uniquely divested of history and heritage. Springborg (2008) states that the common belief about Gulf countries is that they have modernised too fast, leaving behind traditional culture without creating any new modern culture either. Thus, as Springborg (2008) describes, a city like Dubai can be ceaselessly recreated since it is perceived as having no true history or founding struggle, only oil wealth and Western influence, manufacturing heritage and simply trying to please the West. Yet, the opposite view typically holds as well, since Gulf countries have also been figured as excessively tied to their cultural and religious traditions (Springborg 2008). As these countries modernise from desert dwellers and farmers into wealthy global players, Springborg (2008) reveals that they are also at times called “tribes with flags”—members of new nation states that are still “tribal” and “backward” at their core. Dubai is therefore typically seen as too modern or too traditional, based upon Orientalist and colonial legacies, and in these views the city “can’t win” in asserting either its modernity or its tradition to global audiences.

The Orientalist legacy can also be shown in popular media coverage of Dubai’s modernisation. The city has been framed by Western media outlets as a wild and improbable success or as a “boom town” about to bust (Audi & Slackman 2008; Bernstein 2008; Verma 2009; Worth 2009). Alternatively, Dubai is praised for its meritocracy, multiculturalism and capitalist success (Audi & Slackman 2008; Bernstein 2008; Fattah 2005; Maier 2005; Travel Trade Gazette 2000). However, just as often, the city is exposed for its labour exploitation, massive consumerism, corruption, and human rights abuses (Barrett 2009, 2010; Norton 2007; Shadid 2006; Verma 2009; Worth 2009). These varying portrayals show Dubai is both
praised for its likeness to Western ideals of success through financial reward and development, and criticised for the arguable effects of the city’s massive rise in capitalist gains.

Some of Dubai’s critics have been vindicated through the 2008 global financial crisis and its effects on Dubai—many of the city’s future projects have been cancelled or put on hold. Expatriate professionals were said to have fled the country to avoid debt and layoffs, leaving hundreds of cars at Dubai Airport with keys in ignitions and apology letters with maxed out credit cards in the glove boxes (Lewis, P 2009). The fantasy aspect of the city—with its iconic buildings, displays of wealth and wild ambition—seems to have diminished. However, there is another way to perceive the effects of the global financial crisis upon Dubai, which nearly all of my interview participants and expatriate acquaintances expressed. Residents feel that the city is calmer now, easier to manage and less stressful. I was told that those expatriates who have stayed are the ones who care about the city and country, and this has created greater possibility for community building and local and nonlocal communication. This condition is rarely portrayed in the Western media.

Western news outlets contend over the representation of Dubai and the UAE, but the UAE itself is involved in its own representation, responding to these characterisations and Orientalist legacy. Since this thesis explores how the UAE speaks back to these representations both outside and within the country, it is important to understand the historical elements that help frame the UAE’s modernisation and strategies for self-representation.
Modernising the UAE

From the late 1960s onward, the seven separate sheikhdoms along the Arabian Gulf coast have transformed from reed huts, date farms and nomadic desert subsistence to a united country abounding with super-highways, skyscrapers and seven-star hotels. The UAE’s rise to modernity has been the most recent, rapid and profound of any country in the contemporary world (Hamzawy 2008). The story of UAE modernisation typically begins in 1966, when Zayed al Nahyan of the ruling clan of the Bani Yas tribe became the leader of Abu Dhabi, the capital emirate of the UAE today (Davidson 2009). Abu Dhabi is the wealthiest emirate; it holds the greatest land mass and political power, since the ruler of Abu Dhabi is automatically the president of the country. Sheikh Zayed, the first president of the UAE, is seen as an inimitable leader revered throughout the UAE as a unifying force among the sheikhdoms and a benevolent benefactor to all Emiratis (Davidson 2009).

The late ruler was born in 1918, when Abu Dhabi was a small fishing village ruled by tribal sheikhs and strict codes of honour. In 1966, when Zayed took over as leader of Abu Dhabi, he quickly began developing a modern city, creating a huge budget for sewage, harbours, hospitals, roads, bridges, housing, education, airports and agriculture (Al-Fahim 1995; Davidson 2009). An influx of foreign consultants and workers flooded the city, and suddenly Abu Dhabi desperately needed to provide housing, restaurants and services. By 1967, Abu Dhabi had turned into a massive construction zone, progressing two hundred years in one giant leap (Al-Fahim 1995; Taryam 1987). The local people were engrossed in “catching up” to modern progress. The rate of growth, level of construction and fields of knowledge that needed to be acquired to achieve this feat has little comparison in the contemporary world.
Dubai faced slightly different circumstances throughout its modernisation process. In the late nineteenth century, businessmen and traders living on the Persian coast of Iran moved to Dubai to avoid the Persian government’s customs tax. The ruler during this time, Sheikh Maktoum bin Hasher of the Al Bu Falasah tribe, craftily lured these tradesmen to Dubai by establishing tax-free trade (Ali 2010; Krane 2009b). Persians established shops along tax-free Dubai Creek, and soon more ships stopped in Dubai to unload their goods. Along with fishing and pearl diving, trade ran efficiently along the Creek, and Arabs, Persians, Pakistanis and Indians not only bought and sold, but settled into lives (Davidson 2008a). Known as a trade and gold smuggling centre, Dubai’s circumstances at this time produced a number of wealthy local families and foreign residents (Ali 2010). Through its positioning along the Creek, the city had always been the more tolerant, cosmopolitan and trade-friendly emirate compared to Abu Dhabi. When Abu Dhabi got on the fast track to modernisation starting in 1966, the emirate was already well behind Dubai (Ali 2010; Krane 2009b).

Yet Dubai too had significant “catching up” to do in its leader’s eyes when comparing the city to the rest of the world. Starting in the late 1950s, ruler Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum developed ambitious plans to develop the city and boost its economy (Ali 2010; Krane 2009). He improved the Creek to allow for greater volume of cargo to pass through, and opened an international airport. This was followed by the constructions of two more trading ports, one of which is currently the largest deepwater port in the world (Ali 2010; Davidson 2005). Much like Abu Dhabi, in order to complete these projects, a massive amount of foreign workers were brought in, thus initiating the creation of what is currently thought of as a city of transients (Ali 2010; Krane 2009), with nearly ninety per cent of the population comprising expatriate workers (Rosenberg 2011). Like Abu Dhabi, Dubai progressed at an extremely rapid and arguably hubristic rate, creating a massive scheme to
attain wealth without the aid of oil—their supply was never as large as Abu Dhabi’s—and strategising to turn Dubai into a tourist destination of shopping festivals, Western-style nightlife and Arabian-fantasy-meets-modern-architectural-wonders (Ali 2010; Davidson 2005; Elsheshtawy 2010, 2011). As these emirates developed through oil wealth capital throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a growing need to protect residents and create a nation out of the separate emirates and tribes.

**Nationhood**

By 1968, Sheikh Zayed felt acute pressure to unite the Gulf States when the British announced their withdrawal of troops from the region after nearly 180 years of protecting the Gulf coast (Al Fahim 1995). With the British gone, the separate Gulf States would be vulnerable to attacks from Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran; unification was the only way of protection. Yet the rulers of the individual sheikhdoms, who were the chiefs of separate, often feuding tribes, had been concerned about retaining power and autonomy within a federation (Heard-Bey 1982). It took three years of negotiating, with the Gulf states of Bahrain and Qatar bowing out and forming their own independent states, before the seven emirates emerged as a collective unit, forming the United Arab Emirates. Sheikh Zayed was elected president and Sheikh Rashid of Dubai was voted Vice President by the Supreme Council of Sheikhs (Heard-Bey 1982; Peck 1986; Zahlan 1978).

The unification of the seven separate sheikhdoms into the United Arab Emirates created a rare situation for its rise as a modern nation. The rulers realised that instilling allegiance to a president and government would be a difficult process. The separate tribes, often at odds with each other over boundary disputes, had little familiarity with ministries or departments of government, and felt more comfortable with justice disseminating from one’s tribe (Al Fahim
1995). Sheikh Zayed and other Emiratis approached the new citizens to convince them to trust in their new system of government and create a sense of national pride. A year later, on December 2, 1971, the seven rulers paraded down the streets of Abu Dhabi alongside the country’s new military and young men from all the emirates. The new citizens waved the UAE flag while planes flew overhead, celebrating the first National Day (Heard-Bey 1982; Khalifa 1979).

Bringing together the separate tribes and sheikhdoms into one country for the main purposes of alliance and protection from others in the region created a distinct and self-constructed form of nationhood. The rulers had to formulate ways for citizens to develop allegiance to the nation, rather than only their tribe, and construct a national history that all local citizens could share in and be proud of in order to become “Emiratis,” rather than members of their separate sheikhdoms. I will explore this constructed identity, and the ways Emirati women play a pivotal and symbolic role in this formulation, in the following chapter. In terms of Emirati citizenship today, it is extremely difficult to become an Emirati citizen without being born into an Emirati family or marrying an Emirati. The non-Emirati residents who have lived and worked and even been born in the UAE have no path to citizenship. Therefore, when I discuss local Emiratis, I am referring to the UAE’s only group of citizens, since no one else can have access to the UAE passport, and the economic and political privileges of being a UAE citizen.

Another significant feature of the UAE is the fact that its monarchy has provided the country with stability and peace amid Arab neighbours troubled by conflict, oppositions and mass protests (Hamzawy 2008). This tranquillity could be due to the high standard of living (per capita income is markedly higher than other Arab nations), familiar tribal-patriarchal
structure and the benevolence of the UAE ruling families (Springborg 2008). The UAE and most of the Arabian Gulf region did not have the colonial relationships to Europe many other Arab nations have had, such as Egypt, Morocco, Syria and Lebanon have had. Therefore, the UAE’s history lacks much of this bitter legacy. Another reason for its stability is arguably Emiratis’ relative lack of religious sectarianism. Considering the historical and recent battles of Sunni and Shia Muslim sects around the world, most significantly in the ongoing protests in neighbouring Bahrain, which began in 2011 as part of the Arab Uprisings, the eighty per cent Sunni majority of Emirati nationals can be another factor in its lack of civil unrest. As journalist Ourorssoff (2010) notes, the UAE has become “a kind of Switzerland of the Middle East, a haven of calm and prosperity surrounded by big, aggressive neighbours, Iran and Iraq to the north and Saudi Arabia to the west.” This “haven of calm” has even lasted throughout the 2011 Arab Uprisings, even as neighbouring Gulf countries Bahrain, Oman and Yemen protested against their governments. Participants of this study were quick to tell me that such protests would never happen in the UAE, since they were grateful citizens who love their rulers. One female participant told me that she sympathised with Egypt during their uprisings and created a piece of art about the unification of the UAE as a positive counterpart to the revolutions happening in the Arab world.

Economically, the UAE, along with the other Arab Gulf countries, is classified as a rentier-state (Krause 2009). Rentier-states depend upon the nation’s exportable resources, such as oil, and receive much of their GDP from exporting natural resources to other countries (Krause 2009). Citizens of rentier-states often receive support such as free or reduced priced housing, electricity and water. This support then produces a “rentier-society” where citizens depend upon this support, do not necessarily work or need to work, and do not participate in politics for fear of losing this support (Krause 2009). This is another reason why the UAE is
relatively calm when compared to other Middle Eastern countries.

There are no political parties in the UAE, and this is ostensibly due to a preference for tribal associations and direct meetings with rulers, yet a growing number of Emirati intellectuals are making more statements calling for government reform. The government has established an advisory legislative body of forty members with very little power called the Federal National Council (FNC). Starting in late 2006, half of its members have been elected and the other half has been appointed by the rulers of each emirate. The government handpicked voters and those eligible to run for election. Their selection criteria have not been made public. The number of voters has increased in this most recent second election from 6,000 in 2006 to 129,000 in 2011 (Habboush 2011). Of the 469 candidates in 2011, 85 were women. One woman was elected and six were appointed (Salama & Al Jandaly 2011). The media coverage surrounding Emirati women running for election and “women’s issues” was important and often commented upon as a sign of the nation’s progress within the local media.

The rationale behind this half voting, half appointed system is that Emiratis are ill prepared for democracy given their religious and conservative natures that are averse to “conflict-inducing affairs” like full elections and meaningful parliamentary bodies (Hamzawy 2008: 165). It is also assumed that voters will simply vote for someone they know, rather than decide based upon important issues. When I asked participants about the 2011 election, they mostly said that the FNC was not an important body since it only had the power to “advise” the government, and those running only wanted the prestige and status that goes along with being an FNC member. Participants said they were satisfied with the government and the FNC was not needed. Therefore, participants did not appear to be conflict-averse in regards
to political elections, but instead either felt the FNC should be disbanded, or desired the election to be more meaningful.

Yet, unrest stemming from the UAE’s 2011 FNC elections, as well as the Arab Uprisings, hit the UAE when five activists for political reform were arrested for insulting the ruling family, threatening national security and undermining public order. The prosecution argued that these activists were attempting to incite a revolution similar to that of Egypt, in spite of the UAE rulers’ generosity towards citizens. Those who were arrested are among 160 who signed and submitted a petition described as a “gentle plea” (Sussman 2011) for political reform, chiefly voting rights for all Emiratis in its FNC elections. The activists were released in a National Day pardon by President Khalifa (Dajani 2011). This case does show the potential for agitation and greater political participation among citizens, and the lengths the government will go to contain such possibilities. Yet, all of the respondents I spoke with stated that they did not face censorship from the government, and had no reason to critique their government. They felt that issues were better dealt with privately through the majilis, or local councils. With such access, a participant told me that he would rather not make a film about a certain problem and cause disturbance. This is not to say that I interviewed a representative sample of Emiratis on their political views, however, and I will discuss the participant criteria in the next chapter. I only wish to express here that while the potential for political resistance and its containment exists, participants of this study did not express this resistance to me. However, I acknowledged that if participants did hold resentment toward the government, they may be cautious to share those feelings with me.

Another significant feature of current life in the UAE is that Western businesses, tourists and expatriate workers have been invited to participate in the economy of the UAE, and are
continually wooed to Dubai by the government through tax-free salaries, luxury beach resorts and large number of bars and clubs. Nowhere else in the world is there such a high proportion of expatriate, non-permanent residents (Ali 2010). The conservative lifestyles of many Emiratis can be viewed as clashing with Western liberal ways present in the city. These unique circumstances and contradictions highlight the specific pressures Emiratis (and Emirati women especially) must negotiate as they engage with Western forms of modernity. More than anywhere else in the modern world, Dubai forms a transitional and transnational social space, and this dissertation explores what that means for Emirati identity, particularly in light of the ways the government’s public relations branch attempts to “market” Emirati national identity with its specific use of women in this campaign.

Having provided contemporary and historical background information relevant to this research, it is necessary to turn to other pertinent research set in the UAE in order to demonstrate the uniqueness of my research and approach.

**Research focused on the UAE**

There have been several dissertation projects and a smaller number of scholarly books regarding the experiences of Emirati women. These scholarly sources that relate to this thesis have investigated Emirati women’s level of political and civil society participation (Al Mansoor 2002; Al-Oraimi 2004; Krause 2008), Emirati women’s education and employment (Gallant 2008), Emirati women’s dress, its social meaning and media representations (Al-Qasimi 2007, 2010) and generational change among Emirati women (Bristol-Rhys 2010).

Krause’s (2008) study focuses on the role of women in UAE civil society through
investigating women’s roles within government-run organizations, such as the UAE women’s associations in each emirate. Her work is concerned with civil society theory and the impact of the UAE’s rentier state upon civil society participation. For her research, Krause interviewed a mix of Emirati and non-Emirati women between the ages of 22 and 45 who were involved in these organisations in order to learn how they operate, and participants’ levels of participation and empowerment within these organisations. Re-envisioning civil society theory and women’s roles within it in the area of the Middle East and a rentier state economy is a useful goal. However, this thesis seeks to answer different questions about Emirati women’s expressions in relation to dominant discourses, such as the often-competing claims of nationalism and globalisation.

In her Political Science PhD thesis, Al-Oraimi (2004) found that Emirati women are precluded from political participation because of the patriarchal system, and that women only wish to become politically active through their female social groups. And Al Mansoor’s (2002) thesis takes a law perspective in order to investigate women’s rights in the UAE under Islamic, UAE and international law. Once again, these are important topics, but also leave room for this research, which examines the conceptual foundations that influence Emirati women’s subjectivities and self-representations to global audiences, who often presume that Emirati women lack rights and do not fully participate in society.

In Gallant’s (2008) study, she provides narrative accounts of five of her former students to explore the challenges that recent graduates faced in pursuing careers and satisfying domestic lives. Her work focuses on exploring her participants’ employment experiences, their sources of influence and satisfaction in their work. Using a poststructural feminist lens to analyse the ways her participants accept, disrupt and challenge cultural discourses, she found that careers
are seen as an expression of individuality and personal achievement. Gallant (2008) views this finding as a sign of increasing agency and empowerment among Emirati women. She argues that work is the place where Emirati women find personal satisfaction and a positive sense of contribution. This thesis builds upon the poststructural lens Gallant (2008) uses to consider the various discourses her participants are situated within. My research further develops some of the notions of agency and empowerment among young Emirati women drawn upon in Gallant’s study. As I will argue in Chapter Three, the triangulation of my data collection methods and my focus upon “Emirati expressions” makes this study unique as a contribution to gender and nation scholarship. I am investigating the ways young Emiratis are choosing to represent themselves to the world, and this is an innovative approach to studying the relationship between men and women and their nation.

Bristol-Rhys (2010) uses her current and former Emirati female students in her analysis of how modernisation has changed the lives of her students, their mothers and grandmothers. Bristol-Rhys’ (2010) work provides an overall “slice of life” picture of cultural change in Abu Dhabi by presenting her ethnographic findings. She found that all three groups of women are experiencing dislocation, as grandmothers and mothers deal with the loss of traditions, and the daughters grapple with the circumstances of their privileged lives, their relative isolation within public space and the competition they face to present the most appropriate and affluent image when in public. This work is important in its critical stance on the literature based on the UAE as well as the “slice of life” portrayal offered. My study builds upon Bristol-Rhys’ (2010) work, since she provides a necessarily more generalised portrayal of Emirati women and cultural change, as one of the first book length studies on the subject of Emirati women and generational cultural change.
Al-Qasimi’s (2007) dissertation in Film and Television Studies examines the category of the Muslim female subject and the veil through a postcolonial lens. My project differs because Al-Qasimi’s (2007) focuses on media representations of the female Islamic dress, and my focus is on other means of expression and representation, such as artwork and cultural events, that are created by Emiratis themselves. Her work is relevant to my project and is referenced in later chapters to delineate and support my conclusions, particularly about national dress.

While several other studies (Al Nuaimi 2001; Al Shamisi 2002; Al-Oraimi 2004; Lootah 1999; O’Neill 2011) relate to some of the concerns and questions that drive this thesis, no other work has explored Emirati women’s cultural expressions and assertions in light of the larger, gendered discourses of Orientalism, and the conceptual binaries of modern / traditional, global / local, East / West, representation / expression. This thesis reveals the ways in which Emirati women negotiate and construct their subjectivities from within these foundational discourses for a rich understanding of Emirati women’s subjectivities.

This contribution can also be considered valuable in light of the fact that the UAE turned 40 in 2011, when this study’s field research took place. At this time, a common question persisted: What does it mean to be an Emirati in today’s modernising UAE? The other studies mentioned above have not examined national identity as a primary concern of Emiratis, and yet because of the country’s modernisation and global reach, national identity has become a prominent consideration in young Emirati’s self-understanding. Young Emiratis explore and express self-definition and their national identity through various forms of art, cultural programs, national dress and responses to governmental portrayals of Emirati womanhood. Cultural expression and national identity are central concerns among young Emiratis in the globalising context of Dubai.
This chapter has provided the key contemporary and historical information needed to understand the research context of this study. In order to understand the pertinent theoretical framework for this research, the following chapter will delineate the significance of the theoretical concepts of modernity, gender and nation, and poststructural feminism as the most necessary to answer the driving questions of this study.
As this thesis is concerned with the entangled discourses of Emirati nationhood and womanhood, it is essential to unpack the following theoretical fields: conceptualisations of modernity and tradition, the relationship between gender and nation, and poststructural feminist understandings of agency. This chapter argues that these theoretical considerations are most significant and valuable to the driving research questions of this thesis.

The binary of modern and traditional is the threading concept of this thesis not only because the symbols and bifurcation of modern and traditional surround residents of the UAE, but also because the conceptualisations of what makes a place or a person “modern” or “traditional” are essential to participants’ subjectivity, creative process, understanding of their national identity, and strategies to convey Emirati culture to others. Modernity studies intersect with cultural globalisation studies, and are central to this thesis as participants are increasingly asserting, displaying and creating representations of Emirati culture for real and imagined global audiences.2 The term discourse will be unpacked in this chapter, in light of the discourse of Orientalism (Said 1978). Orientalist discourse is crucial to this thesis because participants are responding to the Orientalist legacy, where Emirati women in particular are seen as “backwards” and “oppressed.”

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2 Participants create art and speak at cultural events to “real” audiences — the expatriates and tourists of Dubai who visit art galleries and attend these events. While this real audience is relatively small, the imagined audience is often much larger, as participants are aware of the complex and often contradictory global image of Dubai and their roles as representatives of that image through their travels and presence within social media. While the “real” audience are often non-Emiratis who participants actually interact with through their art exhibitions, film screenings and cultural presentations, the “imagined” audience is often anyone in the world who has head of or is interested in Dubai and the UAE.
Chapter Two

After exploring the underlying concepts of this thesis—the mutually constitutive discourses of modern and traditional—I will delineate the link between nationalism and gender, specifically the role women play in forming a national identity in the UAE. Finally, I will discuss poststructural feminist considerations of agency. I argue that each of these theoretical concepts help frame female participants’ understanding of their positions as “modern” women who are invested in their roles as symbols of the nation.

**Intersections: Modernity and tradition**

The binaries of modern and traditional are ever-present in the UAE today, and are significant to this study as participants consider these terms while conveying and asserting aspects of Emirati culture to real and imagined global audiences. The term “modern” or “modernity” is over-determined and often contested, and has been used to refer to the state of living in the modern present, the process of industrialisation and technological development, and the period after the European Enlightenment, with its concomitant focus on rational thought, technical reason, secularism, humanism, linear progress, individual autonomy and complete break with the past (Brenner 1998; Deeb 2006; Gaonkar 2001; Hodgson 2001; Rofel 1999).

However, in theoretical terms, Moore (2011a) and Cooper (2005) critique the way in which the word “modernity” has lost its purchase, and now signifies “anything that has happened in the last five hundred years” (Cooper 2005: 127). Moore (2011a) argues that these vague, taken-for-granted and often contradictory definitions of modernity—as progress, as loss, as discovery, as breakdown of society—are as unhelpful as they are omnipresent. While I agree that the over-determined use of this concept and its varying definitions is unaccommodating, the term “modern” is ubiquitous within the UAE and the lives of participants, and therefore cannot be ignored in this study. I interrogate the use of “modern” and “modernity”
throughout this thesis in order to gain insight into how the term is being considered among
participants, and how it can be theorised to explain the cultural assertions of the young
Emirati minority culture population. In order to begin this work, below I provide a brief
sketch of modernity studies to arrive at current and more helpful understandings of the term.

Scholars who hold a Eurocentric, homogeneous view of modernity and the modernisation
processes of “developing” nations outside of Europe (such as Fukuyama 1992; Giddens
1990) have been critiqued for assuming that the modernising project of Europe would be
replicated around the world, creating standarised industrialised societies that experience
abrupt breaks with their “past” traditions and ways of life. Specifically, Giddens defines
modernity as “modes of social life or organization which emerged in Europe from about the
17th century onwards” (1990: 1). Here, modernity is defined by selected social elements of
Western Europe without consideration or acknowledgement of how other heterogeneous
forms have developed. As Connell (2007) critiques, the standard social-scientific view of
modernity regards it as a transformation within Europe, or “the West,” which created a
pattern that was then exported to the rest of the world. This explicit Eurocentrism has been
widely critiqued for its hegemonic and unproductively narrow view of historical context,
disregard of present world conditions and individuals’ autonomy and adaptability, and the
disregard for the variety of modernising projects that took place within Europe itself
(Chakrabarty 2000; Connell 2007; Dirlik 2003; Eisenstadt 1999; Fanon 1967; Nandy 1983;
Shohat & Stam 1994; Therborn 2003; Thomassen 2010).

The actual modernising developments in societies outside Europe have proven the
Eurocentric assumptions about modernity wrong (Eisenstadt 1999). In fact, Eisenstadt (1999)
notes that while the Euro-American model continues to be a constant reference point,
societies outside this zone have also developed within the context of their own cultural and historical conditions. As Dirlik (2003) and Wittrock (2000) have noted, modernity has taken a variety of cultural forms within and outside of Europe. This contextualised understanding of modernity is important to my research as the UAE, Dubai in particular, is often criticised for its “imitation” of Western modernity, or because it is not “enough” like the West’s version of the modern. Yet, the city and country are modernising in their own ways, in relation to the discourses of modern and traditional that surround them. Unpacking these understandings of modern and traditional is essential to understanding the everyday concerns of Emirati participants who are involved in conveying cultural meaning to outsiders.

Chakrabarty (2000) emphasises the damaging Eurocentric belief that all civilisations were headed for the same destination, but some would inevitably arrive before others. He stresses that those deemed by Europe as “less modern,” “needed a period of preparation and waiting before they could be recognized as full participants in political modernity” (2000: 9). As has been shown, the Western media has been sceptical of Dubai’s rapid financial success and modernising projects. Journalists have been quick to point out the city’s flaws and anticipate its demise, since there was relatively no “waiting period” for its development or modernisation. In contrast, Dirlik (2003) notes that modernity is not a separate thing unto itself that must be achieved. It is a relationship between people and their nation, between the local and global, and between nations. Involvement in these relationships is the ultimate marker of modernity. Dubai and the UAE are part of these relationships to the modern, with a variety of consequences for young Emirati subjectivity, as will be described throughout this thesis.
Rofel (1999) and others (Brenner 1998; Deeb 2006; Ghannam 2003; Hodgson 2001) have pointed out that the process of modernisation is neither purely localised nor universal. Instead, the two interact in distinct and complex ways to create varied sites of modernity where people adapt, negotiate and creatively engage with both global processes such as capitalism and industrialisation, and more local influences, such as religious practices, community engagements and historical circumstances. As these scholars point out, it is vital to consider the interaction between macro and micro effects on modernising nations as well as the ways in which people actively make themselves modern. Similarly, Berman (1982) argues that individuals are the subjects as well as the objects of modernity, holding the power to change its processes as much as its processes are changing them. I agree with the above-mentioned scholars who argue that individuals are in a mutually implicating relationship with the processes of modernisation and globalisation. This understanding aligns with my observations while living in the UAE, and spurred my research into the relationship between gender and nation, the ways global processes shape national identity, and how Emirati culture is being represented by young Emiratis.

*Cultural globalisation*

This link between local and universal in modernity studies relates to the relationship to global and local in globalisation studies. When discussing globalisation, Tomlinson advises that one “must engage with the discourse of modernity” (1999: 31). This is because the historical context of globalisation is embedded within the institutions of modernity, and modernity causes the multifaceted networks of globalisation to occur (Tomlinson 1999). Appadurai (1996) also looks at the link between modernity and globalisation through his concept of disjunctive flows of people, capital, technology, images and ideologies. This idea highlights the various streams through which cultural materials cross boundaries at the swift pace of
modernity. Global flows thus generate a variety of modernities throughout the world (Appadurai 1996). Similar to Rofel’s (1999) argument above, the local and the global interact to create different versions of modernity. This thesis will not engage with the debate over whether modernity gave rise to globalisation or vice versa, but instead engages with their connections and mutual entanglements.

The literature of cultural globalisation is significant to this study as Dubai’s place as a “global” city has exacerbated the concerns over nationhood and national identity. Globalisation has become a buzzword when speaking about the city, and participants are acutely aware of performing their cultural and gendered identities to global audiences. While globalisation is generally associated with the open flow of commodities, people and knowledge (Marcuse & Kempen 2000), critics of globalisation and the effects of global processes often connect the phenomenon to domination and inequality, a threat to local culture, resulting in a loss of identity, tradition and sense of place (Davids & van Driel 2005). With a significant range of cultural influences and actors in the cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Emiratis are bombarded by a large number of cultural flows. Thus, this thesis aligns with Hopper (2007), who argues that globalisation and culture are not discrete, but inseparable, shaping and constituting each other.

Globalisation is a profound and unprecedented shift in our world central to reshaping modern societies; it is made of up flows of information, technology, capital, culture and people, which interact in particular and conditional ways (Castells 1996; Giddens 1990). These flows have no single destination, as in a world culture of Westernised society, but instead include processes that are uneven, complex, negotiated and resisted (Giddens 1990; Hay & Marsh 2000; Held 1999). I also recognise that while the term has been accused of including so much
but providing little understanding of current human circumstance, it does signal the pervasive belief that the world has become a collective social space (Beck 2000; Featherstone 1995; Held 1999; Robertson 1992; Urry 2003). This is because globalisation has resulted in the intensification of interconnectedness, unbounded by the local, national or regional, so that decisions in one region can come to have significance for those in another part of the globe (Giddens 2000; Held 1999).

Globalisation’s effect upon culture has been most recently evidenced by the intensification of numerous forms of global interrelations, through the Internet, worldwide television and radio, and mobile phones, so that cultures and cultural forms now have global range (Hopper 2007). Cultural practices have been said to “lie at the heart of globalisation” (Tomlinson 1999: 1). Culture itself is a “sphere of existence” where individuals generate meaning of their lives (Inda & Rosaldo 2001). In this way, culture is persistently changing, “informed by numerous internal pressures and influences, ensuring that [cultures] are neither static nor stable, and are shaped by external forces” (Hopper 2007: 40). Cultural globalisation has a particular effect upon nations and national culture, as cultural globalisation is transforming the ways “national cultures are produced and reproduced” (Held 1999: 328). In addition, patterns of hierarchies and global stratification have shifted under globalisation, whereby some societies become more entangled in the global order and others are disregarded (Held 1999). As Smith (1997) notes, these hierarchies have modified but not eliminated the power of the nation state, which can no longer shut itself off from the world. These understandings of the relationship between globalisation and cultural change relate to this study, as my research questions explore the ways Emirati culture is asserted and expressed by young Emiratis as they hold global audiences in mind, rather than only citizens of the UAE.
Chapter Two

Cultural globalisation is experienced in concrete rather than abstract ways, and the participants of this study demonstrate this through their responses to Emirati women’s representations by the UAE government, their approach to volunteering at the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding, their artistic productions, and their “choice” to wear or not wear the national dress. Global processes are concrete because globalisation is not a one way, top down process, but a local – global dialectic (Giddens 1990). Robertson supports this view, stating that globalisation revolves around the local, so that each interpenetrates and constitutes the other, where the “universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism” occur (Robertson 1992: 102). Globalisation takes away the security of the local and provides us with experiences in global terms (Tomlinson 1999), where the local and global interact. As modernity studies also show, the local and the global must be considered as interconnected, rather than separate, “as part of embedded, situated and particular contextualized practices and social realities” (Davids & van Driel 2009: 911).

For a more specific example, Masquelier (2009) has found through her study of Muslim women in Niger that the increasing flow of foreign commodities and media only intensifies local fixity and reaffirms borders. People use global capital to “reassert local values and reinscribe cultural identities” (Masquelier 2009: 178). Thus, she writes, “global consumption and local transformation are two sides of the same coin” and can be used to understand “the creative strategies through which Muslim women customise imported goods to redefine themselves in resolutely local terms” (2009:178). These effects of globalisation can also be seen within Dubai, where various world influences from the US, Japan, Korea, India, Europe and elsewhere inform young Emiratis’ lifestyles and identities, which also reminds us that aspects of modernity and globalisation do not solely come from the West. Instead of losing local traditions in light of modernising change, tradition is instead transformed and...
reimagined in light of other global styles and influences, which in turn have also been reformed within the context of Emirati tradition.

As a country that has risen to modernity so rapidly, the UAE has deliberately attempted to show its “modern-ness” to the Western world — as well as its global reach — alongside its distinct local culture. This blending has not been a simple task, particularly since it has involved Emirati women as symbols of modernity and tradition, which I will discuss further in Chapters Four and Five. These unique circumstances create specific pressures on Emiratis, particularly Emirati women, to engage with modernity and its frequently considered opposite, tradition.

**Tradition**

“Modern” is widely viewed as the binary opposite of “tradition,” which is often assumed to describe aspects of the past that have been “overcome.” The modern is seen as superior to antiquity and “the past” or pre-modern, which has been characterised as superstitious, ignorant, backward and religious (Gaonkar 2001). Thus, cultural and religious “tradition,” and those described as “traditional,” are assumed to be in opposition to features of modernity. Huntington’s (1996) “clash of civilizations” theory recognises this belief. His theory proposes that people’s religious and cultural identities would become a major source of conflict and division in the post-Cold War era. More specifically, “tradition” in the post 9/11 world is typically equated with patriarchal oppression and religious fundamentalism (Eisenstein 2010). Yet this division does not account for the myriad and nuanced ways tradition or modernity is experienced throughout the world.
Since the term tradition is employed in a variety of ways throughout the literature, it will be explored and understood from several perspectives. First, tradition is understood in its opposition to modernity, as a way to organise society in a unified fashion, where “the past is honoured and symbols are valued because they contain and perpetuate the experience of generations” (Giddens 1990: 37). Thus, it is a way to handle time and space, infusing social activities with the continuity of the past, present and future (Giddens 1990). In contrast, societies considered to be modern have experienced rapid change and are reflexive about those changes, considering new information and creating practices in light of new knowledge (Giddens 1990). Similarly, Laclau (1990) writes about the feeling of dislocation within modern societies, where there is no longer one unified centre or principle, but instead a fragmented multiplicity of power centres, as well as various social divisions and oppositions that create different identities for individuals. These two ways of considering time and space — as continuous and unified or fragmented and constantly changing — are at work in Dubai and highlighted by my participants’ responses, as they expressed longing for continuity as well as pride in the rapidity of change.

Secondly, I explore the term tradition through the ways my participants use the various contexts of the word and its evocations within Dubai. For respondents, tradition is often connected to elements of their personal or ancestral past, practices from their childhood or learned from grandparents, such as sleeping under wind towers at night to receive a cool breeze. In the larger context of Dubai tourism, “tradition” refers to a broader scope of representations about Emirati past and pre-oil days.

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3 Wind towers, also called wind catchers, are architectural features that sit on top of buildings to help create natural cool air ventilation. The design comes from Persia, and can be found throughout the Middle East, especially in the Gulf States. Dubai in particular has adopted this architectural feature as part of its “heritage.”
Chapter Two

Tradition is finally conceived of in a third way, as religious tradition. For this aspect of tradition, Asad’s concept of “discursive tradition” (1986: 14) is most helpful. He states that the founding texts of the Quran and Hadiths (the recorded words and deeds of the Prophet) form the discursive tradition, which seeks to “instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice, that precisely because it is established, has a history” (Asad 1986: 14). In this view tradition is not a set of unchanging practices or barriers to modernity, but instructions for how a practice is justified, and why it should be preserved, altered or rejected. Thus, as Masquelier sees it, this concept of discursive tradition enables us to “consider what Islam might mean to ordinary Muslims, regardless of their degree of literacy and education and their religious ideologies” (2009: 9). Traditions are and will continue to be reformulated, and the practices they authorise “acquire significance insofar as they are thought to be historical, established, and authentic” (Masquelier 2009: 9). Tradition in this view is malleable. It is and can be reformulated, engaging with the past to speak to the issues of the present, quite a modern activity in itself. Asad (1986) writes that past traditions are not rejected to invent new ones, as Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) figured, but reinterpreted based on the historically evolving discourses of the founding texts of Islam. This understanding of tradition allows this study to recognise differences in the way tradition is described and thought about, rather than stating what is historically accurate or false.

Scholars have posited various views on the role of tradition within developing countries. Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) have argued that modernity destroyed tradition. Similarly, anthropological accounts have shown that some groups, such as those within the town of Marakwet, Kenya (Moore 2011b), have willingly rejected tradition in pursuit of the “modern.” In such cases, tradition is commonly thought of as inhibiting one from taking part in the larger world, and is conceived of as negative, cutting one off from globalised society.
In turn, modern is conceived of as positive, connecting a person to all aspects of the world outside one’s immediate surroundings (Moore 2011b). In a postmodern sensibility, tradition can also be understood as having elements of “good” and “bad,” and therefore some traditions can be kept and carried forward into modern society, others can be left behind, and still others can be “updated” and even “recycled,” blended with the modern to create something new (Moore 2011b). Yet there are also more wholly positive ways that tradition is considered, especially within nation building efforts. Latour (1993) points out that it is no longer the case that the “moderns” always win against the “ancients.” Furthermore, Mitchell (2002) argues that a country must prove that it has an ancient and worthy past before it is considered as legitimate in the modern world. Thus, the over-determined points of reference for tradition, particularly in the context of the UAE, has allowed the term to become a multiple and abstract reference point that is often spoken about but has little concrete or unified understanding. When an Emirati speaks of his or her “traditions,” it could refer to very different things all at once.

The concepts of “modern,” “traditional,” and “globalisation” affect men and women differently, as women are called upon to be the markers of modernity and the preservers of tradition, as well as the victims and barometers of globalisation’s progress in non-Western nations.
Chapter Two

Gendered modernities and traditions

My research is primarily concerned with gender as it is affected by and influences conditions of modernity, tradition and globalisation, as gender roles and representations are key sites of contestation within these binaries and concepts. Hodgson (2001) acknowledges that men and women experience modernity in profoundly different ways. She calls for analysis of modernity’s important effect on gender and stresses that modernity itself is gendered. She sees modernity as championing typically “masculine” traits such as order, reason and individualism, while “feminine” traits such as emotion, communal bonds and “tradition” are devalued (Hodgson 2001). Therefore, modernity affects not just men and women, but the idea of gender itself, by shifting “the cultural, social, political and economic relations of power between men and women” (Hodgson 2001: 9). Emirati women are called upon by the UAE government and society to embody the country’s modernity and tradition, while Emirati men are not addressed in this way. Therefore, this distinction of gendered modernity is vital to this study.

These deep effects of gender are important to uncover. Joseph and Slyomovics (2000) note that those in subordinate positions have become feminised within the framework of modernity, thus gendering views on class and citizenship. Rofel stresses the importance of gender when analysing responses to and enactments of modernity, noting that gender is central to the way modernity is imagined and “operates at the heart of modernity’s power” (1999: 19). Bullock (2007) echoes this idea, by reminding us that modernity has instilled dichotomies that oppress women, such as male / female, reason / nature, and superior / inferior. Clearly, gender has come to symbolise various opposing aspects of modernity, and
this thesis examines the ways this has affected Emirati women in the context of the UAE’s modernisation and nationalism strategies.

In Jamal’s (2009) study in Pakistan with the Muslim women of the Jamaat-e-Islami group, she found that her participants emphasised their “modern” lifestyles located within examples of their education and participation in public life, but also highlighted that their idea of a modern self was very different from women in the West. Above all, Jamal found that her participants called for an “Islamic re-reading of the modern” rather than “a modernist re-reading of Islam” (2009: 22). Jamal calls for scholars to understand that Muslim women can at times refuse, restore and redress the modern. The ways Emirati women respond to the discourse of modernity is a driving question of this thesis, as I sought to learn the ways female participants might at times attempt to reject and rebuild the modern.

Within globalisation studies, several feminist scholars have noted that gender causes and affects global flows, and is not just something that should be “added” to an analysis (Desai, M 2007; Doumato & Posusney 2003; Ferguson, Mironesco & Merry 2008; Freeman, C 2001). Davids and van Driel (2009) critique the prevalent idea within globalisation and gender studies that globalisation is “bad for women.” This type of analysis takes the view that women are victims who are positioned as outside of globalisation instead of carriers of it, and expects women to resist the forces of globalisation. In line with Davids and van Driel (2009), this thesis calls for moving beyond the victim / heroine binary in order to analyse contextual negotiations with global processes. As Marx cogently proposes, women can “do more in and to globalisation than serve as a barometer of progress” (2006: 23). Emirati women currently serve as this barometer of progress for the UAE, but are not victims or resistant to this circumstance. These beliefs about globalisation’s effect upon women are part of the larger
legacy of Orientalism, where non-Western societies are seen as “Other,” inferior, backward, immune to progress, and those “Other” women are viewed as oppressed and in need of rescue. This depiction by Western, colonising nations allows those nations to present themselves as superior, and the nations being colonised as in need of “civilising.” This Orientalist legacy began in the 19th century and persists today through the power of discourse, which will be described below.

**Discourse and Orientalism**

Since my research questions relate to the impact and response to competing discourses, such as Orientalism and the official discourse about Emirati women that the UAE government participates in, discourse is an important term to unpack. While the term discourse is used in many disciplines where its meaning is often assumed and unstated, this thesis takes discourse to mean: “groupings of utterances or sentences” that are used within and determined by a social context, “and which contribute to the way that social context continues to exist” (Mills 1997: 11). In other words, discourse is not a loose gathering of statements, but constitutes, speaks to, reproduces and even shifts our understanding of our social context (Foucault 1979). Indeed, discourses are “forms of ‘knowledge’ – powerful sets of assumptions, expectations, explanations — governing mainstream social and cultural practices. They are systematic ways of making sense of the world by determining power relations within all texts, including spoken interactions” (Baxter 2003: 46).

Within poststructural theory, discourse is the only way to “apprehend reality” and in this way we “categorise and interpret experience and events according to the structures available to us and, in the process of interpretation, we lend these structures a solidity and a normality which it is often difficult to think outside of” (Mills 1997: 54). Thus, discourses often work to make
the thing that is expressed appear natural and self-evident, and yet these ideas have all been put forth through discourse, through language, rather than any natural, proven fact. For example, the discourse of femininity provides a sense of what is acceptable behaviour for a woman, and what is not. Yet, since these discourses can be reproduced or transformed, the discourse of femininity as meek, compliant and “naturally” caregiving can and has changed to accept a wider variety of ways to perform femininity. This reveals that discourse is always constructed, and never true or real. Instead of seeking the “true” discourse, I am concerned with how a subjectivity becomes produced by “the dominant discourse, which is supported by institutional funding,” and other discourses are “treated with suspicion,” “housed both metaphorically and literally at the margins of society” (Mills 1997: 19).

Some discourses become more powerful and dominant than others through the way power is disseminated within social relations, producing acceptable ways of acting as well as constraining behaviours (Mills 1997). Often institutions play an important role in expanding, upholding and disseminating discourse. Foucault (1979) sought to chart the development of discourses to show that even though they appear inevitable and natural, they have and can change, originating at certain moments in history. Fairclough (1992) identifies the main insights from Foucault’s work on discourse as understanding that discourse constitutes all social life, and that discourses are produced and constructed based on their relations with other discourses. Fairclough (1992) also notes how power is used in producing discourse and that social change occurs through discursive practices. In Chapter Three I will further discuss discourse, its origins in poststructuralism, and my discourse analysis methods. In this section, I wish to explain the power of the discourse of Orientalism in the lives of Emirati citizens, specifically the participants of this study.
Said (1978) uses European literary texts, travel writing, academic work and art from the 19th century to show the ways in which the discourse of that time portrayed the “Orient” as a monolithic category, creating the Orient as “a repository of Western knowledge, rather than a society and culture functioning on its own terms” (Mills 1997: 107). In his later works (1993, 1997), Said looked at the role of media in shaping Orientalist views about the Middle East. Through these works, Said showed that the region was thought of only in relation to and its difference from the West, producing those living in the Middle East as Other. Over time, the power of this discourse grew, as more discourses validated this view of the Orient, until the idea of the Middle East as inferior to the West became naturalised. This discourse is the reason why many Western people hold pre-conceived notions about the Middle East, often without ever having been there.

In *Orientalism*, Said (1978) demonstrates that Western societies essentialised the Middle Eastern region as inert, undeveloped and monolithic. He uses the term Orientalism to describe the framework through which Western people began to understand Middle Eastern people as different and threatening. Western countries purported to construct “objective” knowledge about Middle Eastern countries during colonialism, and this knowledge served as a powerful ideological means to justify the colonising and imperial projects of Europe (Said 1978). Through looking at the Middle East as uncivilised and unchanging, the West constructs its ideal other, seeing itself as rational and superior (Said 1978). The UAE government and citizens continue to experience the effects of Orientalism, and attempt to overcome its ideological power through their own strategic representations and discourses.

Hall points out that the West wishes to view “other” societies as “‘closed’ places — ethnically pure, culturally traditional, undisturbed until yesterday by the ruptures of
modernity” (1992: 305), and that this is a fantasy. These fantasies of “pure” natives and “untouched” lands play themselves out in Western media representations of Dubai, which, as noted in the previous chapter, express surprise at the city’s sophistication while criticising its less than perfect attempts to imitate the West. From the point of view of the Middle East, Elsheshtawy (2004) states that the common narrative of the Middle Eastern city is one of loss, as the Islamic Golden Age has been diminished through colonisation and Arab cities have been ransacked, their resources exploited. This narrative states that the “East” is thus perpetually underdeveloped and disconnected from the rest of the world, unable to achieve the developments of the West, such as democracy (Elsheshtawy 2004). Therefore, Dubai’s wealth, development and financial growth have come as a surprise to many who expect the Arab world to continually fail. Critics predict the city’s downfall and point out its flaws while supporters focus on its uniqueness within the Arab world.

In response to this Orientalist legacy, the UAE government puts forth a series of statements about young Emirati women’s “empowerment” to show that these women are not “oppressed,” and that Arabs are not opposed to women’s education and employment. Therefore, the discourse that the government participates in legitimates the Orientalist discourse while also opposing and attempting to change it. As Mills (1997) notes, discourses are not fixed, but are often in constant conflict with other discourses. Therefore, discourses can change, and are in dialectical relationships with each other. That relationship is fluid, changing and dynamic (Baxter 2003).
Chapter Two

**Orientalism and women**

Kahf (1999) has traced the history of European literature in order to show how Orientalism was constructed from medieval times. Gender was a primary aspect of the Middle East’s representation. Muslim women shifted from powerful actors who converted to Christianity and pursued Christian men in medieval portrayals, to two-dimensional characterisations in the 17th century, where Muslim women were depicted as either libidinous whores or submissive nonentities. By the 18th and 19th centuries, this submissive quality dominated, as more and more depictions of harem slaves in need of saving by European men arose (Kahf 1999). Ahmed (1992, 2011) has pointed out the long and varied history of Muslim women’s dress and its Orientalist perception from the West. This Western perception typically assumes that Muslim women are forced to wear the veil and if they had a choice they would not wear it. Ahmed’s work (1992, 2011) also focuses on Muslim men’s shifting reactions to Western notions of female Muslim dress, which has ranged from encouraging and demanding that women take off the veil, to forcing women to wear it as a symbol of ideological opposition to the West. Yeğenoğlu’s work has also concentrated on the veil and the Western gaze, observing that Western desire is “frustrated with the invisibility and inaccessibility of this mysterious, fantasmatic figure, disappointed with the veiled figure’s refusal to be gazed at” (2003: 542). This refusal and frustration of Western desire continues to play itself out, most currently in the European headscarf debates, as well as within female participants’ explanations to tourists and expatriates justifying why they wear the abaya and sheyla.

As Mernissi (1975) points out, however, while the West sees female sexuality as passive, Muslim society sees it as active and often dangerous. Mernissi (1975) has found that seclusion and veiling can be seen as a source of pride and prestige for some Muslim women.
Therefore, while European society often saw Muslim women as passive, Muslim society itself at times saw the veil and the harem as a means to control dangerous sexuality rather than entrap meek women (Mernissi 2003), thus revealing one aspect of the misrecognition of Muslim society by the West.

More generally, with the popularity of Western feminism, the belief that Third World women are “oppressed” arose through an Orientalist understanding of women as subjugated outside the West. Ho (2010) refers to “Orientalist feminism” as a discursive strategy that constructs “a binary opposition between a civilized West and an uncivilized East” (433), and denies Muslim women their agency. Further, Ho (2010) sees Orientalist feminism as fuelling the idea that Muslim women are passive victims, and that women are silenced by Islamic culture. Western women believe that they have nothing in common with “oppressed” Muslim women in the Middle East, and therefore, in contrast, Western women feel that feminism is no longer relevant in the Western world (Ho 2010).

Similarly, Bulbeck (1998) notes that the Western concept of the opposition between self and community bears itself out in Orientalist thinking. In this way, white Western women are seen as unique individuals with personalities and rights, whereas Third World women are seen as tied to their communities through their roles and responsibilities, and generally lacking individual agency (Mohanty 1991). Such perceptions continue through Western media, particularly focusing on Middle Eastern women who are pictured as either passive and victimised, or liberated through wearing Western dress or involvement in capitalist economic activities (Navarro 2010). Equality and freedom are understood in this context through a Western lens, and this thesis examines participants’ reactions to these Western perceptions of freedom and equality. There is a strong awareness of this external, Orientalised, gendered
gaze among the participants of this study, and this research explores various responses to this
gaze. A key component of the Orientalist legacy is based on the relationship between gender
and nationalism.

**Gender and nationalism**

This section is central to my thesis as the connection between gender and nationalism
underpins this investigation of Emirati female participants’ reactions to their roles as national
symbols. While the term nationalism has been used in several different ways by scholars, for
the purposes of this thesis I am concerned with the nation as an ideological and social
movement which imposes opportunities and burdens upon its citizens, particularly women
(Smith 1995). It is also important to recognise that the nation is one of the most prominent
that nations must also articulate their roots by linking to the past in the form of myths and
cultural memories in order to persuade their members of their vital belonging. As “imagined
communities” (Anderson 1983) the idea of the nation has thus come to be seen as both
modern and innovative as well as “natural” and inevitable. This relationship between modern
and traditional is linked to women’s roles, status and representations within the nation state.

Recent work on nationalism has shown the ways in which gender and nation have been
constructed by each other and should be thought of as relational identities (Bracewell 2000;
Mayer 2000). Women’s new roles as educated women allowed into the public sphere are
viewed as part of the changes in accordance with modern life. In contrast, however, women’s
relationship to their nation is also viewed as the biological and “natural” destiny of women as
mothers and daughters in need of protection. As Sinha (2004) notes, while it was once
assumed that men and women experienced modern nationalism in the same ways, scholarship
now recognises that the discourses of gender and of the nation have jointly influenced and shaped one another. This is the case within the UAE, where “Women” have been given their own chapter in the UAE Yearbook 2010 (uaeinteract.com), and “Men” have received no equivalent chapter, as will be described further in Chapter Four of this thesis.

Many scholars have noted the various and contradictory roles women around the globe are asked to fulfil and symbolise within the modern nation state (Al Dhaheri 2009; Baron 2005; Blom 1995, 2000; Bulbeck 1998; Esposito 1998; Gocek 2002; Kaler 2006; Kandiyoti 2000; Marecek 2000; McClintock 1993, 1995; Moghadam 2003; Ray 2000; Sinha 2006; Timmerman 2000; Yuval-Davis 1997). These roles have been delineated by Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989:7), and they include procreators, reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic and national groups, transmitters of a nation’s culture, signifiers of ethnic and national groups, and participants in national, economic, political and military struggles. Yuval-Davis has also stressed women’s multifaceted positioning as “embodiments of the collective” and “cultural reproducers” within modernist and even anti-modernist nationalist struggles (1997: 23). Thus Yuval-Davis (1997: 23) notes that women serve as “symbolic border guards” for their nations; their function is to continually demonstrate, define and represent a nation’s culture so that it will not be lost, taken away or subsumed by another. McClintock (1993), points out that women are often constructed as emblems of the nation, but are not supplied with any direct connection to the nation’s decision making. Thus, as Yuval-Davis has argued, women bear the “burden of representation” for their nation (1997: 45). As shown above, women’s treatment is often seen as a barometer for the nation’s progress, and within the nation itself women’s behaviours are seen as symbols of the nation’s negotiation of modernity and tradition.
Chatterjee (1990) and other scholars have noted that indigenous cultures have employed women as “emancipated” and/or the bearers of “tradition” in reaction to colonialism in order to define cultural change as well as demonstrate a move toward or away from Western modernisation (Bulbeck 1998; Esposito 1998; Joseph & Slyomovics 2000; Kandiyoti 1991a; Majaj, Sunderman & Saliba 2002). As Sinha (2006) has put it, as signifiers of the nation, women were not only viewed as “traditional.” They were also viewed as “the ‘modern-yet-modest’ woman who both symbolized the nation and negotiated its tension between tradition and modernity” (329). These concerns are furthered, then, when Muslim women are represented in nationalist projects of representation. As Masquelier points out in her study on Muslim women in Niger, “women are made to embody all that has gone wrong with development and modernity” (2009: xvii). How women embody or are seen to embody the modern nation is an important question in this thesis.

Hegemonic masculinity is fundamental to defining and validating the nation and public sphere, and yet that definition is always created in relation to the role of women (Bracewell 2000). This primary form of masculinity and its relationship to nation building has treated men and masculinity “as stable, undifferentiated categories” (Bracewell 2000: 566). This is simply not the case, as all men do not benefit equally from the nation’s construction or policies, and all nations do not use gender and male privilege in the same ways (Bracewell 2000; Sinha 2006). Within the UAE, it is important to note that Emirati men face a myriad of challenges under the conditions of their modernising country, yet their perceived stability and immutability often renders those challenges invisible. These issues can be seen in representations of Emirati women in the local media. Attention is paid to demonstrating women’s prominent roles, but the silence around men’s changing roles also reveals that men
are viewed as able to enter the modern world without any great sense of change, compromise or loss, which is certainly not the case.

There is strong encouragement from the government to marry other Emiratis and reproduce as the UAE government’s Marriage Fund provides Emiratis with large funds to wed each other (Fattah 2006a). The government has held mass weddings for arranged marriages in the northern Emirates (Fattah 2006a). This situation links to gender and nation scholarship, which has pointed out the ways in which the heterosexual family is constructed as the ideal, with marriage as the only suitable relationship (Sinha 2004). Yet a large number of Emirati men choose to marry foreign wives since they often have the opportunity to meet a potential foreign wife while studying abroad (an Emirati man is much more likely to study abroad than an Emirati woman is). Some Emirati men also feel that marrying an Emirati woman would be too expensive, given the typical required costs of an Emirati wedding and the expected gifts for an Emirati bride (Bristol-Rhys 2010). In that case, it is much less expensive to marry a foreign woman and seen as a preferable option among some men for that reason. This is one consideration that involves the reproduction of the nation and national women’s role as the biological and cultural reproducers of the UAE. This occurrence — the attraction of foreign wives — is considered a major social problem within the UAE, which the government attempts to rectify through programs like the Marriage Fund.

Sinha (2006) believes that gender and nation scholarship should focus on historical, contextualised analysis in order to reveal the ways differences are informed and produced by the nation. My approach follows Sinha’s recommendation in order to contibute to gender and nation scholarship. Because of the UAE’s unique rise to nationhood and modernisation, I will argue in the next section that this research is an important contribution to gender and nation
scholarship. This work fills a gap in the literature through focusing upon young Emirati women’s expressions in relation to various representations and discourses about themselves.

**Gender and nation studies**

There have been many recent ethnographic studies focused on Muslim women’s experiences with modernity and globalisation in Egypt (Abu-Lughod 1999; Mahmood 2005), Morocco (Mernissi 1988; Sadiqi 2003), Lebanon (Deeb 2006), Jordan (Droeber 2005), Turkey (Göle 1996), Pakistan (Jamal 2009), Malaysia (Frisk 2004; Stivens 1996), Indonesia (Brenner 1998; O’Shaughnessy 2009), Nigeria (Alidou 2005), and Niger (Masquelier 2009), among others. Yet there is a dearth of ethnographic research on the experiences of women in the Arabian Gulf. The work of the abovementioned scholars has been ground-breaking in voicing the perspectives and attitudes of Muslim women and the ways they have rejected, adapted, negotiated and experienced aspects of modernity. However, these studies do not speak for the majority of women in the Arabian Gulf, who are undergoing regionally specific concerns and shifts based on their countries’ unique histories and distinct approaches to modernisation. As several scholars have noted, there is no singular Islamic or Middle Eastern culture, but rather an intersection of histories, contacts with the West, and attitudes toward the role of Islam in daily life (Kandiyoti 1991b; Moghadam 2003).

A distinct point of difference between the studies cited above and this thesis is that nearly all of those studies concern women’s religiosity and the enactment of piety. In the UAE, religion is emphasised as a private matter, and women are not involved in large-scale movements of religious education, Islamic revivalism or civil society organisations with Islam at their core, as is the case with many of the research studies mentioned above (Abu-Lughod 1999; Alidou 2005; Deeb 2006; Frisk 2004; Jamal 2009; Mahmood 2005; Masquelier 2009). Previous
studies have shown that women are marked as more religious than others by a distinctly different style of dress and set of behaviours, and often face denigration by society for their lack of “modernity” (Deeb 2006; Jamal 2009; Mahmood 2005). However, within the UAE, religious identity gradations are much less significant than in the studies cited above. There have also been a large number of studies on Muslim women in Europe (Amir-Moazami, Jacobsen & Maleiha 2011; Bracke 2008; Fadil 2011; Fernando 2010; Jouili, J 2011; Scott 2007), which in many ways more closely align with the circumstance of Emirati women in the UAE. In many situations, Emirati women are more concerned with explaining and expressing aspects of their religious belief and cultural practices to non-Muslim expatriates, tourists and the imagined global community, than distinguishing themselves among other Muslim women within their country. The context and approach of my study remains unique among other works concentrated on Muslim women and modernity, as participants are engaged with expressing modern and traditional identities strategically to actual and potential global audiences. In order to understand participants’ concerns in expressing modern and traditional identities, it is crucial to unpack the theoretical concept of identity as applied in this research.

**Theories of identity**

It is important to delineate my approach to identity because Emirati or national identity is a key phrase for participants, most especially in the lead-up to the UAE’s 40th National Day in 2011. Answering the question “what is Emirati identity?” was the topic du jour among participants as well as in local media. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the concept “identity” is needed to provide context for this study. My analysis will follow current understandings of identity (Elliot & du Gay 2008; Hall 1996) as non-essentialist and fluid, but at the same time strategic and positional. In terms of cultural identity, key scholars in this
field (such as du Gay & Elliot 2008; Hall 1996) argue against the idea that a shared history and ancestry necessitates a unified sense of cultural belonging and national identity. Instead, identity is fragmented and multiple, across different “intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (Hall 1996: 4). Hall also calls for researchers to focus not on where we came from or who we are but “what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves” (1996: 4). I argue that identity is multifaceted, depending on a number of allegiances and perceptions, as well as strategic in speaking back to certain discourses.

In relation to identity, the broader concept of subjectivity needs to be applied, which explains the unconscious, illogical and emotional aspects of identity (Weedon 2004). Subjectivity consists of our “conscious and unconscious sense of self, emotion and desires” (Weedon 2004: 18). Poststructural theory shows that subjectivity is based upon different discourses shaped by power relations. Thus subjectivities are socially constructed, even as they are often experienced and performed as self-evident and even innate (Butler 1990). As subjects, individuals take up the identities offered as citizens of a nation (Emirati), or members of a religion (Islam) or gender. Yet, Harvey (2000) points out the difficulty in securing one’s identity in a shifting world, as identity is often connected to place. Therefore, connections to one’s sense of place and cultural tradition are no longer simple identifications to make. One learns about identity through what one is not (i.e., I am a woman and not a man; I am an Emirati and not a foreigner). Others’ non-recognition and non-identification of this identity result in “an abject state of non-subjectivity and lack of agency” (Weedon 2004: 3). Many participants feel misrecognised by tourists and foreign expatriates within the UAE, leaving their sense of identity and their control of meaning fragmented. This thesis explores Emirati women’s subjectivity formation through discourses shaped by power relations, and
investigates the ways this formation is challenged by the increasing complications involved in identifying one’s sense of place, culture and tradition.

It is also important to note that identity is constructed through difference — through relation with the Other, what it is not, what it lacks (Butler 1993; Derrida 1981; Hall 1992; Laclau 1990). Aligned with identity as differentiation, Laclau argues that identity production is an act of power, because an identity can only affirm itself by “repressing that which threatens it” (Laclau 1990: 33). This relational differentiation applies to my thesis as my research questions involve this exchange between Emiratis and “Others”: Other nationalities, Other Arabs, and even Other Emiratis.

Finally, a significant part of identity theory that relates to this thesis is that identity is closely linked to and constituted within representation (Hall 1996). Thus, a subject must go through a process of articulating their identification with their identity-as-representation. In this way, identities are not just one-sided constructions where one is compelled into a particular identity and the subject accepts this as such. Instead, identity is formed through a more complicated negotiation with the identity one has been summoned into and the ways in which this is and can be represented. For example, young Emiratis are called upon to create nationalist art projects in the mediums of visual art, photography, creative writing and design. These expressions highlight their articulations of identity in negotiation with the identity they have been summoned into. They express their personal feelings, as well as how they are “supposed” to feel about their nation and life as a young Emirati. Hall (1996) calls for social scientists to look at how people fashion, stylise, produce and “perform” their identity positions, and why they never do so completely, for once and all time. Within these representations and subjects’ identifications within it, certain markers of identity come to the
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forefront, such as race, culture, gender, sexuality, religion, generation and ethnicity. For this thesis I concentrate on the major identity markers of “Emirati” and “woman,” as these are the most significant aspects of identity that drive my research questions.

**Emirati identity**

At the most obvious level, Emiratis are concerned about becoming an “extinct” population, since there are close to one million Emiratis in the UAE (around 948,000) and the expatriate population is at 7.3 million (Salama, V 2011). Therefore, an important component of identity I wish to focus on, “Emirati,” is a rich and contested aspect of identity to explore. As noted by Hall (1992), national identity is not something one is born with as an inherited trait but is instead constituted through a system of cultural representations. This is formed through participating in “the idea of the nation as represented in its national culture” (1992: 292). These representations are contested and discussed by my participants, as they create a variety of art and other expressions to represent their sense of “Emirati-ness.”

Hall (1992) writes that national culture is a discourse, a way to produce meaning which citizens can identify with. Stories, memories and images connect the present to the past so that individuals can take part in the “imagined community” of the nation (Anderson 1983). These memories and stories represent the shared experiences of the nation, connecting its citizens to a larger purpose. National identity is also represented strategically in several other ways: as timeless and eternal, as given to an individual at birth and remaining unchanged throughout history, and as “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). National identity is defined as “a set of practices, … of a ritual or symbolic nature which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviours by repetition which automatically implies continuity with a suitable historical past” (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983: 1). These
representations of national identity are explored in this thesis through participants’ creative expressions in light of competing discourses, and through their national dress, a potent and contested symbol of national identity that purports to connect Emiratis to their past.

Modern societies and the rise of globalisation have created a new relationship between people and time and space, and this changes one’s relationship to national culture and identity, and how this is represented. While some theorists might believe that globalisation will eliminate cultural ties in favour of cultural pluralism, fragmentation and “shared identities” across the world, it is also evident that national identification has remained strong. This research explores the ways participants express their relationship to national identity and women’s role as national symbols, and this investigation is most effectively produced and conveyed through the lens of poststructural feminism.

**Poststructural agency**

Feminist poststructural theory explores women’s experiences as subjects and the ways these experiences have been shaped through discourse and power relations. Feminist poststructuralism views identities as constantly performed in relation to cultural norms. Yet individuals are “multiply positioned in terms of their agency to adapt to, negotiate or resist dominant subject positions, or, alternatively, take up subject positions within a resistant discourse” (Baxter 2003: 30). Feminist poststructural theory seeks to identify the varieties of subjectivities open to women. Baxter writes about the importance of feminist poststructural theory:

> For individual women, it can offer an explanation of where our experiences have come from, why these are often contradictory and inconsistent, and why
and how these can be changed. In other words, the social and historical constitution of the subject is not a limit on women’s agency but a precondition for understanding the possibilities for action and change. (2003: 31)

Feminist poststructuralism is not interested in unearthing structural gender inequalities, but rather the multiple positions that can be both powerful and powerless across a range of conflicting discourses. It is important to identify this range of competing discourses and discover the ways these discourses construct an individual’s experiences and understandings of power relations (Baxter 2003).

Theories of agency are the important work of poststructural theorists (Gannon & Davies 2007). Agency is an important component of my thesis since Emirati women are spoken about as being “empowered” in government documents, and yet are often popularly characterised, along with Muslim women generally, as lacking in agency. Therefore, agency is a significant feature in constructions of Emirati womanhood. Mahmood (2005) argues that a liberal framework of agency — where agency is seen as possessing freedom from constraint by one’s culture, religion or tradition — is an unproductive approach to conceive of the ways individuals act upon the world. Instead, through her ethnographic study of a women’s mosque movement in Cairo, Mahmood (2005) advocates for a more complicated view of what it means to be an agent in this world, particularly a female agent. Agency could in fact be connected with limiting or restricting oneself in the name of one’s religion or culture. This limitation does not mean that an individual is constrained or lacks agency, but that researchers must open their view of what agency means.
Poststructural conceptualisations of agency move beyond the binary of unrestrained choice / structural determination (Hughes 2002). There is neither no choice involved in shaping our subjectivities, nor only choice. Instead, poststructuralist positions show us that we have not all been inscribed with a uniform sense of gendered subjectivities, but recognises our differences, our multiple positions, and our ability to resist certain discourse positions (Hughes 2002). Thus, poststructural conceptions of agency are “perceived to be the simultaneous act of free will and submitting to the regulatory order” (Hughes 2002: 101). This simultaneity of subjects’ perceived free will in relation to discourse is central to this thesis.

Because the UAE is a majority expatriate population, Emirati women in particular are often asked to explain and provide reasons for cultural practices, especially national dress, to translate cultural mores into terms Western cultures will presumably understand. This context is not present in other studies, such as Masquelier’s (2009) study among Muslim women in Niger, since the UAE is unique in its rapid modernisation and multicultural population. The women in Masquelier’s (2009) study are not often asked, “Why do you wear that?” as many young Emirati women are, and therefore do not need to present individualised answers, rationalisations and choices, nor defend their culture to others. The need to explain one’s cultural practices to a generally liberal-minded audience leads to providing individualised answers in the language of individualised choice, empowerment and freedom. Therefore, theories of poststructural agency will be unpacked in the following chapters to explain female participants’ “invested agency” within the discourses surrounding them as well as their negotiated satisfaction with those discourses.
Chapter Two

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the ways in which the theoretical conceptualisations of modernity studies, cultural globalisation and Orientalism intersect to explain how certain, often disparaging, discourses about Dubai and the UAE have been created. The theoretical conceptions of modernity and tradition are important because these concepts surround UAE residents daily, since “modern” time is conceived of as the time after oil discovery in the 1960s, and the time of “tradition” is considered as having occurred before oil discovery, the blanket time of the “past.” These terms are used in various discourses about the Gulf region and the UAE, as these countries and citizens consider what it means to be “modern” and live in a “modern” country while preserving “traditions.” Even as the UAE attempts to “prove” its modern-ness, the country is also criticised for this attempt because of the discourse of Orientalism. Orientalism has been shown as the key discourse that the UAE government and participants are responding to, and drives my research questions related to the strategies young Emiratis use to explain, defend and assert their minority culture.

The intersection of gender and nation is also an essential concept of this thesis as it frames the way Emirati women are positioned as symbols of the nation and used in strategic ways, and aids in explaining Emirati women’s reaction to this placement. This work adds to the burgeoning field of gender and nation scholarship as no one has looked at the relationship between Emirati women and their nation before, particularly by investigating female participants’ expressions in relation to their positioning by the nation and other competing discourses. A review of related literature revealed the space for this research.
My discussion of the conceptualisation of identity has illuminated the important question of national identity within the minority local population of the UAE, as identity provides the site where participants make the nationalist discourse their own. Emirati women play a prominent role within this shifting definition of Emirati national identity. I argued that the identity markers of “Emirati” and “woman” are prominent given the representations of women and Islam historically and in recent times. Thus I aim to investigate the ways in which Emirati womanhood is represented through discourse and how Emirati women are representing themselves as a minority population within their country.

The literature on feminist poststructural theory laid the groundwork for crucial understandings of agency through a feminist lens. Since my research questions involve Emirati women’s negotiations with their positioning as national symbols, and bridges between the modern and the traditional, it is vital to consider how those negotiations, assertions and expressions are conceptualised within theories of agency.

These theoretical considerations have been shown to be the most valuable to seek answers to my research questions. This chapter has also established the gap in the literature related to my research topic. In the next chapter I outline the innovations in research methods that this study demanded.
Chapter Three

In the Field: Research Process and Methods

This thesis is constructed from empirical research data collected in 2011 during a four and a half month field research period based in Dubai. The theoretical and methodological orientation of this thesis is a poststructuralist feminist approach. Several concurrent, interpretive, qualitative methods were utilised: semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, participant observation, and discourse analysis. I chose these methods because I sought to understand the complex ways participants experience and create cultural and gendered representations. These methods inform and enrich each other. Discourse analysis provided an understanding of representations of national identity and Emirati womanhood, and participant observation allowed for deep consideration of Emirati self-representation in relation to the discourses analysed. Interviews, the primary method of data gathering, provided the means by which to reflect upon and analyse participants’ responses to and expressions from within the surrounding dominant discourses. Such relationships could not easily be considered through other paradigms, such as quantitative means of data collection.

No other study has investigated artistic or cultural expressions in relation to dominant discourses within the UAE before. For the context of this research, I define “expression” as the desire to and process of creating cultural products that are themselves embedded within various discourses. I also consider the term “expression” in the way that my research participants understand it: as an internal idea put forth into the world to “express” one’s culture and individuality. These understandings of expression were applied and considered throughout the data gathering and analysis.
I employed interviews as the central method of data gathering since this research analyses participants’ responses to various official and historically significant discourses, and how they reproduce and attempt to shift those discourses through their cultural representations and expressions. I chose to interview a specific group of young Emirati women and men who are high achieving artists, filmmakers, writers, designers and volunteers for a cultural program, and for the most part are successfully employed or pursuing higher degrees. Since, like women, art is used as a sign of “progress,” interviewing artists and viewing Emirati art was a central part of this research. The interview sample is purposefully not representative of the whole population of Emiratis, as the aims of this project necessitated interviewing young men and women who are deliberately negotiating cultural representation to a variety of audiences. Therefore, my sample size of 40 interview participants was deliberately chosen to most effectively align with and answer my research questions. The concurrent methods of participant observation and discourse analysis allowed me to achieve a fuller picture of the research questions, as well as gain convergence and reliability in research findings.

This chapter outlines the feminist perspective taken in this project, the rationale for data triangulation, the sampling procedure, reflexivity and positionality, and analysis strategies.

**Poststructuralist feminist approach**

While I have previously discussed feminist poststructuralism as the theoretical framework underpinning the content of this thesis, I will now describe the way in which my research approach — from forming research questions to gathering and analysing data — is based within poststructural feminist methodology. On a fundamental level, a feminist research approach emphasises the role of the researcher’s perspective and the different ways in which that worldview and positionality can influence, burden, and support the ways a researcher
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engages with data collection and analysis (Hesse-Biber 2007). This approach takes an engaged view from “somewhere,” rather than assuming the stance of an objective knower who believes that truth is “out there” to be discovered. Haraway’s (1988) theory of “situated knowledges” is important to my approach as it calls attention to objectivity as well as its impossibility given that all research takes place within a social context. Thus, as Haraway (1988) explains, situated knowledges are partial truths within particular contexts that are not necessarily a barrier to knowledge building. Instead, the theory of situated knowledges, “can offer each of us a unique way of seeing the world, a ‘focusing device’ … through which we may be able to catch, see, and / or understand phenomena in ways that others cannot” (Brooks & Hesse-Biber 2007: 13). A feminist approach therefore acknowledges that the situated perspectives of researchers and participants are part of knowledge building. This perspective is important to this research as the central questions of this study concern the real and imagined dialogue among audience and producer, researcher and interviewee, those from one cultural and historical background and those from another.

The feminist approach I describe and employ allows for a reconceptualisation of the concepts of Self and Other (Behar & Gordon 1995; Geller & Stockett 2006; Mascia-Lees & Black 2000; Mohanty 1991; Moore 2006). I use this perspective because of my concern, shared with other scholars, over how Emirati women, and Middle Eastern women generally, are continually viewed as “Other” and oppressed by much of the Western world (Bulbeck 1998; Bullock 2007; Ho 2007, 2010; Kahf 1999; Zine 2004). It is this false divide between West and East, “us” and “them,” freedom and oppression, empowerment and exploitation, that moved me to choose this topic and a poststructural feminist perspective. At the same time, I take my cue from a number of feminist scholars (Bulbeck 1998; Mohanty 1991; Webb 2000; Zine 2004) who have pointed out the prejudice and patronisation of imperialist Western
feminists. Such imperialist Western feminists wish to impose “sameness” on all women by assuming that all women must be measured against a liberal, secular sensibility. While women from the Middle East should not be viewed as “Other,” it should also not be assumed that all women must follow popular Western conceptions of womanhood. This feminist approach guided my continual awareness of “which women” I am involved with throughout my research, rather than taking the position that all women around the world are or should be the same (Hesse-Biber 2007).

As Mohanty (1991) notes in her influential article “Under Western Eyes,” there has been a tendency to write about non-Western women as the monolithic category of Third World Women, who are constructed as passive, ahistorical victims of sexual, economic, social and political oppression. Instead, she calls for scholars to pay attention to the specific social and historical contexts that have created varying positions for women. Mohanty (1991) warns scholars not to portray third world women as mere victims who are acted upon, but instead analyse the complexity of their resistance, challenges, contradictions and subversions at various moments. Therefore, this analysis pays attention to the social structure implicated within the varied responses to women’s changing roles and pressures as bearers of “modernity” and “tradition” within the UAE.

Mascia-Lees and Black point out that feminist approaches to writing about “Other women” can be achieved by interpreting data as depicting, “a process of interaction, rather than … descriptions of discrete and isolated entities” (2000: 100). It is also important to remember, as Moore (2006) explains, that feminist approaches and feminist anthropology contribute more than just emphasising gender and sex, but rather multiply constituted identities, embodiment and subjectivities. This is echoed by Gellner and Stockett, who state that feminist approaches
question what the categories of gender and sex mean and, “how they intersect both with one another and with other relevant categories, such as age, occupation, religion, status, and so on” (2006: 2). I utilised these ideas while seeking out, interviewing, observing and analysing my data, as my work is not only concerned with gender but its relationship to participants’ sense of identity and its symbolic meaning within the nation. Thus, I also interviewed Emirati men in my study to gain a wider perspective on cultural representations and the place of gender within them. As Lewin writes, analysis of gender is not mainly concerned with documenting the experiences of a female population, but instead “interpreting the place of gender in broader patterns of meaning, interaction, and power,” not only among participants, but researchers themselves (2006: 20).

A feminist methodology, above all, creates knowledge that is beneficial to women and other minorities (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser 2003), and that is my aim in this thesis. By taking my participants and their ideas seriously, I believe my research has benefitted them, as well as other young Emiratis who were not part of this study, since this research considers and respects the opinions of this often stereotyped minority group. Furthermore, this work can benefit those academics who wish to read an account where participants’ responses have been carefully reflected upon. In this thesis, I interrogate the discourses surrounding Arab and Emirati womanhood, and the reactions, alignments and challenges to these portrayals, as poststructuralism acknowledges that people are situated and act from within specific discourses. This research highlights the entanglements of discourses this population of women in particular face, and demonstrates the agency that is shaped from within these discourses. Thus this study points to both the potentially constraining and liberating discourses available, compelling female subjects to invest in certain subjectivities. These reflections and interrogations are beneficial in that this study shows the process through
which a presumed “oppressed” group exhibits agency from within and between the competing surrounding discourses.

**Poststructuralism**

I align my approach with a poststructuralist feminist stance, where I am not interested in “giving women the same ‘rights’ as men, but accounting for the differences amongst people in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality and creating a social structure that is congruent with such differences and the corresponding perspectives yielded” (Hesse-Biber, Leavy & Yaiser 2003: 19). My research adopts this approach as I examine the discourses and perspectives of participants in order to theorise and understand their positioning, rather than encouraging or strategising to “help” female participants acquire a liberal feminist standpoint.

For poststructuralism, language is the foundation of subjectivity, our sense of ourselves. Thus, our subjectivity is socially produced through language (Weedon 1997). Weedon (1997) states that poststructuralists understand that language always exists within historically particular discourses, where ways of understanding the world are contested and competing. Thus, language is a central site of political resistance. Poststructuralism recognises that the meaning of language is never fixed, but deferred, depending upon its context (Weedon 1997). For example, “young Emirati woman” can have many meanings, such as oppressed victim, terrorist, pious, wealthy, entrepreneur, and trendsetter, among others. These meanings are dependent upon which context the term arises within, and therefore can change and be reinterpreted. Poststructuralism also acknowledges that social institutions shape subjectivities and generate social meaning. As individuals, we can all become “agents of change,” who “may either serve hegemonic interests or challenge existing power relations” (Weedon 1997: 25).
Gannon and Davies note that discourses are multifaceted, interrelated, persistently unstable and often conflicting, as well as historically and culturally specific. They remind us that we are “always already constituted within discourses, and discourses operate on and in us simultaneously through constituting desires and modes of reasoning” (2007: 73). Since discourse, which encompasses written text as well as all mediums of communication, such as visual art, film and advertising, powerfully shapes subjectivities, we must turn to discourse to understand the experiences of research participants.

Poststructural theory and the concept of discourse have particular implications for Gender Studies since the discourses surrounding femininity and masculinity are an important way in which we understand ourselves and make meaning of our lives (Weedon 1997). There are many competing discourses that describe how to perform femininity and masculinity, which we consume and from which we construct our subjectivity. Considering these discourses and their impacts upon the participants in this study is a central element of my research. Feminist poststructuralism in particular allows researchers to investigate individual women’s experiences — how positions are chosen, justified and challenged from within limited (if any) options.

Through feminist poststructural theory, a researcher can analyse the role of power in shaping subjectivities. This power is not a dominating force upon susceptible subjects, but a web of interconnections that influences subjectivity formations (Foucault 1978). Subjectivity is not only imposed upon a gendered subject, but is also a dynamic process that can be modified and shaped (Weedon 1997). An individual can be active in their complicity or resistance to a particular discourse, but not completely sovereign. As this theory acknowledges competing
discourses, it can then explain how individuals are able to hold contradictory or inconsistent views of the self.

Yet since we are not completely sovereign in developing subjectivities, poststructural theory can also explain our limitations as subjects whose beliefs and desires are the product of the social institutions that create society (Weedon 1997). The theory also explains why we hold the belief that we possess full subjectivity to act without restraint in the world (Gannon & Davies 2007; Weedon 1997). Gannon and Davies (2007) point out that the subject “remains opaque to herself,” and it is this lack of knowing that allows us to live and be subjects (74). People are certainly aware of the discourses around them, but also often strongly believe that they act without limitation upon the world. The poststructuralist lens allows researchers to be aware of both constricting and influential discourses, and how these discourses shape people’s experiences.

Another important aspect of poststructural feminism that applies to this study is the awareness and rejection of binary categories, as they have the “capacity to limit and constrain how we think and what we imagine to be possible” (Gannon & Davies 2007: 67). Following that, poststructural feminism is also deeply sceptical of assumed truths (Gannon and Davies 2007). In this way, the theory provides the potential to problematise ingrained truths by which one might have been confined. My work does not reinscribe these ingrained truths, but instead interrogates them and Emirati participants’ reactions, acceptance and challenges to them.
Data triangulation: Interviews, participant observation and discourse analysis

My primary means of data collection was in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. As Crotty (1998) notes, it is important to describe our research methods specifically when identifying and justifying our research process. Therefore, researchers must describe their interview style, techniques employed, sampling procedure and interview settings (Crotty 1998). Researchers must also describe the kind of observation that takes place within participant observation and the degree of participation (Crotty 1998), and describe the context for texts chosen as part of discourse analysis (Jacobs 2006). Therefore, I will justify my choice of research methods and data triangulation, as well as describe how I used these methods within my field research and data analysis.

This thesis is premised on the following research questions:

- What is the relationship between gender and nation in the UAE, and how has this relationship particularly affected young Emirati women?
- How have global processes shaped the way national identity is performed, considered and represented among young Emiratis within the UAE?
- How is Emirati culture being represented by young Emiratis to real and imagined audiences, and how is gender regarded within those representations?

Because of the nature of these questions, I sought responses that were reflective, experience-based and involved lengthy descriptions and explanations. In addition, because of the nature of my research questions, I sought to speak to women about their roles and experiences within public space, and analyse representations of Emirati women in those spaces, rather than in private, domestic spaces.
over other data gathering techniques, such as quantitative surveys, for example. Quantitative methods would not have allowed for the rich description I was endeavouring to explore through my research questions. I did not intend to find out the number of women who felt as though they experienced equal or unequal treatment in Emirati society, for example, but how women and men experience issues related to gender and national identity, and the process by which they engage with the cultural messages around them. Since in-depth interviews allow researchers access to the often hidden, lived experiences and subjective understandings that a participant brings to an issue or situation (Hesse-Biber 2012), I also felt that an individual focus during one-on-one interviews would be more beneficial than other types of interviews, such as focus groups. I did not want participants’ voices to be vying for attention during a group interview, but instead wished to be able to consider personal details and thoughts, which could be best discovered during one-on-one interviews.

In addition, participant observation and discourse analysis complemented the interviews to achieve data triangulation. I used the ethnographic method of participant observation, where a researcher collects data in a naturalistic setting by observing and / or taking part in everyday activities of the people being studied (DeWalt & DeWalt 2002). I employed this method in order to gain an understanding of the “world” of Dubai in which my participants engaged everyday. As DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) note, participant observation, no matter one’s principle methodology, enhances the quality and interpretation of data collected through other methods as well. Thus, participant observation is both a data collection method and an analytical tool that stimulates researchers to formulate new research questions and hypotheses while in the field (DeWalt & DeWalt 2002). This method allowed me to be connected to wider national issues (such as the Federal National Council campaigns and elections, the 40th National Day build-up and celebration, and the controversy over the
Emirati bloggers who were jailed for inciting public unrest) as well as the daily joys and frustrations of living and interacting within a crowded, multicultural city. More specifically, my participant observation was mainly focused on artistic and cultural events. Taking part in these events allowed me greater insight into and knowledge of the Emirati “art world” and cultural programs, both of which my participants were involved in and spoke at length about, as well as to observe cultural representations first-hand. Thus, this aspect of my research methods greatly enhanced my data collection and interpretation.

Finally, I also chose to employ discourse analysis in my study in order to gain greater understanding of the discursive context of several topics pertinent to my research. Since this research is interested in gender within the context of national identity and cultural representation, such as Emirati women’s role as national symbols of modernity and tradition, it was important to analyse UAE government documents concerning women’s roles within the UAE. Furthermore, in order to gain a broader, more popular perspective, I also give examples of local newspaper articles focusing on Emirati women’s achievements, and UAE tourist literature promoting the modern and traditional roles of young Emirati women as part of the country’s appeal, to provide a wider picture of Emirati women’s representations within the UAE. This discourse analysis allowed me to situate myself within this discursive space of UAE national identity and its employment of women in this regard, thus adding to my knowledge during interviews as well as my perceptions during participant observation. As Jacobs notes (2006), discourse analysis provides opportunities to engage in an informed analysis that can help shed light on the ways in which power is exercised in society. Therefore, all three methods informed each other in an iterative, interpretive process of data triangulation.
Chapter Three

*Sampling procedures*

Throughout my field research I employed a systematic approach to selecting a pool of 40 interview participants using a purposive, snowball sampling technique. For this project’s sampling criteria, participants had to be of Emirati origin and in some way working as an artist (broadly defined as someone involved in creative expression whether as a hobby or profession), and producing public work (whether in visual art, photography, design, creative or journalistic writing, or blog writing for the Internet). I chose to focus on artists because they are the key part of the population that is considering cultural expression. Because of the context of the UAE artistic scene, Emirati artists are more than likely involved in expressing some aspect of their national identity — their “Emirati-ness” — through their artwork. In that sense, then, they are concentrating on how to assert their cultural identity. I could be relatively assured that these participants were considering the discourse of Orientalism, and attempting to speak back to Orientalist representations of “Arabness” and “Emirati-ness.”

Even though only Chapter Eight concentrates on Emirati artwork specifically, the responses of artists are central to answering my research questions about cultural expressions in relation to dominant discourses more generally.

The original selection criteria also sought participants who were fluent English speakers between the ages of 20 and 30, since this was the typical age range of Emirati artists involved in showing their work at local visual art exhibitions and film festivals, or writing / blogging online and in print. However, the artist participants exceeded these upper age limits. Throughout the interview selection process, I realised that it was not necessary to strictly adhere to this age criteria when given the opportunity to speak to an Emirati artist with diverging opinions in order to gather a variety of viewpoints. I also interviewed a sample of
ten volunteers from a cultural program, and these participants must have identified themselves as current or former volunteers for the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding. All of the volunteers were in their late teens, early and mid-twenties, except for one woman, who was in her mid-thirties.

In terms of the artist participants, artistic pursuits are highly promoted by the UAE government. There are various funds, scholarships, competitions and exhibitions for young Emiratis to take part in, which will be described further in Chapter Eight. These events and opportunities for young artists are reported on often in the local media (D'Souza 2012; Lord 2012; Ritman 2010; WAM 2010b; Yaqoob 2009). The UAE has twice taken part in the Venice Biennale, the first country in the Gulf region to be part of this event. Through its history as part of the world fair movement, the Venice Biennale showcases art through national pavilions where representative artists are chosen, and countries compete to display the best exhibitions. The UAE participated in the Venice Biennale for the first time in 2009, choosing featured female artist Lamya Gargash, who was born in 1982. In the 2011 Biennale, the UAE chose two young Emirati female artists both born in 1985 to represent the UAE, as well as one Emirati male born in 1967. I mention the artists’ years of birth here to highlight the consistency with which young Emirati women are chosen to represent their nation in this world art fair.

The UAE holds international art fairs called Art Dubai and Abu Dhabi Art each year, where galleries come to sell high-price works. Additionally, the Sharjah Biennale in neighbouring emirate Sharjah is a well-established presence in the UAE and Middle Eastern art world. The focus of these art fairs and biennales is not specifically on Emirati artists, but the idea of “high” culture as demonstrated by the presence of well-known artists and expensive artwork,
as well as gallery representation and sales, are present and influential among all artists living in the UAE. These events are part of authenticating social difference through symbolic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984), as they show UAE citizens as high-class art enthusiasts, buyers and producers, contrary to popular perspectives on life in the Arabian Gulf, as described in Chapter One.

There are several other artistic genres that are promoted within the UAE. For example, film is taken very seriously as it provides an opportunity for many countries to showcase their stories, as well as invite Hollywood and Bollywood stars to film festival premieres. In the Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF) and the Abu Dhabi Film Festival (ADFF) there are several categories for Emirati-made short films and documentaries. Once again, these filmmakers are typically young, and often involved in university study. Photography is also seen as important medium, as evidenced by the Emirati Expressions exhibit held in November 2011, at a gallery space on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi. Stephen Shore, well-known American photographer, held workshops to instruct the young Emirati photographers chosen to create works for the exhibition. The exhibition was accompanied by an audio guide, an expensive exhibition book and exhibition swag, such as postcards of the photographs, and mugs and key chains with the logo “Emirati Expressions.”

Abu Dhabi is in the midst of completing construction of Saadiyat Island, a man-made island where famous “branch” museums such as the Lourvre and Guggenheim, among other museums, are scheduled to open in 2015. The burgeoning galleries and other art fairs in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah shows that this brand of “high” culture is very much available and present throughout the UAE. Similarly, boutique fashion lines and interior design innovations from young Emirati designers that blend “modern” European styles with
“traditional” Emirati styles have also become very popular. And finally, blogs and online writing venues for Emiratis, such as Sail e-magazine (http://sailemagazine.com) run by a young Emirati woman, are also becoming more prevalent.

As a result of these burgeoning genres, young local artists have a myriad of ways to express themselves. Often, their focus is upon representing aspects of their national identity, culture and personal aesthetic values through these promoted mediums. This is not to say that every expression is motivated by cultural or national themes. However, given the minority population of Emiratis, these kinds of representations are certainly on the minds of local artists of the UAE, a country where most artistic mediums are viewed, heard or read by not just Emiratis but the multicultural residents of the UAE and beyond. Thus, Emirati artists often wish to distinguish themselves as Emirati nationals through the form and content of the artwork they produce, and receive more attention from the media and government funding for doing so. This international perspective and the willingness to communicate to and from within Emirati society ensured that artist participants would provide rich data. The context described here demonstrates that these artists were ideal interview candidates with rich information and reflections to share concerning my research questions.

In addition, interviewing artists ensured that participants and I always had something tangible to talk about and start from: their artistic work. Our interviews were often grounded within their artistic expressions, and this allowed us to move from a discussion of concrete topics to more abstract ideas about cultural representation, national identity and the effects of globalisation.
Finally, and perhaps most importantly, as a creative writer myself and a teacher of creative writing, I felt comfortable speaking within the language of artistic expression in various mediums. I also believed that artist participants would be more comfortable with me as a fellow artist and teacher than those in other professions — such as business or engineering, which are very popular within the UAE — with whom I might have trouble building a rapport, and vice versa. Because of my inherent interest in artistic mediums, my enthusiasm for their work came across, and aided in the interview process.

I saw a connection between artists and volunteers at the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding, and several times I was able to interview artists who were also cultural program volunteers. These volunteers also think through the prism of speaking to different kinds of audiences outside of fellow Emiratis. They too were involved in representing their culture to non-Emirati audiences. Thus, volunteers’ input on this kind of representation was an important complement to artistic representations, and I was able to interview ten of these volunteers.

I generally chose to speak with young people because this group is the most visible in producing a variety of artistic work at the moment and exhibiting that work through film festivals, exhibitions, art fairs and via various online platforms. I learned this by attending artist talks at Emirati art exhibitions and seeing that the Emirati artists were in their early to late twenties, and reading biographies of Emirati artists at exhibitions, which also showed their age ranges to be from early to late twenties. I am not saying that there are no Emirati artists above the age of thirty, but that those artists most often exhibiting as part of nationalist art exhibitions are in their twenties. Similarly, the cultural understanding program in Dubai
where I did part of my research is comprised of all young Emirati volunteers. I could also be assured that the young Emiratis I met with spoke fluent English, whereas for the older population this is less of a guarantee, since the older population would more likely be much more comfortable speaking their native Arabic. As fluent English speakers, I could be sure that these participants were already involved in representing their culture to the global city of Dubai, as their translation and transition from Arabic to English marks a significant shift in the Emirati way of life.

As someone who was relatively young (31) at the time of data collection, without children myself, I felt that young Emiratis and I were on a more even level to discuss what were, at times, personal issues. However, as I was typically several years older than participants, and a former lecturer at a popular university in Dubai, I was aware of the potential for a power hierarchy. I approached this by taking the participants’ work — whether it is artistic production or volunteer work — very seriously, admiring their chosen profession or endeavour and expressing my sincere curiosity in their reflections about their work. Ultimately, as Knott and Khokher argue, young people are of particular interest in regards to studies about identity, ethnicity and religion because “they are frequently aware of, even outspoken concerning, religious and ethnic norms and practices as they impinge on their lives” and are therefore well-placed to speak about their experiences and the “strategies they adopt for making sense of them in their own lives” (1993: 593).

In addition, the government tends to promote young artists, typically women, through nationalist art exhibitions, and this helped me to identify potential interview candidates. I became interested in the way the government used young Emirati female artists to promote

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5 The age range of these volunteers at the time of my research was 18-25. Of course, the number of volunteers is always shifting, but the Centre focuses upon presenting young, university-aged Emiratis as representatives of Emirati culture.
both the country’s support of the arts as well as of women, and female artists’ responses to this. One example of a nationalist exhibition featuring Emirati women artists was the abovementioned *Emirati Expressions* exhibit from October 2011 to January 2012. This exhibit featured the work of ten young Emirati photographers, eight women and two men, and showed their works on the theme of expressions of Emirati identity. In December 2011, another exhibit at the Ara Gallery titled, *40 Poems from the Desert* featured twenty young Emirati artists, nineteen women and one man, depicting artistic renderings of poems written by Sheikh Mohammed, the ruler of Dubai. Similarly, the August 2011 show at the Ara Gallery in Old Town, Dubai, titled, *UAE: A Work of Art*, showed the work of seven Emirati artists, four women and three men, chosen to create visual art related to their connection to the UAE. This connection is also evidenced by the majority representation of young Emirati women artists to the Venice Biennales in 2009 and 2011. Therefore, in the UAE there is a connection between young Emirati women and nationalist art.

During interviews, we did not only discuss artistic production, but also artist participants’ responses to representations outside of art. These artists and cultural program volunteers were involved in communications and expressions about and between the perceived binaries of modern / traditional, East / West, local / global, agency / oppression. Therefore, during interviews, I could be assured that these participants, who were already involved in expression and even explaining Emirati culture and lifestyle to outsiders, would articulate considered responses and ideas in relation to my research questions. Since these issues of cultural expression were already on their minds through nationalist art projects and volunteering at the SMCCU, it was beneficial to talk to this population about my research questions.
I learned about and contacted many of these participants through the Internet and at events where I engaged in participant observation. Many Emirati photographers and filmmakers have websites advertising their creative work or blogs, which include their contact information. I also met artists or received their contact information at art exhibitions and other events, such as TEDx Dubai. I encountered cultural program volunteers to participate in the study at various cultural events at the SMCCU as well as other events. In addition, I met several participants at a get-together for young creative Emiratis who were involved in the development of the Think Up GCC website (http://thinkup.ae) launched in September 2011 by a young Emirati man. From there, respondents recommended other people for me to contact who fit my sampling criteria.

**Interview participants**

Forty people took part in my interviews. This was a higher number than I had anticipated. When I arrived I hoped to be able to interview 30 people. However, I found that the Emiratis I contacted were typically very keen to meet and talk with me, often responding to my email request within minutes. Participants told me that they saw our interview as a chance to “set the record straight” about Emirati culture. They saw my work as positive and often wrote that they felt “honoured” to be asked to be part of it. I also believed that because of Emirati culture’s focus on hospitality, participants felt compelled to aid me in my research as a “foreigner” requesting assistance from a local person. I decided not to stop at thirty interviews as I wished to confirm the emerging themes. As I neared forty participants, the interviews began to echo the themes of those prior, confirming my data. Thus I was able to reach data saturation by the end of my four and a half months of interviews, as responses confirmed each other and negative cases also became more prevalent (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006).
I interviewed 26 women and 14 men. To exclude the male population would have been detrimental, as they too are involved in gender representations and are aware of women’s changing roles within the UAE, as well as their own shifting roles and expectations. Of this group, 37 were Emirati nationals. The remaining three participants were volunteers or cultural program managers of different nationalities who had lived in the UAE for a significant time.

The majority of participants lived, worked and were born in Dubai. However, a minority lived, worked and were from Abu Dhabi. Several respondents worked in Dubai but lived in the emirate where they had grown up, such as Ajman, Sharjah, Ras Al Khaimah or Umm Al Quwain. While moving between the emirates is not common, it is becoming more so for young people, especially since most work opportunities are in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Most of my participants were unmarried without children; however, four were married and three had children. All but one of my participants did not have a university degree. To my knowledge, two of my participants had one Emirati parent and one foreign parent, and those two artists expressed various opinions on being only “half” Emirati. In terms of economic standing, many participants were quick to tell me that they were certainly not rich, and non-Emiratis should stop assuming that all Emiratis are extremely wealthy. They wanted people to know that they had to earn their living like everyone and did not have “an oil well in their backyard.” However, most participants appeared to live above middle class living standards, as most Emiratis receive higher wages than their expatriate colleagues (Flanagan 2011).

Finally, to my knowledge, all participants had been brought up as Sunni Muslims, as this is

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6 I could assume that the Emirati parent was the father and the foreign parent was the mother. Until very recently, only if the father marries a foreigner can the child have citizenship rights. If an Emirati woman married a foreigner, she would lose her citizenship and her children would not become citizens either. However, this law has recently changed to allow these women and their children citizenship in the future. The law change coincided with the 40th National Day on December 2, 2011 (AFP 2011a).
the predominant sect within the UAE. However, sect denominations did not come up in interviews. Several participants alluded to rejecting religion, but the majority identified that it played an active, yet private, part in their lives.

**Interview practices**

I agree with Hesse-Biber & Leavy that in-depth interviews are a “meaning making partnership” (2006: 128) between the researcher and respondent, where the researcher and respondent are on the same plane, working together to construct knowledge. This method permitted me the opportunity to learn about social life “through the perspective, experiences and language of those living it” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006: 128). Throughout the interviews, I remained an active listener, saying few words but showing my engagement through gestures and probes (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006).

The interviews were semi-structured in that I relied on a list of questions based on each participant’s artistic production or volunteer experience, as well as the other themes of research inquiry. As the structure remained loose, I guided the conversation to remain on important themes. Yet the semi-structured approach allowed participants the freedom to highlight and talk about what was important to them, possibly taking the interview in unexpected directions, exploring new and relevant topics (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006; Hesse-Biber 2012). Mainly, I focused on allowing participants to describe their medium of art (film, photography, visual art, journalism / writing, design), and their process of creation, as well as what inspired them to create certain works and what they hoped audiences would take away from their work. I did not have the opportunity to watch any artist in the process of making a painting, photograph or film, however. Since participants were often university students or also held day-jobs, their time for producing was limited and sporadic. Thus, I
found it more useful to ask participants about artwork they had already made as well as future projects they had in mind. For volunteers, my questions focused on their experiences as a volunteer at the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding: how they became involved, why they wanted to take part in this institution, how they felt about the visitors to the centre, and how they approached answering visitor questions.

From there, I attempted to draw out ideas from each participant on what it means to be a “modern” and / or “traditional” person in Emirati society, and how these oft-cited terms within the UAE figured in their artistic work or thoughts on their volunteer experiences. I also asked about government and local media representations of Emirati women, and how these and other representations of Emirati women figured in their artistic and volunteer work. Finally, my questions focused upon national identity (often as expressed through national dress), and its place within their artistic expression and volunteer experiences. These themes are all concerned with the role of gender within cultural representation as all themes touched upon had different implications for women and men, with women more typically seen as symbols of national identity, embodying “modernity” and “tradition.”

As the interviews progressed, I took the opportunity to slightly change the focus of some of my questions. My reflections and research notes allowed me to more effectively consider and then alter several of my inquiries to gain richer data. For example, I stopped asking explicit questions about national dress because it came up without my prompting. I also added more direct questions about participants’ thoughts on the media’s portrayal of Emirati women as “balancing modern and traditional” aspects of their lives. I added this because I realised that while this is a major trope of literature about the UAE provided by the UAE government and local English language newspapers, participants were not aware that the government and
local media was focusing on this “balance” as part of their educational and marketing campaign about the UAE. Instead, they were aware of this discourse as a lived condition, rather than understanding it as a description for outsiders.

The interviews mainly took place in coffee shops in malls around Dubai, most often Dubai Mall, the largest and most centrally located shopping space and meeting opportunity. Many respondents asked me to meet them at malls on the outskirts of the city, where more Emiratis live, and just as many travelled to a mall nearer to my location, even though I asked participants to choose a convenient spot for them. Three Emirati women invited me to their homes, and four participants asked me to meet them at their offices. Nearly all participants were very accommodating and available, reliable and punctual, and nearly always insisted on paying for whatever beverages or food was ordered. Typically, cappuccinos were ordered at common coffee shops such as Starbucks or Caribou Coffee. Other times, the Emirati women I interviewed asked me to meet them at more upscale and alternative cafes, such as Crème de la Crème in Festival City Mall, Fauchon in the Mall of the Emirates, and Gerards on Emaar Boulevard, showing me some of the local hangouts they frequented. When invited into Emirati homes, I was provided with lunch, which consisted of various salads and hummus and bread, while the participants often explained and apologised that their maid was not used to cooking for vegetarians. By inviting me to their homes, these three participants went to great lengths to demonstrate their culture to me, telling me about the changes in their diets over the years and their wish to eat more healthily, as well as showing me their homes. For interviews we sat in the majilis room, where guests typically meet to talk while drinking tea and eating sweets. These were large, open rooms with grand circular couches and Persian carpets, ornate lamps, coffee tables and candleholders. Generally, their openness to meet with me and discuss their artwork or their cultural program volunteer experiences was part of
participants’ embedded cultural understanding of *de’afa*, rituals of politeness, reciprocity and hospitality. Participants of this study arguably felt obligated to help and welcome foreign visitors to the UAE. Generosity with payment for food and drink is part of this, and I recognised that arguing to pay for our beverages or food while at a coffee shop or restaurant would be interpreted as insulting.

All research carried out was subject to prior assessment, review and approval by the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee. Participants were fully informed about the research and the nature of their participation before giving consent. They understood that they were under no obligation to participate in the study. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and to have their responses excluded from the research findings upon request. All participants were informed that their names would be kept anonymous in any of my writing about this research. Interviews were digitally recorded when participants consented, and I took notes during and after interviews. Even though all participants were given pseudonyms in this thesis, the majority stated that they would be happy to have their real names used in my research. However, a minority were concerned about anonymity, which I assured them would be kept, and three participants declined using a recording device.

I did not include images of participant produced art here in order to maintain participant anonymity. Artists could easily be linked to their works through their own blogs and websites, where they post their visual art, or through the gallery websites where these artists have exhibited. Therefore, if I did reproduce artist participants’ visual artwork in this thesis, participant anonymity would be compromised. Moreover, I do not have copyright permission to show these artworks in any publications.
Chapter Three

**Participant observation**

To complement in-depth interviews, I also engaged in participant observation at various events throughout the Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah where Emiratis were expressing aspects of their culture and identity. While observing and participating in cultural events, I took notes on what people were doing in the setting, their activities, my sensory observations, what was being said and not said, or, what was being taken for granted (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006). Participant observation is a primary research tool of ethnography, which aims to gather a thorough understanding of how individuals in different cultures and subcultures make sense of their lived reality (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006). I have employed this tool as part of an ethnographic approach; however, my work is not an ethnography, since my observations, for the most part, took place at structured, public and often formal events. My thesis focuses on specific ideas about and moments of cultural representation. The everyday plays a part in this, but is only supplemental to the individual interviews and other cultural representations observed and spoken about among participants.

The participation required at these events was minimal, as I was mainly an observer at art exhibitions or talks. However, participation increased when I attended cultural events. At these events, at the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding, the Sharjah Centre for Cultural Communication, and events hosted by Ask Ali, an Emirati cultural presenter, participation included sharing a meal with fellow tourists and expatriates, and interacting with the Emirati volunteers at cultural programs. This interaction involved asking questions about Emirati culture, and listening to answers. I paid attention to the kinds of questions asked and how the answers were framed. I will return to this analysis in Chapter Six. Listening and paying attention to all aspects of these exchanges — what was said and
not said, gestures, as well as the spatial arrangements of event spaces and participants’ and
volunteers’ comportment — allowed for a deeper understanding of the complexity of these
cultural events. This participant observation experience also provided me with concrete
examples of questions and answers to fuel my knowledge and curiosity during interviews
with volunteers at cultural programs. My discourse analysis on Emirati women’s
representations also informed my observations and vice versa, as women’s roles were a
prominent theme in cultural programs.

For artistic endeavours, I attended many art exhibitions, particularly at the Ara Gallery in
downtown Dubai, which often features exhibitions by Emirati artists. I viewed the *Emirati
Expressions* exhibition in Abu Dhabi several times, and attended the artist talks about how
the participating photographers created their work and what they were attempting to express
about Emirati identity. I also attended several screenings of Emirati films at the DIFF and
ADFF.

As part of my participant observation, I described the works and my impressions of the visual
artwork and films I viewed in a notebook. While taking notes, I asked myself what (if
anything) was being represented about Emirati culture through these works, what was
surprising, typical or atypical, controversial or confusing. Since my research questions are not
driven by the discipline of art history, I did not analyse the forms of art I viewed in a
systematic way that has been previously theorised, but instead used my own impressions in
conjunction with participants’ reflections on the origin and inspiration of their work. This
thesis does not engage with specific interpretations of the artworks, but how participants
conceive of their own and peers’ works as Emirati cultural expressions.
Jackson (1990) has found that the concept of what constitutes fieldnotes varies among those who do research “in the field,” and therefore it is important to define what I mean by fieldnotes as a researcher. During my time in the field, I took written notes during participant observation experiences and during interviews. I typed up these notes nightly. I also typed my daily observations each night. These notes took the form of a running log of my impressions, the formation of ideas and preliminary attempts at analysis. These notes were also intended to aid my memory and reconstruct events I might want to include in my thesis.

Participant observation experiences often led to more interview opportunities through snowball sampling, as I met young Emiratis who met my sampling criteria. These events also confirmed and broadened the ideas expressed by my interview participants. By observing a breadth of Emirati art and film I was able to understand the local artistic framework in which participants were working, their immediate influences and the ways in which they were following or differentiating themselves from the kinds of artwork and films of their peers. For example, much of the Emirati-made films, which were in Arabic with English subtitles and shown to multinational audiences, are set in pre-oil days in the northern emirates, such as Ras Al Khaimah, and deal with dark and dramatic themes such as domestic abuse, adultery and rape. Several filmmaker participants decried this trend, explaining there are only a few Emirati scriptwriters who wish to focus on this kind of material, but these writers’ material is the most popular among filmmakers for its presumed gravitas. These participants told me that in contrast they chose to make (or have future projects in mind) present-day comedies and light-hearted action. These participant observation experiences led to more in-depth conversations through comparing participants’ work with other Emiratis’ work as well as other Middle Eastern artists exhibiting within Dubai. In general, being aware of the various artistic “scenes” — film, art, design, photography and creative writing — allowed me to
focus on what my participants were expressing through their artistic mediums and gain a deeper working knowledge of the field they are working within, knowledge which expanded over time.

**Discourse analysis**

In Chapter Two and within this chapter, I have described the meaning of discourse through a poststructural lens. In this section I will explain how I analysed the chosen discourses related to my research questions. The understanding of discourse used in this thesis allowed me to consider participants’ restrictions by recognising that no one is absolutely “free” in their expression. This idea is both limiting and liberating, as an understanding that discourses shape our lives permits individuals working within discursive contexts to construct positions for themselves. Discourse is important because it provides the “rules” for conceivable speech about a topic and / or social and individual action (Fowler 1991).

Baxter defines a feminist approach to discourse analysis as, “analyzing the ways in which speakers negotiate their identities, relationships and positions in their world according to the ways in which they are located by competing yet interwoven discourses” (2003: 1). In this way, individuals are both exercising power and directed by power, depending on the context and the individual’s positionality. Gill states that discourse analysis is especially beneficial to feminist researchers, because, “It represents a principled and coherent means by which feminists can study talk and texts of all kinds — shedding light on old questions and provoking new ones” (1995: 167). Discourse analysis stresses the ways in which discourse is both constructive and a social practice, and looks at what discourse *does* in specific contexts (Gill 1995).
The method of discourse analysis is generally wide-ranging, examining the negotiation and contestation of meaning within cultural items, such as news media. Discourse analysis takes place through knowledgeable interpretations made about how a text generates and regenerates cultural meanings and values. This method is associated with deconstruction, which unpacks and reveals cultural gaps and pressures within the society where the text was developed (Luke 1995; Strobl 2012). Such an approach contributes to a fuller account regarding the representations distributed about Emirati women, as well as the discourses of “modern-ness” and tradition within the UAE, along with participants’ responses to these discourses. For these accounts, I analysed the government-authored documents about Emirati womanhood and “empowerment.”

Discourse analysis allows for close scrutiny of the ways that texts, such as written and visual materials, objects and bodies, are employed to advance particular agendas, and are used when a researcher is interested in the social meaning of language and discursive practice (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006; Jacobs 2006). Since texts can be vital to establishing and preserving status quo and can also help challenge long-held beliefs and practices, I looked for what was omitted, silenced, or excluded within my analysis, as Leavy (2007) recommends. Hesse-Biber & Leavy note that qualitative researchers can “dive in and out of the text” in order to understand and analyse the ideology within the text and examine language’s construction of social meaning (2006: 293). This is the case within the works I chose to analyse as part of this thesis. Discourse analysis is an important component of my data triangulation as the documents I chose exhibit how Emirati culture is officially represented by the government to tourists, expatriates and citizens.
Participants of this study are embedded within and responding to various discourses depending upon their positioning. Most often, participants are part of the UAE’s “official” discourse about the importance of nationalist art projects and the empowerment of Emirati women. In the case of the SMCCU, volunteers are also embedded within the UAE tourism discourse, promoting the Emirati “way of life” to newcomers who potentially hold misconceptions about the UAE. Finally, artist participants are part of the discourse surrounding global citizenship and minority cultural recognition. The primary discourse analysed in this thesis centres on empowerment of Emirati women, which the UAE government has participated in creating.

**Steps in discourse analysis**

As Fairclough (1992) notes, there is no uniform way to conduct discourse analysis, and it can be approached differently among researchers. The first important aspect is selecting data for the discourse sample. This involves knowing what is available and how to gain access to it. As will be shown in Chapter Four, the most effective way to understand how the UAE government institution constructs knowledge about Emirati women is through the documents that their public relations branch, the National Media Council (NMC), creates and disseminates about Emirati women. In relation to this, I also point to local English language newspaper feature articles focused on Emirati women’s “empowerment.” These newspapers are written for the expatriate / foreign audience, and the articles I point to serve as further examples of the prevalence of this discourse about Emirati women in a local context.

Fairclough suggests overall that discourse analysis progresses from “interpretation of the discourse practice (processes of text production and consumption), to description of the text, to interpretation of both of these in light of the social practice in which the discourse is
embedded” (1992: 231). These are the steps I followed in my discourse analysis: understanding the context of the discourse, how it was produced and who was the intended audience, describing the text itself, and then interpreting this description in relation to the larger social world of this discourse. Fairclough (1992) recommends that the discourse analysis should move between close interpretations of the discourse sample to the larger construction under which this discourse was created. An analysis of this type should show what is conventional and what is atypical about the discourse sample.

Fairclough (1992) sets out extensive means through which to analyse a discourse sample. I will follow the relevant aspects of the analysis he puts forth here to explain my choice of discourse sample and my discourse analysis.

First, Fairclough (1992) recommends considering interdiscursivity to characterise the discourse sample as a whole, and thinking about what genres are used in this sample. My discourse analysis sample consists of documents produced by the UAE government’s public relations branch, the National Media Council (NMC), which is a federal government body established by UAE Federal Law. As stated on their website (nmc.gov.ae/en), the NMC is responsible for all UAE media and aims to achieve international standards in media regulation in order to enhance the UAE’s national and international reputation. This body aims to highlight the UAE’s accomplishments and ensure efficiency and transparency in their publications and media regulations (National Media Council website 2013).

I chose my sample, which will be described and analysed in the following chapter, from the relevant documents produced by the NMC because the chosen documents are intended to be “official” and portray the status of Emirati women to audiences outside the UAE. These
NMC produced documents are therefore authoritative since a government body has created them, and representative of the overall discourse about Emirati women produced within the UAE. The discourse sample chosen appears in an e-book called the UAE Yearbook 2010 (the most recent version) within the UAE government-sponsored news and tourist website, uaeinteract.com. It is a well-funded e-book, and centrally located on the uaeinteract.com website. This sample is therefore distributed widely to those seeking “official” information about visiting or living in the country.

As something read over the Internet, this sample is most likely consumed at a quick glance rather than carefully read. The samples themselves draw upon the genre of International Human Rights reports, using statistics from the United Nations and the language of second-wave feminism to showcase the “rights” and “freedoms” of Emirati women. Such documents have been used in other Gulf countries as well, and therefore these documents promoting national women are conventional in their interdiscursive properties, similarly advertising women’s “independence” and freedom to become educated and work in male-dominated employment.

Fairclough (1992) identifies intertextual chains as the next step in discourse analysis. By this he refers to exploring the other discourses that the sample enters into and possibly transitions away from. In this case, my discourse sample transforms itself into statements similar to Human Rights reports, and enters into this intertextual chain by speaking back to such reports, which often state that gender equality is not as it should be in the UAE. While my sample uses the language of these reports, it also dismisses them and speaks back to them to attempt to show that Emirati women are experiencing gender equality within the UAE. This discourse sample also speaks back to the larger discourse of Orientalism to prove that Emirati
women are not oppressed by unenlightened men, but are empowered by egalitarian, modern male rulers.

In terms of coherence, or the interpretive implications of the discourse sample, Fairclough (1992) wants researchers to explore how others might interpret the text. In this case, the discourse sample might be interpreted by others as going a long way to show that women are treated fairly, since within the UAE Yearbook for 2010, a chapter on “Women” appears among other chapters such as “Oil & Gas” and “Infrastructure,” as will be discussed further in Chapter Four. This sample could receive a resistant reading from those who question the male rulers’ attempts to “empower” women, and what the word “empowerment” means in the context of the UAE. In addition, readers could question the ways the text is meant to speak back to Orientalism, but only re-inscribes Western norms of liberal feminist “rights,” “equality” and “empowerment.”

Fairclough (1992) also identifies discourse representation and presupposition as dimensions through which to conduct discourse analysis. In my case, the discourse representation is direct in that it represents Emirati women as holding the rights and freedoms to obtain education, healthcare and work opportunities that they choose. To prove this, the NMC uses statistics from the United Nations. This is shown as a legitimate way to prove women’s “rights” and “freedoms” within the UAE. For presuppositions, it is assumed in the text that readers believe that Emirati women are oppressed and unsatisfied, and the text speaks against this idea. Therefore, this discourse sample links to prior texts related to Orientalism that show Arab, Muslim women as hidden, non-agents in the world. Since the texts are involved in showing the government’s role in “empowering” Emirati women, the texts are manipulative in attempting to prove that women are “empowered,” and thus attempt to display that the
country is modern, egalitarian, and like the West. In that sense, the texts are not about how content Emirati women are, but how fair and modern the government is in giving Emirati women these rights and freedoms.

The next mode of analysis is interactional control, where a researcher explores who controls the content of the discourse sample. It is clear that the agenda of the NMC documents about Emirati women is one-sided to show the government’s role in supporting and empowering Emirati women in ways presumed appropriate and acceptable to foreign readers. The topics developed concern education, employment, healthcare, and international conferences on women, and these are clearly important topics to establish women’s “rights” and “freedoms” to Western audience readers.

Fairclough (1992) also identifies cohesion (how sentences are connected), politeness (how strategies of politeness are used and for what purpose), ethos (identifying the social identity of the sample), grammar (transitivity, theme, modality), word meaning (key words), wording (new terms, intertextual terms) and metaphor (how metaphors are used and chosen within the discourse sample). I consider these textual aspects of analysis further in the results of my discourse analysis in Chapter Four.

Finally, Fairclough (1992) points to the effects of the discourse sample on social practice. He identifies the social matrix of discourse, which looks at how this discourse sample relates to discursive practice in terms of its conventionality or originality. Does the discourse sample reproduce or attempt to change other discourses? In this case, my discourse sample conventionally attempts to change Orientalist discourse conceptions of Arab, covered women
as oppressed and silenced. Fairclough (1992) also looks to the ideological and political effects of discourse, which I will analyse further in Chapter Four and throughout this thesis.

Another important aspect of all three data collection methods is reflection upon my research positionality and ability to be reflexive in my data collection, analysis and writing.

**Research positionality and reflexivity**

As Gannon and Davies (2007) note, the first principle of poststructuralist feminist perspectives is to acknowledge that research accounts are always “partial and particular” with their “own power to produce new ways of seeing,” which “should always be open to contestation” (66). Therefore, I am aware that my approach and resulting thesis is a partial account from “somewhere” by “someone” with a specific audience in mind. This knowledge allowed for my awareness of my own research positionality and reflexivity about my role as researcher.

Since I was a resident of the UAE and a university English lecturer of Emiratis and expatriate students from 2006-2008, and have published nonfiction accounts of my teaching experiences, I could not deny my previous understandings and observations about this research topic. In fact, my experiences living in the UAE are what led me to choose this topic and refine it throughout my first year of postgraduate candidature. As a white, non-Muslim, middle class, English-only speaker from the United States, I had certain advantages and disadvantages in the field as both an “outsider” and “insider.” I recognise the shifting boundaries between what constitutes an “insider” and “outsider” status in fieldwork (Anthias 2002; Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006; Wolf 1996), and I am aware of the complex way in which

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7 The travel memoir *Abu Dhabi Days, Dubai Nights* (Schedneck 2012) is a selected record of this period.
I was seen as someone outside Emirati and Arab culture who is nonetheless also knowledgeable and has experienced the complexities and challenges of life in the Emirates. While I was viewed as an “outsider,” I also at times felt like an “insider,” since I had lived and taught in the UAE in the past and have learned about Emirati history and culture. Participants knew of my experiences in the UAE and that I had published a travel memoir about those experiences, and thus appeared to trust that I did hold a certain key level of understanding, and was “on their side” rather than promoting negative stereotypes.

An “insider” is seen as a researcher with the traits or characteristics, such as age, gender, ethnicity, language, social class, sexual orientation, and education level, that are shared with research participants, while “outsider” status refers to the differences between researcher and participant (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006; Hesse-Biber 2012). The standard thinking is that an outsider status will make it more difficult to gain access to and understand the situations of research participants. Yet a researcher can in some ways be an outsider and in other ways an insider at the same time; this positioning is fluid and can change even within the course of an interview as the researcher and interviewee find commonalities in shared roles or status, or discover differences (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006; Hesse-Biber 2012). Furthermore, an outsider status can also be seen as an advantage as this position is sometimes viewed as less biased by participants, and researchers may be more likely to ask things that “insiders” might take for granted as shared knowledge, and thus gain more information on how participants view a given question or issue (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006).

For example, one participant also conducting research on representations of national identity commented to me after our interview that in one sense it was easier for her to do this research as an “insider” into the culture, but her findings and involvement with the research questions
also meant a great deal more to her personally, creating biases that she was aware of and which potentially held her back from completing her Masters degree. She mentioned that perhaps it was in fact easier for me to do this research, as Emiratis would open up to me more, since they would not have a fear of being judged or becoming the object of gossip, as they possibly feared when speaking to her, a fellow Emirati. In addition, as Narayan (2003) points out, even the most knowledgeable researcher cannot be all-knowing, as one can only know a society from her own position within it.

I was able to utilise my outsider status for more explanations and definitions of Emirati traditions and national identity, something that a cultural insider would have trouble asking, since such knowledge is typically assumed. Yet, I also knew a great deal about Emirati culture, particularly the ways young people felt about the foreign majority within their country, from my previous resident experience as a lecturer at the American University in Dubai. Awareness of my shifting status as “outsider” to the culture yet “insider” as a former resident, as well as other important factors such as gender, education level, language and social class, was crucial to my interview method and interaction with participants. During my field research I attempted to negotiate the complex power relations within the research encounter (Bhavnani 1993). Ultimately, as Narayan recommends, we can more profitably view researchers “in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations” (2003: 285).

Throughout the research process, I employed reflexivity, where I continually questioned my place and the power relations within the research process (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006). I frequently reflected upon and examined the ways in which my social background, positionality and biases affected my research practice (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser 2003). For
instance, I found that I was giving more positive consideration to those participants, usually women, who felt strongly about their Emirati traditions and aimed to showcase and update these traditions within their artistic work. I admired the work they created and their ties to a pre-oil past they could only imagine. I found that I did not admire the views of the several participants who had very negative ideas about Emirati culture and past, who stated that there was no real culture except that which has been imported from the West. However, I tried to counter these biases by being aware of my feelings and aesthetic visual preferences. I asked participants with views I admired to try to define and specify what they meant by Emirati traditions, interrogating their ideas further, and did not press those who denied Emirati traditions to try to compel them to accept or recognise its existence in some form. In essence, I did not convey my preference for one way of thinking over another, and included all diverging views I felt were relevant in this thesis.

Reflexivity allows the researcher to challenge essentialism and generalisations, and for that reason it is a key aspect of a feminist research approach. As Hesse-Biber and Yaiser (2003) explain, reflexivity can help researchers recognise that there are multiple truths, and that the researcher herself is not the “essential woman,” but that other truths and realities are just as valid. This is one of the aims of this thesis. Reflecting on my shifting roles as insider and outsider, its advantages and disadvantages for my position as a researcher, allowed me to negotiate my differences and similarities with participants in order to gain new insight into the data from a feminist perspective.

I am aware that through my position as a Western woman, female participants in particular were most likely reluctant to talk about any restrictions imposed by family members or society, or their frustration with those restrictions. This is the case because young Emiratis
are so aware of the Western gaze, and the typical belief among Westerners that Emirati women are without freedom and rights. Gallant (2008) also faced similar challenges as a Canadian female researcher engaged in qualitative research with young Emirati women. She describes the potential biases in her work as she was also aware of the ways in which young Emirati female participants’ responses were tailored to her position as a white, Western woman, who was also the participants’ former professor (Gallant 2008). Writing about gender in Arab societies presents a number of challenges, such as:

- How to write about gender without assigning superiority or supremacy to the Western construction of gender?
- How to represent competing discourses without either wiping out or exaggerating differences?
- And how to capture those aspects of the Arab region that intone oppression or misery, while simultaneously capturing the resistance, power, commitment, and enjoyment of life that also characterize Arab / Islamic life? (Treacher 2003: 60)

Through this poststructural approach, it is paramount to recognise how my framing of research questions, as well as my response to participants, has been shaped by my own experiences and biases as a white, Western woman who has lived and taught in the UAE. Because of this positionality, I was interested in the ways in which official UAE documents “marketed” Emirati women as markers of modernity and tradition, and I was also curious about this dialogue between the UAE government and imagined Western audiences, as well as young Emirati women’s responses to it. I acknowledge that I chose to frame my research questions in relation to this imagined dialogue because of my positionality as a white Western woman; living in the UAE encouraged me to think of myself as part of this discourse as its intended recipient, a feminist critic of its tactics, and someone interested in
the condition of women worldwide. I believe this positionality allowed me to be personally
invested in the research as well as biased toward the centrality of this dialogue within young,
female Emiratis’ subjectivities.

I was aware of these challenges, and attempted to combat them through listening to each
woman’s explanation of what it means to be free and empowered and successful in life,
rather than probing participants to state that they were oppressed in some regard. I aimed to
try to understand how each participant came to certain conclusions about gender and culture
through their complicity within and reaction to those discourses, rather than imposing
Western ideals of what it might mean to be a free and empowered woman.

Advantages, challenges and limitations

Since I had lived in the UAE, I knew what to expect, and was adaptable to change. I was
accustomed to the city and aware of protocol of how to approach potential Emirati
participants. When contacting Emiratis, usually via email, I was able to explain my research
and background, and having lived and worked in the UAE helped. As Oakley (1981)
suggests, sharing your biography with participants as well as other stories (which happened
during the interviews) increases reciprocity and rapport, reducing the hierarchy between
researcher and participant. Several of the interview participants had attended the American
University in Dubai, the school where I taught, although not during the same year I was there
as a lecturer. Thus, I was not just in Dubai as a first time researcher for a few weeks. Within a
city of transient visitors and expatriate workers, having committed to this country as an
educator for two years, and then returning to conduct research, meant a great deal.
Participants were typically very curious about my time teaching at the American University
in Dubai (AUD)\textsuperscript{8} and expressed interest in my travel memoir. They were curious about my findings and often asked for generalised responses from others I had interviewed, and said that they appreciated that I had returned to do my research in Dubai.

However, when interviews were completed it was difficult to get back in touch with respondents for follow-up or further contact information for other interview candidates who met the sampling criteria. I do not believe this is because they had a poor experience during our interview, but simply because participants typically led very busy lives. It seemed that once the initial request of meeting with me for an hour (often longer) was complete, their duty was fulfilled and post interview response was minimal. Since I had only initially asked for an hour of their time for a single interview at the start, participants felt their duty was complete and they had done what was asked. I did not feel that I could have asked for more of participants’ time during our initial contact as this would seem to be an imposition and off-putting to potential participants. One-hour or longer in-depth interviews provided rich insights into answering my research questions.

Finally, I necessarily focused on those artists who were very present in the media and not those who might have been more subversive\textsuperscript{9} and much less approachable. For example, I did approach one artist who replied to my email stating that his views were too controversial and

\textsuperscript{8} The American model of education is seen as one of the best within the UAE. Well-known universities in the Middle East, such as the American University of Cairo and the American University of Beirut, also helped to provide AUD with a good reputation through affiliation with the American system. In that vein, Americans themselves, in my experience, are not looked down upon, specifically among Emiratis. If anything, Americans are difficult to distinguish from other native English speakers, and are more typically lumped together as “Westerners.” In my experience, despite America’s foreign policy in the Middle East, it is recognised that if an American chose to visit and / or work in the UAE, this person must not be negatively biased against the country but instead hold positive intentions towards UAE citizens and residents. Therefore, as far as I am aware, I never encountered any problems or negative comments because of my American background.

\textsuperscript{9} I will be discussing the issue of censorship in Chapter Eight. However, I would like to note here that censorship was not a major issue for most of my participants, as they claimed they did not wish to portray controversial material.
he no longer gave interviews, even though my initial email stated that he would remain anonymous in my research. This was the only time this happened, but speaks to a possibly small group who do not wish to share anything with researchers or journalists for that matter, and thus their views are mainly inaccessible. Therefore, some points of view were unreachable. These Emiratis might have had very different ideas about national identity, gender roles and the way these are represented. My study is limited to those Emirati nationals who are willing to express themselves and their ideas about Emirati culture in public ways.

**Interview analysis**

After each interview I began a three-stage process of analysis, starting with note-taking and ending with thematic analysis. After each interview, I typed up notes on my observations about the main themes of our discussion, such as the central issues participants continually returned to. I also wrote about aspects of the interview not captured by the audio recorder, such as facial expressions and other non-verbal cues such as body language. I took notes on the environment of the interview, particularly if the participant chose a specific place to meet as their favourite or usual spot, or within a participant’s home. I made notes about my own interview technique and semi-structured questions. I reflected on the interview process and any changes I wanted to make to the framing of questions or the interview schedule relevant to the emerging themes. This allowed me to make the appropriate changes and reflect on my interviewing techniques during the research process. In the case of the three participants who did not wish to be tape recorded, I took notes during the interview about what they said, and after the interview I engaged in my usual note taking about issues and observations outside of their direct responses.

The second stage of my interview analysis process took place as I transcribed the interviews.
Chapter Three

During this time I was able to become very familiar with the interview data, since I was immersed in typing out participants’ responses verbatim, and then reading over transcripts to check for accuracy. As I transcribed the 37 recorded interviews, I was able to identify emerging themes, commonalities, and the relationships between participants’ responses and theoretical ideas. For example, at this time I identified that female participants used the language of personal choice when discussing wearing national dress, and I saw that this language resonated with postfeminist critique problematising this language of personal choice as entirely positive. I recorded this relationship, as well as others, noting the ways in which participants aligned with their government aims in promoting Emirati women’s achievements and nationalist art projects, and exhibited pride in their personal achievements as individual producers of art. Recording these relationships allowed me to identify the most important themes and discourses that participants were responding to, and led to the final stage of my analysis.

During stage three of my analysis process, I applied the same discourse analysis principles discussed above to the interview data. This allowed me to more fully understand the relationship between the government’s discourse and aims, and my participants’ beliefs about their roles as Emirati women and men. Connecting the relationships between the government discourse and participants’ responses allowed me to consider the influences shaping participants’ ideas about their own creative expressions, as well as their positionality and roles within Emirati society. I was able to consider the wider effects of the relationship between gender and nationalism.

I coded my data by identifying these emerging themes (Ezzy 2002), such as “national dress” and “Emirati tradition,” and then refined the process to develop an emerging theory about the
Chapter Three

relationship between gender and nation in the UAE.\textsuperscript{10} To begin with, I employed open coding to organise my data and test emerging concepts (Ezzy 2002). I then began axial coding, where I re-read and more intensely analysed the relationships between themes (Ezzy 2002). Finally, I utilised selective coding to point to the central codes and essential stories within the analysis, using codes such as “choice” and “response to external gaze” to uncover and build categories and concepts, as well as their interrelationships, drawing out my interpretations of the data.

Interview analysis worked in concert with participant observations and discourse analysis of official representations of Emirati women, as this triangulation helped to describe and allowed me to build a theory about the relationship between gender and nation in this research. The discourse analysis allowed me to understand this official representation as a response to the Orientalist gaze, and its effect upon Emirati participants. Participant observation at the SMCCU allowed me to consider first hand the ways in which this Orientalist gaze is accommodated and spoken back to through this cultural program. Interview data most centrally brought up the relationship between the Orientalist legacy, government discourse, and gender and nation through participants’ responses to the government discourse and Western gaze. Each piece of this research data triangulation fuelled and informed the other, allowing me to understand the discourses shaping Emirati participants’ considerations of their subjectivities and the ways in which they are embedded within, speak back to and act as global agents within and for the UAE.

\\textsuperscript{10} I chose not to use qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo to code my data because I wanted to be closer to the interview data than NVivo would allow. Instead of coding through NVivo, I printed my typed transcripts. I believe this permitted me to have more thorough contact with my data, since I could read and see transcripts in their entirety rather than in pieces.
Chapter Three

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have described my feminist theoretical orientation and my rationale in employing data triangulation of three qualitative methods: in-depth, semi-structured one-on-one interviews, participant observation and discourse analysis. This chapter has also delineated my interview sampling criteria, process and analysis, as well as detailed descriptions of my participant observation methods and discourse analysis approach. Part of my feminist methodology involved reflexivity throughout the field research process and data analysis. I demonstrated my awareness of the “outsider” and “insider” status my position as researcher evoked, and the ways in which my positionality affected participants’ responses. I have shown that my approach and data triangulation were effective ways to answer this study’s research questions.

The next two chapters explore the various discourses that shape Emirati womanhood, and how Emirati women respond to this discourse.
Chapter Four
A Bridge Between: Representing the Modern and Traditional Emirati Women

She may go on to be highly educated, perhaps even abroad. She may choose to be a doctor, a lawyer or opt to teach, passing her knowledge onto siblings and equally aspiring fellow nationals. Whatever she chooses, the family bonds captured that day will remain forever as tight. She will marry and take with her the name of her father and grandfather rather than adopt that of her husband. She will retain her identity and contribute willingly to sustaining a harmonious, diversified society that will continue to be culturally rich and stable.

Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority, *Our Way of Life*, a picture book for tourists

Representations of Emirati women by the UAE government use the discourse of modernity and tradition, as well as the language of second-wave feminism, to convey its state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda. This is a term I use to describe the UAE government’s role in constructing and promoting the dominant version of Emirati women’s roles and representations within UAE society. This chapter focuses on analysing this official representation of Emirati women, deconstructing the modern / traditional binary, and orienting the reader on how this discourse is employed. In conjunction with the modern / traditional binary, this study examines the ways the language of second-wave feminism is used in this official discourse. The concepts of modern and traditional are entangled and mutually constitutive within the UAE government’s representations of Emirati women’s rights and empowerment.

The UAE government utilises Emirati women as national symbols of secular liberalism and cultural authenticity, as is common within Muslim countries (Timmerman 2000). What is
unique about this representation is the keen focus on young Emirati women, and the way in which second-wave feminist language such as “rights,” “equality” and “empowerment” are adopted as implicitly the right language to use for the Western gaze. As McRobbie (2009) notes, the language of female empowerment is connected to demonstrations of modernity. This language is used to show that the UAE exists as a “modern” country, where Emirati women have been given their rights. Therefore, the UAE government is egalitarian and implicitly “feminist” in their policies (although they never use the word “feminist” because of its Western association of women fighting for rights). Emirati women’s potential collective struggle for rights and equality has been pre-empted by the UAE government, and in this way Emirati women should have no reason to resist or complain about their government. Thus, the official discourse becomes an important means of state control.

I argue that state-sponsored women’s empowerment is an accurate term for this official discourse, and that the language of feminism is used to show Western readers that Emirati women have the same “rights” as Western women. In this analysis I investigate “the ways in which subjectivity has become an essential object, target and resource for certain strategies, tactics, and procedures of regulation” (Rose 1996: 151). Emirati women have become this “object” and “resource” for governmental strategies to convince global capitalists of the country’s modernity, and Emirati women have arguably gained and lost much in the process of adopting these subjectivities. In this chapter I will describe the terms state-sponsored feminism and state-sponsored women’s empowerment, and provide a discourse analysis of the UAE government’s official discourse about Emirati women. This chapter will also deconstruct the word “empowerment” and apply postfeminist critique to the discourse analysis on the UAE’s state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda. This discourse
analysis also sets up the next chapter, which focuses on Emirati women’s “invested agency” within this official discourse.

**State-sponsored women’s empowerment and the promotion of Emirati women**

Political scientist Leila DeVriese explains that the UAE has a “state-sponsored feminist agenda,” in which Emirati women are strongly directed by the government (Momaya 2010), and where women are seen as instruments to be “empowered.” Strobl (2008, 2010) uses the term state-feminism to describe the Bahraini government’s attempt to reconstruct Bahraini policewomen’s image in order to display the ruler’s liberal agenda. Within the Gulf region, this state-sponsored feminist agenda often takes the form of appointing female citizens to top ranking positions within the government, such as ministers and members to the UAE’s Federal National Council (FNC), as well as supporting Emirati women’s higher education, entrepreneurial endeavours, and employment in male-dominated fields.

Instead of using the word “feminism,” I use the term state-sponsored women’s “empowerment” to describe the UAE government’s involvement in promoting their attitude toward women’s rights. I believe this term more accurately describes the situation because the UAE government does not use the word “feminism” in their documents. The implications of that word, especially when applied to the Middle East, are inaccurate to explain the government’s initiation of and willingness to support Emirati women in education and employment. The terms state-feminism or state-sponsored feminism are used in an ironic or at least ambiguous sense, since women are being used strategically by their respective governments, and not benefitting from fully committed feminist policies. State-sponsored
women’s empowerment, then, is the more accurate term because Gulf national women are seen as instruments to be “empowered.”

The broader concept of state-feminism, generally applied to Western countries, refers to policies of the government that are concerned with furthering women’s status and rights (McBride & Mazur 1995). Most writing about state-feminism considers the Western industrialised world, where women often had to fight for the right to vote decades after men were granted this right (Sinha 2004). However, this was not the case in many postcolonial nations and within the UAE, where women were given the right to vote at the same time as men. The relationship between the UAE government and female citizens is in contrast to that found in North America, Australia and European nations, which includes mobilisation from “below” in the form of civil society groups and feminist movements, followed by policy changes from “above” (Siim & Skjeie 2008). Since this mobilisation from “below” did not occur in the UAE, the term “state-sponsored women’s empowerment” better illustrates the government’s role in advancing the public positions of Emirati women.

Krause (2009) writes about state-feminism within the Gulf, and points out that the term is used to describe the process of a state’s involvement in women’s interests. She argues that while this mode has given women some greater independence, it ultimately does not allow for radical change, since the women of these nations are typically prohibited from criticising their government. Within the UAE, the government either runs women’s organisations, or sponsors the running of women’s organisations. Therefore, involvement in such groups, referred to as either government-run organisations or government-organised non-government organisations (Krause 2009), leads women toward following the policies of the state. As

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11 However, not all Emiratis, man or woman, are capable of voting. Popular elections to the Federal National Council began in 2006, and since that time the government has hand-picked which Emirati citizens are allowed to vote in those elections.
Krause writes, women are “operating in a framework in which [their] actions are directed to nationalist interests, to which women may be steered through emotive technique or from which they may benefit through a ‘ruling bargain’” (2009: 32). Krause’s (2009) argument more clearly identifies the situation of state-feminism within the Gulf, as the UAE’s state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda offers many opportunities while also acting as a modality of constraint within the government.

**The discourse of state-sponsored women’s empowerment**

It has been well documented that nations often position women as demonstrators of both the modernisation and tradition of their nation (Chatterjee 1990; Joseph 2000; Kandiyoti 1991a, 1991b; Ray 2000; Sinha 2006), since women bear the “burden of representation” for their nation (Yuval-Davis 1997: 45). The UAE government, particularly its public relations branch, the National Media Council (NMC), displays women as a “bridge” between modern and traditional, using them as symbols of the nation’s progress and culture (National Media Council 2008, 2010) The NMC’s focus is firmly set upon the government’s success in educating women, their responsibility to ensure women’s employment opportunities through legislation and various women’s leadership and business federations, their international recognition for women’s progress, and their increasing push for women’s political participation within the UAE’s FNC.
The most prominent display of state-sponsored women’s empowerment discourse comes from the 2010 UAE Yearbook (Image 2), a downloadable e-book on the UAE’s government-sponsored news website, uaeinteract.com. This e-book was produced by the NMC. The Table of Contents (Image 3), shows chapters with titles such as “Oil & Gas,” “Health,” “Political System” and “Environment.” Chapter 17 is called “Women”; there is no complementary chapter titled “Men.”
Thus, Emirati women are presented as just another “thing,” another marker of development and progress in the UAE’s Yearbook. Since 2001, the UAE Yearbook has reserved a lengthy section on “Women” within its “Social Development” Chapter, and again Emirati men received no equivalent section. Yet in this most current edition of the UAE Yearbook, “Women” now receive their own chapter. This highlights the important role of women as the markers of modernity, and the idea that men constitute a “default” category, where their roles are so stable they are not worth mentioning (Timmerman 2000). This Women chapter is
ultimately about othering, offering Emirati women as available to be looked at and appraised while also demonstrating their “freedom” and “empowerment.”


The Women chapter opens with a two-page photo of two young Emirati women (Image 4), wearing the national dress of a black abaya and sheyla. They stand posed in conversation, Dubai Creek in the background. The text on this page states: “Women in the UAE have long been recognised as equal partners in national development and the Government continues to pursue a strategy of empowering women in cultural, social and economic fields” (the phrase “empowering women” is highlighted in blue text). On this opening page of the Women chapter, a video appears in the corner. It features a young Emirati female artist named Reem Al Ghaith, who is also one of the women pictured on the front page. She is depicted as a lone
figure snapping photos of the Dubai metropolis from an isolated desert vantage point. Through voice-over she says:

The United Arab Emirates is changing so fast so the past is not anymore existing. My mission is to kind of document and show people that, “okay, this is happening now, it’s going to happen tomorrow and the day after.” Coming from a family who lived within the generations of Dubai and the United Arab Emirates, they were born here, they used to tell us, “there was a road here and there was a building here, and now it turned into a city,” educating us in what happened to our past and where we really come from.

Through this video and voice-over, Al Ghaith is positioned as the “modern” cultural preserver. Her camera allows her to document the past and changing nature of Dubai, and she can therefore be seen as bridging the modern with the past. Emirati women’s perceived roles as modern cultural preservers can be appealing in the positive attention drawn from displaying such patriotic representations.

Inside the chapter, there is a chart from the 2009 Gender-related Development Index (GDI) produced by the United Nations. The columns in this chart compare men’s and women’s life expectancy, adult literacy, educational enrolment, and the overall Human Development Index. The UAE ranks 175th in life expectancy, 5th in adult literacy, 2nd in educational enrolment and 137th compared to the Human Development Index (HDI).\(^\text{12}\) The UAE is in the

\(^{12}\) For context, GDI compared to HDI puts Mongolia in first place, and Afghanistan at 145. For adult literacy, Haiti is 3rd, and Afghanistan is again at 145. For educational enrolment, Cuba is 1st and Afghanistan is 175. The Women chapter only provides a selection from this UN authored comparative chart, highlighting certain countries as higher and lower than the UAE’s ranking. In this selection, Afghanistan is featured three times as a lowest example rating, as the UAE tries to distinguish itself from this other Middle Eastern nation known in the popular media for its poor treatment of women.
38th place overall in this GDI. The chapter also boasts a ranking of 25th in the Gender Empowerment Measure (put out by the United Nations Development Programme) out of 109 countries. This focus on the various gender and development measures shows the NMC’s keen attention to specific criteria approved by Western nations to prove that Emirati women are receiving increasingly equal treatment to men, and that the UAE government is continuing to take steps to improve these rankings. The state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda in the UAE clearly functions as a response to international human rights’ organisations calling for greater signs of gender equality.

Further inside the ten-page chapter, there is information about the achievements of Emirati women. The late president’s wife, Sheikha Fatima, is credited with orchestrating the policies of women’s “empowerment.” She is quoted as saying that women are “no longer busy claiming their rights, but exercising them” (189). The chapter goes on to state that Emirati women hold positions within the government; they are also employed as pilots, investors, bankers, business owners, engineers and police officers, and work in the fields of medicine, teaching, nursing and the military. In addition, the chapter states that Emirati women enjoy high quality healthcare, particularly maternity and child-care, provided by the government.

The chapter gives information on the General Women’s Union, a government-run organisation, “dedicated to the empowerment of women” (190). This Union initiated a “Know Your Rights” programme to inform women about federal and local legislation relevant to them. The Union is also implementing a “National Strategy for the Advancement of Women” with the United Nations Development Programme, which aims to encourage women to participate in eight key areas, including the economy, legislation and education. The chapter stresses that Emirati women are active in both regional and international arenas.
through their participation in local and international conferences and conventions related to human rights, such as the UN’s Social and Economic Council. The chapter also discusses the Arab Women’s Organization, of which the UAE is a member, whose goals include, “empowering women and building their capacities as human beings and citizens to play an effective role in society, in the labour market and in decision-making circles” (192). Strategies for portraying a more positive and accurate representation of Arab women in the media are also discussed, such as setting up a media-monitoring project and a media professions programme for women.

Image 5: Young women celebrating photo, UAE Yearbook 2010. The caption states: “Women in the UAE have long been recognised as equal partners in national development.”


Throughout the chapter, there are several more pictures of smiling young Emirati women (Image 5): they are waving UAE flags at a National Day celebration and reading Arabic script. A young woman is shown taking what appear to be professional photographs with her wide-angle lens camera, with a caption stating that, “women are making their mark in employment in areas that were traditionally male-dominated” (191). The last picture (Image 6) is of a young Emirati woman in pilot’s uniform smiling next to an airplane. Emirati women are clearly shown as “free” and “empowered” through their apparent satisfaction with their
nation and their fulfilment in a variety of professions. The NMC and local media often call upon young Emirati women as their examples of egalitarian gender parity and support for women. Emirati women are less often represented as “mothers of the nation,” which is a typical and powerful trope for promoting female citizens and nationhood (Sinha 2004). In a later section of this chapter, I will discuss this recent focus on young women generally as the bearers of social change (McRobbie 2009).


13 Although the pictured women may be married and have children, this is not shown as part of their lives in the Women chapter, expect for mentioning the high quality maternity healthcare.
Thus, the government clearly portrays itself as taking the lead role in encouraging and providing opportunities for Emirati women within the public sphere. Emirati women’s “empowerment” mainly occurs through a wide range of employment opportunities and access to higher education, and is therefore in line with liberal feminist expectations. Throughout the chapter, the words “empowerment” or “empower” were used eight times, and “rights” was employed seven times. Other words connected to the language of second-wave liberal feminism were often utilised as well, such as “advancement,” “progress,” “enhancement,” “participation,” “achievement” and “development.”

State-sponsored women’s empowerment is prevalent in the Gulf region because of the Orientalist legacy and current UN policy and rights discourse. Similar strategies are used across the region to convince outsiders of support for women. The Qatar Embassy website features “Qatari Women” as one of its main tabs on the Embassy’s homepage, among “e-government,” “History,” and “Culture and Arts” (Qatar Embassy). This page on Qatari women lists the many accomplishments and active involvement of Her Highness Sheikha Mouza, Wife of the Emir, and provides a list of the various roles Qatari women hold in education, healthcare, banking, tourism, aviation, judiciary, non-profit, politics and finance. In both the UAE and Qatar, the governments’ effort to highlight national women’s acceptance in a variety of fields, as well as their full governmental support in these endeavours, is clear. The Omani government has instilled similar policies and promotions of Omani women for the purposes of appearing liberalised and supportive of women, often despite the circumstances of life for local women (Al-Lamky 2007). In 2005, the Sultan of Oman declared, “Women will be empowered” in his address to UNESCO (Al-Lamy 2007). Al-Lamky’s (2007) study on female leaders within Oman revealed that Omani women were
aware that part of the reason why women were being encouraged or given senior positions related to enhancing the government’s image and international pressure to support women.

**Local newspapers**

Further evidence of state-sponsored women’s empowerment is found in the UAE’s local English language newspapers based in Dubai and Abu Dhabi: *Gulf News, The National* and *Khaleej Times*. These papers publish many feature articles about the successes of young Emirati women. One of my participants, connected to the newspaper industry, told me that if a young Emirati woman is doing something important, it would be newsworthy. Yet if an Emirati man does something similar, she told me, it would not be important enough to report on. Jamilah, a 23 year-old spoken word poet, said, “If a girl does something it’s a HUGE step, and if a guy does the exact same thing it’s like, ‘big whoop.’” Similarly, Aida, a 24 year-old female artist participant, told me that she was aware that English language newspaper reporters and local television news were interested in her and her work precisely because she is a young Emirati female. Aida said that she felt uncomfortable speaking on behalf of Emirati artists since she is very new to exhibiting her work, even though she is often asked to.

Some examples\(^{14}\) of headlines produced by these English language publications include: *Empower women ‘vital for growth’* (Menon 2003), *Empowering UAE women* (Al Awadhi 2007), *Bigger role for Emirati women* (Masudi 2007), *No holding Emirati women back* (Baldwin 2007), *UAE Women make their mark* (Nammour et al. 2008), *Emirati women a success story for the UAE* (Mohammed 2009), *Emirati women urged to develop themselves*

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\(^{14}\) This list of headlines are not a full discourse sample of local newspaper portrayals of Emirati women. Instead, I present a list of limited examples intended to give a sense of breadth on the ways Emirati women are written about in local English language newspapers.
and serve society (WAM 2009), *Empowering women in UAE: Government is committed to investing in their skills to boost country's growth* (Bitar 2010), *E-magazine takes aim at female stereotype* (Seaman 2010), *Emirati women love their jobs* (WAM 2010a), *Sky’s the limit for Emirati women* (Al Serkal 2012), *Empowering Emirati women* (Salem, F 2010), *Women advance with ruler’s support* (2011), *Seminar to discuss Emirati women’s empowerment* (WAM 2012), *The rise of female leaders* (Duncan 2012) and *Emirati women up the economic ante* (Bitar 2012). These articles typically feature an authority figure, such as Sheikh Mohammed, the ruler of Dubai, stating that women are at the forefront of the workforce and taking the opportunities provided by the government to reach great achievements. Usually, outside recognition is employed, such as a study from the Harvard Business Review about Emirati women’s satisfaction with their jobs, and international organisations recognising the UAE’s gender parity, much like the Women chapter.

Other feature articles from these newspapers highlight particular Emirati women and praise their ground breaking employment or creative endeavours as entrepreneurs, judges, photographers, pilots and business owners, among others. Some examples include, *UAE’s first female judge says ‘not afraid of new role’* (Mohammed 2008b), *Emirati women complete internships at NASA* (Staff Report 2012), *Emirati women police officers lead the way* (2010), *Rise of first woman on Adnoc’s marketing block* (Yee 2013), *Emirati women beat the odds to become leaders in higher education* (Swan 2013), *Sheikha Lubna voted Forbes’s most powerful Arab woman* (Shaheen 2010), *The sky is the limit, says Emirati female captain* (Bell 2013), *Mums honoured for roles in UAE police force* (2013), and *HCT women students to climb Kilimanjaro* (2013). This focus points to individual success stories of Emirati women, and these features characteristically show Emirati women’s ability to contribute to the modernisation of the UAE. All the while, the featured women maintain their “tradition”
through wearing national dress, stating that they are or will be better mothers because of their education, and thanking their families for their support. The external gaze is ever-present, as the featured women often want to “show the world what an Emirati woman can do.” It is also important to note the subtle ways in which these headlines present Emirati women as “out of place” or unusual in these roles. Therefore, “empowerment” is presented as slightly unnatural.

Examining the discourse of state-sponsored women’s empowerment within the UAE provides a basis for understanding the ways Emirati women are positioned within the global perception game, and the strategic use of modernity and tradition. This discourse addresses modern / traditional as well as empowerment / oppression in various ways, showing that these concepts are mutually constitutive, shaped by the Western gaze and the global language of feminism. As the language of feminism is used frequently in this discourse, an analysis of this strategy is important here.

**The language of feminism**

As theorists and critics of postfeminism Gill and Scharff (2011) and McRobbie (2007) show, governments, with their language of empowerment and rights, substitute for feminism by displacing its vocabulary. McRobbie (2004) writes that the language of freedom and choice are now linked with the category of young women. As a result, young women feel that there is no need for feminism, since “feminism” involves fighting or rights, and it is believed that women already have these rights. Therefore, Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2004, 2007, 2009) use the term postfeminism to describe the belief that feminism is no longer necessary because women have become sufficiently “empowered” and equal to men. Other scholars of postfeminist critique (Pomerantz, Raby & Stefanik 2013) agree that we live in a postfeminist
world, where the language of second-wave feminism is used, revised and depoliticised so that feminism is believed to be irrelevant in women’s lives. When employed by agencies of the state, McRobbie (2009) writes that words like “empowerment” and “equality” have become a feature of Western modernity, and serve as assertions of “modern” ideas about young women. The UAE governmental discourse aligns with the research cited here in order for the UAE to prove its connection to modernity.

McRobbie (2009) points out that “empowerment” and “rights” draw upon the discourse of feminism, but do so in very individualistic terms rather than in a way that encourages a collective feminist movement. Similar to the UAE government, Gill and Scharff (2011) argue that the Labour and Sarkozy governments of the UK and France respectively have intentionally become involved in delivering women’s rights so that feminist organising would no longer take place. Young women are thus offered specific sorts of freedom and empowerment as a substitute for what a feminist politics might bring about (Gill & Scharff 2011). McRobbie (2007) echoes this idea by explaining that governments are now taking care of young women, who are so busy with educational and employment opportunities that they have no time for feminist politics. McRobbie (2007) states that the focus is upon what women can do, rather than what they should do. Since women are now the subjects of governments’ attentions, it appears as though they are now worthy, and no longer in need of feminism (McRobbie 2007). This relates to the official UAE government discourse, which highlights the rulers’ “modern” sensibility toward women’s empowerment, freedom and choice, while also discouraging a feminist movement, if such a movement was likely to occur. Any disadvantages women face serve as a reminder that the government continues to play an important role in women’s lives (McRobbie 2007).
McRobbie writes of young women:

They are invited to recognize themselves as privileged subjects of social change, perhaps they might even be expected to be grateful for the support they have received. The pleasing, lovely, capable and “becoming” young woman, black, white or Asian, is now an attractive harbinger of social change.

(2007: 722)

Emirati women are encouraged to see themselves and their collective but personal achievements as part of the social change taking place within the UAE’s modernising project. Ringrose points to a new “seductive narrative about girls’ educational and workplace success, where girls have become a ‘metaphor’ for social mobility and social change” (2007: 472). Even more broadly, Baker asserts that it is now common knowledge that young women are seen as the “particular beneficiaries of the reconfigured conditions associated with late modernity,” and are the “success stories of current times” (2007: 54). Of the UK, McRobbie writes that the young woman has become “an active and aspirational subject” (2007: 727) within education and employment. I argue the same for Emirati women of the UAE, as their government’s particular focus on young women’s “empowerment” is a relatively recent way to signal modernity. McRobbie (2007) also points out that young women in the UK are shown to be the ones who can overcome the obstacles of the former class system. Relatedly, this can be seen in the UAE as well, as young Emirati women are called “ground breaking” in the ways in which their employment takes them into fields and areas of interaction that would not have been possible in pre-oil times.
The discourse of emancipation, focusing on rights, freedoms, choices and empowerment is at once attempting to address the concerns of feminists (Lazar 2011), as well as distancing itself from feminism by encouraging women to freely choose to be their true “feminine” selves and not “act like men.” Singapore has faced a similar situation, where women had been “given” equality with men through the “Women’s Charter,” before women in the West were fighting for their equal rights (Lazar 2001). Lazar (2001) notes that since women have been “given” their rights, Singapore is a place where women feel distant from feminism as known in the West. And yet the language of feminism still occurs, presumably to create a counter-Orientalist discourse for the international community to recognise Singapore’s modernity. In that way, empowerment lies within individual women who can take advantage of the government provided opportunities, rather than within a collectivity of women. This point resonates with my female participants’ negative responses to words like “feminism,” analysed in the following chapter. Since empowerment is the most popular word used in the Women chapter and local news headlines, it is important to deconstruct this term.

*To be empowered*

Empowerment was once seen as a tool of liberation pedagogy from Paulo Freire (1970) in Latin America, aimed at emancipating the poor, who were mainly women. The language of empowerment was then taken up by development discourse in the 1990s, focusing on a woman’s ability to choose, speak and act (Parpat 2010). The UK Department for International Development (DFID) defines empowerment as “individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercise choice, and to fulfil their potential as full and equal members of society” (quoted in Smyth 2007: 584). Thus, the test of empowerment has become a woman’s ability to challenge gender hierarchies (Cornwall & Brock 2005). Parpat (2010) has noted that women’s empowerment and agency within recent gender and development
literature is often aligned with speaking out against patriarchal authorities and having individual choices. Women who do not speak out are seen as passive, lacking and failures. Parpart (2010) reminds us that it is not always possible for women in every situation to speak out, and critiques the connection between voice and agency. More broadly, she calls for new ways of theorising agency and empowerment, a call that I answer in the following chapter.

Gill (2012) and Riordan (2001) point out that the word empowerment has currently lost its meaning, since it has been widely used in popular discourse, commodified to sell women everything from makeup to cosmetic surgery to laundry detergent. Gavey responds to the term empowerment “with a sense of fatigue” because of its co-optation and de-politicisation, and ultimately decides it is “too conceptually flabby to be useful in anchoring feminist debates” (2012: 719). Gill argues that feminist notions of empowerment “have been taken up and sold back to us emptied of their political force” (2012: 743). Along with Riordan (2001), Gill (2012) asks why “empowerment” has become so individualised, and disconnected from issues of power, injustice, sexism and racism. Measuring one’s level or attainment of empowerment is also highly problematic in its subjectiveness. Who can say when a person is or is not empowered? When and how can a person determine whether or not she is empowered herself? With all this in mind, then, how can true empowerment be identified? “Empowerment” is also a slippery term since it implies active and passive subjects; empowerment is often something that is done to someone so that they can have agency. With this in mind, it is unclear whether the term means that a subject is becoming actively “empowered,” or is passively receiving the means to “empowerment.” The term also begs the question: what are women empowered to do, exactly? In the case of the UAE, Emirati women are empowered to be part of the UAE capitalist system, supporting male rulers and the patriarchal system.
This idea of what empowerment means and looks like needs problematising. Supporting patriarchy through capitalist activity should not be the implicit goal, but instead should be challenged by researchers. Gill (2012) argues that researchers should cease using the term empowerment as an analytical concept. This research has found the term difficult in its overuse, its lack of clarity over who is being empowered by whom and for what purpose, its employment to appease international human rights organisations, and its focus upon paid work in male-dominated fields as the ultimate goal. Clearly, my aim is not to determine whether or not Emirati women are empowered, but to deconstruct and critique the term’s application to Emirati women by the government. This analysis of the UAE official discourse sits within the backdrop of larger discourses on modern and traditional. While “empowerment” is linked to modernity, Emirati women cannot be seen as only copying Western ideals, but must be seen as creating their nation as “different-but-modern” (Sinha 2004: 183).

**Portraying modern and traditional**

To portray Emirati women as modern *and* traditional, another NMC publication from 2008, called “Women in the United Arab Emirates: A Portrait of Progress,” states:

> The UAE’s achievement is perhaps best typified in the evolution and growing prominence of Emirati women as partners and contributors in this remarkable nation-building process … *creating a bridge between the traditional and the modern* without sacrificing the heritage and culture that defines this society’s national identity. (National Media Council 2008, emphasis added)
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The NMC is very consciously demonstrating that Emirati women can be both powerful forces within the public sphere and repositories of Emirati heritage within the private sphere.

For another example, on the Women chapter’s final page, Sheikha Fatima is quoted as saying, “women must pursue education and keep abreast of progress, while at the same time remaining true to their identity, national allegiance, religious teachings and cultural values” (195). State-sponsored women’s empowerment stresses women’s role as markers of modernity and cultural bearers, as Sheikha Fatima reminds women to remain “Emirati” in their values and sense of identity.

A related aspect of promoting the UAE as a global financial success involves, to a lesser extent, exhibiting the country’s traditions and “exotic” origins. This exoticism is most noticeably performed through Emirati women’s embodiment of cultural tradition through the abaya and sheyla. These outfits are typically worn in “official” images of Emirati women, but this dress code is not enforced. While Emirati men most often switch between Western dress and their kandouras, women are rarely portrayed in anything outside of their national dress. Through the focus on women’s traditional values as embodied by the national costume, as well as other adornments and symbols of modernity — such as designer handbags and sunglasses, and the Western-style clothes worn underneath — women become the site of this “exoticism” to Westerners and cultural tradition holders to local citizens (Al Dhaheri 2009). International tourism appeal is all about producing difference (Patil 2011). Thus, the governmental portrayals of Emirati women wish to convey that the UAE as a whole is “just like you,” but also exotically different.
These (Image 7) references to aspects of the “traditional” are few, however, compared to demonstrations of “modern-ness.” Yet, these portrayals of “modern-ness” are created only in light of the more prominent Orientalist discourse linking tradition to women’s oppression in the Middle East. To avoid this, the traditional is a shadow presence, as these documents attempt to prove that Emirati women are educated, healthy, employed, satisfied and “empowered,” all because of the government’s policies. Yet, the traditional is necessary to show that the UAE is not merely imitating Western modernity, but has its own culture to bring “forward” into the modernised UAE. Sinha sees nationalism outside the West as developing through difference from the modern West, creating these spaces as “different-but-modern” (2004: 183). This “different-but-modern” approach has taken place in countries like the UAE that were not former colonies and were not founded upon anti-colonialism. Sinha’s (2004) point highlights that while nations and nation building projects have similar aims, they
are also created in different ways, on opposing sides of the imperial divide. This “different-but-modern” approach is apparent in the UAE official discourse through their portrayal of women.

**Time as progress, time as loss**

The arguments put forth regarding colonists’ conception of time and its effects on the colonised (Fabian 1983) underpin Emiratis’ desire to showcase aspects of their modernity through Emirati women’s visibility and the legitimacy of their traditions. Fabian (1983) describes time as a stream, where some societies are flowing upstream, evolving, developing, modernising, and others are flowing downstream; these are the tribal, traditional, or Third World societies. He argues that anthropologists use time when writing about the Other as savage, primitive and tribal, creating temporal distance (1983). These conceptions reveal the long-standing way in which European countries viewed the “Other” in terms of temporality, establishing superiority and distance through these mechanisms of time, affirming difference as distance.¹⁵ Time developed into a geography of social power, and those observed by anthropologists are continually placed within a time other than that of the present of the producer of the anthropological discourse (Fabian 1983). The colonial gaze views modernising attempts by non-Western countries as inauthentic and imitative of the West, while the past or traditions are seen as authentic and specific (Fabian 1983; Moore 2011b). Thus non-Western countries do not emerge into the modern world as authentically situated within their own unique context, but as imitations of the West that would necessarily have to lose their traditions and culture in order to adopt modernity. This is the discourse that the

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¹⁵ I acknowledge here that Othering is not simply about devaluing, but can also be romanticised as well as feared. In this case, participants are responding to a kind of Othering that they most often perceive as devaluing, and that is why I am discussing it in this way.
government and participants reflect upon and speak back to, as modern and traditional are intertwined in order to demonstrate Emirati’s authentic modernity, or “different-but-modern.”

The UAE discourse on Emirati women appears to be reacting to this colonial notion of time by showing that women, who serve as a symbol of the UAE, are modern and retain aspects of their tradition that do not detract from but instead add to their authentic modernity. The country is not, in effect, “back in time.” Official literature wishes to show that the country is instead fully present, not vastly distanced from the metropoles of European, American and Asian cities. In many ways, then, the official UAE discourse is attempting to appease the Western conception of modernity as the linear goal of any society and showing signs of achieving this goal through representations of Emirati women.

Longva importantly points out that most writing about Kuwaiti women (which can be broadened to encompass the entire Arabian Gulf region) focuses on “modernization versus tradition,” where women are caught in the middle, “as victims of an antiquated patriarchal system that fights for its own survival” (1997: 188). Similarly, political scientist Tetreault writes about the “impossible dream”: that a Gulf country such as Kuwait can be both “developed” and “traditional” at the same time (2001: 203), a seeming contradiction and “dream” which can be applied to the UAE as well. The UAE’s official discourse attempts to prove that the “impossible dream” of being both a traditional and developed nation can be achieved through the symbolic role of Emirati women.

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16 I refer to studies done in Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman, and use examples from Qatar’s embassy website, for several reasons. There is limited literature available on national women within the Emirates that relates to my study. The situations for women within other Gulf countries, particularly Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain, is relatively similar, and therefore provides the most effective examples available. This condition also points to the gap in knowledge focused on Emirati women’s experiences.
Despite the focus on Emirati women’s empowerment in official discourse, there are counter narratives found within international human rights publications on the Gulf and the United Arab Emirates.

**Counter narratives**

Freedom House, a US-based human rights advocacy NGO, researched various drawbacks to Emirati women’s purported rights. The organisation has documented Emirati families forbidding their daughters to work, Emirati women’s lack of participation in the formal economy, and employers’ reluctance to promote young Emirati women whom they believe will soon marry and leave their jobs in a few years (Kirdar 2010). Women have few opportunities for professional development or promotion, as men are often shown more respect than women in the workplace. Women do not achieve promotions at the same rate as men within the executive branch (Kirdar 2010). Emirati women are more likely to earn less than Emirati men because of the positions they take up and gender discrimination.\(^{17}\) Women are prohibited from “hazardous, arduous, or physically or morally harmful work” by the Ministry of Labour (Kirdar 2010: 9). Family conflicts are often cited as the reason why Emirati women resign from employment. Of the Emirati population, 57.6% of men are employed and 14.9% of women (UAE National Bureau of Statistics 2012). Emirati women make up 2.9% of the total workforce of the UAE (Kirdar 2010).

Domestically, Kirdar (2010) has also found that Emirati women can be restricted from leaving the country without permission from their husbands or guardians. Emirati women are prohibited from marrying outside of their religion, while Emirati men are allowed up to four wives, and men can divorce simply by stating their wish to do so. An Emirati woman must be

\(^{17}\) The same criticisms have been found in Oman, despite the Omani government’s rhetoric of supporting and promoting women (Al-Lamky 2007).
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granted a divorce from her husband. If divorced, a woman receives custody of female children until they are 13 and males until they are 10, at that point the ex-husband is given custody. If the mother remarries she forfeits her rights to custody of the children from the previous marriage. Police are reluctant to interfere in instances of domestic abuse as issues between married couples are seen as private (Kirdar 2010).

Other gendered restrictions participants have spoken to me about include not being allowed to travel alone, feeling pressure to wear the abaya and sheyla, and not being allowed to work in less prestigious fields. In a larger sense, Kirdar (2010) also points out that the UAE’s “state-sponsored feminism … does not present a meaningful change on the societal level” (13), since the government appointments Emirati women have received often offer no real power, and Emirati women in general lack control over policy decisions (Kirdar 2010).

Gallant (2008) argues that the rulers’ leadership of the UAE and its policies toward women have reinforced the patriarchal power structure, which often portrays women as childlike and in need of guidance from a father figure. It could be said that Emirati women have moved from a private patriarchy under the control of men in their families, to a public patriarchy, “where women experience the patriarchal control of a larger community of men” (Sinha 2004: 197). Similarly, Al-Lamky (2007) notes that male privilege is still perpetuated and women are still subordinated, despite the developments to the region and the recognition of women therein.

18 For example, Emirati women would find it difficult to work in hospitality or retail, since these jobs do not convey a reputable status or education level. Gallant (2008) writes about one of the participants in her study who had trouble gaining her parents’ acceptance to work as a receptionist in a hotel. Similarly, one of my participants told me that she was surprised while shopping in a Mac makeup store in Dubai to see that the saleswoman was an Emirati. She asked this young woman how her family had allowed her work in retail, and the saleswoman said that it was only a temporary job and her parents knew she was looking for more prestigious work.
As Lazar (2001) points out in her case study in Singapore, what is given can be taken away in light of other nationalist concerns. Lazar writes:

Therefore, the granting of equality to women in certain aspects of the ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres of life is not to be mistaken for a comprehensive or radical change in the traditional gender order. Indeed, because of its fluid, non-committal nature, aspects of equality granted may—in principle and in practice—be retracted. (2001: 72)

State-sponsored women’s empowerment is aligned with patriarchy and cannot be mistaken for radical change of the traditional gender order.

Considering these limitations, then, why do Emirati women still take up the gendered subjectivities offered by their government rather than seeking an alternative? Chapter Five offers an answer to this question.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has analysed the government’s discourse of modern and traditional as applied to Emirati women within the UAE to demonstrate the aims of the UAE’s state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda. These conceptualisations of modern and traditional illustrate that these terms are reconstituted and shaped by pre-existing discourses. This chapter argues that the official narrative responds strategically to established discourses to signal Emirati women’s modern-ness as symbols of the nation, as well as the sense that the UAE is “authentically” modern: modern in its own way, not simply a copy of Western modernity. This is achieved through representations of Emirati women’s traditions as a shadow presence,
from their embodiment of tradition through dress to their preservation of tradition. The discourse of modern and tradition is connected to the language of women’s empowerment around the world. Women’s empowerment is a sign of modernity, and often used by governments to ensure that young women are “taken care of” by government policies rather than feminist collective movements disturbing patriarchy. How do Emirati women feel about this official discourse? The following chapter analyses empirical data and theorises female participants’ responses to this official discourse.
Chapter Five

Investing in State-Sponsored Women’s Empowerment

‘State feminism’ is generally more a demonstration of rhetoric or political symbolism, concerned primarily with projecting a progressive image internationally, than it is a real motor for change.

Gema Martín Muñoz,
Feminism in the Arab World: The Silent Revolution,
Quantara (http://en.qantara.de), May 4, 2012

Emirati women are out there making a name for themselves, not just in the backdrop. To actually have our name in the chapter shows what we used to be and what we are now. I’m quite proud that we have our names in a book instead of just men. It shows how important we are.

Fatma, 22 year-old filmmaker participant

The representative participant quote above shows that the UAE’s state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda is accepted and unchallenged by the Emirati women in this study.

Through the theoretical lens of Hollway’s (1984) discussion of “investment” in shaping subjectivities, I argue that Emirati women re-inscribe the government’s state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda to reach complex figurations of their roles, rights, empowerment and expectations as Emirati women in UAE society. Participants negotiate the terms upon which they engage in the dominant discourses relied upon by the UAE government, and their “investment” within these discourses (Hollway 1984; Moore 1994). Therefore, I more broadly argue that participants exhibit “invested agency” in relation to the national discourse as seen through their responses to the Women chapter.

Even though female participants accept the underlying liberal feminist language tied to the Women chapter and state-sponsored women’s empowerment generally, they utilise the principles of Islamic feminism (although without explicitly using the term), to counter
Western feminist agendas, and constitute their roles as Emirati women. Because participants do not recognise the state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda as “feminist” or using feminist language, they, along with other groups of young women studied in Australia (Baker 2007; Stuart & Donaghue 2012) and the UK (McRobbie 2007), feel they have “no need for feminism,” since their rights and opportunities have been given to them. Feminism, which is understood by female participants as women collectively fighting for rights and equality with men, has been made redundant. Female participants are explicitly against feminism as a concept, as they say it is “not an issue here,” and they “don’t even think of it.” The principles of Islamic feminism, such as gender complementarity and “natural” female roles, are used by participants to counter what they see as a Western feminist agenda.

Unlike other Third World women’s movements often researched (Afshar & Barrientos 1999; Deeb 2006; Erickson & Faria 2011; Jamal 2009; Jayawardena 1986; Mahmood 2005), Emirati women have no civil society or independent religious organisations for women that are not state-run (Krause 2009). Along with investment in state-sponsored subjectivities, female participants feel that they “owe” the government for their support of Emirati women, which includes complicity with patriarchal structures. Western, liberal feminist understanding might view Emirati women’s complicity with state-sponsored women’s empowerment, and lack of non-governmental and civil society women’s organisations, with suspicion as a major barrier to “freedom” and “emancipation” (Afshar & Barrientos 1999; Naples & Desai 2002; Wichterich 2000). ¹⁹ Similarly, given that the Women chapter and local media’s focus upon Emirati women is exploitative and othering, it is easy to understand why a researcher might expect or measure for resistance against state-sponsored women’s empowerment in the UAE.

¹⁹ I am not arguing that scholars should not analyse resistance movements, or that there aren’t any movements worthy of study, nor am I critiquing these authors for their chosen research focus. I am trying to convey the sense that the expectation of women’s resistance has become part of the literature on the relationship between women and globalisation, and that this does not always need to be the case.
Such a Western, liberal feminist perspective might concentrate on establishing separate civil society women’s organisations in the UAE to gain more power and upset the patriarchal structure and achieve “agency” and meaningful “resistance.” This perspective is based upon a discourse of rights and speaking out; it is grounded in the agency / oppression binary, where subjectivity and agency are formed separately. While I acknowledge the appeal of this response, other scholars have questioned the premise of the agency / oppression binary.

Davids and van Driel (2009), among others (Bulbeck 1998; Mohanty 1991), criticise the “orthodoxy” of this binary. Davids and van Driel state that women are often represented “unidimensionally, as local victims of evil global processes, or as heroines (supposedly) fighting against or resisting these global processes” (2009: 906). As Pedwell argues, “subjectivity and agency often develop simultaneously, in and through one another, rather than independently of one another” (2011: 195). In addition, Bulbeck (1998) critiques analyses that seek to define women’s agency as based on a demonstration of their individual rights, and points to other ways to think of the self and one’s capacity to act in the world. Similar to this critique, Mahmood (2005) has shown that agency is not about resisting norms, but the ways one inhabits those norms. My research aligns with these critiques, as female participants demonstrate invested agency within the official discourse for the benefits it provides and promises.

The unanimous approval of the Women chapter among female participants provides a lens through which to explore the possibilities of agency and investment theories in relation to participants’ responses. The participants of this study are not simply suffering from “false consciousness,” but hold onto investments in their roles as “modern,” educated, employed and “traditional” Emirati women. While state-sponsored women’s empowerment within the
UAE does not present a “meaningful change on the societal level” (Kirdar 2010: 13), the conditions of its benefits and investment by a majority of young Emirati women cannot be ignored.

Participants lay out a complex case for incorporating state-sponsored women’s empowerment agendas into their personal worldviews on Emirati women’s opportunities, achievements and possibilities within the public and private spheres. Participants’ responses show that they are re-inscribing the UAE government and media’s portrayals of “empowered” Emirati women, and rejecting stereotypical representations of oppressed women, who are believed to be lazy, victimised and spoiled (Al Amri 2013; Reilly 2012; Seaman 2010). As Moore asks, “can people actively recognize and choose the subject positions they take up, and to what degree are they able to resist the terms of dominant discourses?” (1994: 4). This chapter investigates this question by examining the positions female participants inhabit, negotiate and reject through the discourses offered to them.

**Agency and investment**

The concept of agency is central to discourses of empowerment. While there are many conceptual frameworks concerning agency, theories and critiques presented by Hollway (1984), Moore (1994), and Rose (1996) most effectively elucidate my findings. Aligned with the critiques cited above, these theorists refuse to see agency as resistance against a patriarchal oppressor that wishes to control and reject female subjectivity. Rose (1996) writes that acts of resistance should not necessitate a theory of agency. He writes that resistance, “needs no account of the inherent forces within each human being that love liberty, seek to enhance their own powers or capacities, or strive for emancipation, that are prior to and in conflict with the demands of civilization and discipline” (Rose 1996: 35). Hollway (1984),
Moore (1994) and Rose (1996) all deny the binary of domination and resistance and look toward more complex processes of investment in certain gendered subject positions where the promised social and material benefits are often real, as well as often limited.

Hollway’s (1984) theory of investment in certain kinds of gendered subjectivities proposes that there is some incentive or fulfilment in this subject position. She argues that any social analysis of subjectivity must account for a person’s investment in that subject position, and why investment in a different discourse has not taken place. She posits that our subject positioning is not involuntary, since if that were the case we would not see any kind of difference in subjectivity. Variability is then produced, Hollway (1984) states, by the multiplicity of discourses, consequences and interpretations available. She is keenly focused on why women take up different subjectivities from each other: what is the investment some women see that others do not? Disruptions of certain subjectivities’ reproduction, and social change, can occur when gender difference is no longer complementary but contradictory, producing alternatives that challenge other discourses. When old and new exist together, Hollway posits, and this contradiction is recognised, then this is the site of “potential change as much as it is a site of reproduction” (1984: 260). For Emirati women, reproduction appears to dominate challenges.

Investment has been used by Moore (1994) to describe the motivation to adopt certain subject positions. These investments are emotional and vested interests, and can provide tangible benefits within the dominant discourse, rewarding the “senior man, the good wife, the powerful mother or the dutiful daughter” (Moore 1994: 64). This investment relates to intersubjectivity, our relationship to others, as well as real economic and social benefits (Hollway 1984; Moore 1994). Such relationships also extend to modes of subjectivity that are
tied to power relations and economic realities (Moore 1994). Rose (1996) also points to the significance of intersubjectivity to counter the assumption that people are coherent subjects who are formed by a regime of government. Rose notes that human beings “live their lives in a constant movement across different practices that subjectify them in different ways” (1996: 35). The acknowledgement of such interrelations between people and discourses can be employed to describe the wider cultural relations that urge people into certain subjectivities.

Investing in a gendered subject position also has its limitations. Moore writes, “Such interest or commitment resides in the relative power, conceived of in terms of the satisfaction, reward or payoff, which a particular subject position promises, but does not necessarily provide” (Moore 1994: 64). The investment might not “pay off,” leaving subjects to negotiate and rationalise the benefits of their gendered subjectivity. Any sense of satisfaction might be in opposition to other feelings, which are often irrational and unintentional. Yet Hollway (1984) asserts that there are reasons to invest in certain kinds of gendered subjectivities that are much more complex than seeking to resist oppression from more dominant forces, such as the state or patriarchal authority.

McNay (2000) also focuses some of her conceptual framing of agency on investment, writing that while gender relations are being renegotiated, men and women have ingrained investments within the established ideals of male and female roles that cannot be easily changed. She uses Hollway’s (1984) term of investment to explain “how individuals may be attached to their subjugation, or the investments, conscious or otherwise, that individuals may hold in deeply irrational and oppressive gender identities” (McNay 2000: 77). While Emirati women do not take up “deeply irrational and oppressive” subject positions, the UAE’s state-
sponsored women’s empowerment agenda does ultimately reinforce patriarchal rule and women’s complicity with it.

Investing and possessing agency within a certain gendered subject position is also limiting as a form of liberation, since agency is just another form of subjectification that calls upon human beings to act as subjects of a specific sort of freedom (Gannon and Davies 2007; Rose 1996). Moore also points out that the sense of benefit or pleasure received from investment in a gendered subject position only relates to specific modes of “institutionalized discourses and practices, that is, in the context of certain sanctioned modes of subjectivity” (1994: 64). Therefore, the kind of freedom and possible benefit remains within the prescribed subject position, and is difficult to move beyond.

Investment also offers particular ideal identities which one can imagine embodying. Moore (1994) explains the important role of fantasy in one’s subconscious motivations for taking up multiple subject positions, some of which can contradict each other. She argues that we present the person we would like to be and how we would like to be viewed by others. She writes that:

Such fantasies of identity are linked to fantasies of power and agency in the world. This explains why concepts such as reputation are connected not just to self-representations and social evaluations of self, but to the potential for power and agency which a good reputation proffers. … The use of the term ‘fantasy’ is important here because it emphasises the often affective and subconscious nature of investment in various subject positions, and in the social strategies necessary to maintain that investment. (Moore 1994: 66)
These fantasies are played out as female participants speak of the ease with which other women and they themselves embody the many roles and attitudes Emirati women are strongly encouraged to enact. Female participants are aware of what they are asked to be — “modern,” educated, career-driven women who also embody and convey “traditional” values as well as wear national dress. These participants want to see themselves fulfilling these roles. They want others to see them as women who can “do it all,” which is a fantasy of power and agency as explained in the quote above. In this case, that means knowing, embodying and passing on cultural and moral values, as well as demonstrating competence and achieving fulfilment in the world of work. As I will argue in the next section, taking up this subject position certainly produces benefits, but also creates multiple and high expectations that can be difficult and confining to embody and enact.

Within the UAE, the government generates a sense of agency for Emirati women. While structurally patriarchy remains the dominant form of power, Emirati women are highly invested in their subject positions as empowered Emirati women with the freedom to become educated and maintain careers. Through this investment they are rewarded with material and social benefits, despite some of the disadvantages that also occur. While the theory of investment explains Emirati women’s subject position, this idea must be considered as part of the “freedom” available within the state-sponsored women’s empowerment discourse.

**Investing in state-sponsored women’s empowerment**

During interviews with nearly all participants, I presented the Table of Contents page of the 2010 Yearbook and asked for each participant’s response to the Women chapter. I also attempted to learn participants’ views about the local media portrayal of Emirati women, and
how female participants felt about their roles as “modern” and “traditional” Emirati women. In this section I argue that there are a number of reasons to invest in the position offered by the UAE’s state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda.

The overwhelming response to the Women chapter in the 2010 UAE Yearbook was that it was a very positive representation that honoured Emirati women’s importance, especially at the present moment. While many admitted that the category of “Women” did not quite fit among the other chapter titles, all the female participants were still pleased with the Content Page and Women chapter, stating that the chapter was meant to tell people outside the UAE that Emirati women have experienced positive changes because of the country’s unification and modernisation. Female respondents nearly unanimously felt that the chapter exhibited the progress of women — their circumstances in pre-oil days and their current status as Emirati women with a plethora of education and employment opportunities. When looking back to the positions of women in pre-oil days, participants today expressed gratitude for their modern lifestyles and therefore invested in the support they receive to become “modern,” educated and employed women. Baker (2007) similarly found that young Australian women also compared their lives to previous generations and stated that their freedoms and opportunities are thankfully much greater. While there are similarities between these reflections, Emirati women also importantly consider the Orientalist gaze, which sees them as lacking these opportunities and choices. Therefore, female participants are even more invested in showing and cherishing these “freedoms” that they didn’t even have to fight for.

Aida, a 24 year-old visual artist, met me at the Lime Tree Café. With a waft of Arabian perfume around her, she offered me a kiss on each cheek. We sat upstairs as she picked at a salad, shy to speak and eat at the same time. She pointed out that a country is always judged
by the way its female citizens are treated, and the way women act reflects on the country itself:

I think if I had to open this book, I think maybe I will jump right away … from “History” to “Women” because … to me, it tells me a lot about the country. For example, if I have to compare to Saudi Arabia … I would think I would read the first thing about women. … I would want to see what they had done so far for women.

When compared to other Gulf Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, and other Middle Eastern countries involved in current revolutions, participants stated their appreciation for their country’s stability and promotion of Emirati women. Awareness of the global perception of women’s rights as markers of the country’s development encourages investment in the subject positions offered to female participants by the government. Emirati women are also invested in highlighting their differences, particularly from Saudi Arabian women, whom most participants expressed sympathy toward for their lack of rights. In this case, participants expressed pride in representing the UAE as a country that treats women in the “right way,” and Emirati women display this pride through wearing national dress, attending university and seeking out fulfilling careers, which do not disrupt the patriarchal structure.

These participant responses display the importance of the government’s state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda (even if they do not know and / or would not use the term) in

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20 Bodies of women often equal bodies of the state (Yuval-Davis 1997), as women’s bodies have been used politically in the attempted destruction of nations and ethnicities. Even though Emirati women have not experienced such treatment, it is important to be aware of the lengths to which such identification can and has gone.
their understanding of women’s opportunities, and of how Emirati women’s achievements and equal opportunities to men can become known around the world. Huda, a 25 year-old media producer, stated that the Women chapter exists because the UAE wants to tell the world that it cares for women:

It does not mean that everything is easy for us. Maybe also that’s why our government, our country, focus on women. Because they want others to know that women are supported, so that women … know that our government is supporting us as women.

Participants therefore acknowledge, as Al-Lamky’s (2007) Omani female participants also recognised within their country, that the government’s representation of Emirati women’s unfettered ambition and freedom is not the entire picture. Yet this picture is necessary to show outsiders as well as other Emirati women that powerful support is present in Emirati women’s lives. This is aided by comparison to other Arab nations’ treatment of women, and the widely held understanding that the Western world thinks Emirati women (along with Gulf / Arab women) are oppressed and without rights. Many participants were aware that the Women chapter spoke to Western Orientalist perspectives of the Middle East, and stated that this chapter should exist to tell Western countries that women are not oppressed in the UAE. For example, Shamma, a 23 year-old visual artist, stated the reason she felt the UAE government included a chapter on Women but not on Men:

Maybe because … the UAE is really supportive … of the women to show they are not unequal or being treated unfairly. … In the Arab world they focus on the women and how they are being treated by the men, but don’t talk about the men
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… always the woman. So this shows that women do have a voice and do have rights.

This quote highlights Shamma’s awareness of the Orientalist perception, and her alignment with the government’s aim to change this dominant discourse. Participants are also invested in the possible benefits of being perceived as “having rights” and aligning with discourses that promote this, even as contradictions to this subject position arise.

Many took a historical perspective and saw the government’s role in declaring their support of women as part of the UAE’s legacy. The late President Sheikh Zayed and his wife Sheikha Fatima championed women’s education and work opportunities, which a majority of female participants mentioned. Sheikh Zayed offered several well-known quotes about women’s roles, such as, “Islam affords women their rightful status, and encourages them to work in all sectors, as long as they are afforded appropriate respect.” And, “The basic role of women is the upbringing of children, but, over and above that, we must offer opportunities to a woman who chooses to perform other functions” (Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan: A Special Tribute 2008). Of most interest to this study is the way in which his words are conditional: women can achieve whatever they want, as long as they maintain complementary gender roles with men and preserve their family’s honour as women. As will be shown later in this chapter, female participants agree with this assessment of these general limitations to their behaviour and opportunities.

Along this line of thought, several female participants stated that the Women chapter’s purpose was to protect Emirati women by telling foreigners about their dress. In this way, foreigners could learn about why Emirati women cover, so that they do not offend Emirati
women’s privacy. Therefore, a smaller number of women saw the chapter as a way to tell foreigners about how Emirati women are different from Western women, from their limitations on kinds of work to their modest dress. They saw this chapter as a way to explain their specific cultural ideals, rather than exhibiting Emirati women as an example of similarity to Western women’s roles and achievements. Female participants do not simply take up the government’s “rights” discourse, but also invest in the “traditional” aspects, which show Emirati women as different from Western women.

Yet participants did not only discuss the divide between West and East or wider society versus international governments, but also private versus public: the family unit versus the UAE leaders. Participants often admitted that the UAE government is much more progressive than actual UAE families, which can range from more “traditional,” by encouraging daughters not to work, or more modern and open-minded, allowing daughters to work and travel, although often with some convincing. Participants expressed gratitude for the government’s progressive role in publicly promoting Emirati women in the public sphere, and saw the domestic sphere as most constraining to Emirati women’s personal and career achievements. Therefore, investment within the government’s discourse on Emirati womanhood is often seen as more beneficial than the immediate family’s ideal of how their daughters should behave. Strobl (2008) has found similar results in Bahrain, where she also concludes that the government is more progressive in its aims for women than citizens, and sees this as a result of appeals to Western audiences rather than a belief in women’s potential.

As the government offers young Emirati women more opportunities for education and employment than their families would necessarily support, investment in the subject position offered by the government does appear to generate greater material and social benefits. As
such, Emirati women often feel as though they “owe” loyalty to their government for what has been given to them. This is particularly the case when compared to what many of their families encourage, and when compared to the political instability of some Middle Eastern countries surrounding them. Government sanction of university education and employment give Emirati women a powerful institution to support their “right” to pursue careers in the public sphere. These roles become part of contributing to the UAE nation, rather than Westernisation. Hence Emirati women invest in the positions supported by the state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda for a variety of reasons. They wish to counter the Orientalist legacy and uphold their authentic “modern-ness,” or the idea that they are different-but-modern. They also wish to receive the greater promised benefits of taking up the government sponsored gendered subject position, as opposed to that imposed by one’s family or possibly found within other Middle Eastern nations. They therefore exhibit “invested agency” within the official discourse on state-sponsored women’s empowerment.

A bridge between the modern and the traditional

Most importantly, participants agreed that women do serve as a bridge between the traditional and the modern as put forth by the NMC documents analysed in Chapter Four. This alignment with the government’s promotion of women as a bridge is best encapsulated through my conversation with Hiba, a 22 year-old visual artist:

Jillian: Tourist documents about the UAE promote Emirati women as a symbol of the UAE. And they say that Emirati women are balancing the modern and the traditional, and not sacrificing their heritage and their

21 While other Middle Eastern countries also offer free education to women, the UAE provides higher education of a consistent quality that is always taught in the English language. The UAE government gives out scholarships to Emirati men and women to study abroad. Moreover, because there is no political instability, students receive a continuous educational experience undisturbed by war or regime changes.
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tradition. So what do you think of that [idea] that Emirati women are being
highlighted as symbols of the country, for being able to balance…

Hiba: I think that’s a great way to represent Emirati women. There’s nothing
more I can add [to] what you just said. [That] is just right.

Jillian: You think it’s very true?

Hiba: Yeah.

Clearly, Hiba feels that this characterisation is accurate for herself and her beliefs about the
Emirati female population.

Yet, to serve as this “bridge” and as a symbol of the nation, a woman must follow the norms
of sexual appropriateness and female modesty to differentiate herself from “fallen” women
who are Other and / or have not followed these norms (Sinha 2004; Mayer 2000). While
sexuality was not often brought up by participants, when I met Amal, a 24 year-old writer, at
Costa Coffee at the Jumeriah Souk, she paused in the middle of a sentence to point out a
young Emirati man wearing a kandoura and a blonde foreign woman wearing a tank top and
shorts passing by. She turned to me and said, “We can’t do that.” Here, “we” refers to Emirati
women. Emirati men are “allowed” to date foreign women, but Amal feels that she is not
allowed to be seen publicly with a foreign man. She wants to date a foreign man openly, she
told me, but knows the consequences for her and her family. She would become the subject
of gossip, and branded unmarriageable, an outsider. She laughed, and wondered what she
should expect in a country where she was harshly criticised for tweeting that the men in

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22 The actual quote I often read to participants comes from an NMC document called *Women in the United Arab
Emirates: A Portrait of Progress* (National Media Council 2008). It states, “The UAE’s achievement is perhaps
best typified in the evolution and growing prominence of Emirati women as partners and contributors in this
remarkable nation-building process … creating a bridge between the traditional and the modern without
sacrificing the heritage and culture that defines this society’s national identity.” In this case, I paraphrased the
quote for Hiba.

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Turkey were “cute” while visiting Istanbul. These observations from Amal show the ways in which serving as a national symbol of modern and traditional can certainly be constraining, particularly around issues of sexuality.23

I asked the female participants if they felt pressure or anxiety from being represented as bridging modern and traditional. Did they feel uncomfortable enacting and embodying these various roles and modes of behaviour, or being viewed as symbols of the nation’s past, present and future? On the surface, the majority of female participants answered that they did not feel any sort of pressure. Yet their descriptions of enacting these roles suggested otherwise. As Hana put it:

Under pressure? No! I think women are having a really good time! It’s not easy because what’s happening is women are starting to wear more than one hat now. They’re working, they’ve got families, husbands, they’re breadwinners, they have to be a good daughter and daughter-in-law, a good wife, and a good friend, and a good sister and and … a lot of responsibilities. They are very busy and it’s very difficult having that work / life balance … A lot of really strong women out there, very admirable.

It does in fact appear that pressure and anxiety might be the right words to describe the now commonplace understanding that Emirati women wear “many hats.” Yet those who are strong and independent appear to make this juggling of career and care-oriented roles look

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23 For another example, Fatima, a 22 year-old filmmaker spoke to me about the phenomenon of boyats, female students at her all-female university who act like men, and befriend one of the more feminine women in order to engage in a couple relationship. About this she said, “This is becoming a giant problem. Every year I see how big it’s becoming.” When gender and sexuality attitudes arise outside of the traditional norms of Emirati society, many react negatively to uphold Emirati women as proper symbols of the nation.
easy and admirable. This busyness is part of “modern” life, and Emirati women invest in fulfilling the multiple roles assigned to them.

Like many Western women, the “double bind” of work and family life is very much part of Emirati women’s lives, as they do want to have fulfilling careers they are passionate about and a family to care for. Aida stated:

The way I see myself is that I love [that] I’m allowed to work. I love to work. I’m working right now … I have certain ideas, like I have goals in my life. One of them is making a family and … when I reach the stage of making the family, I don’t want to be stuck with just making the family. I would want to do my own thing.

Both of these desires are present in the NMC documents regarding Emirati women as a bridge between modern and traditional, and nearly all of the participants in this study were eager for modern ideals of careers and fulfilling work, as well as traditional ideas of family life, seeing themselves as the possible breadwinners, primary caretakers of the home and children, and cultural preservers. Their roles are extensive, and feeling as though they are being honoured for both their careers and their domestic roles as culture bearers does align with their understanding of themselves and women they admire. However, as mentioned in Chapter One, for many years there has been concern over Emirati men marrying foreign women. This consequentially leaves Emirati women as “spinsters,” since if they married foreign men they would lose their citizenship. This was the case until December 2011, when the law was overturned; Emirati women can now retain UAE citizenship upon marriage to a foreign man (Hellyer 2012). This restriction is not unique to the UAE. Women’s nationality
is often tied to their husbands, so that if a woman loses citizenship of her home country upon marriage to a foreigner, she becomes stateless if divorced (Sinha 2004). Outside of lower marriage costs, other reasons cited for Emirati men’s growing preference of foreign women is that Emirati women are becoming too educated and career-focused, and less interested in marriage during marriageable age (Al Abbabi 2012; Anabtawi 2012; Hasso 2011; Shaaban 2012). Even though it is known that Emirati women face the possibility of remaining unmarried and without a family, often due to career ambitions, female participants did not mention this fear, and in fact often stated the opposite: that family was lower on their list of priorities right now, and that it would happen eventually.

In her quote, Aida also highlights the attractiveness of “doing her own thing,” which the government-approved subject position promises, but does not necessarily offer. Becoming totally “modern” would mean Westernisation, but becoming totally “traditional” would leave an Emirati woman without “her own thing,” her unique goals as imagined within her individualised sense of self (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). The government-approved subjectivity offers both modern and traditional ideals, however difficult the enactment of both ideals might be. Its promise — of being able to care for a family and pass on Emirati cultural values, while also having one’s “own thing” — is attractive and empowering to Emirati women.

Emirati women are performing a wide range of roles, occupations and creative endeavours, and therefore: “The gender of tradition and modernity has produced considerable flexibility in the metaphorical role of women in national projects” (Sinha 2004: 192). And yet female participants and scholars of gender and nation have recognised that only the modest yet modern woman can serve as the symbol of the nation (Sinha 2004, 2006). That is, only a
woman who is accepted in public spaces, who has been educated and has employment opportunities, while also behaving appropriately in terms of sexuality and gender requirements, can benefit from state-sponsored women’s empowerment. This woman is modern, and able to negotiate the nation’s tension between modern and traditional.

As Rose (1996), Hollway (1984) and Moore (1994) theorise, there is no resistance to serving as this bridge or fulfilling this ideal of Emirati womanhood, but instead a negotiation about how this symbolic role is displayed and a rationalising its importance to enact. Resistance against the state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda is also limited because of Emirati cultural ideals that are shared within the Middle East, which prevent acts of individual activism and gender equality. As Rose (1996) and Moore (1994) note, certain sorts of freedom have been made available within a particular discourse of gendered subject positions, and Emirati women act from within this discourse.

**Competing feminisms**

Stirring a latte in Caribou Coffee, Shamma told me that feminism “sounds like a bad thing.” We met in Dubai Mall, a space so central and packed full of tourists that she rarely goes, except on this occasion to meet me. Even though the UAE government relies upon a liberal feminist language of women’s “empowerment” in education and employment, which participants clearly approve of, it is also evident from my findings that participants do not approve of the word “feminism” when its language is not tied to government authored documents about Emirati women. Participants perceive “feminism” as coming from the secular West, promoting strict equality between men and women, so that women “act like men.”
Particularly among female participants, Western liberal feminism is seen as portraying Arab women as oppressed and in need of saving. As Gill notes, “A certain kind of liberal feminist perspective is treated as common sense, while at the same time feminism and feminists are constructed as harsh, punitive and inauthentic, not articulating women’s true desires” (2007: 161). This is certainly the case among female participants, who felt that their “rights” as women, and their “empowerment” were givens, but that “feminism” itself had “gone too far” in its rigidity, militancy and lack of femininity.

It is also clear that participants are aware of feminism as a term that implies expected resistance against an oppressor. Female participants stressed that they do not need to fight for their rights, as their rights as women have been given to them by the UAE government. Countering the participants’ understanding of Western, “rights” feminism, participants ascribed, at least partially, to Islamic feminism. Many scholars have written about this term from various perspectives: as practitioners explaining the reasons for examining women’s issues of justice and equality from an Islamic perspective, and more critical stances arguing that the term is in fact an oxymoron (Badran 2001, 2009; Barlas 2002; Cooke 2000; Moghadam 2002; Mojab 2001; Wadud 1999). I do not wish to engage deeply in the debate over the usefulness or legitimacy of this term, but instead to utilise its most common meaning within academic dialogue and partially apply its basic tenets to participants’ understandings of feminism.

The Islamic approach to feminism focuses on the re-interpretations of the Quran and hadiths in order to show that women have not been devalued and oppressed through Islam, but in fact have been given many important rights and duties. In reaction to what is believed to be the tenets of Western secular feminism, the beliefs of Islamic feminism are seen to free women
from being treated as commodities, viewed as sex objects and robbed of their femininity, as is thought to be the case in the West (Treacher 2003). While participants conveyed this line of thinking, they were not, to my knowledge, specifically or currently engaged in *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning through personal or group-led interpretations of the Islamic texts, which characterises the practice of Islamic feminism.

Islamic feminists often pursue the idea of gender complementarity, where certain roles are ascribed to women and men, rather than gender equality (Treacher 2003). Participants were aligned with this way of thinking, as nearly all stated that there are certain jobs that only a man should do, such as construction and working as a pilot (even though the local media has featured several female Emirati pilots), as a woman doing such work would detract from her innate femininity and role as primary caretaker. Nearly all participants used this and similar examples to frame their ideal of gender complementarity, rather than equality. Foley (2004) notes that the gender complementarity approach allows women to maintain male support by not challenging the current division of labour, and thus gain respect from within these limitations. In the context of Emirati women and employment, then, their patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti 1988) depends upon male support for their roles outside the home, but women are still excluded from the majority of options for public power and are expected to do or arrange the domestic work and uphold Emirati cultural values.  

Because of men’s and women’s complementary roles, there is no burden of equality in work and home, which Islamic feminists feel has been counterproductive, and has only given women the opportunity to act like men (Treacher 2003).

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24 While it would be presumed that any married Emirati woman would have at least one maid, the use of hired help was not mentioned by female participants.
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I do not wish to imply that participants only have a choice between Western, “rights” feminism and Islamic feminism, or that they should be choosing one or the other, but that these two strands appear to be the dominant and opposed ideals of gender subjectivity that participants are responding to. While Western feminism connects to binary ideas of domination and resistance, which participants oppose, some ideals of Islamic feminism help to explain certain kinds of investments within proffered gendered subjectivities. Therefore, participants’ opposition to Western feminism shows that agency is not only a form of resistance against domination. Instead, agency includes investment in particular representations and promised realities, which may or may not be accurate.

As Weiss (2003) has found, for the Muslim world, equality is derived from the West, whereas gender equity has a place within Middle Eastern culture. Female participants often spoke about their equality of opportunity but their equity in gender roles, and appreciation for their gender difference. Abu-Lughod (2006) argues that even as Western feminists fight for Muslim women’s “rights,” many Muslim women don’t see themselves as lacking in rights. They are not self-deluded, but live on different terms than some Western feminists are familiar or feel comfortable with (Abu-Lughod 2006). The benefits of the state-sponsored subject position for Emirati women are clear, as social ties are generated by gender complementarity. As Hana put it:

The problem is the more you want to be seen as an equal to a guy the more you become more manly, whereas you can be feminine but really strong. Because if we try to be just like them, we’re showing them they’re the better race. Does that make sense? I feel you can be very strong [as a woman], but … you don’t need to be equal. You can be equal in another way. Does it make
sense? It’s more like complementing. … I’m not for or against feminism. I never think of it. I have no association. I don’t face any problems with that in the office. We don’t have that here.

Hana points out a common critique of Western feminism, and strongly distances herself from those ideals. Instead she turns to the harmony she finds within complementing gender roles. Western and Islamic feminism are the competing discourses available. Gender equity within the home and work aligns unsatisfactorily with Western liberal feminism in participants’ assessments.

Abu-Lughod (1998) explains that if women appear to fight for individual rights, this would exhibit a rejection of one’s Islamic, Arab and feminine identity. Such an act or series of acts would signal radical social deviation and extreme Western individualism (Strobl 2008). Struggling against patriarchal leadership could affect a woman’s entire family and reputation in society (Al-Mughni 2001). This concern over reputation can also explain why participants speak so highly of their government. They need patriarchal authority to support their wish to be in the public workplace. Generally, the opportunities Emirati women receive cannot be presented as their own volition that they have fought for, but given to them as their right from a patriarchal authority.

Treacher (2003) and Sinha (2006) have noted that while women of Muslim majority countries are often lauded for their part in nationalist struggles, they are denigrated for fighting for women’s rights and accused of employing Western ideals. Similarly, Amy Freeman (2004) has argued that when women demand the same rights as men within many post-colonial nations, they are quickly deemed an enemy. She uses the example of the
Moroccan struggle for independence, where women took an active role in the resistance movement. When they then demanded rights as women, however, they were silenced (Freeman, A 2004). In addition, Ho (2007) argues that Muslim women are often inhibited from speaking out within their communities, as the criticisms they present might be used against them to support the dominant discourse of the “uncivilised East”.

The limits of collective struggles against patriarchal rule are evident and considered by female participants. Feminism and feminist activism can never be separated from its national context (Sinha 2004). Within the UAE, such Western feminist models are unappealing, while the state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda promises are too great to dismiss. Emirati women reproduce patriarchal power structure, while also adhering to Emirati gender ideals, in order to maintain their voice in the public sphere as Emirati women. Therefore, investment within state-sponsored feminist subject positions provides benefits, and resistance against it would cause much loss. This research shows that there are other ways to maintain features of agency that do not involve resistance and speaking out.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explained female Emirati participants’ alignment with the subject positions offered by the UAE’s state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda. As the government is involved in a complex portrayal of Emirati women as a bridge between modern and traditional, participants themselves agree with this representation, and are honoured to be promoted in this way because of the benefits it offers. Most female participants feel indebted to the government for their opportunities and rights, which have resulted in a multiplicity of roles and duties to fulfil within the public and private spheres. However, it appears that the promised benefits of this gendered subject position have not been met, as Emirati women are
limited in major policy-making decisions, employment and challenges to patriarchal rule. Their investments are negotiated through received approval from patriarchal authority, the ability to have a voice in the public sphere, and the perceived prestige afforded to serving as a symbol of Emirati modernity.

The position afforded Emirati women, with all their lived complexity of roles and personal fulfilment, can be seen as part of Hollway’s (1984) “investment.” While the reward of greater social power and voice is offered, and to some extent given, this gendered subject position is also limiting, as described in Chapter Four. Because of the power and economic relations within the UAE, the promised positions do not become fully realised, and so must be negotiated for female participants to remain pleased with what has been offered, taken and embodied as their own ideas. Culturally embedded beliefs also play a large role within taking up this gendered subject position, as definitions of feminism, freedom and equality are imagined from within an Emirati and Islamic context, as well as influenced by global imaginings of women’s roles throughout the Middle East and the world.

Subsequent applications of investment and agency theories must also include key concepts of culturally embedded gender ideals, which allow for negotiations of gendered subjectivity, and also help define the sort of freedom available. Female participants’ alignment with this discourse shows the ways in which “modern gender and national identities have developed together and reinforced each other” (Sinha 2006: 324). Female participants are aware of this alignment and the ways in which being empowered by the government allows them entry into and power within public space and modern discourses.
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The following chapter also focuses upon Emirati women’s representation and invested agency, but within a particular setting: the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding in Dubai. Building upon Chapter Five, I next discuss young Emirati volunteers’ strategic responses to questions from the mainly Western visitors to the centre. These questions and answers revolve around the “empowerment,” “freedom,” “equality,” and “rights” of Emirati women.
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‘We’re Normal. We’re Just like You’: Gendered Practices of Cultural Understanding and Translation in Dubai

After the sundown prayer and *iftar* meal at the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding (SMCCU) in Dubai, five young Emirati volunteers and the manager of the centre stand in front of approximately forty foreign tourists and residents. The mostly Western group of visitors sit on red and white cushions in the middle of a large open room surrounding the remains of their *iftar* feast in covered silver trays. The MC for the night, Samir, a well-groomed young man in impeccable kandoura and headdress, implores the guests to ask the volunteers questions. The crowd fumbles with their paper plates and forks, still sticky from dessert, sugary globs of fried dough with date syrup.

“Anything about our culture,” Rawdha says, “like from what you’ve seen around town or at the malls…” She is wearing a fitted black abaya and sheyla covering her hair, while Fatima, next to her, has left her curly black hair uncovered, and wears a long, loose abaya. The manager, Yusef, pushes his headdress over his right then left shoulder, looking tense without a question to answer. The other two Emirati men stand on his right, smiling encouragingly at the seated visitors.

Samir tries again: “We are very open here at the Centre and have not heard any question that has offended us, so c’mon.”
“What about women’s rights?” A blonde American student visiting from the New York University campus in Abu Dhabi asks. “Do women have equal rights here?”

The volunteers smile and look to Yusef, ready to listen once again to the answer to their most common and persistent question.

This is a typical scene at the SMCCU. The main focus of their cultural events centres on visitor questions, dispelling misconceptions about Islam and Emirati culture. These question and answer sessions primarily concentrate on the issue of Emirati women’s rights, and the abaya and sheyla as a potential symbol of Emirati women’s lack of rights. This notion of women’s rights, freedom and empowerment connects to the discourses of modern and traditional discussed in Chapters Four and Five, discourses that are being used in strategic ways to represent Emirati women to global audiences. This chapter builds upon this concept by investigating a specific case of Emirati women’s self-representations within the SMCCU. This chapter extends the critique of modern / traditional binaries by analysing the Centre’s young Emirati volunteers’ strategy of aligning themselves with “modernity” through a discourse of Western, liberal choice, as well as aspects of “tradition” through exhibiting cultural difference and distinctiveness. I argue that volunteers demonstrate invested agency with the institutional discourse of the SMCCU, which is used to convince visitors that Emirati culture and the Islamic religion does not oppress women or inspire terrorism. Volunteers attempt to explain and even defend cultural practices to foreign guests using the guidelines and official discourse put forth by the SMCCU.

Many studies have looked at re-inscriptions of Muslim women’s agency and autonomy within European contexts (Bracke 2008, 2011; Fadil 2011; Fernando 2010; Jouili, J 2011;
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Scott 2007). These works have shed light on the ways Muslim women are compelled to speak back to non-Muslims concerning debates over women’s religious practices, particularly female Islamic dress. While this work has been useful in a European context, there is a gap in understanding of how Arabian Gulf women, specifically Emirati women, present, justify and defend aspects of their culture and religion to non-Emirati and non-Muslim audiences. Using interviews and participant observation collected from the programs at the SMCCU, this chapter analyses how volunteers portray Emirati women’s freedom, choice and agency to their non-Emirati visitors at the SMCCU.

While the SMCCU’s purpose is more broadly to explain aspects of Emirati culture and Islam, gender issues have become the most important aspect of cultural understanding presented, arguably because of Western preoccupation with gender difference in other cultures, and because women’s roles are seen as the markers of modernity or “backward” tradition. This chapter argues that SMCCU volunteers are involved in a complex discursive situation that involves re-inscribing Western liberal thought, particularly around gender. Volunteers align their responses with this dominant discourse, but also at times move beyond it, occasionally redefining its acceptable boundaries, and upholding significant difference. Thus these young Emirati volunteers — both men and women wearing national dress — are involved in intentionally exhibiting aspects of their “modern,” global identities and behaviours through the use of Western liberal discourses of choice and agency. Volunteers also highlight their cultural “tradition” and collective belonging through demonstrations of their distinctiveness and difference from non-Muslim visitors to the Centre. This chapter demonstrates the useful application and limitations of recent poststructural re-conceptualisations of agency and autonomy in relation to cultural understanding taking place between Emirati religious and cultural identities and non-Muslim audiences within Dubai.
While this chapter emphasizes female volunteers’ responses and the ways women are spoken about, I will also point to the broader challenges of answering cultural and religious questions in the intricate discursive setting that the SMCCU creates. Young Emirati volunteers feel immense pressure to provide the “correct” answers about their culture and religion. Participants believe they are representing their whole country, and even the entire Middle Eastern region, to their visitors. They expressed that their participation in the SMCCU is an incredible opportunity to share their culture with the world and bridge gaps in cultural understanding. Therefore, volunteers are part of global processes through the SMCCU, as they are part of explaining, defining and defending their religious and cultural practices to global audiences.

**Contexts of cultural understanding**

As shown in Chapter One, Dubai has emerged as a modernised, global city in recent decades (Elsheshtawy 2004). Global studies scholars typically connect global development to domination and inequality, a threat to local culture, and a loss of identity, tradition and sense of place (Davids & van Driel 2005; Elsheshtawy 2004). As Elsheshtawy (2004) points out, current understanding of globalisation and modernisation in the Middle East help maintain this narrative of loss, while also portraying Middle Eastern cities as disconnected from the rest of the world, and unable to achieve the developments of the West. The SMCCU considers this line of thinking within their various programs, and utilises strategies to counter these ideas.

As also mentioned in Chapter One, another key aspect of the city’s global status has been achieved through inviting an overwhelming majority population of foreign workers to the
emirate (AFP 2011b; Rosenberg 2011). The UAE’s subsequent development and the overwhelming presence of foreigners has had a downside, and reinforces a narrative of loss. Citizens and rulers have been discussing the possible threats to and loss of cultural identity, as well as how to define, display and preserve this identity, since the emirates united and the city’s development began (Casey 2010; El Sawy 2008; Fattah 2006a, 2006b; Gergawi 2011; Heard-Bey 2005; Khalaf 2005; Schedneck 2009). The SMCCU is a space where this sense of Emirati identity and narrative of loss is addressed by volunteers. They strategise to both appeal to commonalities among visitors and themselves, and attempt to show that their unique Emirati national identity and cultural differences are legitimate and admirable.

As an elite and privileged minority within a foreign population of 88% (AFP 2011b), Emiratis are often viewed by expatriate residents as rare and powerful, an unapproachable novelty. Several recent occurrences of public misunderstandings between Emiratis and Western expatriates have caused greater animosity between these two groups. For example, there was an incident involving a British woman who stripped down to her bikini in Dubai Mall when approached by an Emirati woman for wearing an inappropriate top and violating the country’s modest dress code (Casey 2010).25 These flare ups are irregular, but speak to a greater anxiety about multiculturalism and how much liberal behaviour will be allowed and tolerated within Dubai. Since tourists and even expatriates are typically in the country for only a relatively short period, the rumours and media scandals are often the only details visitors have heard about locals. Some long-term expatriates admit to having never even spoken to an Emirati, and actually knowing or befriending an Emirati is very unusual.

25 For another example, two young Emirati women started a Twitter campaign encouraging modest dress for foreigners in the public spaces of Dubai called #UAEDressCode (Watson 2012). In addition, an SMCCU volunteer and participant in this study told me about another incident where a foreign woman was crossing Jumeriah Beach Road, a popular street, wearing an open abaya over a bikini. Those travelling near the crossing would have seen a woman in a bikini, with an abaya draped over her like a beach cover-up. This participant stated that there was public outcry against this occurrence, causing locals to complain on the local radio that foreigners should not disrespect the abaya in this way.
especially for Western expatriates. As one of the SMCCU volunteer participants aptly stated, “there’s not enough of us to go around.” And, as several participants explained to me, many Emiratis also do not wish to interact with non-locals who will only live in Dubai for a short time. The SMCCU is one of the few spaces where Emiratis and non-Emiratis do interact, and therefore is an important space to investigate the deliberate representation of Emirati culture by young Emirati volunteers.26

However, these cultural programmes are not open to everyone. The cost of an SMCCU Ramadan iftar meal, or cultural lunch at other times of the year, has risen from free in 2007 to 120 dirhams (32 USD) for the iftar dinner and 70 dirhams (19 USD) for the cultural lunch in 2011. The expense of the SMCCU cultural meal events means that not everyone in Dubai can afford to be part of these programs, as they are oriented toward wealthier Western tourists and expatriates, even though the population of Dubai is overwhelmingly a South Asian majority, most of whom are male labourers. The programs are aimed for non-Muslim audiences unfamiliar with Arab culture or Islam, and therefore attract mainly Western expatriates and tourists interested in a new cultural experience. This importantly shows that the West is considered as the most valuable outsider gaze, rather than South Asia or other Arab nationalities. Moreover, the strategies of cultural translation employed, as will be discussed below, exhibit volunteers’ awareness of an ever-present external, orientalising gaze, which volunteers are obliged to respond to with hospitality, understanding and specific strategies to convince guests that Emirati culture is admirable and not as “foreign” as guests potentially assume.

26 The SMCCU functions as a non-governmental entity. However, the UAE government did donate the SMCCU headquarters to the Centre. They are funded by income from the cultural meal attendance fees, as well as other events, such as private corporate training on Emirati culture.
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The SMCCU (Image 8) is located near Dubai Creek in a restored, historic part of “old” Dubai called Bastakiya, characterised by narrow lanes and wind towers. One of the oldest residential areas in Dubai, Bastakiya was home to wealthy Persian merchants for generations, starting in the 1900s (Krane 2009a). After the discovery of oil, these Persian merchants moved to newer parts of the city. In the 1970s, Bastakiya fell into disrepair, as the homes were used as warehouses and to house migrant labourers. The area was set to be demolished, but after a visit from Prince Charles, the legend goes, Bastakiya was restored.27 The area is now home to art galleries, cafes, up-market souvenir shops and guesthouses. The SMCCU is located in one of these restored Bastakiya homes standing prominently on Al Musalla Road. Inside, the layout is typical for a “traditional” home, with a large, open, well-lit space, and several adjacent rooms, where volunteers take guests for small group discussions about Emirati culture.

Image 8: SMCCU building, downtown Dubai,
http://vision.ae/en/culture/articles/open_doors_open_minds_building_cultural_bridges

27 This information is given as part of the Bastakiya tour offered by the SMCCU.
The SMCCU’s official aim and policy is “Open doors. Open minds.” and their logo is two halves of a cracked circle being held together by a black cord (Image 9). The SMCCU aims to be that black cord holding the two sides, East and West, together.


At SMCCU events, such as cultural meals located at the Centre, volunteers begin by offering guests dates and hot beverages, and then they either lead guests into one of the side rooms for small group discussions with one of the volunteers, or remain in a larger group, eating and listening to the SMCCU manager, Yusef, answer guests’ questions, with input from the younger volunteers. At the Jumeirah Mosque Visit, another SMCCU event (at a nominal cost of 10 dirhams, or 3 USD), a female British Muslim convert explains the five pillars of Islam and how Muslims behave in a mosque to the typically seventy tourists and expatriates who take part in this tour, offered several times a week. In all SMCCU events, the majority of time is left for visitor questions, where guests are encouraged to ask anything at all about Emirati culture or Islam (Image 10 captures a typical scene). Volunteers have specific aims in answering these questions, which I will describe and analyse in later sections of this chapter.

SMCCU programs have very recently expanded to offer a cultural dinner (95 dirhams, 25 USD) event every Tuesday, a cultural brunch (80 dirhams, 21 USD) every Saturday, and the Jumeirah Mosque Visit six days a week (www.cultures.ae).
During my data collection period, I interviewed ten Emirati volunteers or presenters, all of whom had been or were currently involved with the SMCC. I attended several cultural events at the SMCCU, including *iftar* meals, cultural lunches, and the Jumeirah Mosque Visit programmes. The interviews with volunteers are thus offset by the public interactions I observed at the SMCCU. Before each interview, I informed participants that my research was about cultural understanding programmes. Since my questions prompted them to reflect upon how they answer visitor questions, participants did convey a greater level of insight than they typically would during a cultural meal at the SMCCU to guests who were new to Emirati culture and Islam. Since volunteers learned I had attended several SMCCU events, they knew to go beyond the typical answers given to foreign guests. Yet, I was still seen as an “outsider” who did not know very much about Islam or Emirati culture, and certain ideas and answers...
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were “translated” for me, a process which I will describe below. However, since I asked questions about these acts of cultural understanding and translation, the insights I received were greater than that of an SMCCU visitor. In short, my positionality did shape their answers, but the nature of my questions allowed them to provide more reflective answers.

All of the volunteers I spoke to stated that the most popular misconception about Emirati culture and Islam was the perceived oppression of Arab women, and this was the most important belief they wanted to dispel. Cultural discord between Emiratis and Western expatriates are mainly focused on gender relations in the Arab world, specifically Muslim women’s perceived lack of autonomy within their societies. This focus on gender prompts a majority of SMCCU visitors to ask if women have equal rights in the UAE, and for volunteers to respond in tactical ways. Often these questions and responses are based upon Emirati women’s dress, which inevitably centres on the body as a source of meaning and cultural definition. As Weedon states, “The meanings discursively attributed to bodies are never static but rather a constant site of struggle in which meanings can change” (2004: 14). The tactics employed by SMCCU volunteers involve this struggle for meaning, as Emirati women’s dress becomes the site of shifting definitions of agency, choice and cultural difference, and are at times re-inscribed and reimagined. Volunteers invest in the SMCCU strategies to convince guests that Emirati culture is both familiar and worthwhile. Even though the “scripted” answers to guests’ questions do not portray entirely accurate experiences, as will be shown, volunteers invest within the SMCCU’s presumption that guests believe Islam is an oppressive religion to women, and that SMCCU strategies are the most effective way to dispel these ideas.
In the next section I will argue that while studies of European Muslim women’s responses to debates over women’s roles within Islam reflect similarities to the complex discursive situation that the SMCCU volunteers experience, and have much to offer by way of comparison, there are also significant distinctions. SMCCU volunteers present various strategies in gaining acceptance, respect and even admiration from visitors, whereas the recent studies based on European Muslim women’s experiences reveals that their defence and justification of their religious practices most often only re-inscribes liberal agency.

**Choice, agency and empowerment in discourses about Muslim women**

Scholarship has demonstrated a common belief within liberal secular culture that religious women, or those living within religious societies, lack or have limited agency (Amir-Moazami, Jacobsen & Maleiha 2011; Braidotti 2008; Mack 2003; Mahmood 2001, 2005). Mahmood describes normative liberal assumptions as “the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them” (2005: 5). Similarly, Braidotti sees the dominant discourse shaping Western thought as one where Western, Christian women who are “white or ‘whitened’ and raised in the tradition of secular Enlightenment,” have been emancipated and are not in need of any liberating policies (2008: 6). However, “‘their women’ (non Western, non-Christian, mostly not white and not whitened, as well as alien to the Enlightenment tradition)” remain backward and “need to be targeted for special emancipatory social actions, or even more belligerent forms of enforced ‘liberation’” (Braidotti 2008: 6). These assumptions of liberal agency are what some Muslim women are choosing to debate, and also the assumptions that volunteers at the SMCCU are at least implicitly considering and speaking back to.
Little work has been done on such cultural negotiations within the context of a Muslim country where locals are outnumbered by a majority multicultural expatriate population. In order to appreciate the relevance of this work, researchers need to understand how other Muslim women in similar situations have used liberal agency and freedom to explain and defend their religious and cultural practices to Western audiences. Therefore, research focused on Muslim women in Europe provides an important complement and counterpart to my own study (Bracke 2008, 2011; Fadil 2011; Fernando 2010; Jouili 2011; Scott 2007). The conceptual framework of these studies derives from Mahmood (2005) and Taylor (2007), who have noted that modern liberal Western thought upholds religious ideals that conform to individual sovereignty; a person has and is expected to use their ability to freely choose their own religious beliefs and practices. Thus, the Muslim European women in the studies cited above feel compelled to describe their religious experiences on these choice-based and personalised terms.

Mahmood defines the liberal concept of agency as “the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)” (2005: 8). In this view of agency, similar to that described and critiqued in Chapter Five, women must act according to their own will, rather than custom or tradition, which is seen as an oppressive force that holds women back from self-fulfilment of personal desires. This liberal notion also holds that only when women are free from tradition and religion can they be considered autonomous and truly empowered. As shown in Chapter Five, agency has come to be understood solely as resistance against an oppressive power, yet this binary of subordination and subversion is not the only way to conceptualise the term (2005). Mahmood (2005) critiques these hegemonic assumptions from a related but new
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perspective for this thesis: feminist religious studies. In particular, she challenges the belief that people living in secular modern societies will resist and eschew religious custom and tradition, and that these features inhibit one from achieving or even realising their own desires and attaining them.

Through her research among Muslim women of the piety movement in Cairo, Mahmood (2005) contends that piety is formed externally and is then cultivated as an internal experience, rather than first understood internally and then expressed externally. Thus, the practice of veiling is not a mere representation of tradition and religious belief felt inside oneself, but an entirely different way to conceive of how a person becomes pious and expresses religiosity. Since the idea of cultivating piety externally, through wearing the veil, is unfamiliar to liberal thought, some European Muslim women potentially convert their defence of their religious practices into choices based on individualised inner experiences, even if cultivating Islamic virtues through external signs is a more accurate explanation. In addition, obligation and submission to God might be equally compelling aspects of their religious subject formation that do not carry much weight within Western liberal thought.

Using Mahmood’s (2005) critique of liberal agency, the research on Muslim women’s responses to European debates over banning Islamic female dress, particularly the headscarf and face veil, shows that even as Muslim women within Europe employ strategies to counter hegemonic ideologies about their perceived lack of freedom and autonomy, and their submission to patriarchal authority, they are still speaking from within and to the dominant discourse on female emancipation, which views them as “backward.” For example, employing the strategy that Muslim women have always been empowered, and that women’s liberation was already achieved through the revelation of the Quran 1400 years ago, displays
attention to liberal discourse, and speaks back to that ideology (Jouili, J 2011). By stating that in Islam women have always been liberated and given equal rights, Muslim women are clearly concentrating on certain Western ideas of gender norms. Thus, the female participants in these studies cannot easily break away from the discourse of women’s empowerment and freedom as understood in Western liberal thought, even if that is their intention. Within the Netherlands, Bracke (2011) has found that Muslim women respond to the public debates over their emancipation in several ways, which attempt to disrupt and also cannot help but acknowledge the dominant narrative of Muslim women who need to be saved from their culture. She shows that “talking back” to these debates is a very complicated matter, since any subject that responds to the debate has been influenced by its ideology, and thus must refer to, rely on and to some extent accept the legitimacy of its discourse (Bracke 2011).

The attempt to speak back to the debates over headscarf bans in Europe, and debates around the world regarding religious women’s freedom, can become mired within the dominant script of autonomy versus tradition, rather than articulating a more complex and accurate representation of Muslim women’s subject formation, choice, adherence to religious duty and submission to God. Stating, or being allowed to state, that some Muslim women hold a different idea of autonomy — one that involves adhering to religious obligation and submission to God — was not admissible within the European debates (Fernando 2010).

The discursive situation of the SMCCU volunteers is similar to that of the Muslim women within Europe discussed in the works of Bracke (2011), Fadil (2011), Fernando (2010) and Jouili (2011), as both groups are attempting to justify and redefine their own positions to secular, liberal-minded audiences. While the context and purposes do differ, the participants in this research are also positioned within and outside of liberal and postfeminist discourses.
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through living in multicultural Dubai. Both groups imagine their wider audience on similar terms: as a dominant group who misunderstands Islam and Arab cultures, and women’s roles within it, and who engage in liberal thinking on choice and agency, and must be responded to on those terms.

Yet the Emirati volunteers’ explanations of their culture and religion ultimately differ from that of Muslim women in Europe. Emiratis are an elite minority within their home country, welcoming visitors to the UAE and introducing them to the Emirati way of life. The control drawn from this context is an important distinction, and adds another layer of complication to the multifaceted discursive situation SMCCU volunteers find themselves in. Yet with this control comes instilled responsibility to convince visitors that Emirati culture is in many ways aligned with Western values as well as admirably different. In addition, volunteers are not speaking back to a particular debate or policy, but to a more implicit sense of how multicultural Dubai views Emiratis, as well as broader Orientalist stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims that Emirati volunteers have encountered. The Muslim Europeans are responding to specific criticisms against their religion and dress, and are much more implicated in the liberal discourse of choice because of this. They must respond along these lines if willing to engage at all, as these are the terms of the headscarf debate as begun in Europe. The SMCCU willingly takes on the liberal discourse to counter beliefs about women living in religious societies, and at times wishes to show distinction from and movement beyond this discourse. Yet, while the SMCCU has the freedom to engage more deeply in articulating and expressing cultural distinctions, they more often choose not to.

As seen in the case of the headscarf debates and bans in Europe, women and gendered practices are a contested site of cultural change and attempted understanding. It has been well
documented that women play key roles in nation building and global performances of modernity (Abu-Lughod 2001; Ahmed 1992; Baron 2005; Kaler 2006; Kandiyoti 1991a, 1991b; McClintock 1993; Sinha 2006; Timmerman 2000; Yuval-Davis 1997) that are often manipulated and contradictory. Developing nations often portray their “modern-ness” and preservation of “traditions,” and these concepts have been variously and often embodied within the roles and practices of women. Therefore, even though this research questions the expectation of defending one’s cultural practices, particularly in one’s home country, any formal or informal cultural understanding programme is likely to have a component of, if not focus on, gendered practices, particularly visible practices such as dress.

Muslim women representing the nation

It is well known that debates over Muslim women’s dress and the ways in which their perceived roles and treatment represent their nation have a long history (Abu-Lughod 2001; Lewis, R 1995; Lowe 1991; Melman 1992). Ahmed (1992, 2011) has emphasised the long and varied history of Muslim women’s dress and its Orientalist perception from the West, as well as Muslim women’s and men’s reactions to this perception. The veil is often seen as “a symbol of the hidden order to Oriental society and as proof of its inimical difference from the West” (Lewis, R & Mills 2003: 15). Yet, as shown in Chapter Four, the nation-building efforts of the UAE have featured young Emirati women in national dress as their most visible public relations tool and mark of development. Therefore, presenting this complex, symbolic portrayal of Emirati women as free and empowered as well as traditional and religious — as relatable and similar to Western women as well as significantly different — is the difficult and primary task of the SMCCU.
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Gender features so heavily in cultural understanding projects and dialogues because, as shown above, women’s rights are part of the nation building exercise (Kandiyoti 1991a, 1991b; Yuval-Davis 1997), and because the questioning of Muslim women’s rights is a natural extension of any Muslim dialogue with the “West.” The key Western preoccupation with Muslim women has to do with their presumed lack of choice, agency, mobility and bodily freedom, signalling the “backwardness” of the nation. Because of this, women’s perceived oppression outside Western countries will continue to be a crucial site of debate and justification within practices of cultural understanding. At the moment, the primary intention of the SMCCU is to convince Western visitors that their misconceptions about the Middle East — that women are oppressed and Islam inspires terrorism — is not true. To convey this argument as conclusive, several tactics are employed, particularly what I call “cultural translation.”

Cultural translation

One of the main strategies the SMCCU employs to discuss Emirati women’s roles and appearance within the UAE is to exercise cultural translation,29 or, to explain aspects and practices related to Islam and Arab culture in a way that Westerners with different worldviews and beliefs can understand. This implies that the basic belief underlying cultural translation is that the two cultures involved in cultural understanding are isolated entities, closed off from one another, and translation bridges these gaps (Mandal 2009). Cultural translation projects typically depend upon such binaries: “my” culture and an “other’s” culture. Certainly the SMCCU functions on binaries as a result of the UAE’s broader discourse of binaries — modern versus traditional, East versus West, global versus Emirati,

29 The volunteers do not use the term “cultural translation.” It is a term I am using to describe their approach to explaining Emirati culture to non-Emiratis.
us versus them. The binary of cultural understanding is also an easy and simple framework to situate oneself within, one that Emiratis and tourists are familiar with from media and tourism throughout the Gulf.

Much literary fiction and visual art addresses cultural translation, and attempts to show that histories and cultures are intertwined and always mixing, rather than homogeneous or distinct (Desai, K 2006; Jarrar 2008; Kureishi 1990, 2008). Maharaj (Fletcher 2000) calls for the “self” and “other” to “equally plunge into free fall, breakdown and mutual re-making,” and imagines, “the dislocutive scene of cultural translation [opening] up as an unfinishable existential, ethical encounter” (quoted in Fletcher 2000: 33). Thus Maharaj encourages a “shifting, collision, coalescing of cultural continents — a mucking up of classificatory order” (Fletcher 2000: 33). These statements acknowledge other ways of thinking about sharing in cultural experiences that move beyond justifying one’s cultural practices to another culture. Emirati citizens and Emirati culture have blended with other cultures throughout their history, and the views of artists who highlight cultural blending and hybridity are certainly relevant to the circumstances of the UAE. However, the implied assumption of unconnected and discrete cultures is still assumed at the SMCCU, and this is a large part of volunteers’ thought processes when answering visitor questions. Volunteers wish to show that Western and Eastern cultures are more alike than guests presumably believe at the outset of a cultural understanding event, and attempt to “bridge” the perceived cultural gaps of the East and West.

A complication that arises from this view of cultural translation is anxiety over providing the “correct” answer, the one that foreign visitors will understand, relate to and accept. This act of translation can explain why some of my respondents expressed contradictions in
articulating their positions. Participants often felt defensive and dissatisfied with the need to explain their culture to visitors. Yet these same respondents also stated that cultural understanding was their greatest passion and that they enjoyed answering all questions. Volunteer participants expressed the view that visitors should have learned more about the UAE before arriving, but also that there was no way for tourists and expatriates to know the “truth” about Emirati culture besides visiting the SMCCU. And, finally, they spoke about repressing the urge to become aggressive in their defence of cultural practices, and also stated that it was simply nice of the visitors to come to the SMCCU with open minds and questions to ask, rather than hold onto false assumptions.

These contradictions point to the difficulties involved in this selective practice of cultural translation. Hence, within the SMCCU, culture is made of artefacts, behaviours and actions that can be described, visualised and demonstrated. In one sense, the employment of this kind of cultural translation could be viewed as patronising to guests, since volunteers are often closed off from the possibility of presenting a potentially abstract and more accurate representation of Emirati culture and its connection to the multiple cultures of Dubai, not just Western cultures. Yet, in another sense, the SMCCU’s approach could also be seen as one inspired by respect for guests and a general sense of hospitality. Translating certain cultural and religious behaviours into terms foreigners can understand could be perceived as respectful and effective, as well as simply logical, appealing to modern rational thought processes. As one female SMCCU volunteer, Maha, stated to me:

I understand [visitors] wonder, “why do people start first eating a date [at the iftar meal],” because I understand that seems weird. … I talk to other Arabs and they say that it’s because it’s Sunnah. And Sunnah means that the Prophet
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did it. And I’m like, but they don’t believe in your religion. So when you talk to someone who doesn’t believe in your religion you can’t talk to them on the same line … you have to … talk scientific and go to common ground they understand and believe in. I can’t say, “oh, it’s in the Quran.” But you don’t believe in the Quran, so leave my Quran alone, that’s my belief. And let’s go up to logic. So it’s proven that dates do settle your stomach down and break up the acid from long hours of fasting, so it makes sense to you. But if I tell you it’s Sunnah it’s not going to make you understand anything.

Maha does not feel as though foreign non-Muslims would accept an explanation of wishing to follow the Prophet’s actions recorded in the Sunnah. Instead, logic is the common denominator that she believes will achieve acceptance, and she doesn’t mind altering her answer, even if religious and cultural meaning is compromised.

However, there is another way that this consideration for guests can be perceived. Hiba, a female volunteer, spoke to me in these terms regarding Emirati hospitality, stating:

Usually we don’t talk to Europeans or foreigners as if they don’t belong here or [say] … “Why are you here?” Or “what are you doing”? But when we travel outside, okay, they give us very dirty looks, you know? So it’s kind of part of our tradition and even religion to be nice to people and welcome them.

While the tradition of hospitality is acknowledged in Hiba’s response, a more important aspect of her statement is the way in which she promotes her culture and religion as more welcoming and open than Western countries. Despite feeling as though Europeans and
foreigners are denigrating her culture, she is saying that Emiratis will continue to be welcoming and not question others’ right to visit or live in Dubai. Thus, the SMCCU operates on a fine line. On the one hand, they are sincerely welcoming visitors and wishing to explain cultural and religious practices in a way Westerners would understand, appealing to liberal secular norms. On the other hand, there exists a distrust of guests’ real beliefs about Emirati culture and religion, and moments of cultural superiority and alterity arise from such encounters and translations.

“Correct” answers

As part of an elite minority culture that is not lived daily by expatriates within Dubai, the volunteers I interviewed are acutely aware of their roles as ambassadors of their culture, religion and country. Often, volunteers’ responses are embedded within discourses aimed at tourists to portray the UAE as a “modern” country maintaining its “traditions” in admirable ways. Several participants told me that they feel it is their responsibility to their rulers and their country to promote the UAE in the “right” way, and thus demonstrate clear investment within the aims of the SMCCU’s programs. This pride in representing their country is often felt to the point where some volunteers are nervous about giving an answer to a visitor’s question for fear of getting it “wrong.” As Sabeen, a female volunteer, said to me, “One bad thing happens and they will judge [the] whole country so we have to be careful. … We have the chance to show the world who we are. Big responsibility we have.”

Choosing specific ways to answer questions is instilled through the SMCCU training. New volunteers are given a list of one hundred and fifteen frequently asked questions, as well as the model answers to those questions. During the Ramadan I spent in Dubai in 2011, the new volunteers were given the most popular fifteen questions to focus on. Although I was not
permitted access to the full list of these questions, I did learn that the most common questions are about women’s rights, women’s dress, Emirati food, Islam as a violent religion, multiple wives, and the UAE political system. Volunteers are told to use these model answers as a base, and then put their own unique spin on the response.

In a direct sense, then, the SMCCU as an institution defines what is “right.” More broadly, correct answers are collectively imagined by volunteers as a response to expatriate attitudes towards Emiratis and Islam, within Dubai and abroad. Through experiences interacting with visitors and Westerners through work and other travels, volunteers have internalised a sense of Western liberal values, and thus respond to this. The SMCCU frequently asked questions reinforce this thinking and make it more explicit in terms of answer models to follow. The volunteers and the institution have aligned ideas of misconceptions they wish to dispel.

Volunteers had rarely if ever thought about the meaning of their cultural practices. Yet at the SMCCU, they are being asked to articulate their self-awareness and present reasons for cultural practices they have witnessed and taken part in all their lives. Therefore, volunteers remain anxious over how to convey cultural information to guests. Another respondent, Rawdha, said to me:

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Even amongst the volunteers ourselves we’re like, “you answer the question,” “no, you do it,” because we are always afraid that we’re not going to answer it good enough…We always want people’s minds to leave opened with a whole new perspective of how Emiratis are …so we’re always looking for the best answer.
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This kind of pressure is likewise felt within the Muslim diaspora. As Jouili and Amir-Moazami (2006) note, Muslim women in France and Germany are compelled in similar ways. Their studies show that Muslim women in these countries do not wish to convert others to Islam, but to change negative opinions about their religion, especially with respect to assumptions that Islam creates gender inequality. Similarly, Zine (2006) has found that Muslim girls in a Canadian Islamic school felt they needed to be careful with everything they said and did in public, as their behaviour would be seen as representative of Islam. It is the widespread negative opinion of Islam and the treatment of women that concerns the SMCCU and many other Muslim women around the world, who are trying to find the best ways to combat and change these beliefs. This condition makes the work of the SMCCU a serious and vital endeavour to volunteers, where they are representing not only themselves but also the Islamic religion and the Middle Eastern region.

For volunteers, the implications for getting answers “wrong” are that visitors will not leave feeling as though they have learned anything new about Islam or Emirati culture, or that visitors’ misconceptions will be reinforced. There are also limitations in getting it “right,” in that visitors will not know the possibly deeper religious and culturally embodied feelings embedded within gendered, cultural and religious practices. Therefore, volunteers present invested agency within this work through the institution of the SMCCU. Volunteers are not resisting a repressive regime, but working within and through discourses, attempting to alter Orientalist, liberal ideas about those who make religious and cultural practices a visible and prominent part of their daily lives.
Representing Emirati women at the SMCCU

The most important and striking point made about women’s roles throughout the programs of the SMCCU focuses on Emirati women’s traditional dress. This is not surprising, considering that Muslim women’s various modes of covering have entered the Western popular imagination as the marker of religious extremism (Kahf 1999; Zine 2006). Muslim female dress is also viewed as synonymous with cultural difference and loyalty to patriarchy, which in turn supports the view that Muslim women lack autonomy (Zine 2006). Covering has also marked Muslim women from colonial times as erotic and inaccessible (Kahf 1999). Thus, the ways SMCCU female volunteers portray themselves are negotiated within these constructs.

“I bet you’re wondering about these funny costumes,” Latifa, the British Muslim guide, said during the Jumeirah Mosque tour in August 2011, pointing to her abaya and adjusting her sheyla. “Why do women wear black cloaks in this heat?” She tells the crowd that women would not want to wear anything else, stating that the abaya’s material is thin and loose, and that it creates a breeze while walking. Latifa noted its convenience; a woman can wear anything she wants underneath, and just “chuck” it on without worrying about finding an appropriate and modest outfit in one’s closet. Finally, she mentioned that it was appropriate in all social situations and that black was a slimming colour.

Latifa also spoke about the many reasons a woman would choose to wear a veil over her face. It could possibly be because she’s going to a private party and wearing a lot of makeup, and doesn’t want to draw attention to herself in public; it could be to block the sun if she forgets to put on sunblock, or it could be because she believes those scholars who interpret the Quran as obligating women to cover their face and hands. Her main point is that covering and styles
of cover are each woman’s choice, and each woman will probably have a different reason for what they choose to wear. The primacy of choice was echoed throughout my visits to the SMCCU, where female volunteers repeated that it was their choice to wear the abaya and sheyla, and focused on its modern practicality. Volunteers are deliberately trying to convince guests that Emirati women are “free” and “autonomous” as an immediate goal of their volunteer work. This valence of choice aligns with liberal, Enlightenment thinking to convince guests that tradition is not holding women back from their “true,” individual desires.

Latifa, as well as the female volunteers, joked several times about wearing their pyjamas underneath their abayas when they could not bother to get dressed. They often laughed at their cheeky advantage over other women who were forced to decide on an appropriate outfit. Women volunteers often spoke of themselves as harried by the demands of modern life, whether it be balancing work and home life or university study, and are grateful to have these time savers as a part of their culture and religion. This may be true for some women, but the justification is also a convenient one for Western audiences. Thus these rationales are put forth so that Westerners will accept volunteers’ choice to wear this dress, seeing it as a valid option. Choice in this case is made out of convenience. It is not about displaying cultural pride or honouring ancestors, or to preserve unique cultural heritage so that it is not “lost,” but as the most rational option for dress.

While practicality was not the only reason featured by volunteers, it was a central point. Volunteers do not address the self in the ways theorised by Mahmood (2005) by explaining that the veil is the way they enact and constitute their religiosity, that piety is attained externally. Nor do they provide any of the other responses as explained to me by participants
outside the SMCCU, relayed in the following chapter. Rather, they adhere to concepts they believe are familiar to Western audiences.

In her study of Muslim women in Niger, Masquelier (2009) argues that the veil has become part of her participants’ social selves, facilitating their relationship with the wider world, and shaping the ways in which they interact within the social world. The veil protects the body, and in that way, Masquelier argues, it “plays an essential role in the constitution of agency, autonomy and subjectivity” (2009: 212). Thus, the veil can also be seen as part of an Emirati woman’s social being, integral to her daily interactions in the public world. However, this circumstance is certainly not easy to explain to Western visitors, with all of their preconceived beliefs about the symbolic meaning of Muslim female dress. When Masquelier (2009) surveyed Muslim women in Niger on why they wore head covering, they usually responded: “We veil to cover our bodies.” Without much interaction with Western people, or pressure to explain their culture to outsiders, their responses simply stated the fact of their covering as corporeal, rather than something that needs to be articulated as a means of personal choice and convenience. Masquelier writes:

> Because the meaning of veils, for some women, encompasses an entire mode of being in the world that is acquired mimetically, the modesty expressed and cultivated through veiling obeys a logic that seems vested more in embodied experience than in conceptual categories. … One could say, paraphrasing Bourdieu, ‘It goes without saying because it comes without saying’. (2009: 240)
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However, these embodied ideas of veiling are not and most likely cannot even be expressed within the SMCCU, or, if we take Masquelier’s (2009) findings literally, anywhere. While Emirati women appreciate the practical aspects of their national dress, convenience is not typically the first reason that comes to young Emiratis’ minds when unprompted by the discursive situation within the SMCCU, as will be shown more concretely in Chapter Seven. Thus, within the SMCCU, these volunteers are giving the “correct” answer about national dress to their visitors, as it is the one that guests will, presumably, most easily relate to. Volunteers even encourage the Western female visitors to wear the abaya, if only for its practicality. This is one aspect of volunteers’ selective responses, highlighting the positive effects of the dress to visitors ostensibly critical of Islamic dress and doubtful of women’s choice to wear it. Their responses connect to liberal thinking of personal choice and Enlightenment rationality.

Participants also frame their ideas on choice in relation to Western attitudes about freedom and tradition in a different way. Female volunteer participant Hiba said to me:

…The first opinion [Western people] have of us is that we are oppressed and not … as free or open minded as outside. And I really think that’s wrong because we are free and open-minded but in our own way, you know? Under our own culture and our own traditions and our own religion, and we are comfortable with that. … Really I don’t like it when they call us oppressed.

Like Mahmood (2005), Hiba is challenging the liberal definition of agency so that Emiratis can be understood within their own religious and cultural contexts rather than fit into the Western model of liberal agency. Several respondents strongly wish to be viewed as “free,”
but within their own framework and choices, with limits and restrictions that they choose to abide by. Hiba went on to say:

Americans and Europeans … think being free is, you know, not covering her hair or wearing pants or not wearing the abaya. And … in our religion we’re not supposed to drink and … we can’t eat pork meat and it’s all under … good reason and we know those reasons and we accept them and we think it’s for the best. That’s why we do them, okay? To us, we want to do them; we want not to do them, ok? But maybe from their point of view they think, “oh, why can’t they do this?” We don’t feel like we want to. We feel like we don’t want to.

Echoing Rose (1999), Hiba feels that choice and agency is thought about in the West as freedom to choose without external pressure, and freedom from constraint. Here Hiba is declaring her choice to be constrained and limit her options. She also points out the limitations of Western definitions of freedom, which presumably prohibit Western women from wearing an abaya or headscarf. Similarly, female participant Maha stated to me, “I feel naked without my abaya. This is my comfort zone, and it’s never been a hurdle.” Reference to restriction came up often among participants, as female volunteers wished to assure me and other foreign visitors that the abaya does not prevent them from doing things they wish to do. Volunteers realise the importance of stating that they are free to act without constraint, and if they are limited, that too is their choice. Articulating one’s choice that is free from constraint is under spotlight at the SMCCU, where certain expectations of how and why cultural practices are engaged in must be met.
Mahmood (2005) critiques liberal thinking, where an individual is only considered free when her actions are the result of her own will rather than of custom, tradition or societal compulsion. Therefore, the kind of language used at the SMCCU works to demonstrate and convince Western visitors of Emirati women’s ability to choose freely. However, within cultural understanding, distinction must be upheld as well. Emiratis within the SMCCU also differentiate themselves from Western attitudes and attempt to provide alternatives to liberal secular thought.

**Demonstrating distinction**

Emirati volunteers’ investment within the SMCCU’s aims is evident through the volunteers’ wish to convince visitors that Emirati culture is supportive of women’s rights and freedom. Volunteers express agency through their demonstrations of distinction from liberal norms. They attempt to achieve this admirable distinction through the strategic deployment of Emirati dress, as well as other intentional, favourable comparisons between Emirati culture and Western assumptions about women’s rights.

Rose (1996) argues that the process of Othering includes contrasting oneself with other people, and understanding where you belong through comparing your home with other places. Emirati volunteers at the SMCCU enable this process for themselves and visitors in several ways. Visibly, cultural distinction is displayed through the traditional dress worn during the cultural events, marking the Emirati volunteers as culturally very dissimilar to the Western women and men wearing trousers and tops. Even as they attempt to convince guests that any Western woman would want to wear an abaya for its practicality, beauty and variety of styles, the differences between the expensive abayas and kandouras, which display wealth, taste and pride, and Westerners’ outfits, is deliberately striking. While the traditional dress is
presented as practical, it is also often shown as a superior, elegant option that the female
volunteers in particular wear with distinction. Thus, they are countering the idea that the
unveiled body is “natural” and “free” and a veiled body is a violation of one’s “corporeal
autonomy or bodily integrity” (Fadil 2011: 97).

As Treacher (2003) has noted, Western women are positioned by Westerners as those who
are the truly feminine, and Muslim women’s veiling breaches women’s “natural” state and
subjectivity. Therefore, Western women are viewed as more “real,” and Muslim women who
cover are viewed as lesser, “not quite the right thing” (Treacher 2003: 70). Yet at the
SMCCU, one could argue that veiling is shown as the “natural” and “free” state through
volunteers’ comportment and ease of movement, as well as their deftness in explaining the
various styles and choices involved in wearing the national dress. During demonstrations at
cultural meals, volunteers often dress a Western woman in the abaya and sheyila, and then
show how a woman wears the face veil and niquab. Visitors take photos of the Western
women modelling the Emirati dress. Often, the woman and her family / friends laugh while
she is being dressed in these clothes. As much as these demonstrations are educational,
hospitable and entertaining, the discomfort and awkwardness of the Western women
modelling Emirati dress is also apparent. Comparisons between the discomfort of Western
women and the ease of Emirati women in this arguably elegant attire appeared to be an
intentional signal.30

During the Ramadan events, women and men are given abayas and kandouras to put on for
their walk to the nearby Diwan Mosque. Inside the mosque, everyone is required to cover

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30 I was one of these volunteers at the Sharjah Centre for Cultural Communication, which presented a similar
program as the SMCCU, but with only one Emirati volunteer present. While the burqua mask was put over my
face by the British Muslim woman running the presentation, I did feel uncomfortable wearing this new item that
unfamiliarly hid much of my face from the small audience. Even though I smiled and laughed, it was a slightly
unsettling experience, and I was glad when the mask was taken off and I sat back down with the group.
their arms and legs, and women must cover their hair. While Emirati dress is not required, volunteers provide abayas and kandouras for guests as an extension of hospitality, and, I argue, to signal a greater sense of distinction between Emiratis and guests. Often, the abayas and kandouras provided do not fit or flatter the wearer in the way that it flatters the young Emirati volunteers, and this is another important moment of distinction relating to national dress. The guests typically enjoy wearing these outfits, laughing at their inability to walk as usual in the oversized cloaks, and the sudden greater anonymity of their appearance. Wearing an oversized abaya, and incorrectly wrapping the sheyla around one’s head so that it is near to falling off, does not give visitors a sense of what it would actually be like to wear Emirati national dress as an Emirati does, but it does allow guests to realise the difficulty in “pulling off” the abaya and sheyla so that it appears elegant. This provides another example of invested agency on behalf of the SMCCU and volunteers. Through these demonstrations the dress becomes something that takes skill and practice to wear, rather than something that is forced upon Emirati women unwillingly.

Beyond differences derived from Emirati female dress, there are also strong challenges to the meaning or illusion of gender equality. Yusef described to me how he would answer a visitor question about gender equality in this way:

Let’s say if a tourist asked me, “why are not women treated equally or the same as men”? I’ll say, “well, first, 21st century in Europe after fighting for so long to becoming equal with men, are we really equal? There’s no such thing as equal. Even men with each other aren’t equal, so let’s take the word equal out. Then, are you equal to a man’s pay in Europe? Do you get paid the same degree as a male with the same degree, the same position?” And she will say
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“no.” Ok, … let’s talk about women positions in Arabia. … At one time women in Arabia were very elite and sophisticated and very superior in all over where in Europe they used to buy them and sell them, right? Gift them. And that’s the truth. … So for a feminist I will answer in a way her mentality is. …Women are not second-class [here] but at the same time don’t think that you are already first class and they are second, yeah.

Here Yusef is challenging the terms of the questioner: what is gender equality? Has any society achieved it? He is thus pushing the boundaries of liberal thought by questioning the terms of the debate, and European beliefs about their own society’s gender parity. He blocks contemporary discourses on what gender equality looks like and believes that an historical perspective on women’s treatment — their superior and inferior statuses — should be part of the debate instead. However, this sort of boundary pushing is not often taken further than this. When I heard Yusef respond similarly to a group at a cultural lunch, visitors nodded in agreement, but did not take up these ideas to further question why Europeans often presume superiority over Muslim societies. In addition, Hiba’s previous quote about Muslim women’s freedom to prohibit themselves serves as a similar moment of invested agency where the boundaries of liberal thinking are pushed. She pointed to Western women’s actual limitations in that many feel they cannot cover, which astutely counters the perception that Western women have complete freedom and Muslim women are very limited. These moments highlight volunteers’ invested agency in their movement beyond the dominant discourse of liberal thought, yet these moments are much less frequent than engagement within the liberal framework of choice and modern convenience.
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As Aitchison points out, “the subaltern can speak (to the tourist) but upon stages where audiences and actors are differently engaged and differently empowered in (re) enacting and / or resisting hegemonic colonial and gender relations” (2000: 144). SMCCU volunteers are certainly speaking, but upon prescribed stages with differing levels of co-opting and challenging hegemonic discourses on Muslim gender relations. Aitchison also believes that these practices can “shape and reshape the social – cultural nexus of gender-power relations in tourism…” (2000: 145). This reshaping is taking place at the SMCCU through the strategies of invested agency in aligning with Western cultural norms and liberal thought, as well as pushing these boundaries.

One respondent, Maha, told me that she hoped visitors understand, “It's okay. We’re normal. We’re just like you.” As shown, there is a strong investment within universalism, to be seen as “normal.” Similarly, there is a strong pull for distinction, a wish that expatriates and tourists would understand, accept and respect those distinctions and the pride Emiratis feel for their cultural history and modern development. Volunteers demonstrate invested agency within the script of the SMCCU as part of their own desire to alter the discourses of Orientalism and liberalism, which position Emirati women as un-free.

**Conclusion**

Within the SMCCU, the representation of women’s agency and freedom is highly selective, reflecting both consideration of liberal thought as well as significant alternatives to Western cultural norms as understood by the SMCCU volunteers. The intentional nature of the SMCCU volunteers’ cultural translation strategies highlights their difference from studies of European Muslim women who are also involved in explaining the reasoning behind their cultural and religious practices. SMCCU volunteers employ a variety of strategies in order to
be understood, seen as “normal, just like you,” even if that understanding is ultimately inaccurate. While this pull is strong, the desire for portrayals of distinction also arises. Through their invested agency, volunteers feel compelled to convince visitors of their shared liberal thinking, framed as shared humanity, as well as demonstrate Emiratis’ admirable cultural distinctions and at times boundary-pushing disparities with liberal thoughts on the meaning of equality and freedom. The condition of Western relations with the Middle East compels the SMCCU and its volunteers to strategise in certain ways to convince visitors of their benevolence toward women and humanity, and that they are “just like you.”

This chapter has demonstrated the usefulness of Mahmood’s (2005) critique of liberal agency, and the ways in which its re-inscription by European Muslim women also connects to the context of the SMCCU. I have also explained the general difficulty of describing the significance of Muslim women’s covering outside of liberal norms to Western audiences. SMCCU volunteers ultimately show that they are not just receiving global processes and reacting to them, but are involved in their production. Volunteers show invested agency in their representations, particularly of cultural difference; yet through the discourses of Orientalism and liberalism that they inevitably cannot get outside of, volunteers are also constrained in how they represent Emirati culture.

The following chapter builds upon the term “invested agency” to show that Emirati women outside the SMCCU also apply the discourse of “choice.” Yet, outside the SMCCU, “choice” applies to female participants’ investment in embodying their roles as national symbols, which is often achieved through wearing the national dress. I analyse the complex position of choice in Emirati women’s lives outside the SMCCU as they serve as symbols of the UAE’s modernity and tradition. Rather than convincing tourists and expatriates that they are not
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oppressed, outside the SMCCU female participants speak in the language of contextualised choice. They explain their roles as national symbols as part of their national pride displayed through the national dress.
Chapter Seven
‘It’s a Choice We Make’: Gender, Choice and Emirati National Dress

“To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, regulate every aspect of their conduct, and present their actions as freely chosen.”
Rosalind Gill 2007: 164

Within the SMCCU, convenience and choice were associated with wearing the abaya and sheyla as a tactic to convince outsiders that Emirati women are not oppressed. Yet, outside the SMCCU among female artist participants, choice as applied to national dress was tied to more abstract notions of individualisation, globalisation and nationalism. In this chapter, I will be exploring the responses of female artist participants regarding national dress, and not SMCCU volunteers. Female artist participants do not consider convenience when speaking about national dress, as in the SMCCU, but instead recognise the many complex positives and negatives involved in wearing the abaya and sheyla, as will be shown. In this way, female artist participants hold a greater sense of agency than the volunteers within the institution of the SMCCU. This is because female participants outside the SMCCU consider the various and often contradictory advantages and disadvantages in wearing national dress, such as connection to ancestors and global fashion status, as well as exclusion, alienation and societal pressure to wear the abaya in certain ways. These artist participants invest within the positive attributes this dress often provides, so that it is not explicitly wrong or right to wear abaya, but “better” to do so. Female artist participants invest within the perceived worth and power of choice as cultural actors in a global context.

31 However, two participants, Hiba and Maha, are both volunteers and artists, and I include some of their responses here in the context of national dress outside the SMCCU.
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Expanding upon the concept of invested agency, female artist participants negotiate the neoliberal, postfeminist discourse of choice and exhibit invested agency in serving as national symbols through wearing the UAE’s female “dress code,” the abaya and sheyla. Many participants conflated the abaya and sheyla with Emirati national identity. Through the lens of cultural globalisation studies, individualisation and postfeminist literature, wearing the abaya and sheyla is considered as a choice to belong to and serve as a symbol of collective Emirati identity. I argue that Emirati women are tied to serving as symbols of Emirati national identity through the discourse of individualisation and “choice,” but choice is more complicated than simply wearing the abaya and sheyla or not, as female participants are often compelled to make “the right choice.” Since participants variously stated that the abaya and sheyla is at once a fashion symbol and modest dress that garners respect, as well as an outfit denigrated by outsiders that can cause alienation, the abaya and sheyla is a contested symbol participants choose to wear through invested agency. In this chapter, I argue relationships between individualisation and collectivism — and between modern and traditional, and global and local — are entangled and constituted through the ways participants consider Emirati national identity and national dress.

Through discussing national dress — a significant topic for all participants that came up frequently without my prompting — female artist participants expressed much contradiction over wishing to at once be recognised and respected by outsiders as a separate cultural group with a collective identity, and also be recognised as “free” individuals, who can choose to act autonomously outside of cultural norms and create their own life stories (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Rose 1996). In cultural globalisation theory, anthropologist

32 Because of my research positionality, I acknowledge that participants most likely brought up national dress because they were talking to me, a white Western woman who “expects” to talk about the abaya and sheyla. I often brought up national identity, and nearly all participants connected national identity to national dress, whether positively or negatively.
and indigenous studies scholar Niezen (2009) writes about the tension between ideals of freedom and individualisation on the one hand, and cultural belonging and safety on the other. Similarly, female participants often displayed the need to demonstrate strong cultural ties, as well as the ability to freely choose how to be global, Emirati citizens as individuals.

Niezen asks:

> How are [people] seeking stable, orderly, and secure forms of belonging in circumstances of ideological and social flux? How might they be overcoming injuries of imposed change and social exclusion by rearticulating and redignifying the self? And what are consequences of the success or failure … of these efforts? (2009: xvi)

I attempt to answer these questions in this chapter. First I provide theoretical background for a discussion of female individualisation, postfeminist problematisation of “choice,” and modern nationalism. Following that, this chapter analyses female participants’ considerations of the relationship between national dress, individualisation, choice and cultural belonging.

**Female individualisation and choice**

Individualisation is connected to late modernity and the increasing need to create one’s own life story (Bauman 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernshiem 2002; Rose 1996). This idea of individual choice and the ability to create one’s own reality is in itself a modern concept (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). As previous social forms disintegrate, new modes of life come into existence, ones that are not dictated by religion and tradition but by freedom of choice (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002), where one acts autonomously and enterprisingly to get what one
wants out of life (Vintges 2012). While in the not-so-distant past roles were assigned to a
person at birth (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002), and one was thought of as a communal
subject and actor, presently participants are experiencing a variety of competing expectations,
where one, “has to do something, to make an active effort. One has to win, know how to
assert oneself in the competition for limited resources — and not only once, but day after
day” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 2). Givens must now be chosen, so that even one’s
traditions, religion and engagement with family life should be justified and framed as a
personal and individual choice against other options (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Rose
argument that subjects are not only free to choose, but in fact are obliged to do so (17),
constituting their lives within the mode of choice. Choices are thus seen as extensions of
oneself, as expressions of the inner self (Rose 1996).

While Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) are basing their argument within dominant ideas
found in Western countries, I have found that these arguments apply to Emirati participants.
The discourse of choice and belief that life is a project may have been conceived, at least in
theoretical terms, in the West, but its ability to explain and help describe the greater variety
of life pathways, influences, discourses, multicultural identities, and ways to belong to a
nation, culture and global society, have spread beyond Western borders. Of course, this
process of individualisation is not experienced in the same way everywhere or among all
people, but is a trend that has shown itself strongly within the ideas and expressions of
participants. Participants are in fact living lives for which there are no historical models or
precedents within their country. Perhaps contradictorily, participants use the language of
individualisation to at times show their difference from conceptions of the West, or “choose”
to enact traditional practices and display their sense of national identity. This study has also
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revealed that participants do not consider the language of choice and individualisation as a Western concept, but simply the discourse that they are within and often do not think outside of.

Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) argue that traditions have been “de-traditionalised,” so that men and women are released from prescribed roles. Women in particular are at the head of social transformation, “both as instigators and recipients of de-traditionalising forces and an opening up of options” (Baker 2007: 54). Drawing upon the concept of individualisation put forth by Giddens (1991), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and Bauman (2001), McRobbie (2004) uses the term female individualisation to show the ways in which choice is a “modality of constraint” for women in particular, as they are “compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices” (261).

Kim (2010) writes about female individualisation in connection with transnational mobility among educated Korean, Japanese and Chinese women who, as she writes, are interested in individualisation, “autonomous choice and the aspiration for self-actualization” (27). Like McRobbie (2004), Kim states that female individualisation is limiting and contradictory, in that women can now “imagine” their lives in different ways through media consumption, but do not experience substantial shifts in real life experiences, as “regulative dimensions of gender and social structure … continue to shape available opportunities and constrain personal choice and freedom” (2010: 32). Kim sees women’s migration in these countries as a gendered process, “mediated by larger forces that push women into different routes across the world” (2010: 32). While Emirati women are not encouraged to leave the UAE for any education or work opportunities, it is clear that different ways to imagine one’s life are now available through the media, and provide the means to consider one’s individual identity. It is
also evident that “choice” in Emirati women’s lives is also a modality of constraint, as
Emirati women are compelled to make the “right” choices, as will be shown.

Niezen (2009) asserts that, like individualisation, establishing an identity is now an
achievement and a duty, as people have a much wider range of choices and possibilities
within the conditions of “individualism, pluralism, and global integration” (5). These choices
and conditions lead even more directly to identity questions. Therefore, the answer to “who
am I?” is more difficult to arrive at given the number of choices and influences in shaping
what one can conceive of as part of his or her identity. In the case of the UAE, the question of
identity is even more vital and confronting, as Emiratis are a minority population that has
only relatively recently joined together in the formation of a united country.

**Modern nationalism and identity**

Even as many scholars have predicted that the role of nationalism in constructing one’s
identity will diminish in the face of globalisation (Appadurai 1996; Beck 2000; Delanty &
O'Mahony 2002), others have found that nationalism still plays a major role in the world
today as a consequence of globalisation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Billig 1995;
for the continued strength of nationalism could be that “national cultures are the product of
shared histories and collective memories, and thereby are able to generate deep allegiances
that globalizing processes will always struggle to undermine” (123). And as Papastergiadis
convincingly argues, even when nation-states recognise their society’s multiculturalism, “this
representation of difference is projected only to confirm the greater image of the national
culture” (2000:113). Thus, as is paramount in the case of Dubai and the UAE,
multiculturalism can reinforce national sentiment among citizens rather than diminish national culture. While there are challenges to national sovereignty because of globalisation, the nation state remains a central actor in global affairs and this looks likely to continue (Hopper 2007).

As shown in this research, the national and the global overlap and interact, rather than act discretely or against each other (Sassen 2003), as national identity is performed as part of global processes. This argument is echoed by Jameson (2003), who states that “it is not national state power that is the enemy of difference, but rather the transnational system itself, Americanisation and the standardized products of a henceforth uniform and standardized ideology and practice of consumption” (74). Within this framework, national cultures are then asked to demonstrate their national collective culture as over and against “the multiplicity of local and regional markets, minority arts and languages” (Jameson 2003: 74). Thus, globalisation creates a space for national identity to emerge.

Billig (1995) argues that the nation reproduces itself through everyday reminders, such as national newspapers, flags, logos, postage stamps, maps and even national flowers. This is certainly the case in the UAE, particularly Dubai and Abu Dhabi, where photos of rulers appear in hotel lobbies and on billboards, flags hang from highway lampposts, and malls are decorated in UAE colours of red, white, green and black. This reproduction was particularly apparent during the lead up to the UAE’s 40th National Day in December 2011, where the logos for this anniversary — the number “40” and the “Spirit of the Union” image, a drawing of the founding sheikhs walking in a line — appeared on the sides of buildings and on posters and billboards throughout the malls and highways (Image 11).
It is also clear that citizens intend to reproduce the nation for themselves. Along with the most prominent reminder — national dress — there are other indications of exclusivity and separation from expatriates and tourists. Emiratis often live outside the city, actively moving away from the popular living areas of the UAE expatriate community. In addition, nationals are more likely to shop and seek entertainment on the outskirts of the city, closer to their homes, than go to the malls and entertainment areas in the city centre, which tourists and expatriates frequent.

The terms “Emirati identity” or “national identity” are well known in the UAE and part of popular national dialogue, particularly in the lead-up to the 40th National Day (Al Subaihi 2012; Alexander, K 2012; Fattah 2006a, 2006b; Gergawi 2011; Issa 2008; Mohammed...
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2008a; Moussly 2009; Salama 2008; Salama, S 2011; Salem, O 2012; The National Editorial 2012). This circumstance has also been made apparent to me through my own teaching experiences with Emirati students and through conversations with expatriate teachers and university professors in the UAE. Since the seven emirates that make up the UAE all had different traditions, memories and connections to ancestors, their national identity is still in flux and in question. The importance of national identity in popular national dialogue has also been noted by participants. For example, as stated in the Introduction, Muneera, a 40 year-old photographer, responded to my email request for an interview in this way: “Exploring Emirati identity feels like it's the topic *du jour* as it's being discussed/debated a lot across many areas at the moment. Also think because UAE will turn 40 this December, probably raises questions on what the next 40 years holds in store.” Similarly, participant Sahar, a 21 year-old journalist, compared her sense of Emirati identity to other nations by stating, “I haven’t seen any country where people walk about saying, ‘I am American, I am Canadian, I am, I am, I am.’” As Sahar critiques, Emiratis of her generation are very involved in displaying, “I am Emirati.”

Therefore, the term national identity is very much part of participants’ thought process as they consider what it means to be part of an elite minority culture whose population has undergone rapid modernisation and experienced an influx of majority foreign workers. Participants grapple with defining their collective and personal identities, as well as how, if and when to display and perform this identity, and ultimately what it means to be a part of a minority cultural group in one’s home country. National identity and its preservation are at once vital and ephemeral to participants, as they wish to convey an individualised identity that also honours their sense of cultural belonging.
Niezen (2008) writes that the central effect of modernity has been migration and “Others” intruding upon one’s own land, as well as the need to “protect oneself from these encroachments with the technology and knowledge of the encroachers” (46). This protection often means that people will strengthen their social boundaries against these “others.” As Moore (2011a) writes, since the argument that group identities should be recognised is very popular, it is rational to expect that “lines must be drawn, and identities even more firmly based on exclusions, rather than similarities” (275). Participants draw those lines around what is acceptable and unacceptable to perform as part of their sense of national identity, and wish to be accepted and acknowledged by other groups.

Anderson (1983) famously wrote about the “imagined communities” of modern nation states, where communities feel a sense of belonging through collective experience, and citizens can imagine themselves as part of national society. However, Sinha critiques Anderson (1983) for believing that the imagined communities outside the West would “simply replicate the ‘modular’ form of the nation as it was once imagined in Europe and the New World” (2004: 183). Instead, Sinha sees nationalism outside the West as developing through difference from the modern West, creating these spaces as “different-but-modern” (2004: 183). As shown in Chapter Four, this “different-but-modern” approach also took place in countries that were not former colonies and were not founded upon anti-colonialism, such as the UAE.

Even as most nations, and in this case the Emiratis within the UAE, are comprised of many different ways of life instead of a singular culture, the nation presents itself as a “flat, contiguous, and homogeneous space of nationness” (Appadurai 1996: 189). Appadurai notes that nations have their own tests of “loyalty and treachery, their special measures of
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...compliance and disorder” (1996: 190). One of the most important of these tests within the UAE is the national dress, which is much more consequential for Emirati women than Emirati men. This test has to do with global performance, where women in particular are expected to demonstrate the preservation of culture within their country, as well as symbolise modernity, as discussed in Chapters Four, Five and Six. The abaya and sheyla is often put on display through tourist items featuring the figures of Emirati women in national dress appearing on pens, mugs, saltshakers, and T-shirts (Image 12). Stuffed camels are even dressed in the abaya and sheyla, on sale at tourist stalls in the malls.

I asked participants how they felt about these souvenir items, and most laughed and said they thought it was “cute.” They didn’t mind this display since the dress symbolises the UAE, and
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is memorable for tourists. However, a few felt that these souvenirs disrespected the dress, and therefore disrespected the nation.

For an example of how female participants consider the global performance of the abaya and sheyla as a cultural symbol, Nasreen, a 25 year-old designer, stated, “For me, abaya and sheyla is a cultural thing that represents me as an Emirati, and this is my way of showing.” She went on to state that she loves wearing the abaya and sheyla and wouldn’t want to wear anything else. Twenty-seven year-old blogger Danah similarly said, “I personally think it’s beautiful and embodies what’s left of our identity to showcase.” Female participants are focused on showing this “Emirati identity,” often to outsiders, through their dress. The sense of external gaze is clear here, as the main point of wearing the abaya and sheyla is to embody and “showcase” Emirati national identity.

Anheier, Isar, and Viejo-Rose (2011) write that, “people tend to reify both identity and memory, referring to both as if they were material objects — memory as something to be retrieved; identity as something that can be lost or found” (10). This is true within the UAE, where participants focused on the idea that they were “losing” their heritage, traditions and identity, and that their ways of life were being “forgotten,” as mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis. Yet, as Anheier, Isar and Viejo-Rose (2011) point out, identities and memories are not things that one can lose or forget, even though they are often spoken about in these terms. They are instead representations, imbued with power and class relations, which allow us to decide what is important and what is discarded, what is cherished and preserved and what is disregarded (Anheier, Isar and Viejo-Rose 2011). National dress is one site at which the debate over cultural preservation and disregard takes place. The majority of concerns over national dress take place not over the dress as a whole, for men and women, but focuses most
strongly on women’s attire, the abaya and sheyla. National dress often signals exclusion of expatriates along nationality lines and becomes the site of autonomy, individuality, collective belonging and national identity among participants, most notably among young Emirati women.

**National identity as dress code**

In this section I explore the notion that the abaya and sheyla is national dress “code,” as it has been referred to by participants, both literally and sarcastically. The fact that the abaya and sheyla are seen among participants and through the UAE government as the symbol of national identity, rather than or in concert with the male dress, the kandoura, highlights the way in which the forming of the nation itself constitutes gender difference (Sinha 2006). I will provide some context for this national symbol within the UAE, and investigate the ways in which Emirati women invest in its relevance and importance as a national identity symbol, even though the dress has advantages and disadvantages that participants acknowledge.

Khalaf notes that within the context of multicultural UAE, the national dress conveys Emirati “traditions” as well as “cultural difference, social conservatism, moral decency, social poise and respect” (2005: 246). It advertises wearers’ as Emirati and signals their benefits and power as an elite minority, garnering certain privileges when interacting with government officials, for example, and general preferential treatment in daily life. For an example of privileged treatment as well as alienation, Tariq, a 25 year-old blogger, said:

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33 Of course, other visitors and residents in the UAE can and do wear the abaya and sheyla, not only Emiratis. The majority of those who wear the abaya and sheyla within the UAE outside of Emirati women are other Gulf and Arab women. Even though this is the case, popular sentiment within the UAE shows that the abaya and sheyla is predominately “local” dress.
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If I wear the kandoura I speak to much less people than I would if I was in other clothes. … People’s approach to me changes, good and bad, and I don’t like either. The bad is that people are afraid, intimidated, and look at you weird because you’re a minority and you dress differently. But some people who respect you more just because you’re Emirati and I hate that too, because I’m like, why? Why, if I wear a kandoura, you’re going to let me through the access gate when I’m not supposed to be going through. No, don’t let me through. I’m not supposed to be here.34

Tariq then stated that he was not a fan of the national dress, and only wants Emiratis to wear it on special occasions. He himself switches between Western style suits some days and the kandoura on other days in his daily work schedule (when we met he wore black track pants and a grey polo shirt). He asserted that Emirati women do not have the luxury of wearing Western style clothes because, as he put it, some falsely assume that they “love it [the abaya and sheyla]”, and the rest are “held back by their parents and society.” Similarly, several other male participants expressed sympathy for Emirati women who they felt experienced much pressure to wear the abaya and sheyla.

For another example of the abaya’s expectation for Emirati women, Muneera, who does not wear national dress, stated that when people learn she is Emirati, they express surprise and ask her why she isn’t wearing “the uniform.” She feels as though others question whether or not she is telling the truth about her nationality, for she can’t be a “real” Emirati if she isn’t wearing the abaya and sheyla. This shows the extent to which national dress serves as a

34 I have no similar story for a female participant to compare how she is treated when she is wearing national dress with when she is not wearing it, since the majority of my female participants stated that they wore the abaya and sheyla daily. Out of the three participants who did not wear it, two never wore it, and one only wore it to select formal occasions and so could not comment on wearing it versus not wearing it in her daily routine.
symbol of authentic Emirati womanhood, and the alienation experienced when those expectations are not met.

Specifically for Emirati women, Khalaf (2005) has found that the meaning of national dress is primarily social, informing expatriate men of the expected attitudes to adopt when interacting with women of dignity and status. The national “uniform” or “dress code” can also enhance Emiratis’ sense of constructing an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983). This “dress code” also displays the wearer as having connection to “traditions”: the Emirati traditional way of life, which has not been “lost” or “forgotten.” Thus the dress holds multiple signs for others to interpret. The female national dress has become a particularly potent example of this “imagined community” within the UAE.

Since it is often believed that wearing national dress honours Emirati ancestors, cultural memory is another important aspect of participants’ considerations and performances of national identity. Anheier, Isar and Viejo-Rose (2011) point out that cultural memories are now tied to and help shape one’s sense of identity. They also point to the idea of dissonant heritage, which:

relates to the conflicts that arise from divergent interpretations of heritage or from opposing memories or visions of identity. These, in turn, bring up questions of authenticity, ownership and representation. Whose heritage is it? Whose voice is more authentic, or more legitimate in claiming the right to ‘interpret’ a site? Who has the right to publicly remember and be remembered? (2011: 5)
The idea of dissonant heritage brings up important and contested questions among some participants, who sometimes challenge the authenticity and meaning of national dress itself. Several wondered why it serves as such a potent symbol of identity, so that those who don’t wear it often feel they are not considered “real” Emiratis. Several female participants spoke about national dress as honouring ancestors, which provided continuity for wearers, as participants often believed the dress had been part of their collective past, as well as their present and future. As Aida said, “The abaya goes back to our old generations and ancestors. It reminds me where I come from, how I’m different from other people. The abaya was in my past, present and I hope in future.” This aligns with Khalaf’s (2005) findings, in that wearing national dress is seen as a way to remain loyal to ancestors, even if those ancestors did not necessarily wear the dress continuously and in the same style over generations.

However, others stated that the abaya was not worn by their ancestors, but is a recent invention from the 80s to distinguish Emirati women from other foreign women, and signal to foreign men that they should interact appropriately and selectively with the women in this kind of dress. Muneera told me that when she was growing up, the abaya was a loose cover for modesty with little cultural meaning attached. Yet now she stated that it has become an expectation for Emiratis, particularly women. My aim is not to uncover the “real” history of the abaya in the UAE, but analyse its meaning and purpose to female participants. A common theme from female participants was that of choice when speaking about the dress.

**Individualised choice**

Choice is an important factor in Emirati dress, particularly among female participants, who appeared very prepared to articulate why they choose to cover (or in three cases, not cover). There was no mention of men choosing or not choosing to wear the national dress, as it is
implicitly recognised that they can move between wearing the kandoura and wearing other 
attire, without defending or acknowledging their “right” to choose.

Yasmina, a 27 year-old visual artist, reinforced the idea of choice with regards to female 
dress. I met her one evening in the Dubai Women’s Club during Ramadan, after her fast had 
ended. Her black shelya hung around her neck, hair down to her shoulders. She arranged the 
folds of her black abaya, flower print on one side and black mesh on the other, the pattern of 
a basketball net.

She stated:

It’s a choice we make, either have this on or not have it. I don’t think that 
anyone is forced to have, but it’s more of a respect to this country. Some wear 
it for religion and some respect where they come from. How can they lose it?

Clearly, there is a wrong and right choice to make here, even if the choice is up to the 
individual herself. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) write about choice in light of tradition, 
stating that tradition plays a large role within individual choice, and that these traditions must 
be chosen, and only have strength because they were chosen. Therefore, Emirati women 
“should choose” to wear the abaya and sheyla. Since young Emirati women’s attire serves as 
a primary national symbol, there is more at stake for these young women to preserve Emirati 
culture and continue to wear traditional dress. Stuart and Donaghue (2012) point out that “so 
long as a woman’s actions or circumstances are considered a result of her own choices, no 
further analysis or problematization of them is welcome or warranted” (99).

As Hiba, a 23 year-old visual artist, said:
You can see girls that don’t wear the sheyla. Yet they’re still young and no one really tells them, ‘hey, why aren’t you wearing it?’ Yes, it’s true that it’s better if they do wear, but it’s fine. It’s her choice, and she will eventually wear it when she reaches … when she’s convinced herself, you know?

Here again the “choice” is clear, as it’s “better” to wear the abaya and sheyla, and eventually it is expected than an Emirati woman will “convince herself” to do so. Baker points out that choice “is a highly relative and often unsuitable term which does not account for the conditions in which people are making decision and which bestow more ‘choice’ on some and limit it for others” (2007: 58). The “choice” for the young Emirati girls Hiba describes is limited, as these girls are expected to “eventually” wear it. As Baker writes, “modernisation is signified by [women’s] participation through individual choice (in a fundamentally unchanged social structure)” (2007: 62). Similar to Chapter Five, Emirati women are in some ways demonstrating their individual modern-ness, but are not challenging the underlying gender hierarchy.

Women’s dress is now considered a choice and not a compulsion, and that choice is “a modality of constraint” in that the individual “is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices” (McRobbie 2004: 261). It is through these choices that women are judged as “responsive to the regime of personal responsibility,” or “failing miserably” (261). Women are expected to choose what is socially acceptable and not choose outside of those norms. When women act outside of norms, their choices are not praised but treated with

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35 While it depends upon the family, Emirati girls usually start wearing the abaya and sheyla when they reach puberty. Underneath the abaya, Emirati women can wear whatever they like: jeans, T-shirts, colourful traditional dresses called jalabiyas, blouses, and skirts. As stated in the previous chapter, some women even wear their pajamas underneath their abayas.
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suspicion. Therefore, women can embrace their right to choose, as long as it does not detract from their femininity or modesty (Stuart and Donaghue 2012), and through choice they are thus “re-regulated” (McRobbie 2004).

Gill (2007) writes that young women are represented as active, with “can-do girl power,” and this has been shown of Emirati women in several examples from Chapter Four and Five. In addition, Gill (2007) states that young women are also scrutinised heavily. An example of this was given in Chapter Five, when Amal complained about the criticism she received for tweeting that the men in Turkey were “cute.” For another example, a 22 year-old female illustrator, Maram, stated that it was personally acceptable for her to sit in a coffee shop with other men seated in tables next to her, but not to share a table with another man, noting that there are limits that she will not exceed. Maram felt she would receive criticism if she were to sit at a table with a man, and did not wish to cross this personal boundary either. Similarly, Huda shared that she felt as though others’ were judging her interactions with men at work. She stated that if she laughed too much or too loudly with male co-workers she would be looked down upon. Maram and Huda speak of their ability to work and appear in public space sitting in coffee shops as part of their many “choices,” “freedoms,” and “rights,” but their behaviour within these settings is clearly scrutinised so that women are compelled to make “the right choices.”

Lamis, a 20 year-old designer and writer, connected the Orientalist gaze to choice and national dress in this way:

I’ve talked to a lot of people from different nationalities, and they always ask me this question: ‘Why do you wear the sheyla? They don’t have to force you. You can say you don’t want to.’ So I say to them, ‘It’s my choice. We’re not
forced to.’ And some of them say, ‘they force you to get married to people you
don’t want to.’ But we’re not forced into that either, at least in most families.
So it’s these little things that people don’t know about. We can tell them that
it’s not like that, but because we have this wall between us and them they
can’t know about us.

As shown in Chapter Six, proclaiming one’s “choice” is important to convince foreigners that
Arab women are not oppressed. Yet, Lamis believes that foreigners “can’t know about”
Emiratis because of “this wall between us and them.” This wall is the invisible barrier
separating foreigners and Emiratis. The only strategy Lamis has is to say that she has a
choice. While this is a similar strategy to that of the SMCCU volunteers, in this case the
audience is imagined, and wider. “Choice” is often used to convince female participants
themselves, and other Emiratis, that young Emirati women possess autonomy in their lives,
as cultural actors experiencing globalisation.

Similarly, Maha, a 35 year-old comedian, used choice to show that Western women’s dress
and Emirati women’s dress are similar: “We are not different from you. This is just the way
you choose to [dress] in jeans or a mini-skirt. This is the way I choose to dress. It’s personal
choice, so we’re not really different.”36 For Maha, the recognition of choice flattens the
difference between Western and Emirati women’s dress. Since we all get to choose, the
choice itself doesn’t matter. This response is conceptually broader than in the context of the
SMCCU.

36 Here it might be that Maha was addressing me particularly (although I never wore jeans or a mini-skirt to
interview any of the participants). More likely, I got the impression that Maha used “you” to refer to all Western
women who I represented at that moment.
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One female participant, Amal, spoke about choice in a different way: she wishes she had a choice to wear the abaya or sheyla, but in fact she felt that she has no choice in the matter. Amal stated that her parents would be very upset if they found out she wasn’t wearing it. When I asked her what would happen if she didn’t wear the abaya and sheyla one day, she said, “I think people will eat me alive. I don’t know what will happen, to my father, you know?” By reference to her father, Amal means that her father would hear from others that his daughter wasn’t wearing the abaya and sheyla, and would receive criticism for her lack of national dress. If Amal was seen not wearing the abaya and sheyla by those who knew her, it would be assumed that she was taking part in something illicit, such as meeting a foreign man. It could also signal that she was no longer proud of her country or proud to be an Emirati.

I also asked her if she wanted to remove it and felt obligated to wear it:

Yeah. Culturally obligated, society obligated. A lot of things we do we’re scared of society, that’s why we don’t do it. … I think that because I don’t have a choice to wear it or not, it becomes imposed on me. Yes, I’m proud to wear it as part of my culture, but in the meantime I’d like to have an option. But right now I don’t. Imagine if I did have an option, how greater will it be on me the effect of it. … Truthfully, I think there should be a choice for women and men to either choose to wear it or not.

Amal feels there is no choice involved in wearing national dress, and if there was the demonstration of cultural pride would be even stronger. Here she highlights participants’ ideas about the power of having a choice to convey cultural meaning, even though she feels as though choice is lacking in her life. Amal’s response conveys positivity about the
possibility of having a choice, and expresses the sense that one’s choice would be one’s true, inner desire, separated from the expectations of others. Thus, she asserts that having such a choice would make the tradition itself more meaningful. This in itself is a modern concept. It does not appear that wearing national dress is very meaningful to Amal as a connection to her culture in its own right, but rather could become very meaningful if she was able to choose to demonstrate this connection. As Rose (1996) notes, choice is the way in which individuals are able to “express and manifest their worth and value as selves” (98), and therefore this choice is paramount to Amal and other participants. Rose (1996) also notes that when one feels able to choose freely, this allows for a sense that life is meaningful. Therefore, as Amal noted above, the belief that one has one’s own free choice makes those choices more meaningful. Lazar (2011) notes that “choice” has become shorthand for feminism, especially when consumer products are connected to it. As long as women are choosing, “the choices count as ‘feminist’” (44). This “choice feminism” leaves the gender order undisturbed, and participants show that Emirati women are not entirely free to choose not to wear national dress without consequence. The choices that are available may not be the ones that align with feminist principles, and they might not be satisfying.

Jamilah, as 23 year-old spoken word poet, justified her choice not to wear the abaya and sheyla in this way:

I don’t cover. I mean I probably will eventually, but I feel like I’m going to do it for me and because I want to, not because everyone else is doing it. … I have this romanticised idea that one day I’m going to wake up and decide that I need to cover, but I feel like when … that times does come it will be because I want it, because I’m ready for that step, not because of anything else.
Deep, personalised choice is stressed here; choice that is not influenced by surrounding pressures or others’ beliefs. Jamilah’s statement reifies choice, where choosing is believed to be an autonomous act but is culturally determined through dominant liberal discourses (Rose 1996).

While I am interpreting Jamilah’s comment as demonstrating her belief in the power of individual choice, it can also be interpreted that she is speaking from a more religious or spiritual perspective. “That step” might be religiously motivated. However, as a half-Emirati half-American, Jamilah also revealed that she felt alienated from her female peers while at school. These classmates called her “Stephanie” and worried that they would become “Americanised” by befriending her. Thus, here Jamilah could also be speaking about the moment of reconciliation with her past alienation from national belonging. Whatever the case, the significant point here is that this “step” must be her choice and desire, and not “anything else.” Her choice to belong to the nation through dress must be individual and personal, connecting those aspects of one’s identity together.

Jamilah went on to further state the importance of choice in considering national dress:

I think a lot of people weren’t given a choice [in wearing the abaya and sheyla], and a lot of people don’t know any different. And I think that I’ve done a fair bit of traveling, and really it’s true when you don’t travel you don’t see things different, you don’t … look at people differently. You don’t question different things.
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Here Jamilah feels that other young Emirati women don’t really have a choice in wearing national dress because they have not travelled and therefore do not question whether or not they have made a choice in the matter at all. However, as for Jamilah and Amal, having the ability and capacity to make a choice is seen as superior and the most effective way to demonstrate one’s true inner desires.

Female participants do not often focus upon the social regulation involved in their choices. They choose to take on the expectations placed upon them, seeing it as a choice rather than a compulsion. Dwyer (1999) has similarly found that young British Muslim women emphasised choice in wearing the abaya as part of defining their own identities, resisting the meaning that others attached to the dress, and demonstrating that they were not constrained or influenced by others. However, in this case study, critiques do surface regarding the social compulsion to wear the abaya and sheyla. As Stuart and Donaghue (2012) state, “The neoliberal panacea that all choices are good so long as they are freely made ignores the cultural conditions in which choices are offered and taken and the contingencies that are attached to these choices” (101). This following section further analyses the cultural conditions attached to female participants choices about national dress.

**Invested agency and the abaya and sheyla**

As Baker (2007) notes, choice is a difficult term to criticise since its disapproval denies women the capacity to take actions for their own benefit. There are clear reasons why an Emirati woman would choose to invest in the importance of wearing the abaya and sheyla. Emirati women describe positive consequences for wearing the abaya and sheyla that include feeling “empowered” and respected within the UAE’s multicultural society. Participants often spoke of the abaya’s beauty and elegance, its power to garner respect for the wearer, as
well its worldwide status as a fashion statement. As was quoted in an article titled “The Best of Both Worlds” in *The National*, Sarah Belhasa, a 34 year-old designer, stated, “Being an Emirati woman is really great, you get a huge amount of respect. When I wear the abaya it is almost empowering. It gives me power and makes me feel dignified and like royalty (Al Zaabi 2009).” Here we see Belhasa positively connecting the social respect she experiences and the status conferred upon her as an elite cultural member to the female national dress. This connects to my findings. For example, Hana described the abaya in this way:

I find it very elegant; I find that the way you carry yourself changes. You’re more proper ladylike and it gets you a lot of respect. … I just feel at the workforce, wherever I go, it does get me a lot of respect.

Just as Belhasa put it, the abaya can provide respect for the wearer, as well as a feeling of elegance and royalty.

The dress can also be seen as fashionable, garnering world-recognition, something one can purchase from top designers as a one-of-a-kind coveted item. As Aida put it, “It’s a fashion icon right now. And one of my friends has a shop, and not just here but even in Harrods in London, which sells abayas. And that even tells you that the abaya … is as important.” Here Aida implies that the abaya in this context is as important as other designer clothes available in Harrods. This is not surprising since Harrods is a popular shopping destination for wealthy Middle Eastern families. The important point here is that Aida is emphasising that the abaya is sold alongside top end European brands, justifying its place as a fashionable item and not a

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37 As noted in Chapter Four, local English language newspapers very often focus feature articles on Emirati women, as a group and as individual achievers of “modern” success. This feature is somewhat unique in focusing upon women’s “two worlds,” that of modernity and of tradition.

38 Abayas have been designed by fashion houses such as Sweety, M Collection, Nabrman, Joanna, Surbhi Jaggi and Orkalia. These houses are based in Dubai, Pakistan or Malaysia and their collections are sold in the UAE.
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marker of backwardness. This connection to European ideas of class status demonstrates the importance of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) to participants.

Al-Qasimi (2010) refers to the current fashion trends39 related to abayas as “abaya-as-fashion.” She argues that while this trend alters and individualises the style of abaya, it does not go beyond the restricted boundaries of the abaya itself: a long black cloak (Al-Qasimi 2010). Al-Qasimi (2010) critiques the abaya-as-fashion trend as only a passive resistance to patriarchy. It is important to point out that the abaya-as-fashion does aim to individualise the wearer, while also displaying one’s allegiance to the collective. The dress both excludes other cultural groups and invites worldwide recognition as a fashion trend.

To discuss the abaya’s evolution in terms of fashion, Al-Qasimi (2010) quotes designer Halima Al-Shamry as saying:

Currently, abayas have evolved in form and in colour40 to avoid uniformity, and to add a sense of individuality, as well as a way to avoid the feeling that it is a socially imposed dress code. So we try to add style to an abaya to help women accept it instead of her feeling that it is imposed. You might be a veiled woman (muhajjaba) but your dress code follows fashion. Girls love fashion, they are obsessed with it, so if you make them wear a traditional-looking abaya, they will get rid of it the first chance they get. (65)

39 These trends are high among Emirati women, many of whom are becoming abaya designers. One female participant told me that she didn’t want to design abayas because too many others were doing it, and so designs other clothing styles instead. Some examples of high-end Emirati abaya designers are Badreya Faisal, who has a fashion line called BLEACH, Rafia Helal Bin Dra i, who is the founder of Mauzan. Huda al Nuaimi has a fashion line called Malaak, and the sisters Reem and Hind Beljafla have established Das Collection.

40 While the abaya is black in colour, Al-Shamry is referring to the colourful decorative elements that are now acceptably added to the black abaya to enhance the wearer’s individuality.
This shows that cultural belonging is not as simple as donning the dress, but wearing it in a shifting and particular way in order to both appear as though the dress has been made uniquely for the wearer and to show allegiance to the UAE nation. In this way, female participants have a choice in their style of abaya, but it is culturally prescribed, as only certain expressions of individuality will be accepted. This quote also furthers the idea that the abaya and sheyla is a “dress code” that wearers need to believe they are choosing to wear because of its promise of individuality and connection to collectivity.

This idea was confirmed by Hana, who spoke about the abaya in this way: “It has changed now because it was very standard and … now it’s very stylish, so many different styles.” This is something that Hana appreciates to show her individuality.41 There are many examples of scholarly perspectives on Islamic fashion in different parts of the Middle East, 42 many of which note the shift from local to cosmopolitan consideration for styles of dress (Moors 2007). Such reference is important to contextualise the individuality such dress holds while also allowing one to be recognised as a member of Emirati or Muslim or Arab society.43 However, much of this scholarly work examines the way piety and Islamic faith are demonstrated through fashion, and in the case of my female participants, the majority spoke in terms of cultural demonstrations through dress, rather than religion.44

Abaya-as-fashion therefore allows for individuality while also, as Al-Qasimi (2010) notes, reinscribing patriarchy, as these abayas do not challenge the form, style and function of this garment as a long black cloak and therefore does not threaten the conformity of the dress. As

41 For example, when we met, Hana was wearing a leopard print abaya.
43 This has been similarly found on a more global scale with Miller & Woodward’s (2007) study of jeans, which they found to be both a sign of individuality and recognised global belonging.
44 However, this lack of mentioning religion could be because of my positionality as a non-Muslim Western woman, and the popular belief among Emiratis that religion is a private matter.
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Al-Qasimi (2010) states, this fashion is “only disrupted, never displaced” (69). The participants of this study appear to be disinterested in displacing the abaya, as its current style affords them some individuality but also recognition as part of the collective. Echoing Chapter Five, accepting the abaya and sheyla for the benefits it offers ultimately results in acceptance of the patriarchal system, but allows much more independent mobility and interactions in public space. Thus, this negotiation is an example of invested agency. Female participants invest in choosing this dress as an individual expression of their national identity.

*Alienated in abaya*

While participants focused on the advantages stated above, some also felt the abaya is denigrated, while other national dresses — such as the sari, kimono and African female dress — are celebrated and recognised. Aida stated:

> In Japan, there’s the geisha. For example, in Africa they wear certain colourful outfits and no one argues about that. No one thinks it doesn’t look good because people respect these things. It’s part of their identity. I think people should respect the same thing when it comes to here. … Because, how come you respect other nationalities, like for example the Indian sari, and stuff like that? Why do you respect that? How come you don’t respect mine?

“Mine” here stands for Aida’s cultural identity, showing how easy it is to conflate dress with identity. Even though fashion designers have promoted the abaya as an elegant, coveted, unique and expensive item to combat this disregard for it, it is still imagined as disrespected.  

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45 While there are many styles of abayas to choose from, it doesn’t appear that there is actually a wide range of choice if one wishes to avoid criticism, as several male participants stated that some Emirati women go “too far” in wearing tight or sexy abayas.
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as Aida shows above. Cultural recognition is given to some national dress styles whereas her country’s dress is denied this imagined respect. Aida highlights the way in which she considers the global perception of the abaya and sheyla, and the ways in which her own beliefs about the dress as a fashion trend counters typical ideas from foreigners. She is torn between knowing that the abaya is a fashion icon featured on runways around the world, and receiving unwelcome stares when she visits downtown Dubai malls and restaurants. Aida expressed difficulty in reconciling these two realities, and it appears that focusing upon the abaya as a fashion statement is the best tactic to overcome this divided reception.

As the abaya and sheyla is often seen as a symbol of national recognition and therefore exclusive of non-nationals, it is also unsurprising that the abaya and sheyla is also alienating, as Amal pointed out. She was once at a marketing conference in Dubai. Out of about three hundred people in attendance, Amal said she was the only person wearing an abaya. She stated that it was “horrific” to be in a room filled with people, and she was the only one in an abaya; she felt “out of place.” Amal, among others, described moments when she was turned away from expensive restaurants and upscale bars where the national “dress code” is not allowed. People wearing national dress are often not allowed in these spaces because being in the presence of alcohol, and the atmosphere such drinking inspires, is seen to be disrespectful of the national dress. Amal was told by a bouncer outside an exclusive bar that she could take off her abaya and sheyla and enter to join her friend, already inside. Amal declined, offended by the suggestion. She then asked me, “Why? It’s the UAE. This is the dress code and you’re in the UAE. How would that make you feel if you’re in your own country and you get stopped by someone saying, ‘I’m sorry but you can’t wear this’?” I commiserated with her frustration. Other female participants described expatriates staring at them in upscale restaurants, as if they didn’t belong in this setting.
These experiences show the pain and embarrassment involved in exclusionary cultural practices, and in not being recognised appropriately as a minority cultural group or symbol of national identity. These examples exhibit the disappointment in being recognised negatively for this cultural belonging, particularly in one’s home country. Thus, female national dress as perceived by female participants serves as both an alienating practice and a positive distinction that can connect some wearers to global ideas of female “empowerment,” high fashion and respect.

Another example of perceived disrespect comes from Yasmina. At the beginning of our interview, she told me that she wanted me to tape record her answers because she is a proud Emirati woman with nothing to hide. As she rearranged her sheyla more loosely around her neck, shifting her hair behind one shoulder, she kept returning to a story, an incident during her Masters course. In the middle of class, she corrected one of her professor’s statements. She knew that he was wrong, and gave proof. The professor said, “Wow, that’s the first time I’ve seen a smart Emirati, a smart Emirati girl.” I asked Yasmina what happened next. “What do I say?” She asked. “I just looked at him.” No one else in the class — Emirati men, Pakistanis, Russians, Lebanese, Armenians — stood up for her, and she wondered if they all thought the same. While this incident is not explicitly tied to dress, it does reveal negative stereotypes about young Emirati women, who are identified through their national dress, and the powerlessness Yasmina felt in that moment to overcome such beliefs.

The variety of opinions and concerns over national dress that this research elicited shows the ways in which global audiences are imagined to be receiving this attire, and participants’ reaction to that reception. This highlights the importance of an imagined global audience
within participants’ minds, as they attempt to define the meaning of national dress in relation to global perception, individual choice and collective belonging. Bhabha (1990) notes that “The ‘other’ is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously ‘between ourselves’” (4, emphasis in original). Therefore, even when cultural practices appear to be solely about and contained within one culture, they are part of a cultural discourse with the other. While female participants’ discussion of the abaya and sheyla was more varied and contested than their responses to the Women chapter, there was still a majority invested within the positive meaning of this dress. The dress both allowed participants to feel that they are expressing unique individuality in the design of their abaya and sheyla, as well as connection to larger Emirati society.

**Conclusion**

The connection between individual choice and collective belonging is a key aspect of globalisation’s effect upon minority cultural groups, particularly the women of this group. Choice is inscribed within the discourses of modernity and tradition, global and Emirati, cultural distinctiveness and belonging. Through these parameters, female participants are engaged in debating what it means to be part of a minority culture at the present moment, how to represent themselves and their gendered subjectivity as part of this culture, and the terms of cultural and national belonging. They invest in their roles as national symbols through wearing national dress, yet the choice that they make is highly inscribed.

The final chapter will build upon these themes as it examines Emirati self-representation through another lens, Emirati art and artists. In this case artist participants similarly find themselves moving between presenting globalised, shared identities, as well as cultural
distinctiveness and individuality, as they display invested agency within nationalist art projects.
Chapter Eight

Global Performance of Cultural Distinctiveness: Young Emirati Artists

[Young people around the world’s] aim is not to resist modernity or western culture, or even to appropriate or subvert it, but rather to take up their place as producers of culture within a new set of cultural possibilities.

Henrietta L. Moore, Still Life (2011:7)

Building upon the ways young Emirati’s assert their cultural and gendered subjectivities to real and imagined global audiences, this chapter focuses on young Emirati artists and what they convey about Emirati culture and national identity through their creative expressions. This chapter centres on data collected from female and male artist participants, as well as works produced by young Emirati artists, both participants and non-participants. I argue that artists demonstrate invested agency within their nationalist art projects, where they invest within the official censorship guidelines while producing cultural expressions that also reflect their global artistic awareness and influences.

Through this research, I found that artist participants are involved in asserting themselves as culturally distinct from the multicultural population of Dubai, as well as from outside international audiences, through their artistic expressions. As Niezen (2008) notes, globalisation has caused worldwide fears of cultural homogenisation, and minority cultures are being encouraged to express their cultural distinctiveness to the world, through universal means and forms of distribution, with global audiences in mind. This chapter shows that artist participants attempt to appeal to global audiences through demonstrations of cultural distinctiveness because globalisation fosters such expectations, particularly from minority artist culture groups. This is unlike the SMCCU volunteer participants, who mainly appeal to
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non-Emirati audiences through cultural “translation,” and liberal rationalisations and justifications for cultural practices, such as wearing the abaya and sheyla. These artists’ attempts at representing Emirati culture ultimately differ from the techniques of the SMCCU volunteers because the artists are not involved in deliberate translation from one (assumed) discrete culture to another. Artist participants do not adapt cultural ideas to certain audiences, or consider whether cultural explanations are “right” or “wrong,” but rather possess a greater sense of ownership over forms of expression, and use those forms to demonstrate cultural distinctiveness. Here, the artwork becomes the medium as an object or text, and not the artist herself / himself. The SMCCU uses the body (of both the volunteers and guests) as the site of representation and performance. Similarly, as was shown in the previous chapter, female participants more generally consider the body as part of their demonstrations of national identity through wearing the abaya. Artistic production of the artists in this study is a different form of cultural representation and performance, occurring through creative expression and not the artist’s body. Therefore, such creative expression allows for greater agency within the invested agency model I have delineated in this thesis because it is much more open to varied interpretations, as will be shown.

Artist participants possess a sense of ownership and agency over forms of expression and iconic figures originating from the West. They employ and even disrupt those forms to demonstrate both cultural distinctiveness and appeals to global audiences through references recognised worldwide. Artistic forms and content, such as pop art, van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, and global female icons like Beyoncé and Marilyn Monroe, are not discrete cultural entities explicitly tied to the West, but part of lived realities that are not “other” or “exterior” to artist participants. Instead, these references demonstrate participants’ understandings of Emirati culture today. Therefore, like volunteers, artist participants are
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showing the ways in which they are part of global processes through use of these globally recognised forms and icons, as well as their cultural difference and distinction. They are essentially involved in displaying their “modern-ness” and “tradition,” and the ways these two concepts fuel each other. As artist participants interact with global processes — where they are encouraged to create culturally distinct productions that display this particularism to the world — they become agents of globalisation. Participants are producing themselves as global citizens, and not just recipients of globalisation (Freeman, C 2001). Today, part of being a global citizen and exhibiting oneself as such means having and exhibiting one’s own distinct culture (Niezen 2008), and demonstrating that cultural uniqueness through universalised means and forms of artistic expression. This expression is part of invested agency, where artist participants create art that speaks to global processes and aligns with the UAE’s nationalist goals.

Artists’ discussions of their own work highlights that while global performances and being an agent of globalisation are often considered liberating, in that it allows for wider audiences who expect distinct cultural expression, in some cases awareness of global audiences and expectations also causes limitations. Artists consider what can be safely represented and how other Emiratis might judge this representation, as well as how these representations are framed for Western viewers. Therefore, while artistic representations are not necessarily considered “right” or “wrong,” this globalised view of artistic production has drawbacks. Some artists feel pressure, and exert pressure over other Emirati artists, to avoid representing “sensitive” topics, and instead focus on only those that appeal globally and convey a positive image of Emirati society. Most participants did not state that they felt this pressure was a drawback to their creative expression, but simply a part of their artistic consideration, which allows them to showcase the UAE more positively. I argue that engaging in self-censorship
and being concerned about how to convey a positive image of Emirati society is part of participants’ investment within their positions as Emirati artists.

Although there is some challenge to strictly positive representations within artistic work, because of this narrow view of what is acceptable, some participants considered typical Emirati artistic production as repetitive and unchallenging. Expressions that are deemed negative representations of “Emirati-ness” are often not validated by Emirati artist participants, who view such art as unworthy, inaccurate or unauthentic. Later in this chapter I will provide a brief overview of censorship issues within the UAE, and the extent to which self-censorship is considered. Yet I argue that ultimately artistic work is more open to interpretation and variety than the cultural explanations within the SMCCU, where artists’ unknown intentions and the subjectivity of audience interpretation are often seen as mitigating factors when participants describe negatively perceived work.

This chapter claims that minority cultures’ global performances of cultural distinctiveness are imbued with the struggle to define culture. Participants consider what can be included and what should be excluded, what is safe and what is unsafe to represent, what can be discussed and what cannot, and how to speak about one’s artistic process and choice of representation. Through an encompassing range of artistic forms and icons, Emirati artists demonstrate that they have taken up their place as cultural producers who are not aiming to resist Westernisation or imitate the West, but instead employ “a new set of cultural possibilities” (Moore 2011b: 7). Therefore, I will argue that cultural possibilities, which suggests openness to and engagement with all cultural influences and expressions, is an accurate description of Emirati artists’ works, rather than resistance or complicity with dominant cultural forces. While Chapters Six and Seven revealed some complicity with the dominant cultural force of
a liberal worldview in order to appeal to and convince mainly Western audiences that Emirati culture does not oppress women, this chapter reveals that artist participants’ representation of Emirati culture is much more open and fluid. Even though artists have clear intentions with their work, the desire to convince audiences of certain ideas is less present, and therefore artists can take a more varied and complicated stance toward their cultural representation and messages to potential viewers.

As Carla Freeman writes: “Global processes are simultaneously shaped, limited and redefined” by actors within local contexts, “even if in small ways” (2001: 1014). Like SMCCU volunteers but in different ways, these Emirati artists are part of global processes that define, promote and express Emirati culture, as artist participants consider the opportunities and limitations encouraged by these processes. Participants are not just reproducing and reacting to global processes, but demonstrate invested agency through working within and through these processes to generate a burgeoning art scene with the question of how to represent Emirati culture at its core.

This chapter will provide theoretical background for globalisation’s effect on creative and cultural expression. Then I will discuss the UAE’s current state of artistic production. Through participant responses and examples of artistic productions, I will provide analysis of works that attempt to convey universal appeal through cultural distinctiveness. This is often achieved through forms and concepts that are Western in origin, but are decontextualised to become universal icons, which Emirati artists can employ as part of their own lived realities. The use of these icons within artists’ particular cultural context shows that participants are integrated into wider global interactions, and employ these features as part of their own artistic, cultural expression. The chapter will conclude with an exploration of the contention
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over what is acceptable and unacceptable to represent, and the challenges made to these limitations.

**Globalisation and creative arts**

Several theorists discuss the meaning of creative and cultural expression within the context of globalisation. As Hall defines it, “Cultural expressions refer to the many forms in which the values, experiences, ideas, identities, beliefs, hopes, achievements and aspirations of a people or social group find expression and take significant — and signifying — form” (Hall 2010: ix). And through globalisation, cultural expressions have become “the vessels of collective cultural identities” (Singh 2011 :xxi). Cultural creativity is more often adopted in relation to circumstances of transformation, conflict and discontinuity (Hall 2010). As these expressions are received, or imagined to be received, by an increasingly global audience, their meaning and reception becomes more vital. Creative works are thus connected to concerns over the global anxieties of identity loss, and embolden cultural identity. Creative expressions symbolise cultural identities and ways of life, and are therefore necessary, and are becoming even more so, as cultural flows are perceived to threaten local cultures and identities. Having a “voice” amid global flows often amounts to creating some form of art.

Yudice argues that through globalisation, culture has become a resource for social, political and economic ends, “for increasing participation in this era of waning political involvement, conflicts over citizenship, and the rise of … ‘cultural capitalism’”(2003: 9) Yudice (2003) notes that today “art and culture” are upheld nearly universally as activities and expressions that improve society, promote multiculturalism and advocate for civic participation. Of course, cultural expressions such as art and its relationship to politics and the public sphere is not new, as Bourdieu (1984) has revealed. Cultural distinctions, expressions and tastes mark
class differences, and constitute features of social class (Bourdieu 1984). This is seen within the UAE, particularly Dubai, as the government and expatriate community promote expressions of “local” arts as positive affirmations of cultural and social identity. As Bourdieu (1984) illustrates, aesthetic preferences, often through art, show one’s distinction from material necessity, and displays these refined tastes as far removed from mundane, everyday needs. The UAE government and national artists’ role in defining and developing these tastes is part of this display of distinctiveness and social recognition that is tied to social class as well as cultural affiliation. But these demonstrations of taste do not only show one’s economic advantages, but also exhibit the struggle for recognition and status (Bourdieu 1984).

In terms of cultural recognition, Niezen (2008) notes that while globalisation often refers to increased communication channels through technology, it also describes the process by which cultural groups become integrated into wider, global interactions. He (2005) identifies two ideological strands related to globalisation: that of an emerging, singular global identity and that of increased cultural particularisms throughout different societies. Ideals of utopianism, Niezen points out, diverge into either “universal commonwealth or to restored, autonomous communities” (2008: 1). Yet, instead of just contradicting each other, Niezen argues that these two standpoints often overlap, so that fears of cultural homogenisation spur the development of distinct cultural expression aimed at global audiences.

Both of these ideals are seen through artistic representations of Emirati culture. The overlap between universalism and particularity manifests itself when groups, such as the minority local population within the UAE, use universalised forms and mediums to convey cultural distinctiveness. Young Emirati artists understand that their audience is potentially worldwide,
rather than only the local Emirati population. As Niezen points out, those who think of themselves as “indigenous peoples” or “ethnic minorities” (2008: 2) are not in fact choosing between autonomy or assimilation. Instead, they are choosing among “various ideas, institutional models, strategies,” that originate from “dominant societies and global institutions, which hold out the possibility of protecting a distinct community’s ability to make such choices in the future” (Niezen 2008: 2-3). This can be seen in the UAE, as it has become increasingly necessary among artist participants to draw upon universal ideas to promote cultural particularism, and consider how this distinctiveness should be demonstrated to global audiences. If protecting cultural distinctiveness is a universal idea and “right,” then cultivating and expressing this distinction in fact becomes a force of universalism itself and a part of global processes.

While not every piece of art is a reflection of collective culture, within the UAE participants often perceived art in this way, and those who did not still felt the tension between personal creative expression and representing Emirati culture. While representing Emirati culture, participants felt that the forms that allowed them to communicate these ideas were part of “universal” media tools for the taking, rather than particularly Western forms of expression. Therefore, these artists employ tactics that convey the fluidity and agency of cultural processes and change.

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46 This sense of worldwide audience is also demonstrated by my participants’ responses to their idea of audience. Participants always spoke of their audience as “everyone,” not just Emiratis, and not just those living in the UAE, but anyone interested at all in the UAE, or in their medium of art. Often, Emirati artists’ works can be viewed or read online. Several times, artist participants brought up the positive reception, feedback, and general curiosity they received online about their work from non-Emiratis living outside the UAE.
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\textit{Globalisation and creative expression outside the West}

The expectation that globalisation results in hybrid cultures and identities arises from several sources (Anzaldúa 1987; Bhabha 1994; Canclini 2005; Kraidy 2005; Pieterse 2004). Global communications scholar Kraidy (2005) puts hybridity in the context of globalisation, stating that hybridity celebrates cultural difference as a reaction to and product of globalisation. Similarly, anthropologist Canclini (1995) and sociologist Pieterse (2001) use hybridity to describe multiple identities, boundary-crossing and binary deconstruction. Whereas for Anzaldúa (1987), cultural and feminist theorist, hybridity is empowering, giving agency to the community by subverting and destabilising the centre. While these theories of hybridity are useful in very general terms regarding interactions between and among different cultures and multicultural identity formations, the varying ideas stated here do not fully apply to this case study to explain Emirati artists or their work within the context of globalisation, as will be explained further below.

Bhabha (1994), the founder of postcolonial hybridity theory, writes about hybridity within the context of colonialism. He argues that hybridity is a consequence of colonisation, since the process of colonisation has shown that indigenous cultures are neither fixed nor controlled by their colonists, nor are they culturally isolated or pure. Bhabha (1994) states that repression of the colonised never fully succeeded because of hybridisation and mimicry, where the colonised attempt to imitate or copy racialised identities. This capacity enables resistance against the colonized cultures through the “mimicry” of the coloniser. Bhabha (1994) argues that the colonised are able to maintain some of the hidden aspects of themselves through performing the authorised identity. Most usefully, Bhabha (1994) states that races and cultures are “liminal,” ever shifting and evolving.
Even though Bhabha (1994) discusses colonial identities, it is evident that Emiratis also define themselves as an excluded Other, and are at times denied recognition and denigrated. Yet, while Bhabha’s (1994) theory is useful in terms of arguing against essentialising Third World cultures as monolithic, static and “traditional,” the relationship between Emiratis and dominant Western cultures is not so direct or straightforward as the colonised and coloniser, and this makes the relationship between Emirati artists and their audiences ultimately different from Bhabha’s model of hybridity, mimicry and resistance. Emirati artists are attempting to appeal to global audiences through creative expression of their “imagined” cultural heritage by blending universalised symbols of global citizenship with images of unique Emirati “tradition.” As will be shown, this is not necessarily a tactic of resistance against or mimicry of a “coloniser,” but a way to both appeal to and challenge dominant Orientalist modes of thinking about the UAE and the Middle East more generally.

Several theorists have shown that analyses of hybridity as a result of global processes are not an accurate approach to examining cultural production outside the West (Alexander, C, Kaur & St. Louis 2012; Dirlik ; Moore 2011b; Niezen 2008; Tomlinson 1999). Social scientists Alexander, Kaur and St. Louis find hybridity theory “modish and mundane” and “diminished” (2012: 5). As a critique of hybridity theory, Hopper (2007) offers the assessment that if discrete cultures need to exist before hybridisation can take place, the claim that all cultures are a blend of influences from other cultures is weakened. In addition, cultural encounters are arguably superficial, and understood through one’s own cultural perception, and therefore do not easily result in the mixing frequently described by hybridity theorists. Individuals interpret mass media and other products from their own cultural perspectives and histories, constructing their own meanings and understandings (Hopper
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2007), rather than blending to the extent promoted in hybridity theory. Similarly, Tomlinson (1999) critiques hybridity for its essentialism. If we have all always been hybrid, then what is the use of this theory? (Tomlinson 1999). This idea of mixing and blending implies “equal measures,” and yet this is not always so (Tomlinson 1999: 145).

Instead, invested agency is a more effective model, since artist participants are invested within the UAE’s nationalist art projects promoting positive aspects of Emirati heritage and modern life. This promotion does not involve “mimicry” of Western nations because such inclusion of outside influences and techniques are not perceived by participants as imitating something outside of their own experiences. Instead, the varied elements and influences within their artistic work are seen as part of their experience, as will be shown. Artist participants maintain agency through awareness that art is subjective and open to interpretation. Through being involved in the process of defining how the UAE should be represented by Emiratis, they demonstrate invested agency. The blending of globally appealing icons and images of Emirati “traditions” exhibits invested agency because it shows the way artist participants attempt to contribute to the positive image of the UAE through their artistic output as well as their personal expression regarding modern life in the UAE. Artist participants are invested within their nationalist art projects, but also find ways to determine and define cultural production for themselves. This output is not resistance against a coloniser.

This study has found that artist participants more closely align with Moore’s (2011b) understanding of creative production within the context of globalisation. Moore finds the analytical terms of globalisation, such as “hybridity, mimicry, resistance, reappropriation” are feeble attempts to describe the different reactions to presumed “‘external’ influences”
Discussion of these “external influences” actually points to Western preoccupations, rather than the lived conditions of those outside the West who employ a variety of techniques in their creative expressions. Therefore, while much Western analysis describes such non-Western reappropriation of Western technologies and concepts, Moore (2011b) argues that this basis for analysis is unfounded and ultimately inaccurate. Appadurai also asserts this idea, as he argues that the imagination is a “space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (1996: 4). Therefore, he also suggests that these practices of modernity become one’s own, rather than taken up as reappropriation of an “external” influence.

Moore’s analysis of young people’s worldwide responses to globalisation is certainly borne out in my findings. She notes that young people around the world are:

Seeking ways of contributing to cultural production, leaving their mark on the world … projecting themselves into history … Their aim is not to resist modernity or western culture, or even to appropriate or subvert it, but rather to take up their place as producers of culture within a new set of cultural possibilities. (2011b: 7)

Moore argues that we cannot understand the ways in which young people worldwide are “reproducing themselves as global citizens” (2011b: 7) by calling them hybrids, or describing their productions as resistances toward or appropriation of Western modernity. Her work decries such accounts that analyse non-Western cultural reproduction as valueless and unoriginal when employing modern technology. She implores us to ask of our own analyses
Moore critiques an aspect of globalisation studies that overemphasises difference and the binaries of “impact / response, capitalism / culture, Western / non-western” (2011b: 8). Instead, this field should understand that creative expression is part of contemporary culture. Using the example of Indonesian designers, she argues that these artists do not see themselves as hybrid, as resisting or reappropriating Western forms, but instead as “interconnected global citizens” involved in “creating new connections, new meanings and novel forms of relation” (Moore 2011b: 8). Similarly, Appiah notes that “people in each place make their own uses even of the most famous global commodities” (2006: 241), such as Levis, Coca Cola, and in this case study, famous artworks such as Mona Lisa or Starry Night, and artistic forms such as pop art. Therefore, hybridisation cannot easily work as a theory to explain current circumstances of global processes since syncretism, or the fusion of different forms or practice, has always been a part of identity and culture (Amselle 1998).

Not only do Emiratis live within a majority expatriate population, but Emiratis themselves have stated that they often feel as though they are in a different country to the one where they grew up, given all of the changes that have taken place, and the variety of cultures and consumer items on display, which influence and shape new ways of life. Emiratis also feel marginalised as a local minority as well as ambivalent about the idea of other cultural influences. These effects are born out in artists’ works, as participants both attempt to assert their cultural uniqueness and employ universalised icons and forms to varying extents, while

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47 Miller and Woodward (2007) similarly argue that denim jeans are also an example of global products that are worn in specific ways for specific purposes among different cultures, while also appealing to enduring worldwide fashion trends.
viewing and using these icons and forms as part of their own subjectivities to portray through art.

**Global performances of nationalist art in the UAE**

In the last decade, the UAE has been heavily promoting the arts (such as visual art, photography and filmmaking), as well as young Emiratis’ role within artistic expression. For example, international events such as the Dubai International Film Festival, the Gulf Film Festival held in Dubai, the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, the Sharjah Biennale, the Art Abu Dhabi gallery show, Dubai Art Fair, and the international book fairs held in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, are all important events on the UAE’s cultural calendar. These events almost always have separate components for Emirati exhibitions and viewings. All of these festivals and exhibitions have only existed for less than ten years. These events happen alongside the presence of over 100 art galleries (ranging from large showroom galleries to much smaller spaces which also serve as cafés) showcasing visual art and photography, and local film festivals, all of which showcase Emirati talent.

The Tourism Development and Investment Company (TDIC) in Abu Dhabi funds and manages much of the Abu Dhabi cultural programs listed here, and the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority (DCAA) funds many artistic projects in Dubai, and supports the Gulf Film

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48 A similar case of a nation state endorsing art to promote itself as globally appealing, as well as to maintaining national identity and unity, is taking place in Singapore (Chang 2012). The country holds arts festivals with national and international participants and artistic managers / agents to demonstrate itself as a cultural hub, much like the UAE. And like the UAE, it is challenging to convey both cosmopolitanism and nationalism at once, as these two modes of appeal often lack coherency (Chang 2012).

49 For comparison, Madrid has around 45 art galleries, Doha has nearly 15, Beirut has approximately 70. All of my sources for these figures come from *Time Out Magazine’s* art gallery listings for each city. The numbers are approximate because it is difficult to know which galleries are still currently running or the criteria for being listed as an art gallery.
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Festival and the Dubai International Film Festival. 50 Although different people and groups manage these events, it is clear that these two bodies within Abu Dhabi and Dubai are the main supports for artistic initiatives, and that Emirati cultural production is a key feature of many of these festivals, exhibitions and events. Therefore, especially in Abu Dhabi, where local art is promoted through their tourism branch, Emirati artistic expression is seen as a way to appeal to visitors and worldwide audiences interested in the UAE.

Artistic expressions are promoted by the UAE government as part of their global performance of “high culture,” to exhibit that Emirati society creates culture as much as it consumes it from other countries. This performance of culture stems from the 19th century, when Europeans expanding their empires began to view fine art as a sign of progress or civilisation’s advancement (Phillips & Steiner 1999). Art became a measure of human achievement by which to judge a culture’s level of civilisation. Of course, Western perceptions of “fine art” excluded much cultural production outside of the West, and supported hierarchies of race, gender and class (Phillips and Steiner 1999). This Orientalist legacy persists today, so that the UAE government promotes creative artistic productions, particularly among young Emiratis, to demonstrate their “advancements,” not just as a modernised city, but as a culture infused with vitality and curiosity. Like women of the nation, art is put forward as a measure of progress.

As Bourdieu (1984) has shown, cultural practices mark class distinctions and are part of a nation’s cultural and symbolic capital. In the case of the UAE, demonstrating the national culture’s artistic ability shows that Emiratis are far removed from worries of material subsistence, but instead are contemplating more abstract representations of their social world.

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50 Since these organisations are very large and private, it would be very difficult to learn an exact or even approximate figure for the funding available for these particular festivals and exhibitions.
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This context marks this cultural group as distinctive from other expatriate nationality groups who possibly cannot afford to demonstrate this aspect of their class status to such an extent as the Emirati population. Through these fine art events, the Emirati government is promoting its class status as well, by highlighting the country’s interest in expensive, well-regarded art from international artists, and aligning Emirati artists’ work with these pieces. The UAE government and artists themselves are “legitimating social difference” (Bourdieu 1984: xxx) by showing themselves as high-class art enthusiasts, buyers and producers.

The government and Emirati artists are displaying their artistic taste, which is a central element of social identity (Bourdieu 1984). Bourdieu states that taste “unites and separates.” It “unites all those who are the product of similar conditions while distinguishing them from others” (Bourdieu 1984: 56). Bourdieu notes that taste distinguishes “in an essential way, since taste is the basis of all that one has — people and things — and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others” (1984: 56). Therefore the demonstration and worldwide exhibition of this taste is important to Emiratis themselves in terms of their own international image, as well as important to outsiders who then can decide how to regard this city and country in terms of cultural and social distinction. Artistic production and admiration is not an innate quality, as Bourdieu (1984) points out, but something that is inculcated as part of one’s often high-status education. Cultural consumption is learned and indicates one’s social class (Bourdieu 1984), and thus the UAE government and Emirati artists attempt to use this view to reflect their own conception of social class to global audiences.
As has been shown, Emirati artistic production is strongly encouraged by the UAE government through exhibitions, which are often themed around expressions of national identity, and only include Emirati artists. Examples of these nationalist exhibitions are the August 2011 show at the Ara Gallery in downtown Dubai, titled, *UAE: A Work of Art*, where seven Emirati artists (four women and three men) were chosen to create visual art related to their connection to the UAE. Featured artist Nawal Khoory exhibited a work titled “Across the Times,” which is a digital print of a dhow (wooden boat). The dhow is sketched in black with a white background, and other symbols are depicted as abstract figures appearing as though they are connected to the sides of the boat. These symbols are a wind tower, winding alleyway, and the desert sand. She describes the work in the exhibition brochure as such:

In the Bastakiya artworks, I rewrite the past of my family living in old Bastakiya. This past has been written. The future we write. But what has been recorded? The presence of our nature, examined as a still from the past resurfaces as to preserve what was achieved. This brings to light the various elements that make up the lifestyle of the people living in old Bastakiya. Water, their means of living — on board Dhows and Abras. Wind, their source of comfort—captured by the wind towers and winding alleys. Sand — the harsh walk across the sandy dunes of the desert with the desert-enduring camels. Soil, the grains of life — once pictured and forever remains a part of a history.

Khoory’s description here shows her questioning how to display the past’s meaning for the present, and consideration of how to represent that past to highlight the UAE’s current
achievements. This consideration appears to be framed overall by her reflection on how to “write” the future, which is a postmodern conceptualisation of her artistic intentions. This type of work appears to align with the government’s aims for such shows as Emirati artists convey their reflections upon their cultural past, present and future and represent themselves as definers and architects of that future.

Similarly, another exhibition titled *Emirati Expressions* at Manarat Al Saadiyat in Abu Dhabi from October 2011 to January 2012 featured ten young Emirati photographers (eight women and two men) exhibiting their works on the theme of expressions of Emirati identity. A video about the project and the artists played on a loop in the entrance to the exhibition space. The video voiceover stated, “These artists captured moments, places, people, sounds and mirages that reflect the essence of what is an Emirati expression.” For this project, the chosen photographers worked with well-known American photographer Stephen Shore, who also exhibited his work alongside the amateur Emirati photographers. While the presence of this prominent American photographer suggests paternalism, his involvement also gives high-status to the project, showing that these young Emirati photographers deserve this kind of authority presiding over the exhibition, and even exhibiting alongside them. Tarek Al Ghoussein, Palestinian and Kuwaiti-born photographer and Professor of the American University of Sharjah, also showed his work at the Emirati Expressions exhibition and was involved in teaching the workshop. He is also internationally recognised, and the presence of a well-regarded Arab photographer signalled a conscious effort to downplay any imperialist overtones from Shore’s involvement.

The chosen artists’ works were eclectic, featuring varied conceptual photography projects. One set of photographs by Fatima Al Yousef focused on scenes from inside the house where
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she grew up. Since the house was being demolished, it was empty except for a few items, such as an old calendar and a cushion. Several women and children populate the rooms, looking out the window. In the video presentation, Al Yousef states that through these pictures the house is never truly gone. She does not blame anyone for the home’s demise, but attempts to document and preserve it through her art. Another photographer, Afra Bin Dhaher, composed much more abstract work through self-portraits. The idea of “Emirati expression” was interpreted and displayed in various ways by the photographers, from personal reflections to documentations of the social changes and physical transformations to the cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Thus, projects were promoted as specific expressions of “Emirati-ness,” whether personal or encompassing broader elements.

In December 2011, another exhibit at the Ara Gallery titled 40 Poems from the Desert, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, featured twenty young Emirati artists (nineteen women and one man) depicting artistic renderings of poems written by Sheikh Mohammed, the ruler of Dubai. Like the poems, the paintings celebrated aspects of UAE life, with subjects like Sheikh Zayed and Sheikh Rashid (previous ruler of Dubai), as well as love poems and tributes to beauty. These works are mostly in the mediums of mixed media on canvas, digital illustrations, acrylic and watercolour, ink and pastels on canvas and paper. In Shamma Al Amri’s “The Dream of the UAE Union,” mixed media on paper, she incorporates a number of Emirati symbols — a gazelle and a dhow — around oil fields placed in the centre of the canvas. These various mediums and ideas about how to represent these poems show the way in which Emirati artists are combining and experimenting with new visual art techniques to portray ideas about the UAE union, their leaders, and other themes such as unrequited love and beauty. These mediums are clearly not viewed as “other” or “external” to Emirati artistic
production, or they would not be present in this exhibition celebrating the ruler of Dubai and his poetry.

Artists are selected for these events by submitting some of their previous work and then being commissioned to create art based on the exhibition’s theme. In some cases, gallery managers select the artists for these events, and in larger exhibitions, the DCAA or the TDIC would be involved in the selection. The selection criteria for each event is unclear, but it is evident that nearly all of the chosen artists are young (under 30), and the majority are women. Again the aspect of global performance appears clear, in order to show that the young people of the UAE are maintaining and expressing Emirati cultural ideas, and to highlight that women are prominently given a “voice” in this kind of expression.

With these examples, it is evident that Emirati artistic production is encouraged, and those artists are heavily influenced to create art celebrating Emirati cultural identity in international venues. While the intention to highlight local talent is apparent, separating these artists by “Emirati” and “Other” not only re-inscribes Orientalism, but also reverses it, to state that Emiratis are the centre, and everyone else is an Other. This highlights the cultural distinctiveness and import of Emirati artists.

Despite these pushes for showcasing Emirati artists and their work, there is no national gallery in the UAE that displays national art of the past. Therefore the visual traditions of the UAE are not studied or easily known. There is, in fact, very little representation of the past, besides several heritage museums, which recreate typical scenes of the past with mannequins or display old photographs of the ruling families, and other artefacts such as

51 There is also very little public or street art such as graffiti. Since there is seldom any foot traffic in the cities of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and people mainly drive and meet each other in malls, there is little opportunity for spontaneous expression on a street or alleyway.
coins, weapons and stamps. These heritage museums are not very popular with Emiratis and are geared toward tourists. However, these sites are not particularly popular for tourists, either, who mainly think of Dubai as a shopping destination and not a cultural site. Since there is little written record of Emirati past, and those records that do exist are not very important or representative to participants, Emirati artists feel compelled to try to represent aspects of that past in their art.

This sense of the past is often based on oral history through stories from grandparents or participants’ imagination of what pre-oil life would have been like through the prism of universal forms and icons, as will be described. Therefore, in order to legitimise their national and artistic efforts, a shared story must be formed out of little record. These stories about the past must be constructed in the present (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). Fadil, a 29 year-old filmmaker, stated that filmmakers are “really bringing the old stories to life. They have a right to do so. The reason is we don’t have any recorded films from lives of 30 [or] 40 years ago …” Without these records, Emirati artists feel they lack the historical significance that other countries can display through their documentations of the past. Art appears to be one way to demonstrate cultural legitimacy and reclaim alienation from Emirati past. It is a means of conveying this cultural import to global audiences and to support nationalism, which requires founding antiquities.

In terms of visual art and photography, the markets for this artwork are often foreign expatriates who visit these gallery exhibitions. It appears that Emirati artists are not necessarily creating art for a living, where profits matter a great deal, but to contribute to

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52 While there are some channels one can go through to find historical record, once again these records often date back to the time of the UAE’s unification in the 1970s, rather than a more deep-rooted past. Poetry unique to the region (called nabati) from pre-oil days exists in some record, but participants never mentioned an interest in this form to me, and did not know much about it on the few occasions I brought it up.
these national shows that demonstrate Emiratis’ ability to create art. Proving this idea appears more important than individual sales. Most artist participants were educated in art techniques in university, and hold day-jobs in government research positions, or in marketing, and said they preferred making art in their free time. Many participants stated that they had no particular audience in mind, and told me that they definitely weren’t only thinking of an Emirati audience, but anyone interested in the UAE, or their form of art.

Several participants spoke to me about their family supporting their artistic endeavours, but not understanding why their son or daughter creates art or why art is important. For older Emiratis, the artistic “scene” that has been created in the UAE can be alienating, while to young Emiratis, this scene is often more familiar, since younger Emiratis have often majored in art in university and feel more comfortable in the company of foreign expatriates and the media. Even though these artists were young and not very well established in their profession, it was interesting to note that participants did not seem surprised that I wanted to interview them for this research. Participants often spoke of their art and inspirations as if they were prepared for such questions, even though it is highly unlikely that they had been interviewed many times, if at all, about their artistic work. One of the main themes among participants’ responses was that their artistic processes were connected to forms and icons which are deemed universal, and not exterior to their lived realities. These artists exhibit invested agency within the UAE’s nationalist art aims.

**Global citizens, culturally distinct**

Participants wish to create work that both appeals to global audiences and demonstrates cultural distinctiveness to that audience. To do this, they often employ forms and techniques that they take to be “universalised” or global. That is, these elements or forms have been
released from cultural context, and have become larger in scope, consequence and effect, in that they are seen to be concerned with human life and experience, and not just relevant to one location (Ong & Collier 2005). Ong and Collier write that global forms “have a distinctive capacity for decontextualization and recontextualization, abstractability and movement, across diverse social and cultural situations and spheres of life” (2005: 11). Therefore, such artistic forms and techniques applied by Emirati artists are not “exterior” to their lives and culture as Western in origin, but decontextualised from this origin to become “theirs” as much as anyone else’s.

For example, participants spoke about using artistic forms, such as pop art, or recognisable icons such as van Gogh’s *Starry Night* or da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, as part of their own lived realities, and not something from another culture that is external to their experiences. When I asked one of the artist participants\(^{53}\) about her artistic influences, she stated:

> If you look at my paintings you’ll see that two per cent of the paintings only are related to my culture. The other things [are] not foreign culture, but scenes I saw in my life: *Moulin Rouge*, a movie I love because of the colours and idea. And it’s something I really studied when I studied media studies, so I picked Lautrec to study, and *Moulin Rouge* is something. I don’t mean I’m connected to France. I love this movie, the scenes, colours. … Every painting I do, the Dubai series was dedicated only to Dubai, to my culture, but other things are things I love: music, movies, a person, an icon I saw in my life. I cannot say I am connected to a specific country or culture. I can say these are the things I love.

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\(^{53}\) For greater anonymity, I will only refer to the three artists whose work I describe as “an artist participant” instead of a pseudonym.
In this case, she is aware of appropriating other cultural forms and using them to her own designs. This artist makes the case for employing scenes and experiences from her life as part of her artwork. She states that inclusion of these images does not exhibit her connection to another culture, or any one culture, but instead displays her reality and influences, and desire to express that reality to global audiences. However, one of her series of works that I will describe further below consists of Dubai skyline scenes, which belies the idea that she is completely removed from a cultural context. Although she clearly acknowledges that there is a cultural association between Moulin Rouge and France, she is quite self-conscious in her rejection of this connection in her artwork.

In one of her paintings, she used the style of van Gogh’s Starry Night to create her own Dubai skyline artwork, called Starry Dubai. The painting depicts rows of boxy, abstract renderings of buildings, as well as the Burj Khalifa and Emirates Towers, coloured in beige, green and yellow. Above this are layers of green and blue sky, and then above that are the swirling clouds van Gogh made famous in his Starry Night.

While it appears that this artist is appropriating Western forms, this is not part of her artistic process or thoughts about cultural representation. Instead, she sees Starry Night as an iconic artwork that will “add value” to her own work as a young Emirati visual artist. Perhaps the idea that van Gogh is a Western artist is part of her understanding of his “value;” however, much more important to her is the idea that this is a globally known painting and style from a well-known historical figure. It appears that his location and time in history has been decontextualised, and instead is something she saw, connected with and employed as a teaching tool for her own work. As she put it:
I tried to learn from *Starry Night*, and the idea of *Starry Night* was van Gogh looked outside his window in 1888 and this is the view he saw outside his window. When I wanted to do this project I wanted to incorporate that. And this is the new Dubai. We want to see the old and new Dubai all together in one scene. We don’t want to lose our identity of the old Dubai and just focus on the new Dubai. It’s a mixture of everything, and that’s why I wanted to use van Gogh, because I wanted to add value to it, like add value from a person from history, you know? And not just make it [something] I can create now and then people would forget about it.

Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, from 1888, adds value to her depiction of old and new Dubai together because it is globally recognisable and therefore connects her work to larger global ideas. While Van Gogh’s work can be globally known because of his Western origin, she is more concerned with the work’s recognisability, rather than its origins. This artist believes this recognisable style allows her to convey old and new Dubai together “in one scene.” Her connection to this process, looking out her own window and depicting what she sees, connects her to this artist and his process. Van Gogh’s status as a historical and artist figure becomes the “value” that allows her to create something memorable about the unique condition of Dubai, where the old and the new mix together, “all in one scene.” This added value inserts Dubai art into “global” art history. Linking *Starry Night* to other stories of nationhood and development legitimates the Emirati story. It is not that it is a specifically Western form or idea that allows her to “add value” to her work, but that this is a well-known artist whose works she, and many people throughout the world, have access to and see as a familiar image, even without studying art, or Van Gogh’s body of work. Therefore, such
ideas and forms have become globalised and universalised, rendered as discrete touchstones unmoored from cultural context.

Reference to *Starry Night* allows this artist to bring together old and new Dubai through her connection to van Gogh’s process as an observer, in this case an observer of the city’s physical and cultural changes. She is showing that Dubai, and its changes, have as much value as van Gogh’s French scene. Her scene is culturally distinct, and yet shows global audiences that Dubai is an important place to be acknowledged alongside van Gogh’s France. However, that the scene is European is not as important as that its worldwide familiarity can elevate her Dubai scene through this iconic reference.

For another example, another artist participant designed popular T-shirts featuring famous celebrity faces, such as Marilyn Monroe, Beyoncé and Queen Elizabeth, as well as famous Arab women such as Lebanese model, actress and singer Haifa Wehbe, wearing the burqua mask, a traditional golden-coloured mask that married Emirati women wore frequently in pre-oil days, and that elderly Emirati women still wear very infrequently today. Mona Lisa and Audrey Hepburn are also transformed, wearing Emirati golden jewellery and henna. These designs were exhibited on canvas in a collection called “My Heritage” at a gallery in downtown Dubai in 2011. With this work, she aimed to show that the burqua mask was worn by strong women in the past, and that these women were also elegant and “classic” in the way that the celebrity women are universally deemed as elegant and classic. The use of both Western and Arab female icons reveals that to this artist, the Western icons are in fact current universal symbols of elegant femininity, as much as Arab women, and she wishes to convey that Emirati women of the past were also elegant and sophisticated in similar ways as the Western and Arab celebrities.
She can make this statement appealing and available to global audiences through using these iconic images. While some of the women this artist chose to feature have become universal symbols of beauty and elegance because of fame originating in the West and because of her interest in appeasing the Western gaze, to this artist and the other artists, the Western gaze is less important than the idea that these women have become symbols in her own life, similar to the Arab women she features. She shows that no one “owns” pieces of culture, as cultures are more porous than they are often made out to be. Through these universal references, combined with local ones, she demonstrates cultural distinctiveness, and appeals to global audiences.

Yet these luxurious images of famous bejewelled women certainly portray a kind of cultural distinctiveness, one that is clearly tied to class. As Bourdieu (1984) illustrates, individuals and groups strive to preserve or improve their class standing. This can be achieved through demonstrating artistic taste, and in this case exhibiting artistic production that includes references to several European models of beauty and high-class status. These references align Emirati past and tradition with the wealth and symbolic refinement of contemporary beliefs about beauty and luxury. As Bourdieu (1984) points out, one’s sense of collective identity emerges through both material and symbolic resources that reflect one group’s distinction from others. In this artist’s case, she is reflecting material and symbolic features of her collective identity.

She has created similarly themed fashion designs to make her brand appeal to a global audience. In her process, this artist described first thinking of themes of cultural
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distinctiveness she wanted to employ, such as the burqa mask or oudh, Arabian perfume,\textsuperscript{54} and presented them within universal forms and icons. In this way, cultural particularism and universalism once again fuel each other in cultural production among participants. Participants show themselves as global agents invested in their cultural expression through this combination of tactics for global recognition of cultural uniqueness.

As a final example, another artist participant created a piece called $I = You$, a scanned collage printed on canvas. The artwork is made up of advertisements printed in the UAE over time, and arranged to evoke the familiar image of the \textit{Mona Lisa}. This work depicts the form of Mona Lisa through small, irregular shapes cut out from advertisements, against a colourful background, also made up of advertisement cut outs. The lower half of the collage is mainly black and white, and the top half is more colourful, with blues, pinks, greens, oranges and reds. Mona Lisa herself appears to be wearing a dark dress that could be an abaya, but her long brown hair is uncovered, and her features are more like that of a fashion model than the original painting of \textit{Mona Lisa}. He commented on his process:

\begin{quote}
I never thought I would remake \textit{Mona Lisa} in my own view. But … I just experienced something and I end up adding it to the collection. So it’s basically \textit{Mona Lisa} is a great piece, a precious piece in France. And the museum that which is holding this piece is going to open in Abu Dhabi, so this is coming to here.
\end{quote}

This artist is certainly aware that the \textit{Mona Lisa} painting resides in France, but is more concerned with the fact that this is an iconic piece of art that is making its way to Abu Dhabi.

\textsuperscript{54} She transforms the Arabian perfume, called oudh, into Oudh No. 5, a take on Chanel No. 5.
to be exhibited in the Abu Dhabi branch of the Louvre on Saadiyat Island.\footnote{The Tourism Development and Investment Company (TDIC) of Abu Dhabi is managing the construction of Saadiyat Island, a man-made island off the coast of Abu Dhabi. This island will hold residencies and hotels, as well as world-known, “franchised” museums such as the Louvre and the Guggenheim. The TDIC has paid to use the name and works from the Louvre, as well as curatorial advice of the Louvre staff. The Abu Dhabi Louvre is set to open in 2015, when the Mona Lisa will be exhibited. This project is an enormous undertaking to attempt to make Abu Dhabi into a world-class cultural capital. However, this plan has received much criticism from international media since the project focuses on exhibiting Western art and the assistance and brand recognition of famous Western museums.} This circumstance is a way to connect with this piece of work, because soon it will be on exhibition in his country, connecting his country to worldwide ideas about important and recognisable art and where it can be found. Therefore, this artwork is decontextualised as a totally foreign item and becomes something for this artist to employ and utilise in his own artistic work about the UAE’s development. The \textit{Mona Lisa} has, in fact, become a symbol of the UAE’s development as a globally known country set to house globally famous museums and artworks. Through the availability of international residents, lifestyles and media within the UAE, many icons and artistic forms that are derived in the West have become discrete cultural entities that participants see as part of their own experiences as Emirati citizens.

This artist goes on to describe why he chose the various advertisements that make up the collage, from the first telecommunications network in the UAE, Etisalat, to familiar fast food restaurants. He points out that the bottom half of the collage is black and white advertisements and the upper half is coloured:

So the black and white is showing the old days of the UAE, which means more life as a desert. So the improvement [is] growing so it has colours. A lot of nationalities are living in the UAE, whether it’s for work or tourists. And showing that it’s not an Arab country right now, it’s an international country.

So [I’m] saying that a lot of people are sharing the same hopes and dreams,
emotions. … So it means like everyone could have different dreams, but I could share the same dream. Maybe me and you or someone else would share the same dream. Something else is showing the different cultures and countries they come from…

He appears to be reaching out to global audiences through his process of art creation, attempting to depict what is unique to each individual and what is shared. Therefore, both elements of portraying cultural distinctiveness are present — through the black and white advertisements that only Emiratis or those living in the UAE for a very long time would recognise, and global appeal, through easily identifiable advertisements and colourful images in the top portion of the artwork, which portrays the idea that dreams and hopes are often shared around the globe.

This mix of cultural particularism and universality is evident here, as well as artists’ acting as agents of global processes, and not just recipients of it. Through using icons such as Beyoncé and van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, and popular forms such as pop art (an art style that several artist participants employed in their work about the UAE), Emirati artists are showing their connection to both the universal iconic and the local particular, and the ways in which these blend together. The artwork asks viewers to reconceive of their own ideas on the meaning of these icons and popular forms to create new understandings about Emirati culture. This works also compels viewers to reconsider how other cultures view global products, icons and forms as they are reinterpreted in local contexts, to highlight local lifestyles. Therefore artist participants bring new meaning through these artworks as they showcase the ways in which the global world is and can be conceived of through certain local and cultural lenses. Participant artists engage in interpreting various influences as part of their own lives and
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convey cultural messages as part of the many changes taking place through globalisation. Their artwork shows their agency as participants in globalisation, as they claim their position as global citizens who can use various elements from a globally shared history to express cultural meaning that is distinctive and globally relevant.

Since Emirati culture is certainly not unitary, some cultural messages can become controversial. Such concerns create an atmosphere of artistic self-censorship where the government, then, rarely feels the need to get involved. This context often leaves artists representing “safe” topics of nationalist pride. Measures of self-censorship and implicit ideas over what is acceptable and unacceptable to convey about UAE society demonstrate the extent to which these representations matter as key forms of cultural artefact and transmission of Emirati culture. Unlike the SMCCU, there is no clear definition of what is “right” and “wrong” to convey about Emirati culture, as participants accept that art is open to interpretation and even intended to challenge normative views. These artist participants are embedded within discourses about global citizenship and minority recognition, rather than the discourse of UAE tourism, as is largely the case with SMCCU volunteers. These volunteers are often participating in and representing an “official” discourse more than they are involved in cultural expression. Artist participants have greater agency in their artistic cultural expressions, yet artists still struggle over how to define and represent Emirati culture to themselves and outsiders. They display invested agency in these nationalist projects as they follow the aims of UAE nationalism and consider how to best represent the UAE to outsiders through their artistic expressions.
Self-censorship and the limitations of UAE art

As Dellios notes, an “insider” artist is often viewed as the “mouthpiece” of one’s nation (2010: 622). This creates positive and negative consequences for the artist participants of this study, as well as shapes the ways they view other Emirati artists and what they represent about the UAE. Since global performances of cultural distinctiveness are increasingly seen as universal rights and expectations, what counts as acceptable to represent also becomes more important. Some participants spoke about their own representational limitations as artists or how they wish other artists would censor their own representations. Participants often spoke to me about Dubai as a safe space where they are treated with privilege; this sense of privilege can also limit creative expression as challenges or criticism to their work is often lacking or non-existent. Muneera, a 40 year-old photographer, spoke to me about needing to leave the UAE to experience “culture” (meaning fine art), because she could not find anything that was conceptually challenging here.

When I asked participants about censorship issues, most spoke to me about why they felt that censorship was not an issue for them. As we saw in Chapter Four, participants are mainly content with the government’s representation of themselves, and generally express gratitude for what they have received from the UAE authorities in terms of education and career opportunities. In this chapter it has been clear that participants are pleased with the governmental support they receive for their artistic endeavours and are “invested” within the government’s aims. However, UAE authorities are certainly involved in censorship of films, books, websites and the local press. While the UAE has been called more liberal than the other GCC countries in terms of censorship, particularly with cinema, any work must not offend the nation’s social and religious values (Chubb 2010). This means that sexual
depictions must be removed, along with all references that might be offensive to any religion. Any criticism of UAE laws will be censored (Chubb 2010). A wide range of books are banned, even though officially only books that offend Islam and are pornographic are allowed to be censored (Davidson 2008b). In terms of the press, journalistic misconduct is considered a criminal offence (Davidson 2008b) and the UAE ranks 112 out of 179 countries in the Press Freedom Index for 2011-2012 (Press Freedom Index 2012). For context, Australia was ranked 30 on this list, Singapore was 135, and Bahrain, neighbouring Gulf country, was ranked 173 (Press Freedom Index 2012). The government monitors press content and journalists routinely self-censor (Freedom House 2012; UAE: Stepped-Up Harassment of Rights Defenders).

Websites are blocked if they are related to terrorism or encourage premarital sex; telecommunications programs such as Skype are also prohibited (Davidson 2008b). Sites also officially blocked are those that are seen to promote hatred of religion, are against UAE laws, or encourage gambling or use of illegal drugs (Dubai FAQs Information Guide). Unofficially, sites that mention human rights abuses in the UAE are blocked, as well as sites endorsing other religions (Davidson 2008b).56

The 2011 World Report chapter on the UAE showed that the UAE authorities suppressed and harassed human rights advocates (UAE: Stepped-Up Harrassment of Rights Defenders). As Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director of Human Rights Watch, stated in a January 26, 2011 press release:

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56 However, blocking such sites is becoming increasingly difficult as many of Dubai’s free zones have a direct internet access that does not go through a proxy server and therefore cannot be monitored (Davidson 2008b). Thus, most residents can access Skype.
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The UAE should take a long, hard look at what happens to governments that suppress the rights of its citizens to speak out or that think they can control the information people share. Tunisians are not the only ones in the Arab world who will insist that no government has the right to trample their rights. (*UAE: Stepped-Up Harrassment of Rights Defenders*)

While cultural production is highly promoted, UAE rulers are exhibiting even more concern regarding political opposition and participation since the Arab Uprisings. For example, in July of 2012, at least 37 bloggers, writers, poets and lawyers were arrested (Sailer 2012). However, the great majority of Emirati artists who I contacted were very eager to meet and speak to me, and claimed no wish to remain anonymous in my research. Only one visual artist apologised for not being able to meet with me, as his ideas were too “controversial.” He wrote in his email correspondence:

> Regarding the interview, as much as I am flattered and grateful that you found me interesting enough to interview, but I would have to respectfully reject your offer. I apologise for that. These subjects for me are too sensitive and my views tend to be controversial. I decided to not take part in anything related to the community or the country when it came to interviews.

This shows that at least one artist, and likely more who I was unable to contact or identify, are concerned over speaking about these “sensitive issues,” even though in my interview request email, I did not reference speaking about sensitive issues. I spoke about my interview aims in this way:
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My project is looking at creative expressions of Emirati nationals and the ways this might communicate different ideas about Emirati national identity.

You would be given the chance to speak freely and express your views on issues of national identity, the effects of the UAE’s modernisation on you and your gender, and any related topics that you feel comfortable bringing up.

Even with assurance that anonymity would be maintained, this artist refuses to do interviews of any kind related to the UAE. This demonstrates that censorship, and forming and stating opinions is a concern for UAE artists.

However, many of the participants, who were very much in the limelight of the artistic scenes within the UAE, felt that there was no need to present controversial ideas or critiques of the government because “there hasn’t been a real issue to show in art” within the UAE. As Fadil, a 29 year-old filmmaker, put it, “…there could be stories here [and] there, but I don’t know, criticising them in a movie would fix this?” Through implying faith and investment within his government to deal with problems in the UAE, Fadil conveys that Emirati artists do not need to express criticism in artistic forms. These problems are not pressing, and as Fadil also noted, he can bring up such issues with the government himself, rather than portraying problems to global audiences. Participants were also considering the Arab Uprisings in their responses. By championing the generosity and support of their own government, they are asserting the safety and comfort of the UAE as compared to other government’s relationships to their citizens in Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen, among other Middle Eastern countries.

While fines and jail time are a real possibility if an artist defames the government or religion, it is highly unlikely that any artistic work would be shown in a UAE gallery if it depicted
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such issues.\textsuperscript{57} Governmental and self-censorship would also depend upon how connected one is. If an artist is from a well-known family, this person is less likely to be jailed or fined. However, a well-connected person is also arguably less likely to present material that might be censored to protect her own and her family’s position in UAE society.

With awareness of all of these factors, participants have internalised a sense of what can and should be represented, what might be accepted and what might be offensive. As Rashid, a 28 year-old filmmaker, said:

\begin{quote}
When I make something I’m not trying to be controversial. … I’m still part of this community, so I don’t want to upset people. Even if I want to present a taboo subject, I think you have to be careful the way you treat and present it.
\end{quote}

Such self-censorship was practiced often among participants, as they spoke in terms of their invested agency within nationalist art projects: they felt they possessed and utilised artistic freedom, but also did not want to express anything controversial or offensive to Emiratis or the UAE government. Similarly, other participants stated that they understood what the rules were, and simply didn’t want to upset people by presenting a taboo subject. Malak, a 35 year-old filmmaker, also stated that censorship was not a problem for most filmmakers, since the “three red lines” that should not be crossed are criticising the ruling family,\textsuperscript{58} religion and sex. Malak feels that “there are smart ways to tackle certain idea[s] here and there, so putting that in mind, what is the percentage of censorship really we have here? Really very very

\textsuperscript{57} Perhaps this is one reason why visual art, particularly photography, is very popular among young Emirati artists, whereas creative writing is not. In the art world, it is arguably easier to talk about various interpretations of a work. While authors can certainly argue the same point, it is easier to deny meaning within an image or set of images than meaning within a text.

\textsuperscript{58} However, Malak stated that you can criticise other government ministries and government performance generally, and that the rulers state that they encourage criticism toward these entities and promote freedom of speech in the media.
limited.” Clearly, many participants do not wish to portray taboo subjects and therefore do not directly face fears of censorship for the works they produce. Yet their awareness that creative expressions are also global performances is apparent, and therefore wanting to represent Emirati culture in a noncontroversial manner also applies. Asserting the UAE as a country that lacks the problems of nearby countries involved in uprisings is important to participants. Any problems participants might be facing may appear less significant in light of the revolutions going on around them throughout the Middle East. This also highlights artists’ participation in global processes, as they formulate art that distances themselves and the UAE from these revolutions.

However, “sensitive” issues are another matter, as well as how they are received by the Emirati community. “Sensitive” issues differ from the “three red lines” in that they are not so clear-cut, and are therefore more open to differing interpretations and possible criticism from audiences. Participant Maram, a 22 year-old illustrator and writer, stated that she would never write or represent any other controversial ideas in her works after a very negative experience when revealing a sensitive practice within the UAE: female circumcision. She received many accusations against her patriotism for doing so. She states, “Everyone was accusing me and many people said ‘you are not an Emirati because an Emirati would not write about this’ and … that’s why I’ll stay in the illustration field [only].” She wrote about this practice in an English language newspaper, and this fact caused the most uproar, since she was seen to be “airing dirty laundry” to the expatriate community of the UAE.59

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59 For another example, filmmaker Ali Moustafa stated that he was criticised for portraying young Emiratis drinking and smoking. When he replied that everything else shown in the cinema is much worse than his depiction of Emiratis, a pair of local girls said to him, “Yeah, but we expected more from an Emirati” (Chubb 2010).
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Such an environment certainly does not encourage risk-taking and therefore artists are more likely to remain invested within representing “safe” topics. In this sense, the recognition that creative expression is also a global performance inhibits cultural production. Yet such considerations still show artists as global agents in that they are not just receiving aspects of globalisation, but involved in the fight over their cultural image, approving and disapproving of local artistic production. Participants are involved in inventing “smart ways” to express themselves, and this exhibits their agency.

Few artist participants described crossing the invisible line and representing sensitive topics. Jamilah, a 23 year-old spoken word poet, performed a poem at a Dubai youth community centre’s open mike night about wanting to know what it felt like to be sexually desired. She knew that this was a scandalous topic and received negative feedback after her performance. She stated:

[I wrote a poem called] “Red Lipstick” and it’s really about not necessarily putting yourself out there, but wondering what it’s like to be wanted and sought after. That raised a lot of eyebrows, but it was good I think. When you do art you want people to talk about it. I mean, I’m not going to go set myself on fire, but you need to have that kind of effect. People need to think about [what artists say].

Jamilah willingly performed a poem she knew would be at least somewhat controversial to listeners in order to allow audience members to think about the topic of sexual desire from a controversial angle: her personal curiosity about feeling another’s desire for her. This shows that some artists are also willing to push some of the internalised boundaries on cultural
expression in order to demonstrate agency by having an effect on viewers and start to shift those boundaries. It is also very possible that some artists are giving me “safe” interpretations of their work, but hold different intentions for their art and its reception. This is also part of global performance, as artists might feel compelled to say one thing about their cultural expression, while aiming to represent something else entirely.

In some cases, artists feel or are compelled to feel that their or other local artists’ expressions are inaccurate and misrepresent Emirati culture. Such concerns over representation highlight the artists’ processes in considering what can and should be representative of Emirati culture and life, and the importance of artistic means to define, exclude and push boundaries.

**Misrepresentations**

Another way the importance of global performances of cultural production is demonstrated is through critiques of other artists who don’t necessarily “get it wrong,” as volunteers at the SMCCU spoke about, but who “misrepresent” the UAE. Lamis expressed anger at the way in which Reem Al Ghaith — a young Emirati visual artist gaining international fame — represented the UAE through her exhibition at the Venice Biennale 2011. Al Ghaith’s work is called *What’s Left of my Land*. It is a seven-metre by six-metre mixed media installation about Dubai, which changed throughout the exhibition to give audiences a fresh perspective with every viewing. The work (Image 13) evokes a construction site, with tools, pulleys, maps, images of male construction workers, and raised text, abstractly reflecting the rapid modernisation of Dubai.
In an interview with *Art in the City* magazine, Al Ghaith describes her work in this way:

> What fascinates me about my homeland is … the reflection and combination of history, traditions, the progress and the change in my city’s landscape. There is so much to document and create a visual series from. My surroundings always inspire me and get me into the creative mood. (Art in the City 2011)

In her many interviews, she does not mention any subversive intention for any of her pieces.

However, Lamis felt that the idea conveyed in this piece is that Dubai’s character as an Emirati city is being erased by modernisation. Lamis stated that while this might be the case
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in some people’s opinions, this is not the way to represent the UAE to foreigners — many of whom would be seeing this artwork and learning about the UAE for the first time. Lamis stated:

What I understood from her [Al Ghaith’s] artwork was yes, the UAE is changing, but it kind of meant that we’re losing our identity, and the thing is, for example, I’m really really tied to my traditions, my culture. I love it. … So now they [international viewers] think of Dubai, they think, “oh, yes, the city that’s losing its traditions.”

Lamis sees Al Ghaith’s work as a representation of the UAE as “losing its traditions” and becoming culturally homogeneous through globalisation, which is untenable to her. Therefore, any critiques that align with this idea are, for some, inaccurate misrepresentations in light of global performances of cultural distinctiveness. Lamis believes that Al Ghaith’s work is an inaccurate interpretation of the UAE, and she doesn’t want this shared with outsiders. Her reaction to this work is both about the accuracy and strategy of representation, and demonstrates Lamis’ investment within UAE nationalism as shown through art.

Yet, Lamis also acknowledges that this is her own interpretation of the work, and that Al Ghaith may have had different intentions. Lamis stated: “I’m sure she had her reasons. I couldn’t talk to her personally. I emailed her a couple of times, but I believe she’s busy, so maybe she has a different point of view.” Therefore, Al Ghaith did not truly get it “right” or “wrong,” as she might have had acceptable reasons or entirely different intentions with her work. Thus the importance of global performance is highlighted here as artist participants are invested within their positive distinctiveness, rather than their failure to preserve their cultural
identity or the negative consequences of modernisation in their art. Yet, artist participants also understand that artists’ intentions and viewer receptions can be at odds, making the possibilities for artistic representation at once more open as well as more confining. Participants are aware of their global reputation, and how art is part of this. They demonstrate agency in having a say in what gets represented about the UAE, and how its current condition is described.

Participants’ criticisms of Emirati artistic work often asked for the impossible: representing all of Emiratis accurately and positively, while still telling a compelling story. Criticisms also implied the desire to present cultural distinctiveness, but in a way that is universally accepted as positive and admirable.

As Malak stated about his representation of UAE life in his most current film:

…We need to see the reality purely as it is without trying to make it look better or nicer. … In UAE especially … they are trying all the time to make it all look nice and clean and polished. … It’s not wrong to polish things for people outside but the danger here to me is that you do it too much that your own people start believing that, “hey, we’re perfect.” We’re not perfect, you know?

Presenting the imperfections of this minority society within a majority multicultural population has many drawbacks if one wants to remain a featured artist whose work is supported by government related institutions. However, the consequences of solely positive representations can also be crippling, as Malak points out. Global performances of cultural
distinctiveness are vitally important to those who represent the UAE through creative expression. The past is a “safe” space to represent, as it is most often idealised and appreciated. Portrayals of the present have a much greater tendency to be interpreted as a critique of society, and thus are viewed as a poor representation of UAE life. These considerations for global performances of Emirati culture show that participants’ productions function as part of global processes, rather than only passively reacting to them. They demonstrate invested agency in being part of the young generation that is defining what can and should be acceptable as representative of Emirati culture.

Conclusion

This chapter considered Emirati artistic expressions as appealing to global audiences through showcasing cultural distinctiveness. Artist participants use forms and mediums that have become universalised to them, and represent their variety of influences as part of their lived realities, and not as part of cultural homogenisation or resistance to Westernisation. Participants are part of global processes, then, in several ways. They demonstrate that global icons are part of their subjectivities and not alien to them. They also show that these forms and icons help artists convey aspects of cultural distinctiveness to global audiences. In addition, participants are involved in the struggle over how Emirati culture and image is portrayed to global audiences as they consider what are acceptable and unacceptable artistic representations. All of these demonstrations exhibit artist participants’ invested agency within Emirati nationhood and its strategic global representation.

Artistic expression ultimately differs from the cultural representations being conveyed at the SMCCU, as interpretations cannot be controlled, and artists are mainly satisfied with this. Furthermore, the kinds of cultural expressions being produced do not attempt to celebrate
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choice as a universal aim, as in the SMCCU and in regards to national identity more generally, but instead participants focus upon their wish to express themselves and convey cultural distinction, to make global audiences aware of what it means to be part of Emirati culture. Artist participants are not so concerned with explaining aspects of Emirati culture, as they are in the SMCCU or demonstrating they have a “choice” in their dress, as they are with recording, celebrating and acknowledging Emirati past and present. Thus artist participants focused much more upon presenting their cultural distinctions than translating Emirati culture into terms that participants felt Western audiences could understand, such as within the SMCCU and with explanations of national identity and dress more broadly. Artist participants are not concerned with explaining Emirati culture, per se, but promoting it as valuable in global arenas and markets, to global viewers. Thus these artists are involved in debates over cultural representations with Emirati culture and show themselves as global, invested agents who are aware of both their cultural distinctiveness and their place as cultural producers and global citizens. Through artist participants’ use of global art forms, icons and products, they are facilitating viewers’ encounters with reinterpretations of the globally familiar in light of the cultural and particular.

I will further discuss the implications of the study in the following Conclusion chapter.
Conclusion

Gender and Invested Agency

This thesis has advanced understandings and theorising of the relationship between gender and nation through the concept of “invested agency,” where participants’ subjectivities are shaped by and expressed through the dominant and available discourses around them. In this case, Orientalism and the UAE government’s response to it are the prominent discourses participants speak to, are embedded within, and which constitute their subjectivities. Instilled within these discourses are the concepts of modern / traditional, global / local, agency / oppression, individualisation / collectivity, and autonomy / cultural influence. This thesis has shown that these conceptual binaries are not opposed, but are mutually constitutive. Such perceived binaries fuel each other, so that, for example, the desire for global recognition often implies promoting one’s cultural distinctiveness, and the Orientalist notion that Muslim women are oppressed leads to various strategies and means to assert one’s “agency.” In addition, female participants demonstrate individualisation through “choosing” to wear the national dress, but this “choice” also reinforces collectivity. Therefore, these binaries are each entangled with the other.

Throughout this study I have argued that participants display invested agency through their investment within the government’s nationalist aims, and are agents of globalisation. Participants engage in the debate over how and when their minority culture and personal identities are represented, yet this can only be done from within and not outside of existing discourses. In this Conclusion I will summarise the main themes of this thesis, as well as provide recommendations for future research.
Conclusion

Gendered subject position

This thesis has emphasised gendered subjectivity, particularly among female participants. My findings indicate that female participants respond to Orientalist discourses which position Arab women as oppressed by taking up the UAE governmental discourse subject position, which situates Emirati women as “empowered,” the symbol of the nation’s modernity and tradition. Through discussions of the UAE government’s participation in the discourse on female empowerment, and the desire to change Westerners’ perceptions of Arab women within the SMCCU, I have found that female participants are likely to take up the governmental and institutional subject positions offered, even though these positions also have limitations.

My study also emphasises some researchers’ expectations for resistance against governmental authority, particularly among women, and that these expectations are not warranted. To have agency within social science theory often means to resist, but as Moore (1994), Hollway (1984) and Rose (1996) argue, agency and freedom arise from within available discourses. The female participants of this research did not express any desire for resistance against their governmental positioning, and often gladly took it up for the very real benefits it offered to them. My findings align with Moore (1994), Hollway (1984) and Rose (1996) in that this thesis demonstrates that agency is not simply resistance against an oppressor, but instead a negotiation and investment from within available discourses. The works of Mahmood (2005) and Mack (2003) not only acknowledge religious women’s agency, but also allows feminist researchers to question the larger, inherent problems in theories of agency and freedom located within a liberal universalism. My work challenges the
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problem of liberal universalism by arguing that participants demonstrate invested agency from within their available discourses.

Another important valence through which I have examined gendered subjectivity was through female participants’ relationship to the nation, which greatly shaped their considerations of education, employment and future family life, as well as who they admired, the art they produced, what they wore, and how they articulated these dimensions of their lives. Sinha writes that the future of gender and nation scholarship may lie in “densely historicized analysis of the articulation of the nation in specific historical moments” (2006: 335). She concludes: “Only then will we begin to make visible the multiple, and often uneven, ways in which particular forms of difference inform, and are produced by, the nation in any given historical moment” (Sinha 2006: 335). Through analysis of this most recent historical moment in the UAE, the gender subject position of female Emiratis is uncovered, as female participants invest within the position offered by the UAE government for its promised benefits, and rationalise this investment if and when those promises are not met. Women are not just “barometers of progress,” since research focusing on women’s experiences reveals their nuanced and contextualised relationships to the nation.

As Mohanty shows, the symbolic roles women hold, such as “mother-of-the-nation” or “religious bearer of traditional culture,” “stand in for the contradictions and complexities of women’s lives and roles” (2006: 382). This research has pointed out the danger of monolithic categorisations of women in that they “circumscribe ideas about experience, agency and struggle” (Mohanty 2006: 382). This thesis has called attention to and theorised female participants’ experience and invested agency as women embedded within competing and often contradictory national and global discourses about women’s gendered subjectivity. As
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Gavey writes, “as subjects we are not automatically unfettered and free. The process of subjectification, in broadly Foucauldian terms, works both to constrain *and enable* possibilities for how we experience and act in the world” (2012: 721, emphasis in original). This research has shown the relevancy of this statement, as female participants are both limited and provided with opportunities through their subjectification as gendered citizens of the UAE. These chapters portray a progression of agency among participants, where they move from more confining circumstances to greater available and acceptable means of contextualised choice and expression.

**Individualisation and choice**

Rose has identified the theme of individualisation, which he describes as attaching one’s life to “a project of identity, and to a secular project of ‘life style’, in which life and its contingencies become meaningful to the extent that they can be construed as the product of personal choice” (1996: 195). This project of identity can be seen among participants, who are invested in the discourses of Emirati identity surrounding them. They are staking a claim on what Emirati identity means to them as individuals who choose the ways in which they display their belonging to Emirati society in particular, often prescribed, ways. This negotiation of choice is about using the language of individualisation to invest within aspects of surrounding discourses. Participants do not just act as individuals with a wide range of personal choices, but instead act from within available discourses that encourage investment in certain choices for real and perceived benefits. These negotiations differ among participants in the ways they consider and define modern and traditional, take up the government’s state-sponsored feminist agenda, explain Emirati culture to visitors, and create art and perform national identity through wearing (or not wearing) national dress. Yet these
avenues are ultimately a negotiation among individualisation and collectivity, and not an either / or choice.

Because of exposure to a majority expatriate population and the global processes of the country’s modernisation, participants have described the need to present and explain their cultural mores to the multinational UAE population and imagined global citizenry. These considerations are present in different ways than, for example, in Masquelier’s (2009) study of Islamic women in Niger who state they wear Islamic covering to simply “cover their bodies.” The women in Masquelier’s (2009) study are not often asked, “Why do you wear this?” as many young Emirati women are, and therefore do not need to present individualised answers, rationalisations and choices, nor defend their culture to others. These negotiations I describe among Emirati participants stem from their exposure to a wide range of expatriates and tourists, as well as through their own travel, and are a response to them. Of course, Masquelier’s (2009) participants are responding to media and exposure to other cultures through trade and entertainment, but not in the direct and immediate way as the participants of this study are.

While popular imagination views Western women as having a choice that is free from cultural influence, non-Western women are believed to be “culturally oppressed, duped and victimised” (Braun 2009: 235). Braun (2009) writes about this appearance of choice in relation to female genital surgery in Western contexts, and female genital mutilation in non-Western contexts. In her case study, similar procedures are seen as a “choice” when made by Western women, and as enforced and culturally influenced when a non-Western woman “chooses” the traditional practice of FGM. Similarly, a headscarf is rarely seen as a “choice” made free from cultural influence, whereas Western women’s clothing options are more often
Considering the findings, choice needs to be problematised in relation to women no matter their culture. As Braun (2009) recommends, researchers must look at “contextualised choice” rather than “autonomous choice.” Poststructural theory has shown that autonomous choice is only imagined, and choice is instead regulated within particular available discourses (Hughes 2002). Baker goes further to state that when we examine the nature, limits, and difficulties of individualised choice, we “reveal the limits to and punitive aspects of this brash discourse” (2010: 12). Therefore, contextualised choice reveals that participants are involved in invested agency, where their choices are strategic, and chosen from within the discourses around them. The term invested agency reveals the promised benefits of “investment” within certain discourses, while “agency” describes the ways in which participants assert their expressions and ideas in relation to Emirati culture and national identity. “Contextualised choice” is a less specific term that helps to describe but does not fully explain Emirati participants’ reactions to and expressions of cultural identity.

Despite the occurrence of contextualised choice, participants reflected upon themselves as autonomous actors. They spoke of choosing, “in the name of themselves,” even as that choice is often one that brings an individual closer to the norms and desires of their collective minority culture, and acceptable means to demonstrate belonging to global citizenry. This discourse of choice is part of their understandings of global belonging, as participants wish to be recognised as global citizens (“we’re just like you”).
Global citizens and distinctive cultural belonging

Niezen (2008) has shown, and my research demonstrates, choosing and displaying acts of cultural distinctiveness (such as national dress and artistic production, in the case of this study), are components of being recognised as a global citizen. Thus these perceived binaries of cultural exclusion and global belonging are mutually constitutive.

Along with wishing to be recognised as part of global processes, participants in turn desired to be acknowledged and even admired as a distinct cultural group with their own ways of dressing, expressing themselves creatively, interacting and being in the world. As Moore states, “from one perspective, culture is about the selection or constraint of meaning, the arresting of difference, the presentation of a certain perspective on the world, the enactment of a series of embodied practices” (2011a: 277). Thus in one sense, culture is about being alike and unified within one’s cultural group, erasing difference from within it. Participants present this uniformity through national dress and artistic productions, but this endeavour is also part of global citizenship, where one is expected to present one’s individual and unique cultural belonging. This is why wearing the abaya and sheyla as a fashion icon is seen as mainly positive, except when it goes “too far” and Emirati women no longer appear to be wearing national dress. One can individualise to an extent, but not “too much.” This proclivity toward individualisation as integral to collective belonging, and presenting one’s culture as distinctive to real or imagined global audiences in order to be recognised as part of global citizenry, has become an expectation through global processes.

Thus the wish to be seen as culturally distinct is intrinsic to being a global citizen. As Niezen describes, “The essential features of a community’s history and culture are more than ever an
outcome of global collaboration” (2008: 79). Global and cultural belonging are not opposed choices, but inherent in each other, as being a global citizen often means having a unique culture to promote and represent, even in individualised ways. Participants attempt to define Emirati culture and its representations with consideration of global audiences and processes. Participants are involved in creating representations, displays, expressions and performances to define Emirati culture as part of globalisation, and themselves as global citizens.

**Agents of globalisation**

Carla Freeman (2001) argues that local actors are not mere tools of globalisation, but often actors and agents of its processes, involved in its expressions, however large or small that participation might be. She writes about Caribbean higglers, women who, through travel and fashion trade, change the ways they themselves and their clients consider their personal fashion style and what this might signal to others. This claim is also demonstrated through this study’s artist participants. Their creative expressions, often involving a juxtaposition of a globalised icon or image, such as Beyoncé or the *Mona Lisa*, calls upon viewers to reconceptualise their own understandings of these icons and images through a different cultural lens. This reflection then generates new meaning about Emirati culture as well as the globalised icons, and the role that minority cultures play in commenting upon their global belonging.

As has been shown in this thesis, artist participants did not conceive of themselves or their work as a hybrid of Western and Eastern. Instead, they conceptualised their artwork and its content as appropriately derived from global influences that were “theirs” just as much as anyone else’s. Their work often represented a multicultural, globalised UAE alongside individual and cultural identity, with influences from *Starry Night*, *Mona Lisa*, Marilyn
Conclusion

Monroe and the founding of the UAE — all for the most part equally assumed as “theirs” for inspiration, and not “belonging” to another culture. This openness, pre-figured by Moore (2011b), highlights the means through which artist participants are involved in representing their culture to an imagined global audience. While self-censorship and concerns over reception of certain artistic messages were conveyed, this is still an open debate among artist participants who are willing to discuss and learn from each other’s art, rather than condemn and solely be concerned about a work’s reception.

These findings present calls for further research, as well as point to some limitations of the application of this study.

**Limitations of this study**

This research is limited in scope in that these findings cannot be applied easily to other minority culture groups. Emirats within UAE society are a privileged minority group, whereas most other cultural minority groups have been historically marginalised, disenfranchised and are often engaged in fighting for rights and recognition. However, these findings can be applied to other minority groups who are also privileged minorities of their own countries, such as citizens of Qatar, Kuwait and Brunei.

Further, the role of religion is arguably very strong in participants’ daily practices and worldview, and yet in order to be perceived as “just like you” this religious dimension is often downplayed in favour of “culture.” Distinctions of culture, as Niezen (2008) has pointed out, are not only accepted on a global scale, but expected. Participants employ this understanding in their own cultural representations through art and volunteering at the SMCCU, following the individualistic perception that religion is a private relationship
between an individual and “their God.” Therefore, a limitation of this study has to do with religious affiliation. In Chapters Six and Seven, I quoted female participants stating that they chose to limit their options, and these limitations in particular often had to do with an Islamic worldview that includes an understanding of proper and improper behaviour from this point of view. Therefore, some of the elements of individualisation described in this thesis, in particular the stated choice to limit one’s options, may have more to do with an Islamic perspective than allowed for in this thesis. As a non-Muslim researcher, aspects of religious life were most likely not conveyed to me, and therefore this dimension of life and its impact upon creative expression was not considered in full detail.

**Recommendations for future research**

From this thesis a number of recommendations for future research can be made. Further understanding of the role of individualisation in the lives of non-Western minority groups in shaping their sense of identity is called for. Additionally, research focused on the concept “identity” among young minority culture groups and its impact upon gender subject positions and cultural representations would be useful given the findings of this study. If, as Cooper (2005) suggests, the term “identity” is no longer useful within theory, how can researchers reckon with the fact that many of our research participants use the language of identity to discuss their cultural distinctiveness, struggles and representations? I argue that rather than theorising the term itself, researchers should point to how it is being used by research participants, particularly those among minority culture groups, to understand the term’s vitality and nuance.

In terms of the intersection of nation and gender, my work calls for a re-thinking of women’s role as symbol of the nation. This positioning is at times burdensome to the women involved,
but as this research shows it can also be a beneficial position that the female participants strongly approve of and feel that they deserve. Therefore, once again, researchers cannot only think of complicity and resistance, but the pathways in between which foster real benefits and real limitations, especially for privileged subjects as in this study. It cannot be assumed that women who appreciate their symbolic role as national symbol are suffering from false consciousness. This study calls for more research into this intersection that contextualises women’s responses to their national symbolism in terms of the surrounding and competing discourses, and what might compel women to feel privileged, burdened, or something in between by their positioning within the nation.

This work also calls for more research on the usefulness of applying terms such as hybridity to non-Western contexts. It may be, as my study demonstrates, that such terms do not fully capture the context of employing multiple influences in one’s creative production or personal identity, as participants consider most influences as “theirs” and not “other.” This does not mean that cultures are becoming more homogeneous and “losing” traditions to become one mass culture. Rather, these influences can be taken as part of everyone’s frame of reference, alongside culturally specific allusions, as part of promoting cultural distinctiveness and representing a culture’s shifts. Perceiving worldwide influences through a particular cultural frame leads to greater heterogeneity and awareness of a variety of interpretations and ways of employing and considering artistic influence. This notion has implications for cultural globalisation studies. This research shows Emirati culture attempting to become more distinctive as it becomes more assimilated into a globalised sense of belonging, and the ways in which this distinction and global belonging constitute each other.
Conclusion

Like Moore (2011a) suggests, this work calls for not just recognition that modern and traditional are mutually constitutive, but an examination of the context in which those mutual constitutions are enacted and changed. My work, along with Moore’s (2011a), implies that culture is not something one can possess, or over which one can make proprietary claims. Instead, culture can be seen as shifting between assertions of difference, and something that is shared and mutually created.

As Carla Freeman argues, in a feminist reconceptualisation of globalisation “the arrows of change are imagined in more than one direction” (2001: 1013). This study has shown the ways in which those arrows of change move toward and away from the young Emirati participants of this study. Globalisation is not an even process, and its associated discourses about minority cultures, gender and globalisation shift to accommodate new configurations of global and cultural belonging. As Held (1999) asks, does globalisation theory deliver any “added value” in the search for meaning in our everyday lives? I argue that a contextualised analysis of the effects of globalisation which take gender, representations, cultural assertions and discourses of identity and belonging into account, do add value.
Appendix One

Appendix One: Interview questions (guide)

1. Describe your artwork (filmmaking, visual art, design, writing). What inspired you to begin this work?
2. Who do you imagine is the audience for your work?
3. What do you hope your audience learns / understands after seeing / reading your work?
4. What future projects do you have in mind?
5. Are you interested in conveying anything about Emirati identity in your work?
6. How would you describe Emirati identity?
7. How would you describe Emirati traditions?
8. Do you consider yourself a “modern” or “traditional” person? What do those two words – “modern” and “traditional” mean to you?
9. Do you think women’s roles are changing within the UAE?
10. Do you ever face any advantages or disadvantages as an Emirati woman / man?
11. What do you think about the local media’s interest in reporting about the achievements of Emirati women (give examples)?
12. (Show the participant the UAE Yearbook Table of Content Pages and point to the Women chapter) What do you think of women having their own chapter in this book?
13. In this chapter, Emirati women are described as a balance of modern and traditional. Do you agree with this statement?
14. What do you think about the word ‘feminism’?
15. What do you think about the word ‘empowerment’ when related to women?
16. Is there anyone else you could recommend that I could speak with?
Appendix One

SMCCU volunteers:

1. What made you interested in becoming a volunteer?
2. What are the most common questions you receive?
3. Can you describe the “training” process for becoming a volunteer?
4. How do you approach answering visitor questions?
5. Do you ever tire of answering similar questions over and over?
6. Do you feel as though you are sometimes “defending” your culture?
7. What is it that you most want visitors to take away from visiting the SMCCU?
8. What are the most common misconceptions visitors hold about Emirati culture and Islam?
9. Why do you think the role and dress of Emirati women is so important to visitors?
10. What do you most wish visitors would understand about Emirati culture?
INFORMATION SHEET FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Dissertation Project title: National Identity and Creative Expression among Women in the UAE

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand and explore the ways in which young Emirati women in Dubai and Abu Dhabi are expressing their sense of national identity through artistic mediums such as filmmaking, art, creative writing and social media. I seek to find out the ways in which Emirati women are re-defining Emirati identity in complex ways.

Participant Involvement

Participation in this project is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. If you agree to be interviewed, I would like to meet with you for approximately one hour at a convenient place. If there are things that you do not wish to discuss, I will respect that. If you agree, I would like to audio-tape our interview so that I have an accurate record of what we discuss. If not, then I would like to take hand-written notes of our conversation.

Privacy and Anonymity

The information you provide will be held in the strictest confidence. Your name or identity will not be disclosed or written on any of the audio-tapes. I will transcribe the interviews. I will allocate you a pseudonym and this pseudonym will be used throughout the entire research project. Any unique features relating to your personal identity will be dealt with in a way that protects you from being identifiable. All data will be stored in a locked cabinet or computer. You will not be identified by name in any publications, and you are free to withdraw from the project at any time.
### RESEARCH CONSENT FORM
Dissertation Project title: National Identity and Creative Expression among Women in the UAE

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| 1. | I, ............................................................ 
    | *(please print name)*
    | consent to take part in the research project entitled: National Identity and Creative Expression among Women in the UAE |
| 2. | I acknowledge that I have read the attached Information Sheet. |
| 3. | I have had the project, so far as it affects me, fully explained to my satisfaction by the research worker. My consent is given freely. |
| 4. | I have been informed that, while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal results will not be divulged. |
| 5. | I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time. |
| 6. | I am aware that I should retain a copy of this Consent Form, when completed, and the attached Information Sheet. |

............................................................

*(signature)* *(date)*

### WITNESS

I have described to .......................................................... *(name of subject)*

the nature of the research to be carried out. In my opinion she/he understood the explanation.

Status in Project: ..........................................................

Name: .................................................................

.................................................................

*(signature)* *(date)*
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