# The Cultural Gifting Dynamics of Valentine's Day in Kuwait

## The Adoption of Western Practices in Muslim Majority Countries

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

This academic achievement has enlightened me about so many wonderful concepts behind my religion, culture and birthplace. My doctoral years have taught me discipline, resilience, and humbleness. I wish to thank all the people whose assistance led me to another significant milestone.

My sincere thanks go to Doctor Eloy Martín Corrales for showing interest in my research and taking me in as his doctoral student. I also wish to express my appreciation to my supervisor and personally, my mentor, Doctor Yolanda Aixelà-Cabré, for her very attentive and excellent supervision in creating together this marvellous doctoral thesis. Having the substance of a genius, Doctor Yolanda convincingly guided me to be professional and aspire for the best, even when the journey was tough. Without her persistent help, the goal of this thesis would not have been accomplished. Dear Yolanda, it is whole-heartedly appreciated that your great advice for my research proved monumental towards the completion and success of this thesis.

I am eternally indebted to my magnificent parents, Oussama Dbaibou and Bassima Bekdash, who have invested their efforts in me up until this day. You have taken plenty of risks and made continuous sacrifices for me and my siblings. I am humbled by your unconditional generosity and support. For my dad, your life had meaning, it was all worthwhile, it is here in these pages. Thank you for sharing your experiences and life lessons with me, for teaching me how to build my goals with thoughtful prayer and hope. For my mom, you always did more than is expected of you, the cost was immeasurable. I have the deepest gratitude for your constant emphasis on the value of education that made me the person I am today; I would not have done it without you. As my research revolves around the notorious gift, this is my gift to both of you. May I forever be worthy of your love and pride.

My indispensable siblings, Jana Dbaibou and Omar Dbaibou, thank you for believing in me. Thank you for inspiring me to be the best version of myself and never settling for less. I hope I have fulfilled my role as an older sister who you can always look up to and be inspired by.

I wish to acknowledge the motivation and great love from my husband, Yassir Akhayad, who tirelessly accentuated the significance of my work and saw potential in me. My dearest Yassir, thank you for being by my side in every decision that I take. Your company and humour have kept me grounded during many sleepless, tiresome nights. Thank you for being patient with me, I know I can always count on you.

I cannot begin to express my gratefulness for the presence of Luisa Martinez Torres in my life. You accompanied me and stood by me since the very first day of my arrival to Spain. Thank you for representing a parent figure in a country which was, at the time, an unfamiliar place. Your guidance and constant encouragement helped me grow into a better person and got me through this promising thesis.

Last but certainly not least, my irreplaceable and closest friends, who have reminded me to have faith in myself and in my work every day. This thesis would not have been possible without your input. I would like to recognise the priceless support that you have all provided during my study. Thank you for making my time more enjoyable during the years away from my home country.

## Abstract

This thesis is a study of historical anthropology that explores gift-giving practices in Kuwait, a multicultural Islamic country, with a focus on Valentine's Day. The research is conducted among five age groups, allowing a diachronic social study of generational differences in perceptions, beliefs and opinions about European influences. As Valentine's Day is a western occasion, a comprehensive approach to gift theory and practice is presented in relation to the Islamic religion and Arab tradition, thereby developing a historical analysis of how other cultures affect thoughts and practices in Kuwait. The possible impact in the future is discussed with regards to the cultural dynamics that shape Kuwait's contemporary society.

The information will help build cultural awareness around the Middle Eastern region, particularly the Arabian Gulf. It will demonstrate how Islamic countries are adopting changes in their communities relative to western ideology, ultimately recognising a social transformation within the region.

Keywords: The State of Kuwait, The gift, Valentine's Day, Islam, Social transformation.

## Resumen

Esta tesis es un estudio de antropología histórica que explora las costumbres de la entrega de regalos del día de San Valentín en Kuwait, un país islámico multicultural. La investigación se realiza entre cinco grupos de edad, permitiendo un estudio diacrónico social de las diferencias generacionales en las percepciones, creencias y opiniones sobre las influencias europeas. Se presenta un enfoque global sobre la teoría y práctica del regalo con relación a la religión islámica y tradición árabe, dado que esta ocasión es una celebración occidental, desarrollando así un análisis histórico de cómo otras culturas afectan a los pensamientos y las prácticas en Kuwait. Se analizan futuras repercusiones con respecto a la dinámica cultural que configura la sociedad contemporánea de Kuwait.

La información contribuirá a crear una conciencia cultural en Oriente Medio, especialmente en el Golfo Pérsico. Demostrará cómo los países adoptan cambios en sus comunidades relativos a la ideología occidental, mostrando una transformación social dentro de la región.

Palabras clave: El Estado de Kuwait, El regalo, Día de San Valentín, Islam, Transformación social.

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# Introduction

Limitless research studies and fieldwork have been dedicated to the gift, its consumers, and its variable motives. The gift has formed part of culture and society, which are ever-changing but continuous, making it a base of human relationships, a memory-capturer and a strong valid practice that delivers emotions and nonverbal communication to the receivers.

This thesis presents a range of topics that appear important for the gift study. Relevant theoretical frameworks of the gift are reviewed from a historical perspective to understand the complexity of this social cultural practice, as Godelier (1999) expresses in his prominent book "The Enigma of the Gift". Reference is made to history as well as to social, cultural, and religious adaptation changes taking place in Kuwait, a country of high status and prestigious role in the Middle East and Arabian Gulf. As a subject closely related to anthropology, an approach that allows a historical study in terms of gender and intersectionality was developed, thanks to the realisation of life stories and interviews with people of varied ages, with emphasis on the narratives and explanations of the older ones. My work will shed light on social gender construction in Kuwait which includes certain traits and stereotypes, ultimately revealing "gendered" practices that are reinforced by tradition and debating the validity of their conception in Islam.

Academic history confirms the gift-giving practice as a universal act and a custom of society. It has existed for many years, performed namely in social occasions with family members, friends and workmates (Sherry Jr. 1983; Goodwin, Smith & Spiggle 1990). Gifts are initially commodities found in stores, which means that gifts and products intertwine to define trade markets. The main difference perhaps between exchanging commodities and offering gifts is the added personal value of emotionality (Carrier, 2012b). Previous studies have explored the way gift givers take regular everyday objects and try to reshape them by adding personal touches and then presenting them in a symbolic, meaningful manner to the receiver (Benson & Carter, 2008). The gift varies as far as ethnicity,

geographical regions, and history. It is also profoundly responsible for the creation, upkeep, and loss of social connections among the concerned groups or individuals.

The gift-giving practice primarily emphasizes the importance of symbolic gifts, in which their purchase is frequently influenced by social pressures. These pressures depend on the individual's religion, culture, and other affiliations. Generally, these affiliations are determined by recognising a person's characteristics, their likes, dislikes, and factors that influence their decision-making. This falls under lifestyle research which distinguishes consumer identities, their habits and motivations; why they may choose, or use, one item over the other (Quester, Karunaratna & Goh 2000; Francisco, et al. 2015). In turn, this information produces the structure of social relations present in interactive situations (Campbell, 1995). An example of lifestyle research is Yau, Chan and Lau's study (1999) conducted in Hong Kong that tested gift-giving behaviour in accordance with Chinese cultural values. Similarly, this thesis studies gift-giving practices with regards to Islamic and traditional values in Kuwait. Kuwait's society portrays a delicate role in gift-giving. Its irreconcilable culture shows different personal values that influence purchase and intimate relationship intentions. Gifts also play a major role in tradition and folklore, among other dimensions, which is a personal growing interest that I aim to investigate.

Many gift-giving occasions are constantly emerging, which eliminates the typical "rule" that gifts should be given in a certain place or time. Some of these occasions are forever known, such as birthdays, graduations, anniversaries, Christmas, or milestones. Other gift exchange occasions are created due to a change in a person's accustomed routine, for example, during housewarmings, bridal or baby showers, farewells and so on. Even when there is no specific event, gifts are presented to give thanks, show gratitude and cherish a relationship. The idea of gift-giving has also changed. It is no longer necessary to give gifts exclusively to other human beings. For example, during Valentine's Day, young individuals are trying to modify the typical norm of giving gifts to romantic partners by gifting their friends, relatives or even their pets instead (Statista Research Department 2016; Cullen 2018). Giving gifts to pets for their (long) companionship is an understudied notion in gift literature. Other phenomena include giving gifts to homes for their shelter as

means of appreciation and gratefulness (Kondō & Hirano 2014; Heath 2019). These different forms of gifting suggest that there are emerging motives and events that encourage this practice, which slowly weakens the essence and significance of the gift in social life. This also means that there could be an excess of giving and receiving things, sometimes resulting in unwanted gifts, known as a deadweight loss or a burden (Waldfogel, 1993). This allows me to propose the subsumption that with increased consumption and purchase, anything today can be wrapped (or regifted) and presented as a gift.

The transformation of gift-giving habits has been notably noticed in our contemporary 21$^{st}$ century in the media, business promotions, culture and within our personal relationships and social circles. The list of occasions or motives to give gifts continues to enlarge year after year. Since our parents or grandparents might not be fully familiar with these new concepts, this introduces a captivating research area to understand and analyse historically and culturally. Idolizing the idea of gifts triggers the curiosity as to why it is an important concept in many cultures.

Whilst uncountable research studies have been conducted on Christmas, birthdays, and anniversaries, little data has been found about Valentine's Day in Arab or Middle Eastern countries, even less in the Arabian (or Persian) Gulf region. It is therefore difficult to have official data that confirms its level of popularity. Valentine's Day appeared to be a critical controversial matter in many Islamic communities however this has not influenced its presence and celebrations. This appears as an urgent matter to be addressed in the literature. It is an area worthy of attention and assessment since Valentine's Day is linked to a different religious ideology from Kuwait's. It is an opportunity to examine the complex causes and consequences of assimilating western practices into the Kuwaiti society, especially that the Arabian Gulf is a region often interpreted as an exceptionally conservative Islamic one. The thesis topic therefore was narrowed down to study Valentine's Day gift-giving in Kuwait, which distinguishes Kuwait's position, its values and cultural habits among other Middle Eastern Arab countries.

Valentine's Day was inspired from the story of the Roman Christian priest, Valentine, in the 3$^{rd}$ century, whom his Saint's Day, February the 14$^{th}$, had been associated with the

manifestation of courtly love (Van Dyk, 2013). As one of this thesis' main objectives, Valentine's Day religious significance and background are considered in aims of understanding the reason behind its popularity and admiration in Kuwait.

My research interests include understanding changes in Kuwaiti culture throughout the past century by examining lifestyle practices, particularly during Valentine's Day celebrations. I start off by providing a short review that describes Valentine's Day in other Islamic countries and how people from other regions celebrate it. As for romantic relationships in Kuwait, like many other Arab Islamic communities, they are mainly focused on heterosexual bonds, where "true love" is usually strongly linked to conjugal passions (Kreil, 2016). "True love" emotions could have developed in a relationship prior to official matrimony, otherwise known as a love marriage (something popular nowadays in many Arab countries that may or may not have the parents' approval) or, contrarily, during the relationship that forms over time after marriage, otherwise known as a traditional or arranged marriage. Studying Valentine's Day has therefore determined that romantic love in Arab Islamic societies is different than that in Western or European ones, given that it is almost always linked with marriage, more collectively defined, pressured, observed and criticised.

Exploring romantic relationships in Kuwait and the concept of "true love" guarantees an understanding of traditional barriers that keep people from celebrating Valentine's Day. On the other hand, excessively commercialising the occasion in the country triggers a love culture and facilitates the expression of romantic relationships. The work therefore allows to distinguish gender roles in Arab Islamic societies, where women generally value and prioritise gift exchange in romantic relationships more than men. However, gifting standards are insufficient in men-dominating societies. In this sense, young Arab women have taken Valentine's Day as an opportunity to dream, visualise and achieve common gender values and goals of empowerment that detach from the androcentric system, while men still feel the pressure of the old-time tradition, that to be "men" means to provide, pamper and protect women. This in turn has transformed the Islamic conception of dating and shows how cultural gifting occasions influence gender roles in romantic relationships.

# I.     FORMULATION OF RESEARCH TOPIC

The methodology of this thesis involves ethnographic fieldwork using a historical research approach. Primary exploratory research was gathered in forms of in-depth interviews with 46 residents of Kuwait, ages ranging from 17–87. Interviewing people that represented different generations was established from ethical values. The findings' analysis throughout the thesis was based on socio-demographic data that includes gender, marital status, nationality and age group of the respective informants. Widening the age range was useful to identify how people of different generations refer to similar concepts, like the gift or Valentine's Day, which developed a historical analysis on how the meaning of the gift has changed overtime and provided possible implications for the future. Using this approach, the significance of the gift during the last 50-80 years in Kuwait could be identified and particularly the significance of Valentine's Day during the past 5 years. Fieldwork in Kuwait created a clearer image about the influence of other cultures on certain individuals, regardless of what we know from the media. The fieldwork also revealed how people's changed habits and ideologies shape the Kuwaiti society, which might have altered some Islamic interpretations in our current day.

The research constitutes an ethnography on Valentine's Day in Kuwait, with a reassessment of the prevalent scholarly terminology on the subject. Thus, this doctoral thesis follows the standard structure for empirical research. Chapter "I" describes the object of analysis, purpose of study, hypotheses, and the uniqueness of this research area. Afterwards, a presentation of methodology and data collection is provided, followed by certain limitations to the study. The state of the art is then developed to introduce the research in question, that is, Valentine's Day in Kuwait as an Arab Islamic country.

Chapter "II" provides background information about Kuwait. The chapter distinguishes Kuwait's cultural identity and traditions among groups. I discuss various areas about the country; its history, ethnic makeup, as well as collective practices that shape majority values and the challenges and opportunities that are faced. Finally, this information is used to give purpose for my gift-giving research in Kuwait.

Kuwait's ethnographic data analysis begins in Chapter "III" that embodies the soul of the research: The Gift. The chapter examines the comparative literature on the topic. The gift-giving practice shapes the object of study from two major disciplines: history and anthropology. A conceptual framework is built from theoretical matters raised by experts in the field like Marcel Mauss, Bronislaw Malinowski, Pierre Bourdieu, Marshall Sahlins, Alain Testart and Jacques Derrida. As shown, the gift has been studied across many other disciplines besides history and anthropology, like sociology, religion and philosophy (Komter & Vollebergh, 1997). Studying gift-giving across distinct eras, colonies and geographies therefore addresses the necessity to consolidate history, anthropology and democracy (González Alcantud, 2001). The recovery of works include literature in French, English, Arabic and Spanish. The French gift theory was particularly fundamental because it offered ethnological studies dedicated to the gift and the economy, as well as religious interpretations that surround them.

The fieldwork in Kuwait identifies different situations in which gifts are exchanged, distinguishing Kuwait's Gift Theory and its prominent characteristics. Then, the Art of Reciprocation in Kuwait is explained, which includes decisive factors before choosing the "right" gift. The section emphasises the importance of relationships in the gift exchange practice. The aim of this section is to analyse the significance of gifts in Kuwait and how they are materialised in everyday life. Evidently, the gift, its presentation and wrapping are shaped by Kuwait's culture, and this is where I discuss reprehensible gift choices with the presuppositions of Islam. This information then develops an analogy between the contemporary gift in Kuwait and the Gift in Islam, highlighting some contradictions, for example, how the Gift in Islam mainly revolves around its moral value rather than its monetary value. The gift in Kuwait also portrayed distinct concepts from the literature. These include the Gift of Time, Surprise Gifts, and considering recent circumstances, the gift during the COVID-19 global pandemic, which examines how the pandemic affected collective occasions and gifting practices in Kuwait. These gift concepts were realised to be largely influenced by war, tragedy and ideologies from the past. At this point, I seek to show differences in gift-giving by underscoring how past to present gift meanings have changed since the discovery of oil and the affluence it brought, and since the increase in

popularity of Valentine's Day in Kuwait. This had required a recall in informants' memories on how gifts were perceived during their infancy or by their parents.

The thesis carries on to closely analyse a specific gift-giving occasion, Valentine's Day. Chapter "IV" starts off with a panorama about all intercorrelated aspects and theories present during Valentine's Day in Kuwait. It provides a comprehensive analysis on the occasion's noticeable icons and features, its popularity that has been impacted by marketing and commercialisation, and the factors that further promote the occasion such as education, economic transformation and globalisation, which have affected gender roles and proposed the idea of "open-mindedness" in Kuwait. Kuwait's colonial link with Great Britain and its liberation from Iraq that ended the Persian Gulf War in 1991 have also influenced western practices to be part of Kuwait's society (Kluijver, 2013). I would like to stress the ramifications of war and other religious, economic and social pressures or conflicts that are present in many Islamic countries. These pressures attribute to the decline of traditional, religious and cultural norms (Ahluwalia & Miller, 2016). This represents the first focal point of the thesis, explaining the transformation of a traditional society into a progressive one.

The main objective of this chapter is to lessen typical Islamic stereotypes, which could hardly be represented in all Muslim societies, by providing a profound discussion that disputes the "dissimilar Islam" existing within every separate Islamic community. Eickelman (2009: 161) explicitly ruled out the presence of one "single dominant view among Muslims concerning religious and ethical pluralism". Therefore, the chapter clarifies that there are several images to the religion along with major differences in the practices of each Islamic country, which fully follow independent government interests and social policies (Aixelà-Cabré, 2006: 69). Kuwait's policies could have been an imitation of previous colonial empires and the ways they had affected their inhabitants, calling it their "colonial footprints" (Aixelà-Cabré 2018: iii; Bowden 2019). Accordingly, Kuwait's history is studied with regards to postcolonial conceptions after its independence from the British protectorate in 1961, and its alliance with the United States shortly after.

As my research points out, it appears necessary to reiterate the notion that people living within Muslim majorities do not act fully in line with religion, but instead usually follow familial principles: their taboos, rules, traditions, customs and beliefs. These principles have been passed down to several generations and are practiced year after year and generally, they are neither antagonistic to Islam, nor are representations of piety (Schielke, 2010). This demonstrates that lifestyles are not pure expressions of traditional Kuwaiti culture and history but are quite rigorous multinational structures formed by social concepts that have circulated the country for many years, similarly in terms of gender roles. Above all, this suggests a distinction between an Arab identity (tradition) and a Muslim one (religion), especially in the case of women. The growing paradox of education, social media exposure, and technological developments has established a feminist cause in Kuwait, differentiating between what tradition had coerced women to do -or how tradition had decreed the "female role" in society- and what Islam desires for Muslim women in terms of independence, aspirations and empowerment.

Furthermore, this thesis argues that one specific person (or country) could not be an accurate representation of their faith, religion, or nationality, but they are a representation of themselves. As Tariq Ramadan[1] similarly mentions in his book, "What I Believe" (2009b: 2), "I do not represent all Muslims, but I belong to the reformist trend". Not representing the majority is especially the case when leaving the homeland and adapting within a diverse culture like Kuwait's. For example, immigrants from India and Pakistan would reduce wearing traditional attire, like the *sari* or *shalwar kameez*, and start representing themselves with something more culturally "acceptable" in Kuwait, like the *abaya*[2] (ʿabāʾah), or regular pants and shirts. This is probably triggered by moral and subconscious motives, such as to look less like an immigrant or to avoid hate speech (Aixelà-Cabré, 2012). Comparably, Muslim females in American or European societies might consider removing the Islamic veil or the *hijab* (ḥijāb) for similar reasons (Blakeman 2014: 31; Tariq-Munir 2014: iv-1; Khirallah 2017). This does not indicate a loss of faith or being distant from God, as Tariq Ramadan (2009b: 2) explicitly states, "I aim to remain

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[1] Tariq Ramadan is an academic, philosopher and writer who holds a PhD in Arabic and Islamic studies.
[2] A long women's cloak. Essentially a simple, dark-coloured robe-like dress, worn in parts of the Muslim world and is widely spread in the Arabian Peninsula.

faithful to the principles of Islam, on the basis of scriptural sources, while taking into account the evolution of historical and geographical contexts". Accordingly, removing the *hijab* is a decision made in certain contexts to avoid racism, discrimination or embarrassment[3]. This reveals the variation and tolerance of religion that exists in different communities and families. These are simple examples that show how a person would adjust their clothing style to match specific social and cultural identities; that clothing styles are influenced and perpetuated by social groups (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003: 58-59).

On that note, it is useful to look at the topic not only from a historical approach, but also anthropologically. Appadurai (2000) and Hernàndez i Martí (2006: 93) expressed within their work the significance of society changes and reasons why people as groups start representing others coming from different cultures. As claimed, when people travel, they gain experience, familiarize themselves with foreign culture and learn about countries' religious and historic beliefs. When they understand certain concepts, they start to implement similar ideas in their respective countries. This process slowly occurs by numerous ways. Learning the language, getting festive for the holidays, trying new food, and listening to local music are all practices that people learn when being abroad. They gain these experiences away on tourism, exchange programs, work trips, or simply being born into a family of different countries or mixed races. Thus, these practices can drive a person to implement a few things from another culture into their own. Gradually, it becomes noticeable that every individual's lifestyle does not authentically represent where they come from. Similarly, the adoption of Valentine's Day in Kuwait is of particular importance to this research so that an accurate analysis to the transformation of festive culture in Islamic societies can be done.

The chapter continues to introduce feasible reasons for a "differing" Islam existing in Middle Eastern countries. When Kuwait experienced a period of oil prosperity and massive growth between 1946 and 1982, or during the so-called "Golden Era", immigration significantly peaked, attracting many foreign workers which exemplified Kuwait as a

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[3] Self-isolation and social withdrawal are common experiences among immigrants in unfamiliar cultures (Ramadan, 2009: 27).

dynamic model of cultural diversity (Alsager 2014; González 2014; Al-Nakib 2014b; 2018). Furthermore, individualism, global capitalism and urbanisation are other key concepts associated with the research, which build awareness about Kuwait's contemporary culture.

The chapter shows that the dissimilar versions of Islam have also blurred some romantic situations. Valentine's Day incites tensions in romantic principles, matrimonial strategies, and understandings of religion. It has triggered a revolutionary moment to question the changing practices of a significant proportion of the country's youth (Kreil, 2016). I would like to explicitly mention the cultural and gender contradictions that the gift has revealed among romantic relationships in a country self-identified as traditional, Arab and Islamic, which on many occasions has rejected any type of external cultural influences, like this festivity of European and Anglo-Saxon origin. Briefly, the research realises a transformation in gender roles, cultural practices and dating standards. These implications on dating and romantic relationships in Kuwait establish the second focal point of the thesis, explaining the transition from conventional practices to a globalised modernity from the 20th to 21st century.

A bigger focus was placed on the expressive forms of love that Valentine's Day promotes through its merchandising and commercialisation. These aspects are frequently assessed in Kuwait because arguably, they demonstrate contrary conceptions of love, that Valentine's Day is a celebration beyond sweet talk and gifts. Social media was also determined to have a significant role in romantic relationships during gifting occasions. It is important to heed that these conceptions could urge defiance to institutional attempts that control pre-marital love relationships during Valentine's Day and other non-traditional events in Kuwait. Evidently, the gift collects various positive and negative emotions, thus my research also contributes to the study field of affective science (Cheal 1987; 1988) and emotional psychology (Ruffle 1999; Pizzetti 2016).

Kuwait's transformation in cultural practices has adjusted family values, religious perceptions and traditional customs. I would like to highlight and investigate the notion presented by several informants who asserted that taking part in western practices is

considered "being modern". Modernity in Kuwait was also previously proposed by González (2014), Al-Nakib (2014a) and Vartanian (2015). This perception needs to be further explained with the support of fundamental research. There is insufficient evidence to confirm, or even suggest, that "copying" or following western customs is a sign of modernity, but perhaps it can be mistaken for modernisation, which is argued to be a product of globalisation.

Research findings were the result of fieldwork interpretations and interview responses, used to confirm certain phenomena. Final discussions and conclusions to the thesis are ultimately contextualized in Chapter "V". The thesis concludes with final remarks on the most prominent topics and suggests further areas of research. Finally, a glossary including a list of Arabic words is provided in Chapter "VI" with their literal translation, transliteration, definition and location. Primary and secondary sources, including informant biographies, bibliographies and other references that assisted in this thesis' development, are provided in Chapter "VII", accompanied with annexes, Chapter "VIII", that include the interview consent form, interview pre-set questions and informants' information tables.

Overall, the research underlines the impact of Valentine's Day in Kuwait, which determines the popularity of the occasion in an Islamic nation. Additionally, the dynamics of changing social relations call for a reinterpretation of meanings, functions and structures of gift-giving rituals that correspond to an evolution in the national economy, collective values, consumer practices, gender roles and power relationships in Kuwait's society, thereby supplementing conventional thinking that has changed during the last century. This change just outlined generates divergent points of view, not only about Kuwait but about the Arabian Peninsula. It pinpoints the country's delicate status, clarifies misconceptions about Islam and suggests further potential investigations about the topic.

Evidently, the gift-giving practice encompasses many disciplines and study phenomena. It is a promising field that could be utilized by many researchers. This thesis could become a reference point for future studies on the Middle East. To argue that Kuwait is heading towards a western culture in its social practices is quite a premature affirmation, however Kuwait's ethnographic findings can suggest a pattern that may lead to this result.

# 1. Object of Analysis

Several sources throughout history, like Martín Corrales (2002; 2004), Arenfeldt and Golley (2012: 6) and Holt and Jawad (2013), have studied the Arab Islamic region, which is often portrayed as conservative, uncivilised, and repressed, among many other poor attributes. Oblivious assumptions and misinformation are widely shared especially across western contemporary media, displaying negative stereotypes about the Muslim community (Alghafli, Hatch & Marks 2014; Mooro 2019). One of those belittles the status and role of women, with statements that label them as victimised and oppressed by racism, heteronormativity, colonialism and the patriarchy in their respective households and surroundings (Aixelà-Cabré 2006: 68; Christensen 2006; González Vázquez 2013). This oppression mostly stems from strict rules where obedience is demanded in return. The slightest example of these rules is forbiddance to leave the house or mandatory modest clothing. Therefore, as a popular understanding, these rules are associated with Islamic traditionalism, misogyny and cultural backwardness (Aixelà-Cabré, 2006: 68).

Lack of knowledge and awareness about said communities serves as the initial issue that leads to religious bigotry and biased conceptions of some Islamic practices. As a result, studies on certain practices are continuously being researched and justified, for example Abu Hwaij (2012) on the Islamic veil. Ironically, on the other hand, the presence of Arab women activism or Islamic feminism often puzzles or surprises some groups precisely because of their unfamiliarity with such regions (Al-Mughni, 2001: 151). As a matter of fact, in several contemporary Arab Muslim states, such as Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan for example, women are slowly transforming their daily realities, making their own decisions, and steadily gaining equal gender rights. This feminine movement and sociocultural change are increasingly appearing in more conservative (orthodox) Islamic countries like Kuwait. Women are representing a different cultural image of themselves by taking on new roles in society, other than domestic ones (Hidayati & Apipudin, 2018). More job opportunities are now available for women in several Middle Eastern Islamic societies. They are now working, launching their own businesses, driving their own cars, living independently, travelling alone, owning real estate, filing for divorce,

and most importantly, gaining political and career leadership positions (Al-Mughni 2010; Al-Suwaihel 2010; Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner 2012; Zoepf 2016; Al Qassim, Jazairy & Mohamed 2017). These "symptoms of transformation", as Aixelà-Cabré (2006: 73) described, seemed to boost female social status, consequently enhancing the Arab woman figure. It is therefore necessary to properly reflect this image in media interpretations.

In addition, for many women, marriage is now considered a complement to their lives, rather than an obligation (Aixelà-Cabré, 2007a). Dating is common and Valentine's Day is a very anticipated annual event among many romantic couples. These drastic changes prove the cultural dynamism of Kuwait: the belief that culture is not fixed, that ethical changes and civilisation are inevitable, and that we are capable of enduring life challenges across periods of time without a fixed religion (Al-Mughni 2010; Kashima 2014; Kashima, Bain & Perfors 2019). Therefore, the main research question to be answered in this PhD thesis and through my fieldwork is: Why and how a culture that is supposedly reluctant to change its Islamic practices is slowly accepting and taking part in western customs?

Valentine gifts are scrutinized as highly significant, but apparently, they are an underexplored topic in many beliefs, namely the Islamic one. Little research has been found that examines the motivations and consequences of exchanging Valentine gifts. The transformation of material objects into sentimental gifts in romantic relationships is a process that should be intervened. It helps to recognise the link between materiality, self-identity, and gift symbolism that have developed Valentine gifts into touchstones of memory (Kamptner, 1989).

In Kuwait, unconventional gift-giving patterns have been recently noticed that do not only fall outside Islamic beliefs but also do not represent pure expressions of "collective" society traditions. During the 90s in Kuwait, although a politically independent nation, it was not common to take part in occasions that were established from western Christian lifestyles. Muslim roots and Kuwaiti traditions that reflected historical practices were a highlight to identity and opposition to any sociocultural influence was important to consolidate society. It was also considered taboo to talk about relationships that fall outside of wedlock. Arab Islamic societies have long discouraged romantic love that has no clear marriage intentions;

therefore, a boyfriend or girlfriend figure is widely prohibited. Almost half a century ago, the West hardly influenced such societies; the elders were stubborn to change and had strict principles. Grasping the holistic picture around the transformation of the 1950's typical Kuwaiti culture into a much flexible one is a study that has not been developed yet. Today, a change of events has been witnessed in terms of customs, gender roles, ethnicity, social class and Arab-Muslim slogan and rules, even within families that were once very traditional. Due to profound changes in consumption and globalisation and a rapid advent and exposure to social media, along with increased levels of education, Valentine's Day has become pervasive as a relatively recent phenomenon, leading Middle Eastern Islamic countries to slowly follow norms of the West. From a historical perspective, Kuwait is considered among the countries that have changed significantly since its independence from Great Britain in the 1960s by taking on new habits within its cultural norms and transforming typical dating standards, but it is gradually doing so compared to other Muslim-majority countries such as Lebanon, Morocco, Turkey, and Qatar (Pappé, 2005).

Kuwait has begun to focus on the concept of gifts by integrating creativity within the process. The use of technology has enriched the purchasing process of gifts and emphasized the significance of this multidimensional activity, which was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Programmed mobile applications are now being developed for the purpose of sending gifts while maintaining social distance. It is also noticeable that local stores and shopping malls are embracing Valentine's Day with increased levels of commercialisation and event decoration which influence Kuwait's public to take part in the festivity.

Discussions with Kuwait's residents have given a wider, broader perspective to Kuwaiti culture, traditions, and lifestyle. Relevant connections between the celebration, the Islamic religion and the Quran are analysed to delve into the complex mechanisms of reciprocity that the gift incorporates, which develops into a rich object of study: understanding the past and present of certain social practices and gender roles in Kuwait and the Arab world as a whole. The information and conclusions that emerge from this fieldwork could mirror what goes on during Valentine's Day in other Arabian Gulf countries as well.

## 2. Hypotheses

The main hypothesis for this study proposes that Kuwait, as an Islamic country in the Arabian Gulf, is integrating and accepting western customs while gradually detaching from its conventional, historical traditions and trying its best to combine both, achieving coexistence. Kuwait's identity is distinguished by its history, traditions, and its geographical location. Its strong attachment to the Islamic religion is linked to its proximity to Iran and the fact that it shares a border with Saudi Arabia. Because of this, as well as certain laws and societal expectations that appear to inhibit individual freedom and expression, Kuwait is still publicly viewed as an "oppressed" society by the media and western regions. However, ever since the emergence of gender equality, mass education, mass communication and an exposure to the West, Kuwait is becoming more tolerant and "open to change", thereby inheriting other ideologies and practices. People living in Kuwait are becoming more independent, more receptive to foreign culture and principles, thus embracing change within their social systems. Assumingly, Kuwait widely celebrates non-Islamic occasions.

In this respect, a second hypothesis involves the age group that leads Kuwait's current social transformation. This hypothesis can be confirmed by analysing different age groups. Traditional Kuwaiti customs and Islamic values are still practiced by older individuals, or seniors, who are less interested in material culture and more attached to traditions. Nevertheless, as years pass by, the acceptance of "outsider" values rises and the orthodox take on it declines. In other words, the "rebellious" youth, ages 15 through 25, are interested in combining various events into their lifestyles, which establishes Valentine's Day as a "young" festivity incorporated in Kuwait. Accepting and celebrating Valentine's Day as a popular social practice implies that the idea of romantic relationships is no longer prohibited, but rather publicised (Oghia 2015; Kreil 2016; Fortier, Kreil & Maffi 2018). Assumed reasons for this transformation are the increased use of the internet and the inevitable rise in globalisation. These lead to spurious local and Islamic customs, wishing to be viewed as Westerners by practicing a more "tolerant" Islam (Panaemalae & Prasojo 2016; Duderija 2018). Another assumed reason for this is the fact that Kuwait is influenced

by a great mix of nationalities and different ethnic populations due to immigration that infuse their cultures into the country. According to the World Bank webpage, the Arabian Gulf countries are host to over 30 million migrants (Rutkowski & Koettl, 2020). The research therefore insinuates that Kuwait will continue to normalise western-originated festive rituals in the future. As implied, Kuwait is becoming more pertinent to today, taking on a more contemporary, progressive direction.

My third hypothesis involves the nature of the gift. I intend to develop an analysis arguing that the gift has recently lost its meaning, or its sentimental value, because more focus is placed on the materialistic and commercial aspect of the item. As a rapidly changing and rich nation, it is assumed that Kuwait is paving its way towards a consumerist, extravagant society, preoccupied with wealth growth and the acquisition of pricey possessions as gifts. This consequently affects gender roles and what is socially expected in romantic relationships (Lindholm 2006; Quintero González & Koestner 2006; Esteban 2008; Esteban & Távora 2008; Brosius & Wenzlhuemer 2011; Oghia 2015; Fortier, Kreil & Maffi 2018). The forever question of "what to get" no longer revolves around the symbolic significance of the gift, but is now concerned with its financial worth, which satisfies one's ego and enhances social status among peers and potential romantic interests.

## 3. Unique contribution

The gift-giving practice has been specifically selected because of its universal nature; everybody could relate to it some way or the other. This study has a passionate side to it. Something as simple as a gift could, in Marcel Mauss' terms (1925), solve conflicts and bring nations together, meaning that it is not merely giving something to someone, but it is about the essence and ultimate symbol of the gift, regardless of religion or other cultural notion.

Existing literature about the gift mostly explores the material value of the item, or the significance of the relationship. Being more specific and looking into a gift-giving occasion, such as Valentine's Day, gives more depth to the research. In addition, investigating a culture that does not initially have Valentine's Day within its customs is another area worth studying. The Arabian Gulf region in the Middle East is an understudied area in terms of its practices. Limited research has been conducted on Valentine's Day, especially when Muslims tend to ratiocinate it to Islam. There are many contradictory views about Valentine's Day that exist on social media and among families or friends, but little has been found in published writing. These varied opinions can change a country's norms. Therefore, this gift-giving research draws a historical perspective to Kuwait in relation to its current practices and gives realistic predictions to what can happen in the future.

This strand of research would contribute and add value to the burgeoning field of Arabian Gulf studies, benefitting numerous scholars and collectives. Historians, anthropologists, sociologists and Islamic specialists and researchers can use this information to develop further areas of research and hypotheses about the Arabian Peninsula and its population in a range of articulated multidisciplinary fields of study, such as identity, migration, youth, gender, education, and culture.

This thesis can also bring together work by scholars in the business and marketing fields because it studies consumer (buyers of the gift) practices, motives, and decision-making processes, each of which is affected by religion and tradition. The findings may also assist

merchants to learn about their consumers and their preferences in terms of marital status, gender and age differences. My work could encourage further research from a historical point of view about gifting habits with regards to ethnic and cultural differences, as my study includes informants from different backgrounds and nationalities however influenced by the Kuwaiti culture.

It can be learned that culture as well as individual habits change throughout time because of a constant influence from outside factors. Therefore, habits other than gift-giving could be approached using a similar research manner, for example, sports and meditation, nutrition, diet cultures, cuisines, as well as wedding and birthing rituals. It could also be an opportunity to introduce another focus or variable to my topic as per interest, for example gift-giving practices in relation to religion, income status, or marital status.

Through my work, I aim to promote greater cultural awareness and an increased intellectual interest to the Arabian Gulf States, especially towards a range of issues, such as oil and gas revenue, recycling and sustainability, religious restrictions, racism, discrimination and more, that both shape and challenge this critical region of the Middle East. Furthermore, this thesis pays attention to the dynamic nature of Arabian Gulf countries that have been undergoing significant changes in society, education and academia ever since their independence (Nakamura, 2016). These changes attract regional and international interests from which scholarly work on the most pressing issues within the region can be executed. My work's contribution to small state studies could be used in four potential areas:

- To establish general assessments on Arabian Gulf countries.
- To examine Kuwait's mediation role in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)[4] and among other Middle Eastern Arab countries.
- To use Kuwait as reference to distinguish between Muslim-majority countries.
- To develop conclusions about the relationship between Arabian Gulf states and countries in the wider region, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom.

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[4] The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a regional, intergovernmental, political, and economic union consisting of six Arab states of the Persian Gulf: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

To this end, I seek to encourage and cultivate original research on Arab countries in general, but more specifically on Arabian Gulf states.

Finally, this study contributes to the field of contemporary history, social anthropological sciences, and Islamic studies. It highlights the idea how cultures are changing overtime, whether through gift-giving, fashion, music taste, or any other thematic area. This means that it would be typical to find practices within cultures that do not necessarily follow traditional customs or religious constraints. The study can also prove that perceptions or stereotypes made by the media and other sources about the "oppressed" Islamic (Arabian Gulf) community are not always true or justifiable. I refer to certain symbols of "anti-modernity", such as the female veil (Kilani 2003; Amiraux 2003). In many instances, Muslims and diaspora Arabs face discrimination and criticisms in secular or non-Muslim societies in areas of employment and education, creating an unsafe environment and an inability to express their religious identity or personality (Thijs, Hornstra & Charki 2018; Mooro 2019). However, it can be realised that some Islamic societies or Muslims are tolerable to accept and adapt to foreign practices or ideologies, therefore bettering the image that the world has of Islam. Recognition to these practices, as affirmed by Roy (2003), seems to make Muslims increasingly closer to resembling Europeans. This study is therefore suitable in an increasingly Islamophobic and xenophobic atmosphere and can clear up many misunderstandings or judgements about Muslims (Choudhury, Aziz, Izzidien, Khreeji & Hussain 2006; Mohideen & Mohideen 2008; Lauwers 2019).

# 4. Methodology

This thesis incorporates exploratory research to study certain aspects during a gift-giving occasion, such as personal and collective values, marital status, gender, nationality, and country of residence.

Ethnographic research designed from a historical perspective is based in Kuwait to help tackle the purpose of this thesis. The research more likely follows Malinowski's individualist methodology. Bronislaw Malinowski is often considered to be the founder of modern social anthropological methods of fieldwork and informant observation (Macdonald 2001; Coello de la Rosa & Mateo Dieste 2016). Informant observation took place in shopping malls, such as The Avenues in Al-Rai and Marina Mall in Salmiya, where Valentine's Day decorations and celebrations would normally be extensive as they attract a large number of people. This method approaches social life by examining beliefs and experiences of individual members, unlike Durkheim's systemic methodology which believes that people act as a collective society (Carrier, 2012b). Hence, the process allows to investigate an area that has not been thoroughly studied in the past and develop better interpretations of it (Boyce & Neale, 2006). In this case, the area was investigating informant perspectives on the progression of Kuwait during the last century and its cultural association to the western world.

Albeit a difficult task, Malinowski (1926) claims that the research would be of better quality if there was a considerable amount of time spent among the informants to better grasp a sensation of the community. The achieve this, the fieldwork was completed over several monthly intervals traveling back and forth to Kuwait from Barcelona to stabilize contact with informants who were available to collaborate in this research.

Another fieldwork tool that helped better understand key concepts of this interdisciplinary research was observing "a larger social order" (Marcus, 1995: 95). Apart from oral sources, this method gave some perspective and personal experience about Kuwait's culture and Islamic community.

The research employs qualitative methods by interviewing analysis, specifically in-depth interviews, which were conducted both physically and online from an ethical point of view. In-depth interviews were chosen as a developing key method of educational research and data collection to study social and cultural changes. They give enough time for the informant to express his or her thoughts and information is better elicited to obtain a holistic understanding of differing opinions. In addition, interesting areas for further research can be easily identified using this method, making it one of the most significant and effective forms of data collection (Showkat & Parveen, 2017).

This section provides explanations on how the informant sample group was chosen, and how and where the interviews were conducted based on ethical values. Finally, the advantages of the methodology are presented, which discuss cultural concerns and include a brief debate comparing between online interviewing and face-to-face traditional interviewing.

## 4.1    Research Sample

Informants for this research were residents of Kuwait and were chosen on the basis of being familiar with Kuwait's culture. They represented individuals that have resided in Kuwait for a (long) period of time, therefore demonstrating knowledge about Kuwait's society and values.

The informants for this thesis lived in densely populated residential cities in Kuwait, such as Hawalli, Salmiya and Salwa. They were self-selected using snowball sampling. Also called chain-referral sampling, this method was efficient in identifying informants, who were primarily picked from immediate circles such as friends, neighbours, or family members. Later, those individuals suggested future subjects that might be interested to take part in the study, such as their friends, relatives, or work colleagues, expanding the informant sample. This way, the initial informant could brief the nominated person beforehand on the objectives and benefits of the study and what to expect during the

interview. The process is easy to implement, cost-efficient and goes on until enough information is obtained to be analysed and make conclusive research results.

After all, it should be noted that not all informants were references to each other. Some personal contacts were not interviewed for the study but had referred me to their parents or grandparents. This measure was taken to widen the profile of informants and ensure diversity within the sample. Snowball sampling was therefore specifically helpful to identify senior citizens.

The research sample for this study involved a set of demographic characteristics including age, gender, nationality, marital status, education, and occupation[5]. A total of 46 informants were interviewed for this thesis, 14 of which were interviewed online. The research sample constituted of 18 males and 28 females, age ranging between 17 to 87.

Gender is a crucial variable to analyse in Kuwait because it is influenced by social and economic phenomena, such as globalisation. In addition, diversifying the sample using a wide age range provides a historical study of the gift. Some gift aspects needed a gender and age-sensitive approach, for example to identify men and women gender roles during gift exchange in romantic relationships, or gifting motives of teenagers compared to seniors. The thesis' historical approach with regards to age shows that younger individuals think and feel differently as compared to older ones, and that is an important aspect to consider as part of Kuwait's cultural history. Older individuals are a fundamentally different population cohort when studying time and cultural changes. Interviewing them specifically helps to observe the dynamics of changing gift practices, social structures, and relationship values over the last 50~ years in Kuwait. Informant age was therefore one of the important characteristics for this research because it helps in understanding views and evaluating different opinions about the topic.

Informants were categorised into five age groups. There were 7 youth (first group, age range 16-24), 13 young adults (second group, age range 25-35), 9 middle-aged adults (third

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[5] Detailed informant biographies are provided in Chapter VII.

group, age range 36-50), 5 older adults (forth group, age range 51-60) and 12 seniors (fifth group, ages above 61). Hence, dividing informants into different age groups shows an effort to develop a research study based on a historical viewpoint.

Dividing informants into these age groups was significant to the research analysis. More noticeable differences in gift-giving practices are appreciated when informants are at different stages of life. Informants in every age group demonstrated similar characteristics. For example, from my fieldwork, younger informants were found to have one or several of the following characteristics: they were either students, newlyweds (Cobb, 2009), or young parents, fairly early in their careers, dealing with academic, legal, or financial struggles. Middle-aged adults were more settled, independent, with bigger financial goals, more expenses and perceived themselves to be in a period of growth. Lastly, older adults and seniors were firmly established or retired, and claimed a slower pace of life while enjoying various social relationships (Walker, et al. 2001: 1; Alwin 2012). In this sense, answers from every age group reflected their own cohort-specific context, which gave perspective to different values. Different answers among the age groups generate multiple theories to produce conclusive realisations to the study. Any eccentric or misfit responses observed from an age group were also highlighted in the analysis.

As my rich fieldwork reflects, Kuwait enjoys a very mixed society; therefore, aside from 9 Kuwaiti informants, others came from different backgrounds and nationalities. Non-Kuwaiti informants were from: Belgium, Canada, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Switzerland, and Syria. Out of the total, 10 informants originally came from other heritages, such as Algeria and Iran. Moreover, some informants were children from transnational marriages. Their parents come from dissimilar backgrounds which certainly affect their responses and opinions; therefore, I add to the above list Iraq and Serbia. Distinct ethnic profiles provide more perspective to the studied cultural phenomena and distinguish similarities or differences between informants coming from various countries. As shown, the majority of this fieldwork's informants migrated, or their parents have migrated, to search for employment in Kuwait due to the unavailability of job opportunities in their home countries. This research therefore studies two distinct

types of foreigners in Kuwait: immigrants and children of immigrants. It is important to note that even though some informants were born in Kuwait, they are not granted the Kuwaiti nationality and are therefore not considered Kuwaiti citizens. Despite living their whole lives in Kuwait, their families and origins would have made an impact on their upbringing and mindset one way or another. On the other hand, children of immigrants in Kuwait, or third culture kids, would simultaneously demonstrate different views and behaviour compared to their parents' who have been raised in a different environment, culture, and era.

Furthermore, my informants had different civil statuses and household compositions (e.g., married with 2 kids). There was a total of 18 single, 24 married, 1 divorced, and 3 widowed individuals interviewed for this thesis. Marriage is an important aspect in social institutions that has undergone many changes over the years in numerous societies. The perceptions and attitudes of a person differ by their marital status because priorities change, responsibilities are likely to increase, and a level of maturity can be realised.

My informants also varied in terms of educational attainments. There were 15 who attained secondary school degrees, 3 had diplomas, 20 had bachelor's degrees, 5 had master's degrees, and 3 had medical or doctorate (PhD) degrees, noting that none of them were illiterate. Education is an imperative characteristic that can affect a person's viewpoint and comprehension of social phenomena. It appears that many informants have attained high educational levels, some even showed progression in their studies, which is a focal point that acknowledges Kuwait as a knowledge-based society.

Finally, the informants represented a wide range of occupations and professional backgrounds of different industries. There were nurses, medical doctors, computer, petroleum, civil and construction engineers, a school teacher, a university professor, an architect, a lawyer, receptionists, administration officers and coordinators, a PR & marketing executive, an HR executive, salesmen and customer service agents, a financial analyst, an aviation and aircraft operator, a travel agent, a security guard, a fitness coach, a yoga instructor, and self-employed individuals: a skincare and makeup specialist, a

freelance artist and a business merchant. A person's occupation shapes their personality, quality of life, income, and determines certain social thought processes. As noticed, the service sector is blooming in Kuwait. All occupations, but one (business merchant), represent offering a service and not a product, showing that the service industry is a major sector of employment in Kuwait.

## 4.2     Ethics

Ethical procedures for academic research undertaken for this thesis require the informants' explicit approval to be interviewed and have their input used for the fieldwork analysis. Prior to the interview, before concreting a meeting date, informants were briefed (by call or text) about the purpose of the study. The reason of my research and their responses' significance were provided overtly. I explained that the data collected will be used primarily for a doctoral thesis to obtain a PhD degree and may be used for journal publications in the future. I mentioned that their direct quotes could be also included. More information about the interview was given, such as topics to be discussed and an estimate of the interview's duration. Interview durations depended on informant availability and flow of conversation. I estimated that the interview would last between 30 minutes and 2 hours. To avoid misunderstandings, I clarified that no financial gain will be generated from the interview for their contribution. I also explained that their answers are preferred to be recorded to be reviewed later. Recording interviews can help dedicate more time to the informant and because memory cannot be the only dependable source and reference to fieldwork answers. Since the research involves delicate or sensitive matters, the informant was assured their freedom to refuse to answer any question without any consequences, as well as stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time (Cicourel, 1964). This was important even with informed consent that assured confidentiality. Allmark, et al. (2009) discussed that the possibility to harm informants emotionally was one of the ethical and generic issues in in-depth interviews. With that in mind, interview questions consisted of words that consider the informant's context and world view, for example, Islamic, conservative, their gender, nationality, romantic situation and so on (Kvale, 1996).

Most importantly, I explained how information will be kept confidential. To protect private and sensitive data, this thesis stresses the anonymity of informants. Informants were informed that their real names will be undisclosed and replaced with pseudonyms. The snowball sampling method eased this stage, as nominated informants can also be ensured discretion of private information and confidentiality by the initial informants (Glen, 2014). Likewise, all identifying information has been removed from the informant biographies presented in this thesis. Upon informant approval to the terms, interview conditions and research process, well-defined consent forms were provided for them to sign[6]. These forms declare their real names and a few statements that explain the research. Informants were informed that the signed consent forms, original audio recordings and interview transcripts will be retained in my possession unless specifically required by editors, journal reviewers, academic supervisors, and the like. Informants were also given the freedom to contact me for further clarification about the research, or to access the information they have provided, at any time. After informed consent, informants were asked to specify an optimal time and place to be interviewed. As for online interviews, they were conducted over the phone using the internet, and consent was communicated verbally, by text, or signed, scanned and sent back to me.

At the end of the interview, reconfirmation of informant comments was necessary. Notes were read out to make sure they agree with what was written and in case they wanted to make any additional comments or changes. Some interview transcriptions were requested to be sent to the respective informant by email. Providing a draft of informant responses for review was found to be a good strategy for building trust, increasing accuracy and awareness of my work (Bryman & Cassell, 2006). Informants were also provided a copy of the consent form and interview questionnaire.

## 4.3    Data Collection Procedure

Interview data was collected and completed over a fifteen-month period, between May 2018 and August 2019. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, I recontacted

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[6] A sample of the consent form is provided in Chapter VIII.

some of the informants to understand the overall situation in Kuwait and how the pandemic may have influenced gifting practices.

My interview style was semi-structured with an informal approach. In a semi-structured interview, a predetermined set of questions is prepared to ensure that certain topics are covered, thus it serves as an initial guide to the interview (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). A total of 32 questions were arranged for Kuwait's interviews[7], which were then divided into three sections to maintain an easy conversational flow. Section A inquired information about gifts, gifting habits and motives, and reciprocation. Section B specifically examined Valentine's Day, its purpose, reasons for celebration or resisting celebration, relative gender roles during the occasion, societal and parental views, and its popularity in Kuwait. Lastly, Section C, the most delicate one in my opinion, discusses Kuwait; views about its society, culture, taboos, religion, government policies and so on. It investigates traditions of the country, general history, and personal ideas that may have affected gift practices. The questions were open-ended, concise, and jargon-free (Cicourel 1964; Patton 1987; Boyce & Neale 2006). Sequencing questions from general to specific, or "funnelling", was a clever technique to build up informants' responses (Cohen & Manion, 1994: 277). Since I also come from an Arab Islamic background, it was crucial that the study and questions remain objective to challenge bias (Tuckman 1972; Heyl 2001).

The question list served as a guide to mediate the interviews and permitted further probing to obtain more information (McCracken 1988b; Thompson, Locander & Pollio 1989). Probing also helped clarify informants' answers especially when misinterpretations to delicate topics may arise. This allowed me to feel confident about my analysis and reassured me of certain conclusions for the thesis (Kvale, 1996).

The interview questions were translated in Arabic, the local and only official language of Kuwait, for those who feel more comfortable conversing in that language. Interviews in Arabic were later transcribed and translated in English. Nonetheless, there were several informants who better express themselves in English. English is widely spoken in Kuwait.

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[7] Interview pre-set questions are provided in Chapter VIII.

It is an acknowledged language for social communication among non-Arabic speakers. In addition, it is a mandatory second language in schools and is increasingly being used in business correspondence, thus it is usually a demanded or required language to be eligible for employment. Other languages that are considerably used among the non-Arab population in Kuwait are Persian/Farsi and Urdu (Commisceo Global Consultancy, 2020).

Interviews started with stating research intentions and inquiring details about the informant's personal experience in Kuwait. Interview discussions were flexible, like casual chats (Lofland & Lofland 1995; Burgess 2016). This meant that topics outside the research focus were likely to emerge. Some of those topics were considered important for the thesis since they gave richness to my Valentine's Day gift research. However, whilst informants were free to talk about anything that came to mind, the pre-set questions were useful to maintain control and bring back the discussion to the research interest (Palmer, 1928: 171).

The interviews with informants required rapport and establishing a firm and respectful relationship (Kvale, 1996). This was mainly achieved by ensuring that their privacy will not be violated, which consequently encouraged them to suggest potential individuals for the study (Crossman, 2019).

I was keen to conduct the interviews in a comfortable informal environment, rather than in a professional office setting. Interviews took place in quiet workspaces, cafeterias and restaurants, which were usually free of noise, distractions or interruptions. Other interviews took place in personal residencies. Providing a relaxing atmosphere where informants were not rushed to answer ensured a more detailed input to the research (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Additionally, the interviews' informal approach and less structured manner created a safe space to uncover details about Valentine's Day in relation to the Islamic religion. This involved unfolding emotions, recalling memories, articulating thoughts, experiences, and personal opinions about the Kuwaiti Islamic community. A laptop, notepad and an audio recording device were used to record interviews and save transcripts for future analysis and research development. Interview notes were revised and confirmed with informants, to make corrections and clarify misunderstandings whenever necessary. Acknowledging

informants' answers and confirming their ideas showed that I was attentive to their comments (Hitchcock, 1989: 79). For those who were weaker in English, I verbally reported my notes to them in Arabic.

At the end of each interview, I asked for feedback on the interview style and research topics to realise areas of improvement. Informant feedback included suggestions for the methodology, for example to upload the questions to an online link to achieve a higher number of responses and to use more closed or multiple-choice questions to save time.

## 4.4      Measures of Data Analysis

Interview data and personal observation served as primary sources of research. This information was collected in the form of field notes and audio-taped interviews, later transcribed for data analysis (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Interviews continued until a "saturation of knowledge" had been reached (Bertaux, 1981: 37). In other words, a pattern in the informants' answers was realised as more interviews were done. The stronger that pattern became, the more defensible the research can be. The most relevant information is determined because it is repetitive, while the exceptions allow to go further in the analysis. Theoretically, saturation, as well as other constraints including time and availability of informants, signalled the end point of my data collection (Boyce & Neale 2006: 3; Mason 2010).

The interviews were reviewed, transcribed, and translated when necessary, during the second half of 2019 and early 2020. After transcription, interview answers were thematically coded. They were grouped into the same three main categories as the questions: gifts, Valentine's Day, and Kuwait. Any topic that arose and could not fit under any of the categories was put in "miscellaneous". These topics included personal stories and ideas on Kuwait's politics, regime and immigration laws. A comparative table was then developed to organise informant responses, which made it easier to notice dominant patterns in answers and more importantly, realise "strong" comments that would affect the research analysis (Wolcott, 1990). The information obtained from the fieldwork was

primarily arranged to make evaluations based on age group (youth, young adults, middle-aged adults, older adults, and seniors).

Afterwards, informant personal details were organized into an excel sheet to facilitate filtering and realise differences among responses[8]. Apart from age group, interpretation of results included a gender and a marital status analysis that were significant assets to Valentine's Day research in Kuwait. Studying men and women responses can indicate certain gender roles in Kuwait. Similarly, dissimilar marital statuses could show a change in interests and a different perception or reasoning to gift exchange and Valentine's Day celebrations. These two variables triggered certain cultural arguments and helped identify future areas of study.

Furthermore, distinct nationalities that represented immigrants in Kuwait had to be considered for this study. Dissimilar views between native citizens and expatriates who live in the same country is important to interpret certain cultural clashes. Therefore, a nationality analysis was established to compare results between Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis. It was also realised from the fieldwork that those who were born and raised in Kuwait, regardless the nationality, demonstrated different views than those who had only lived (or been living) there for shorter periods of time. This shows that newcomers absorb different perceptions towards certain matters and therefore face cultural challenges.

A substantial amount of time was then spent sorting, summarizing key information from each interview, cross relating the findings to their relative theory references and literature, explaining, and arguing potential valid notions, and finally allocating the data into thesis chapters. This guaranteed a better organised study and a more detailed assessment. When mentioning informants or using their direct quotes in the thesis, in-text citations referred to the footnote indicate their name, age, marital status, nationality, gender, and their relation to Kuwait. Providing informant quotes throughout the thesis adds credibility to the information being argued and concluded (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

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[8] Informants' information tables can be found in Chapter VIII.

## 4.5  Advantages to the methodology

There are reasons why in-depth interviewing is one of the most popular and efficient methods of qualitative research. Oral sources are important and relevant for history (Thompson, 1988). Moreover, "it is versatile across a range of study topics, adaptable to challenging field conditions, and excellent for not just providing information but for generating understanding as well", unlike a simple questionnaire or rating scale (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013: 113). This approach was found especially effective when subjects were difficult to find or contact (Naderifar, Goli & Ghaljaei, 2017). During the early stages of data collection in 2018, simply approaching and talking to people was found to be quite uncommon in Kuwait due to their reserved nature. The snowball sampling technique was therefore deemed appropriate to gather primary sources for this thesis.

In-depth interviewing was effective to study subcultures, understand a specific research area and potentially uncover unascertained information by shedding light on some cultural misconceptions. It gave perspective and built awareness about how traditions in a family may change depending on cultural heritages and transnational marriages. Moreover, the revelation and discussion of deeper feelings and more experiences are achieved when talking independently to one person. This was beneficial for those who refrained from sharing their opinion publicly since the research contains topics that can be sensitive or personal to discuss, such as religious beliefs, intimate relationships and cultural taboos. Unlike focus groups, one-on-one interviews can evade peer pressure, therefore socially acceptable answers derived from other individuals in the room can be avoided.

Nevertheless, because of Kuwait's conservative Islamic culture, one-on-one interviews were still disfavoured by some informants. Some asked for an alternative because they felt anxious or shy to speak up and be recorded. Other than that, the influence of religious, societal norms was also present, like meeting alone with the opposite sex in an informal setting. Other challenges included time constraints and difficulty of personally interviewing a few of the informants because they lived outside of Kuwait. Others were unable to set concrete meeting appointments when I was in the country so our dates could

not coincide. As a solution for the above issues, some interviews were conducted online. With the advent of technology, an interview is not bound to be a meeting. It can be done at the informant's own time using a variety of social platforms over the internet (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). This helped reduce embarrassment, hesitation, or other ethical dilemmas related to Kuwait's culture.

The use of online interviews or online ethnographies in research have become more widespread and recognised as legitimate, efficient and reliable means of data collection by both market researchers and academics during the 21$^{st}$ century (Hine 2004; O'Connor, Madge, Shaw & Wellens 2008). Online surveys, internet-based interviews and email interviews have become especially common over the last decade and used even more substantially during the COVID-19 global pandemic. These methods were proven to be beneficial during the mandatory social distancing and travel restrictions (Buxo i Rei & González Alcantud 2021; Lupton 2021). Technology has created a radically changed landscape for the practice of research. The benefits outweigh their disadvantages as they facilitate real time co-presence and interactivity in different spatial locations and contexts.

Online interviewing primarily saved time. This method put less pressure on informants because they were given their space (James, 2016). They expressed their opinions and views more openly and thoroughly than the ones that were personally interviewed. Online interviews were convenient since informants were in a familiar environment, allowing them to be relaxed within the comfort of their own homes, which eliminated anxieties and unsettling experiences (O'Connor & Madge 2001: 11.2; Hine 2004; Bryman 2012). In one-on-one interviews, there was hesitation, long pauses and off-topic discussions, but online interviews reduced the informants' apprehension about being recorded, the conversations seemed more like casual talks.

Online interviews also saved time spent on flights. Additionally, they allowed me to talk to more informants in one day than I would with one-on-one interviews and personally helped me to reach people who lived in other countries. Online interviews therefore took less total time than traditional ones. Furthermore, transcripts were entered on the laptop

immediately during online interviews which are more likely to be accurate, whereas problems of inaudible speech or mishearing usually occurs when listening back to traditional audio recordings (Bryman, 2012). Finally, online interviews also reduced costs, not only travel costs but also general expenses such as gasoline, cafeteria and restaurant bills.

## 5. Limitations to the study

It was evident that this thesis had several opportunities to show critical development of thought, make accurate analysis and reasoning, and deliver better arguments appropriately to make fair conclusions to the work. However, it is necessary to point out certain limitations that have impacted the interpretation of the findings from my research.

One-on-one in-depth interviews were pricey and time consuming. The struggle of travelling back and forth from Barcelona to Kuwait not only included expensive airline tickets, but also meant it was crucial to conduct the maximum possible number of interviews during my limited stays in Kuwait. This also depended on the informant's convenience and availability, especially that the interview could be somewhat lengthy. Most importantly, travelling to Kuwait to conduct ethnographic research during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 was an even more difficult task since the airport had blocked all incoming flights and banned non-citizens from entering the country for most of the year (Buxo i Rei & González Alcantud, 2021).

The sampling method used, snowball sampling, also required a considerable amount of time to gather informants. Furthermore, a good, trustworthy relationship had to be established with subsequent nominated informants prior to confirming a meeting date and discussing their lifestyles and habits. In-depth interviews required purchasing recording equipment, and then substantial time in transcribing, analysing, interpreting, and reporting the results. Apart from being a time-consuming approach, there was no guarantee that the subsequent referrals will actually take part in the research. This represented a risk that limited my informant sample. Furthermore, this method suggests a lack of control, or

choice, over the interviewed informant sample since it restricts me to original and subsequent subjects only.

Since the overall duration of the interview was long, it was expected that informants would get tired towards the end, resulting in short, untrue answers so that the interview could end sooner. An unfinished interview due to time constraints or tiredness was a disadvantage to this methodology approach, which was not considerably mentioned or warned about in previous literature. Another obvious limitation was that there was only one round of individual interviews. While some informants were able to be reached, it was difficult to reconnect with others to inquire further details on a point they made during the interview. There was also no guarantee that the informant would be willing to reopen the conversation again. Additionally, there were a few informants that did not consent for their conversations to be recorded, even after guaranteeing a secure handling of their private information and records. In that case, notes had to be taken and then verified with the informant to ensure the validity of the data collected.

Even when overt ethnography is favoured for ethical reasons, people tend to behave differently when knowing that they are being studied, which results in untrue or inaccurate answers. Being uncomfortable with recording or uncomfortable with the interview location develops anxieties. Developing on that notion, cultural anxieties could develop towards the nature of the research topic, such as concerns about religion. Because of Kuwait's conservative society, some people are not open to share their ideas and feelings with others and hold back from discussing personal details pertaining to their relationships and habits. Therefore, they would provide a more socially desirable answer or might even exaggerate some ideas. This determines social desirability bias as another limitation. A language barrier, a difficulty to express oneself and reportedly unclear questions were other limitations to the study.

Inevitably, the findings to this research reflect limitations to a convenience sample, which include sampling bias and sampling error (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). At most times, initial sources nominated people that they know and are familiar with, like family members

or close friends, who usually share similar characteristics, lifestyles and customs especially since they all lived in the city and not the suburbs or rural areas. Therefore, as I quote from Boyce and Neale (2006: 3), "the impression that results can be projected to a population is not within the capabilities of this qualitative research approach". Additionally, since income analysis was not studied within the research, all informants were assumed to fall within similar income ranges and social classes. Similarly, although the information for this was obtained, the research analysis did not include conclusions based on professional occupation nor educational level of the informants.

Also, many informants were Kuwaiti residents, not Kuwaiti natives. The research was conducted to make conclusions about Kuwait as a country and not about Kuwaiti identity. Secondly, many (tribal) groups that live in Kuwait and demonstrate different social values and life ideologies were not part of this investigation, like Bedouins[9] or *Biduns*[10] (bidūn). These groups might have probably portrayed a different perspective to gift occasions and Valentine's Day. Thirdly, the research only studied the Islamic religion in terms of social and traditional practices. Lastly, the results to this thesis cannot be concluded on behalf of the entire Muslim community.

While online interviews were a clever way to avoid certain cultural anxieties or personal awkwardness, not to mention a very convenient method of data collection during a global pandemic, there was still a downside to them. Clearly, online interviews rely on a stable and fast internet connection. Although this was not a major issue that disrupted the research, poor video or audio quality and internet cuts were bound to occur a few times. Such technical problems clearly do not happen in personal interviews. Also, the informant had to be in a quiet space to enable clear transmission of speech. So, while they were in the comfort of their own homes, background noises and interruptions were difficult to be controlled or avoided, influencing the informant's line of reasoning.

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[9] Nomadic Arabs of the desert.
[10] Stateless Arab minority in Kuwait.

# 6. State of the Art

## 6.1 Valentine's Day

Valentine's Day is a gift-giving occasion that has built bridges between cultures and enhanced social meaning (Robles, 2012). Valentine's Day, a festivity that can be viewed as a global event, involves an act of gift-giving and reciprocation, typically between those in romantic relationships, but is not restricted to them. It is now common that this day also celebrates kinship relationships. This holiday also tempts people to come forward with their romantic (hidden) emotions and sincere feelings to bond with someone new, as Close and Zinkhan (2006: 360) stated, "It is a day when a secret admirer might emerge".

Christmas for example, as a gift exchange occasion, is being exaggerated year after year. Studies show that the gift economy during Christmas in the United States accounts for a few billion dollars (Waits 1993; Dunn, Huntsinger, Lun & Sinclair 2008: 469), whilst in Northern China, villagers spend about 20% of their annual income on Christmas gifts (Yan, 1996). Valentine's Day is slowly taking on the same route of exaggeration in gifts, which betrays its true spirit of demonstrating love. In the words of Cheal (1988: 12), this leads to a "nostalgia for a natural economy" compared to the current commercialized economy existing in capitalist societies.

Valentine's Day is a westernized ritual often troubling to some societies, especially Islamic ones. Some Islamic countries incorporate this occasion as an excuse to show love. However, people in romantic relationships feel it is a pressuring event designed to purchase a gift, which restrains freedom (Goodwin, Smith & Spiggle 1990; Mayet & Pine 2010; Farbotko & Head 2013). In addition, an increasing budget rate is being exhausted on this annual event due to excessive commercialisation. Soon after Christmas is over, people almost immediately witness in-store display decorations and gift offers in preparation for Valentine's Day. Arguably, these tactics are created by marketing professionals to maximize business profits. Even characters that are associated with certain events, such as Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and Cupid, are also merely designed for marketing goals. These characters continuously remind people of their duty to buy gifts (Mortelmans &

Damen 2001; Farbotko & Head 2013). Nevertheless, Othman, Ong and Teng (2005), who studied Valentine's Day in Malaysia, contrarily have found that people are becoming increasingly receptive to western culture and are more willing to purchase romantic gifts due to the success of some commercial advertisements and promotions. These differing reactions were also noted by Close and Zinkhan (2006: 363), who investigated Valentine's Day in the United States. They explained that this holiday combines two extreme opposites or contradictions: consumers who either love it or hate it — "from euphoria to heartbreak".

Dorsey[11] (2018) developed an online report discussing the situation of Valentine's Day in several Islamic societies of dissimilar ethnic backgrounds. He discusses various notions of extremism towards the occasion. Earlier in 2005, the Islamic Development Department in Malaysia reckoned Valentine's Day as a Christian holiday that leads towards immoralities "from abortion and child abandonment to alcoholism and fraudulent behaviour", as Dorsey (2018) mentioned. Young individuals faced consequences (imprisoned or fined) by authorities when found with someone of the opposite sex who was not a spouse or close relative.

Between the years 2008 and 2009, Valentine's Day in India became a controversial subject and could not be treated as a national custom but as a foreign festivity (Dorsey, 2018). It was believed to be a "cultural contamination" brought on from the West and was considered a threat to the authentic Indian culture and tradition (Siddiqui, 2016: 172). Despite this, the occasion remains widely celebrated in the country. Siddiqui (2016) developed an interesting Valentine's Day study in India that explored how the media conceals the event using commercialisation, culture, religion, and politics. The hypothesis was that different newspapers were biased with regards to the content that they share on that day. He found that Urdu newspapers for example, which target particularly Muslims, completely disregarded the occurrence of the event, and even criticized it based on cultural and religious reasons, arguing that it is a western festivity encouraging lust, not love. In English newspapers, however, Valentine's Day was presented in a positive manner and

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[11] James M. Dorsey is a PhD holder, senior fellow, co-director, and podcast co-host, who focuses on matters in the Middle East and North Africa.

romantic relationships were widely promoted. I use Siddiqui's study to validate ethnographic fieldwork since the media cannot be an accurate source to indicate the popularity or the spread of an event. In reference to Kuwait, it can be interpreted that Valentine's Day is discreetly celebrated without drawing media attention, therefore perceived as a strict Islamic country. Perhaps the reason behind why the Kuwaiti media and television industry show a conservative culture is to demonstrate the country's attachment to tradition and religion, thus proving strong ties to one's roots.

Likewise, this occurred in Indonesia in 2012. Valentine's Day was not portrayed in any communication source or teaching, and the occasion ceased to exist. Vendors were even forbidden to sell condoms so that people would not perform any sexual activity on that day. Later, in 2017, in Islamabad, Pakistan, President Mamnoon Hussain claimed that Valentine's Day has no connection with the Pakistani culture and should be prohibited. Valentine's Day was banned to be celebrated even on radio stations, because arguably, feelings that involve love encourage sin, nudity, and indecency among non-marital relationships, which are not acceptable in the Pakistani Islamic culture (Dorsey, 2018).

As for the Arabian Peninsula, Valentine's Day was prohibited for years to be celebrated in Saudi Arabia and any shade of red was banned to be displayed when the occasion approached. This prohibition influenced Kuwait and efforts were made to ban Valentine's Day in 2008 (Garcia, 2011: 2). Ultraconservatives and other members of Kuwait's Islamist movement agreed that celebrating Valentine's Day flouts Islamic teachings and values and does not reflect Kuwaiti customs either. Waleed Al-Tabtabaie and Jamaan Al-Harbash, two members of the Kuwaiti National Assembly Committee oversaw "negative alien" practices in Kuwait. They explained that Valentine's Day is an indecent celebration and practice, which encourages illicit relationships outside of wedlock, thus spreading obscene behaviour and moral corruption across the country (Elias, 2008). The public had been advised to be cautious of adopting non-Muslim practices and that they should not be "misled" by western media. Accepting Valentine's Day as a social practice would therefore strip away authentic Kuwaiti identity, since it had been linked with "Westernization" or "Christianisation" (Brosius & Wenzlhuemer, 2011: 47). However, measures to effectively

ban the occasion never took place, probably because the decision was not approved by an absolute majority of the Kuwaiti parliament.

Shockingly, in 2018, Saudi citizens came across an antithetical change in markets and stores. For the first time, red-coloured items that hinted at the love occasion were no longer hidden. Valentine gifts and symbols were widely displayed and sold to reflect the profundity of human sentiment. Al Arabiya English newspaper (2018) stated that this has been in fact "an old tradition but kept in the dark for too long" and "has finally made its appearance in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia". This perhaps demonstrates the reaction of people who wanted to celebrate the day (lawbreakers) but had struggled to do so because of the country's bureaucratic Islamic system. Views have therefore changed. Sheikh Ahmed Qasim Al-Ghamdi, a former religious police chief of Saudi Arabia, expressed that the conservative religious establishment is problematic, and Valentine's Day could represent an event like Mother's Day, to express feelings to loved ones and make beautiful memories (Dorsey, 2018). The massive transformation in Saudi Arabia was labelled as "optimistic" since it guaranteed a "more peaceful and secure future, for there is no way to fight evil and hatred except with love and tolerance", as per Al Arabiya English newspaper (2018). This suggests the expanding popularity of Valentine's Day among Islamic communities. As acknowledged, these widespread social occasions do not trace back to religion, but it was realised that there is no harm in celebrating them. Dorsey (2018) reflected on how this decision later received many criticisms, that it had misrepresented the image of religious orthodoxy, especially that it came from Saudi Arabia, the "holy" land of Islam (Ascoura, 2013). It can be noted that Muslims tend to follow by example, therefore they believe that when one strand of change occurs in cultural or religious habits, such as permitting to celebrate Valentine's Day, it would eventually normalise more events that have the tendency to start small but can lead towards more outlandish trends in the future.

Life experiences are deeply influenced by familial traditions, geographical location and exposure to other cultures. Because of these factors, many practices are performed distinctly in every Islamic country. Furthermore, a proposition affirmed by Roy (2003)

states that increased immigration rates caused by cultural and religious struggles in the 21ˢᵗ century will make more Muslims imitate the West and become similar in character. Throughout the previous decade, Muslim communities have been confused about whether to celebrate Valentine's Day or not, which led mostly to cultural discomfort. It is evident that adopting foreign lifestyle activities is a tough, slow process since restructuring cultures and religions is a challenging, troublesome matter.

## 6.2    Kuwait

Over several generations, people have learnt and adopted certain habits by taking qualities of other cultures and fitting them with their own. This relates to the past expansion of civilisations through trade, conflict and exploration, forming into complex societies, and this is marked by notable urbanisation, social and professional heterogeneity and corresponding developments in arts and sciences (Greene 2013; Bowden 2016). Civilisations however are distinguished from each other by religion, history, language, and tradition. All these factors lead towards the "gradual transformation to the contemporary, global international society" that we live in today, as underscored by Stivachtis (2008: 71).

As businesses operate on an international scale in a continuously developing society, globalisation becomes inevitable. Globalisation is one of the major factors that adjusted modes of thinking and influenced national cultures (Al-Nakib, 2020). It generated contemporary values that especially affected local heritage; an intangible challenge for Kuwait (Khalaf, 2016). Globalisation has also distorted the image of romantic love through the internet and different forms of commercialisation and media, creating significant ethical issues (Metcalfe & Game, 2008). Illouz (1997; 1998) has distinguished between mass media representations of love and a realistic model of love. Western mass media has portrayed love as a consumer-oriented, typical, "fictional" concept, commodifying emotions in events exactly like Valentine's Day, whereas in reality, it is more about sharing everyday life with one another. Lindholm (2006) explained how romantic love lost its quality and meaning in the West with the rise of individualism and perceptions of gender equality, which are principles linked to modernisation. As for non-western states like

Kuwait, romantic love is becoming more focused on the opulence of leisure time and ego boost instead of mutual satisfaction (Brosius & Wenzlhuemer, 2011).

The discussion on globalisation develops further approaches of deterritorialization, transnationalism and hybridization that were elucidated in the works of Appadurai, García-Canclini and Hernàndez i Martí. Appadurai (1996: 10) explains that expansion and new technologies are linked to the increase in imagination of other regions. In other words, they enable people to access other cultures and realities, which consequently result in the desire of changing their circumstances, or imagine new life, and eventually migrate. With the increasing spread of technology, social sciences were greatly impacted in the West during the acme of the modernisation theory between the 1950s and 1960s (Appadurai, 2000: 4).

People may consider migration to "resist state violence, seek social redress" and design a new mode of civic life (Appadurai, 2000: 6). As the number of immigrants increase, common "interests, cultural exchanges and social relations" also increase (Kastoryano, 2000: 1), which change people's lives in myriad ways. Transnational notions and migration movements began to multiply since the 1980s, which in turn broke down distances and characteristic barriers of modernity (Appadurai, 1996). This also affected post-modernity in terms of shaping and configuring countries in the 20th century because of the profusion of people, with reference to refugees, tourists, and workers who have crossed national borders (Appadurai, 1996: 160).

García-Canclini (2001: 13), on the other hand, introduces the concept of "hybridization", that reflects changes in modernity which then classify cultural systems, such as identity and tradition in local and global contexts. Therefore, in a country like Kuwait, since influenced by many outside factors, hybridization is evident. A mix of original identity and adopted identity is observed within its people. This results in impure understandings of human realities compared to when "populations were homogeneous and closed" and cultures were indigenous (García-Canclini, 2001: 260).

Along the same lines, Hernàndez i Martí (2006) describes deterritorialization as a condition of intensified globalisation that stimulates cultural heritage breakup, ever more caused from the above-mentioned global dynamics such as migrations, tourism, vast shopping centres, mass media and so forth. In other words, globalisation changes the connection between the places where people live and their cultural identities. Deterritorialization and hybridization therefore make it increasingly difficult to identify cultural images within local contexts. But the main takeaway from Hernàndez i Martí's work is the concept of mediatization that affects deterritorialization and is significantly important for Kuwait's fieldwork. It suggests that the media shapes and frames societal processes and discourses of communication in the country. Therefore, Valentine's Day celebrations in Kuwait could have been communicated and encouraged through mediatization. Mediatization seems to be ubiquitous in contemporary cultural encounters and is therefore inescapably decisive in de-territorializing social experiences (Tomlinson, 1999). Mediatization has particularly increased after the COVID-19 pandemic. During periods of total lockdown and self-isolation, the only means of communication was through (new) media technologies, such as newspapers, broadcast media (TV), websites and above all, social media networks.

Other notions explained by Hernàndez i Martí (2006) that contribute to cultural heritage breakup are cultural heterogeneity and transnationalism. Kastoryano (2008) also spoke about transnationalism which highlights global mobility, development of communication and flexibility of people, that their ideas may develop into more open resonances. Transnationalism discusses how language, skin colour, neighbourhood and kinship have become globalised, forming complex dominating social structures (Appadurai 1990; 1996). Accordingly, the large variety of ethnicities and nationalities entering Kuwait year after year has created a diverse circle of social backgrounds that infused and mixed with the original culture.

All the above theories suggest that when immigrants from dissimilar backgrounds meet and interact in a certain country, they begin to introduce their own home country's practices to create a sense of "multiple belonging" (Kastoryano, 2000: 6). Immigrants influence their surrounding communities with touches from their cultures and backgrounds, whether it is

religiously or linguistically. This is due to their desire to maintain good bonds with their homeland (Anderson, 1983). In Europe for example, transnational community organisations have provided services to enrich and promote individual identity of being a "Muslim in Europe", teaching language, folklore, and religious essentials (Kastoryano, 2000: 5). The opposite is also true. The theory of internalisation suggests that individuals would observe and learn the norms of their surroundings as they partake in social interactions and multinational activities, consequently developing an understanding of them, until finally accepting them as their own (Scott 1971; Vygotsky, et al. 1978). In the case of Kuwait, this suggests that immigrants who left the country to live in the United States for example would participate in, and later accept, western practices and social norms. The media has also played a significant role in connecting people with lifestyle habits and activities (Hearn, Blagojević & Harrison, 2013).

As a result of mixed populations, imaginary cultural creation, and virtual contacts (or the new media), Appadurai (1990) and García-Canclini (2001) optimistically agreed to the disappearance of borders and individual identities because of an increase in migratory flows. In explanation, the above-mentioned transnational practices develop a personal dilemma of having multiple loyalties to more than one country, or to a country other than the homeland, "which leads to a confusion between rights and identity, culture and politics", as Kastoryano (2000: 2) explains. To try to link two countries together and pass on norms from one culture to another affect fundamental values of a person's home country (Kastoryano 1996; Portes 1996; Basch, Schiller & Blanc 1997; Levitt 1998a; 1998b). Some view transnationalism as a type of democratic influence, which implies the presence of Western values in the home country (Spiro, 1997). This allows to introduce the concept of modernity. As defined by Kilani (2011), modernity is a system of values linked with Western culture which distinguishes "religious" from "civic". I acknowledge that Valentine's Day in Kuwait was distinguished completely from religious values and was allowed to be celebrated for representing a civic activity derived from Western culture. To study the relevant process that clarifies modernity and transnationalization in Kuwait, historical and social contexts of the country were considered. After the Iraqi invasion in 1990, a new form of globalised power was indicated (Mirzoeff, 2005). Overtime,

globalisation had formed challenges in understanding culture and individual habits. This encourages to understand precisely what codes are still followed in Kuwait, and which ones have contrarily taken various shifts due to the previously mentioned theories and concepts. Thus, modern traditionalism is believed to exist in Kuwait.

"Traditional" refers to small-scale societies that often enjoy indigenous and ancient cultural practices, while "modern" refers to large-scale societies whose practices are linked with the industrial mode of production, often derived from colonial nations. Modern traditionalism shows that both concepts coexist today (Kovtun, 2016). The clash between the two is significant for Kuwait's population. Samar Al Mutawa, a Kuwaiti certified professional life coach who was interviewed in 2018 on a local Kuwaiti TV program commented that societies are being evolved especially with the use of social media. People in Kuwait have searched for the practices that could conform with their community and developed them accordingly. She emphasized that the traditional culture changed overtime, but in a conservative way. People have only adopted the parts that could be socially acceptable and may "work" for them in their society, while resisting other practices. A good example is relationships and dating, which are being increasingly noticed in the Arabian Gulf countries. Similarly, I use Azim's online quote from Rashid (2017) that states, "Young Muslims find a middle ground for fostering romantic relationships between what is permissible and what is forbidden". Evidently, the intercorrelation of conventional and contemporary practices suggest modern traditionalism (Petković 2007; Ratsika 2012; O'Brien & Noy 2015). Islamic societies are hereby faced with constant societal dilemmas of whether to maintain traditions or shift to a "modern way of living"[12] (Hanan, 2012: 800). Although modernity is a complex phenomenon with a highly debatable epoch, Rosenau (1992: 5) explicitly affirmed, "Modernity entered history as a progressive force promising to liberate humankind from ignorance and irrationality".

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[12] Since there is no firm definition of a "modern way of living", it suggests, although admittedly a bold statement, the detachment from bureaucratic autocratic regulations, especially those stemming from religion, and to simply enjoy different experiences and practices by searching for a middle ground that would not displease or enrage God.

Harkness and Khaled (2014) confirmed that, despite of a rapidly developing society, endogamy remains on the rise in Qatar, another country from the Arabian Gulf, despite previous research showing that modernisation and urbanisation would normally reduce traditional forms of marriage. Statistics showed that more than 50% of marriages in Qatar were between first degree relatives (Al-Ghanim, 2010). Levels of endogamy seems to remain generally high in the Middle East as well (De Bel-Air, Safar & Destremau, 2018). Aixelà-Cabré (2000) studied marital relations in the context of Morocco and described how inbreeding among cousins is a recognised concept in almost all Arab countries. With regards to the Arabian Gulf, these customs remain present and almost unaffected in Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Despite the rise of education and global media being part of an alleged "modernisation" concept, families were found to strictly follow their traditions (Al-Ghanim, 2010).

Al-Ghanim (2010: 251) realised that the youth faced obstruction by parents and were forced into arranged marriages. Strangely, however, in the 1970s, the youth disagreed with arranged kinship marriages in Kuwait. Marriage was an easier concept; freedom of choice and the right to select a marriage partner was more popular. Furthermore, there was no certain benchmark to satisfy for suitors to propose. This raises serious questions about the exact role of modernisation in the Arabian Gulf region. Sedgwick (2009) defines a traditionalist person as one that prefers a specific established practice over something that has replaced it. Probably, when people became easily connected with one another and influenced by other cultures through technology, education and social media, parents were keener to reserve local traditions by enforcing marriage from within the family. I could also reason with the explanation of Kim-Puri (2005), that people in Kuwait are more likely to follow and obey tradition and religious codes for being a country of low power or influence in the world. Perhaps overtime, the Kuwaiti population favoured a belief or practice that should have been passed along but was lost to traditions and satisfying family rituals. Modern traditionalism therefore denotes the emancipation from conservative religion, thus the departure of traditional cultural activities, and considers differing ideologies about preconceived ideas that formed limited beliefs (Calinescu, 2006).

Clearly, several interconnected theories and concepts affect this research with regards to Kuwait's culture. The analysis suggests that a situation of coexistence and assimilation is happening in Kuwait. Due to the above discussed factors of migration, media, capital, tourism, globalisation and so forth, the ability to reach outside nations is now widely facilitated and functional (Appadurai, 2000). It is therefore curious to address Kuwait's character socially, culturally, and nationally.

## II.    THE CONTEXT OF STUDY: KUWAIT

Gift-giving practices require an examination of distinct groups and cultural identities, and a deep investigation in social phenomena. It appears necessary to be familiar with the historical, political, economic, cultural, and social structures of Kuwait prior to executing historical ethnographic fieldwork. These structures of developing countries in the Arab region are very fluctuated, thus Kuwait cannot be critically compared with other neighbouring nations. This chapter provides more insight to the research context of this thesis and therefore more awareness about Kuwait. Kuwait's noticeable developing status and situation among the Arabian Gulf countries dates as far back as the 1960s, when it gained its independence. To understand the journey of Kuwait's transformation, I discuss its cultural heritage and contemporary culture. The chapter concludes with arguments about Kuwait's social changes and examples of heresies with regards to the Islamic religion, thus introducing my research in gift-giving.

## 1. History

Like every other country, the State of Kuwait, situated just at the tip of the Persian Gulf, has had its fair share of historical conflicts and wars. Flanked and influenced by many powerful surrounding countries, namely Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran, Kuwait has drawn the attention of other nations as a prospering, oil-rich territory with a strategic location (Sadek, et al., 2021). At the beginning, Kuwait was settled by British migrants who colonised the land and were in control of oil production and extraction. The relatively small country, just under 18,000 km², was a British protectorate from 1899 until its independence in 1961. It was the most extensive mobilisation of British forces in the Middle East (Ashton, 1998). The Anglo-Kuwaiti treaty of 1899 was of great benefit and interest to British enterprises, trade and economy. In return, Great Britain was accountable for the country's security and foreign relations. It also significantly enhanced Anglo-Kuwaiti relations up until this day, which increased the internalisation of the Arabian Gulf states (Stables, 1996). Shortly after Kuwait's independence in 1963, Kuwait became the first Arabian Gulf country to establish an elected parliament. This achievement was more difficult than it seemed, as explained hereafter.

After the discovery and manufacturing of oil in 1938, Kuwait's wealth increasingly prospered between 1940 and 1980, although the industry was interrupted by World War II and afterwards by the Iran-Iraq War throughout the 1980s. The oil boom caused a rapid urban development which attracted many foreign workforces seeking employment[13] (Shah 2004; Ministry of Planning 2007: 4; Gulseven 2015: 13). Immigrants from several countries caused a substantial imbalance between Kuwaiti nationals and expatriates, which resulted in sharpened divisions during the 1980s (Barakat & Skelton, 2014). This posed a security risk. The high level of non-national workers was perceived as a threat to Kuwait's culture, societal integrity, and political system, and thus provoked political activists in the country (Pfeifer, 2004: 213). Eventually, in 1983, the government formulated a nationalistic labour policy, which introduced the concept of "Kuwaitization" in hiring processes, aiming to reduce the number of expatriate labour in the country (Barakat & Skelton 2014: 6; Gulseven 2015: 15). Similarly, it was claimed that there would be an attempt to decrease the expatriate number in Kuwait by 100,000 per year over the next decade by deportation (De Bel-Air 2013: 4; Shah & Al-Kazi 2017).

Shortly before the Iraqi invasion in 1990, Kuwait was already burdened with pre-existing structural issues and political instability. Internal security was threatened in context of the Iran-Iraq war of the 80s, resulting in a serious escalation of political violence in Kuwait. Oil installations, and the embassies of France and the United States were attacked, as well as an assassination attempt on the *Emir* (ʾamīr: ruling prince) of Kuwait in 1985 (Ulrichsen, 2012). Fortunately for some time, further political battles were halted at the occurrence of the Iraqi invasion in August 1990, forcing the royal family into exile, although the regime was already rather deposed. At that time, Kuwait formed allies with the United States to aid in liberating Kuwait with necessary skilled military (Terrill 2007; Lilli 2018). The country still expresses gratitude to this day for the support received during the Persian Gulf War and has become the most pro-American country in the Arabian Peninsula (IOR Global Services, 2018).

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[13] See Schielke (2020) who conducted ten years (2009-2019) of ethnographic research to study workers who migrated to the Arabian Gulf States in hopes of achieving a lifelong dream of career prosperity.

On a more positive note, those who resisted to leave the country and survived the Iraqis had expressed a newfound pride, in hopes that they had earned a substantive role in post-war renovation by redefining Kuwait into a more democratic, self-reliant, purposeful society (Efron 1991; Yetiv 2002: 263). However, upon Kuwait's liberation in 1991 and reconstruction, a wide array of challenges continued to exacerbate in terms of political, constitutional tensions and physical rehabilitation.

The government's failure to protect its citizens and defend its land during the war undermined its trustworthiness in the eyes of the population and harboured resentment against the regime (Katzman, 2005: 2). People who fled the country during the invasion were viewed as facing war in relative luxury (Gargan, 1991). Furthermore, after the war, an even bigger significant shift was noticed in the attractions of "cheaper" foreign workforces coming to Kuwait. They no longer only represented Arab nationals, but now, more Asian populations were entering the country (De Bel-Air 2013; Barakat & Skelton 2014; Hamaizia 2015: vi). Keeping in mind the old-time British influence on Kuwait and their sustained strong relations (Crystal, 1995: 60), the English language was certain to have spread the country and the region in general (Randall & Samimi 2010; Dashti 2017). This was an added advantage for immigrants to consider during their job search. Unfortunately, this resulted in an even more divided population in Kuwait. During the 21$^{st}$ century, an approximate percentage calculates that 70% of Kuwait's residents come from outside Kuwait (itinerate workers, expatriates, refugees, or stateless people), making Kuwaitis a minority in their own country (Shah 2004; Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner 2012: 8; De Bel-Air 2013; Human Rights Watch 2016: 361; U.S. Department of State 2019a: 30).

Furthermore, many highlighted on-going tensions in the country persisted in effect in the context of the Arab Spring, Al-Sabah's regime legitimacy (Crystal, 1995: 57) and mass protests concerning the long-standing political and socio-economic crises. Again, popular demands reflected past concerns, which prioritized a radical political reform to create a liable representation of a trusted governance system (Barakat & Skelton, 2014). However, the Kuwaiti regime drew a "red line" at any opposition to the Al-Sabah monarchy or pressures to cede their rule (Gause, 2013: 22). Authorities have also restricted freedom of expression and defined consequences for any criticism of the *Emir* or the Kuwaiti

government in speeches or in social media, irrespective of who the person is (Human Rights Watch 2016: 360; U.S. Department of State 2019a: 10). For example, in 2013, 25 people, including 3 former members of parliament were detained for "insulting the *Emir*" (Gause, 2013: 19). Other public demands involved promoting reconciliation and equity between divided groups who have been marginalized inside the country, particularly among tribes, youth and the *Bidun* population[14] (Ghabra, 2014).

Clearly, the country is still deeply rooted in a post-war reconstruction model. Although Kuwait had been immensely successful in augmenting economic revenue, it did not consider opportunities to fight contemporary challenges. Kuwait's post-war reconstruction was expected to embrace a different trajectory. It was supposed to focus on profound principles of democracy and social justice. Barakat and Skelton (2014: 2) commented that Kuwait has "missed its opportunity for a more transformational post-war vision".

Kuwait's post-war recovery from 1991 onwards is rarely studied although an incredibly significant turning point in history. The passing of just about three decades since Kuwait's liberation allows this thesis to reflect on present-day Kuwaiti culture. This culture was shaped and impacted by the decisions made following Saddam Hussein's occupation in 1990.

## 2. Ethnic Diversity

Since the diversity of Kuwait triggers many conflicts, an explanation to the demographic composition of the Kuwaiti population[15] is in order. The *Bidun*, as previously mentioned, represent three groups: 1) those who failed to apply for citizenship when the 1959 Nationality Law came into effect, 2) those who originally came from other countries and have settled in Kuwait in the 1960s, and 3) children of Kuwaiti mothers and stateless or foreign fathers (Barakat & Skelton, 2014: 3). Therefore, the *Bidun* population mainly include those who lack Kuwaiti, or any other country's citizenship, and are therefore

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[14] In Arabic, *Bidun* literally signifies "without", but in Kuwait's local terms it signifies "stateless", or without a nationality.
[15] Excluding the immigrant population that consist of numerous nationalities, like Indian, Egyptian, and Palestinian.

stateless (Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner 2012: 9; Barakat & Skelton 2014: 5). The Human Rights Watch (2011: 14) declared that "in 1985, the government changed the status of *Bidun* from legal residents without nationality to that of illegal residents". According to Amnesty International (2013), this initiated protests in 2011 and 2012 demanding human rights, specifically citizenship. Since the process of obtaining the Kuwaiti nationality is difficult, Kuwait is described as a homogenous nation with a distinguished culture among other communities (Anthony Smith 1979; Burrell 1989).

In continuation, Kuwait consists of a range of liberal, Islamist and tribal features. Native groups originated from Najd (central Saudi Arabia) called the Najrdis (Sunni Arabs), from Bahrain (Eastern Province) called the Baharnas, and from Iraq (Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner, 2012: 3-4). In addition, a large group came from Eastern Arabia that today embodies the Iranian ideological influence on Kuwait's Shia (šīʿah: a main branch of Islam) population, resulting in native Kuwaitis of Persian ethnicity (Crystal, 1995: 40). As for the two main Islamic branches, Sunnis (sunnī) constitute about 70% of the Muslims in Kuwait, including the ruling family and leaders of the nation (Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner, 2012: 4-5), while around 30% are Shia (U.S. Department of State, 2019a: 22). Differences between these two main branches of Islam send mixed signals regarding religious conduct to the population, as mentioned in a United Nations (ESCWA) report (2016: 54).

## 3. Culture and Lifestyle

Due to the cultural anthropological nature of this research, an overview regarding Kuwait's lifestyle is addressed, which although supported by some literature, was also very much observed during my ethnographic fieldwork.

Kuwait enjoys traditional, Arab-Muslim characteristics, where individual identities are marked by genealogy and family. Individuals are relationship-focused and family-oriented (Hofstede 1980; Aladwani 2013). It is common for the whole family to live together in the same house or villa, as this method encourages socialisation and therefore ensures familial and cultural traditions among future generations. Family honour is extremely important;

harmony and trust within the family and strong kinship bonds are an utmost priority (Elamin 2012; Khakhar & Rammal 2013; Winstone & Freeth 2018: 53-54, 59). Serious disputes or conflicts, like shaming the family's honour, usually have drastic consequences such as dismissal or abandonment of the certain member from the family. Therefore, rules for appropriate behaviour, like respecting the elders, and strict schedules, like curfews for children, are set by a role hierarchy depending on gender and age. To ensure obeying these rules, patterns of rank in an Arab-Muslim household are observed. Men, especially the father of the family, usually have the final word on major decisions, such as marriage, career choices, education, travel plans and so on (Almadanat, 2018). Therefore, the women, correspondingly the mothers, aim to keep control within those walls (Aixelà-Cabré 2000; Winstone & Freeth 2018: 59). Efforts on obedience and mutual respect are constantly exhausted to guarantee a good quality of life. However, rules do not apply to everyone all the time. During adulthood, rules become more lenient, yet one should still be sensitive to the hierarchy to avoid humiliation. Other strong collective values are based on hospitality, food, ceremonial occasions, and reciprocation (Winstone & Freeth, 2018: 58).

Fatalism and the Islamic religion are strongly reinforced within households, unless in very rare singular cases. Kuwait is viewed as a more religious and conservative country than other Arab states of the Persian Gulf, hence Kuwait, in the words of Winstone and Freeth (2018: 56), is a "God-fearing community". It is an alcohol-free, pork-free country, where dancing is forbidden in public, therefore clubbing is banned as well. The government also imposes censorship of the media and internet for Islamic purposes (Dalek et al. 2018: 58-63; U.S. Department of State 2019a: 13). Abortion, pornography, and prostitution is illegal and being a member of the LGBT+ community results in serious consequences, like a jail sentence[16] (Ferchichi 2011; Human Rights Watch 2016: 21, 27, 362; U.S. Department of State 2019a: 28, 30). Nevertheless, Kuwait strongly tolerates and respects other religions as well (Khashan 2016; U.S. Department of State 2019b).

Being addressed on a first name basis is not very common in Kuwait among non-kin adults who converse, unless invited to do so. It shows that respect between people is even

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[16] Kuwait's Penal Code 1960, Article 193 and Penal Code 1960, Article 198 criminalises same-sex relations or imitations of the opposite sex (Ghoshal, et al., 2018: 67).

enforced in how they are addressed. People usually go by appellations, such as Mister or Sir (Miss/Mrs.), by designations, like Professor, Doctor or Engineer, or by the name of their first son or daughter, for example *Abu* (ʾabū) Omar (Father of Omar) or *Um* (ʾumm) Omar (Mother of Omar). Even when the person does not have any children, a title is assigned for them with regards to the name of their prospective first child.

Arabs, or more specifically Kuwaitis, openly discuss topics such as money, politics, sports, and family or personal matters typically in *diwaniyas* (dīwāniyyah: predominantly men's gathering lounge) or during *chai el-thahha* (šāy al-ḍuḥā: women's morning tea) (Alabdullah, 2020). Contrarily many subjects are taboo or socially unfavourable to speak about (Gobert, 2015). To name a few, feminine issues or reproductive health (even in all-women contexts), sexual relations, abortion, rape (including in marriage), homosexuality, drugs (and other addictions), mental health concerns[17], death, and of course, questioning (or choosing) religion, are all offensive or somewhat dishonourable topics to discuss in a conservative Muslim society such as Kuwait's (Zinnid, 2013).

In terms of social interaction, Kuwait adheres to a traditional Arab communication style, which involves many indirect underlying messages featured with emotional displays, expressions, and hand gestures (IOR Global Services, 2018). As part of my fieldwork observation in Kuwait, greeting with physical contact (hugs and kisses) is not acceptable between men and women, yet to clarify, it is not against the law to do so, but is rather not "pleasing" to the public eye. Public displays of affection, on the other hand, are prohibited in Kuwait. Furthermore, type of language and communication approach were observed to sometimes differ depending on the individual's social class, which suggests the presence of social stratification in Kuwait (Crystal 1995: 39-45; Colton 2011; Alebrahim 2020).

## 4. Challenges: Kuwaiti Citizenship

The abyss and rivalry that divide Kuwait from other Arabian Gulf countries in terms of tourism, transport, infrastructure, agriculture, and other measures of diversification are

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[17] As it is associated with the traditional, outdated misconception of lack of piety or *imaan* (ʾīmān). There is generally low awareness and stigma attached to these issues within the Middle Eastern region (see Al-Krenawi 2005; Yahia 2012; Charara, et al. 2017; Zolezzi, et al. 2018; Plackett 2018; Bell 2019b; McCrae, Sharif & Norman 2019).

absent in the financial sector. These important aspects have long crippled Kuwait as a developing, rich country. Nonetheless, further challenges are also identified. Numerous organisations thoroughly pondered on Kuwait's serious issues and suggested certain recommendations (IMF 2015; TICG 2016). Firstly, actions should be taken on promoting sustainable growth and not to exclusively depend on oil revenue, but rather reform the expenditure structure (IMF, 2012). The country's reliance on the oil sector had been listed among the nation's vulnerabilities and developmental challenges since the 80s (Barakat & Skelton 2014; Hazarika 2016: 202, 204). A slight drop in oil prices could potentially disturb the economical equilibrium of the country (El-Katiri 2013; Kitous, et al. 2016). Most importantly, like every other natural resource, oil is bound to run out, so measures should be made to control overexploitation. The situation is even more critical because of the lack of growth in non-oil production sectors (Barakat & Skelton, 2014). Kuwait exports nearly nothing from its local production, except for oil and refined products, and imports almost everything else (Hassan, Al Shriaan & Al-Mutairi, 2017). For that reason, remedies to this problem were only recently put into action by the government. After acknowledging Kuwait's dependence on oil, it has been decided that at least 10% of government revenue was to be saved annually in the Fund for Future Generations (Hassan, Al Shriaan & Al-Mutairi 2017: 24; Daniel, n.d.: 36). It is unclear however whether this remedy would bear all future economic challenges of Kuwait.

Secondly, an effective plan should be executed to control Kuwait's labour imbalance in relation to foreign and national workforce. This appears even more critical considering the emergence of people displacement that was a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. To control outbreaks, Kuwait's parliament was pressured to further reduce its demographic imbalance, which was already one of the country's most difficult conundrums for over half a century[18]. Due to the pandemic, Kuwait has become less welcoming of 70% of its expatriate population[19], the majority of which work in the private sector[20] (De Bel-Air,

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[18] State of Kuwait, Central Statistical Bureau, "Population in Census Years & Growth Rates by Nationality & Sex 1965-1995," https://www.csb.gov.kw/Pages/Statistics_en?ID=6&ParentCatID=1.

[19] These measures along with xenophobic remarks made by some Kuwaiti parliament members and citizens make the country an undesired environment even for high-skilled workers who are needed in Kuwait's competitive labour market (Gulseven 2015: 15; InterNations 2018; Arab News 2020).

[20] State of Kuwait, Central Statistical Bureau, "Population estimates in Kuwait by Age, Nationality, and sex at 1/1 2019," https://www.csb.gov.kw/Pages/Statistics_en?ID=67&ParentCatID=%201.

2013). The private sector mostly constitutes of "low status" jobs that Kuwaitis are generally not inclined to take (Hamaizia 2015: vi; Malit Jr. & Naufal 2017: 2), such as domestic work or manual labour[21]. The public sector, on the other hand, satisfies Kuwaitis with better job conditions including appealing work hours, longer vacations and higher wages (Hamaizia 2015: vi; Gulseven 2015: 13-14). Kuwaiti nationals enjoy many governmental benefits, namely scholarships and compensations, which again suggests the presence of social stratification (Crystal 1995: 39-45; Colton 2011; Alebrahim 2020). That being so, the system advises the private sector not to employ Kuwaitis for being "expensive" and "high maintenance" (John, 2020). These are all serious challenges for Kuwait, as studies show that its private sector is unlikely to prosper mainly because of its rigid *kafala*[22] (kafālah) system (Al-Ghanim 2015: 6-8; Barzoukas 2018; Garcia 2018). The *kafala* system is incorporated to ensure that migrant workers cannot stay in the country after retirement, let alone apply for citizenship or permanent residence, receive pensions, or own houses (Shah & Al-Kazi 2017; Schielke 2020). On that note, even children from migrant parents are denied birth right citizenship. For many years, recommendations were made to reform the *kafala* system, but so far, the government's stance has not changed (Diop, Johnston & Le, 2015). Prominent Economist Abdelmajeed Al-Shatti (2017) believes that abolishing the *kafala* system would improve Kuwait's international image and economic efficiency. Therefore, due to lack of rights and being "unseen" by the government, migrant workers are now vulnerable to both the COVID-19 virus and to the government's attempts to dismiss their work residencies in Kuwait, which was already a long-acknowledged threat (Hamaizia, 2015: vii). The pandemic has also led to a global economic crisis, recession, and spiking unemployment rates across many other countries.

Furthermore, children of Kuwaiti mothers and foreign fathers, while being denied the Kuwaiti citizenship, are favoured for employment over "stranger expatriates", as per parliament member Safa Al Hashem, whereas the *Bidun* population, who have even longer historical and cultural ties to the country, are the least favoured (Izzak & Saleh, 2020). Relevantly, a reconceived citizenship policy, especially in the case of *Biduns*, should

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[21] State of Kuwait, Central Statistical Bureau, "Migration Statistics Bulletin 2019" (2019). Available from: https://www.csb.gov.kw/Pages/Statistics_en?ID=56&ParentCatID=1.
[22] Work or guardian residence sponsorship.

urgently be put in place (Human Rights Watch 2016: 361; U.S. Department of State 2019a: 18).

The core point here is that these economic, demographic and population issues were recognised ever since the rebuilding of the country from the Iraqi invasion (Herb, 2018). Alas, Kuwait again finds itself experiencing profound political instability and a growing socio-economic turmoil. Some remedies for this situation included undertaking large-scale regional projects, developing infrastructure, and enhancing productivity, which offer employment and boost competitiveness with neighbouring countries (Ministry of Planning 2007: 5; Gulseven 2015: 15). Conversely, however, the country has also considered cutting costs by promoting foreign direct investment, downsizing employment, abolishing subsidies, and beginning to impose tax to compensate for an oil price that became significantly lower than what it was about a decade ago (NDI 2007; Haque, Patnaik & Hashmi 2016).

Thirdly, technology embed into classrooms and lecture halls of education institutes is necessary and more urgent than ever to implement (Ministry of Planning, 2007: 10-11). Unsuccessful attempts to use and integrate such technologies had previously resulted in cultural, technical, and contextual challenges (Alfelaij, 2016). Kuwait should overcome the barrier derived from the belief "that resources should not be allocated to research and development activities", as stated by Al-Sultan (1998: 800). Kuwait has yet to improve on many other educational standards, namely standards in English literacy (Gobert, 2011). A report prepared for the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS) provides recommendations to develop a more knowledge-based economy, more precisely to transition into an international innovation ecosystem (Brinkley, Hutton, Schneider & Ulrichsen, 2012). To support this transition, investment in entrepreneurship, education and frontier-emerging technologies and research are required. This indicates a revolution in technology and a rise in globalisation in Kuwait in the coming future. Recently, Kuwait's efforts and interest in technology integration have been evident in schools, higher educational institutes and commercial centres. Clearly, integrating these sophisticated technologies is another remedy to Kuwait's economic dilemmas.

These cultural issues do not demean Kuwait's situation or capacity for improvement. It only implies that there is still room for advanced innovative processes in the nation. It is necessary to address Kuwait's long-term dilemmas to identify potential areas of growth for the country. This is extremely critical in a post-pandemic era and, certainly, a post-oil future. Belbagi (2015: 2) states, "Given the increasingly young and informed public, building and maintaining a strong national identity must be encouraged to create active citizens who produce more than they consume".

## 5. Opportunities: Women Empowerment

Despite the adversities Kuwait is experiencing, it also has interesting qualities and several accomplishments that are worth mentioning. To begin with, Kuwait is an advanced country born in wealth, being one of the world's largest oil producers (Akhileshwar 2018: 160-162; Greenley 2019: 10-11). Its massive oil reserves make it one of the richest countries per capita (Gulseven, 2015: 15). On top of that, the Kuwaiti Dinar holds the highest-valued currency in the world (Arab Times Online, 2017). After the 1990s, the State of Kuwait and international policy institutions have been exhausting efforts on producing report developments that cover many matters, such as gender equality, infrastructure, education, and employment (NDI 2007; Ministry of Planning 2007; UNDP 2010; European Parliament 2014).

Kuwait is especially leading an example with regards to women political rights (Al-Mughni, 2001). In 2005, women suffrage was passed in Kuwait, granting Kuwaiti women their right to vote and run-in parliamentary elections, the first women to do so in Arabian Gulf history (Al-Mughni 2008; Olimat 2009; Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner 2012: 29). This supports the BBC News' claim (2020c) that being a "conservative state with a Sunni Muslim-majority and a U.S. ally, Kuwait stands out from the other Gulf monarchies for having the most open political system". Additionally, as part of family codes and laws, the state supports women rights by providing funds for new mothers, single mothers, and divorced and widowed women (Aixelà-Cabré 2009; UN: ESCWA 2016: 51). In fact, Kuwait was listed as the number one country in the Arab region in gender development, scoring a "very high" index (UN: ESCWA, 2016: 72).

Nevertheless, women rights and freedom of choice are limited in Kuwait. Women are still fighting for an equal participation in political and public affairs (UN: ESCWA, 2016: 16, 20), especially since some Islamist women activists agree with their male counterparts that the female suffrage satisfies a Western agenda, aimed to break up the country's traditions and culture (Al-Mughni, 2010). Other social and cultural barriers are also sought to be abolished (Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner 2012: 29; Alzuabi 2016). These barriers include discrimination in work environments and in legalities of marriage, divorce, childbearing, and child citizenship and custody (U.S. Department of State 2019a: 21-22, 26-27). Law amendments to sexual harassment, rape and domestic violence are also being developed (UN: ESCWA 2016: 53, 55; Human Rights Watch 2016: 362; U.S. Department of State 2019a: 25).

Above all, Kuwait is recognised as a country that tolerates other ideologies, religions and concepts. Education in Kuwait has risen significantly in the 21st century[23], so much so that campuses are unable to handle the increasing number of enrolling students for lacking space and staff (Al-Ali 2010; Al-Anba 2014). This however inspired teachers and educators to find new ways to deliver their lessons, which reduced teaching and instruction expenses. Alfelaij (2016) listed different types of technologies that are integrated into Kuwait's educational systems, for example, learning management systems (LMSs), e-learning projects, and more recently, smartphone applications. Kuwait's internet use is also among the highest in the region, which further facilitates teaching and learning approaches.

This underscores the fact that, for all its challenges, Kuwait continuously aspires to improve and to stand out amongst its neighbouring countries. After spending 26 years away from the country, Alberici (2017) in an online news analysis expressed her fascination in "Kuwait's stunning architecture, thriving commercial district and women rights, press freedom, sophistication in business, politics and culture". Adding to that, Shehab (2015) stated how Kuwait pushed itself out of oblivion into rapid prominence by its concealed wealth and innovative intellect of western enterprise and technology. Nonetheless, despite

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[23] Although the Kuwaiti government emphasizes the importance of education regardless of gender (Crystal, 1995: 45), segregation between males and females is still observed in numerous schools and university lecture halls.

the obvious transition of the country, Alberici (2017) admitted that Kuwait's progressive ambitions are still wrapped in the "often suffocating cloak of Islam".

## 6. Gift-giving research in Kuwait

The identity of the Arabian Gulf is realised in conflicts of power and beliefs, and in the domain of oil wealth. It is evident that Kuwait holds a rich history with an undoubtedly nationalistic population. It is also evident that Kuwait depends on a "natural unquestioning belief in God and in the teaching of the Quran", as asserted by Winstone and Freeth (2018: 57). This chapter has given an overview that determines the influence of Islam on political and social structures in Kuwait. Attachment to native soil and family traditions is obvious. However, the growing paradox of economic globalisation triggers curiosity to whether a "modern nature of nationalism", as Aixelà-Cabré (2018) concluded for other countries, is emerging in Kuwait.

Recently, more "sophisticated" Arabs often debate certain Islamic rules, such as abstinence from alcohol, or observance of prayer and fasting, or even the validity of friendships with the opposite sex, which suggests that religion is becoming less strict than it used to be decades ago (Winstone & Freeth, 2018: 57). Additionally, I hover over the point that women in Kuwait are not that oppressed and are free to express themselves in both private and public spheres. For a long time, women rights and gender equality were considered as products of western culture and lifestyle, therefore women were taught to adhere to the principles and rules of Islamic Sharia (šarīʿah: religious law) instead (Al-Mughni, 2010). Nevertheless, over about 30 years, Kuwait has witnessed a rise of feminist activism that delineate the role of women in the Muslim society (González, 2013). With an increased access to education, employment and public participation, women were able to acquire new skills to reach their maximum potential. Many studies on contemporary Arab societies revealed the prevalence of women empowerment and leadership (Al-Suwaihel 2010; Alzuabi 2016). In Kuwait, more managerial or leadership positions are increasingly appointed to women, as well as attaining a better women representation in law enforcement and justice-related positions (UN: ESCWA, 2016: 43, 56). This consequently made them more aware of their day-to-day routines that previously mainly revolved around domestic

chores and family care. They also became more knowledgeable about matters of religion. Certain female orthodox interpretations in Islamic scriptures were restudied and questioned[24], which surprisingly contradicted contemporary gender roles and practices in Kuwait (Al-Mughni, 2010: 174). Women oppression is in fact reckoned as a sign of backwardness and humiliation in Islam. The study of the Islamic Sharia and teachings of Prophet Mohammed brought a new comprehension of current societal issues. It also appeared pivotal to reveal ambiguities in many concepts, such as modesty and veiling (Nahar, Lazim & Yusof, 2019). Apparently, they appeared to possess different meanings according to individual situations (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003: 60-61). Religious exploration therefore led many women activists to demand a fairer social role of balancing between work and family and above all, the liberty to make their own decisions and lead their own lives (Al-Mughni 2010; UN: ESCWA 2016: 16).

As a result of this freedom, my fieldwork indicates that young women in Kuwait of middle to upper class are free to date, love, celebrate occasions publicly, and express themselves with their own depictions of fashion (clothing, accessories, makeup, and hairstyle), which apparently are not eccentric to their religion, Islam. Al-Mughni (2010: 170) mentioned the same, "Women's lives changed beyond recognition. Kuwaiti women moved from being veiled and secluded to moving about freely in the streets dressed in Western clothes". Apparels like the *hijab* (veil or headscarf), or the traditional Kuwaiti *abaya* or *dishdasha*[25] (dišdāšah) although still widely common, are slowly fading in younger generations who follow the dictates of western fashion. Veiling is a cultural issue among many Arab, Islamic, male-dominated communities. In Kuwait, when women have become visible in parliament, Islamists in 2009 who previously fought women enfranchisement were now demanding they wear headscarves and were obsessed with conservatism and representations of modesty or "decent attire", as Eltahawy (2015) expressed. Because of such oppressive government regimes, some women have expressed the added responsibility and obstacle the *hijab* forms in many life aspects, leading them to remove it

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[24] This is called *ijtihad* – the reinterpretation of the sources of religion (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2009: 103). A discontinuation of practicing *ijtihad* is believed to be one of the reasons why "the whole Islamic nation is estranged from its active role", as quoted in Al-Mughni (2010: 180).

[25] An ankle-length, loose traditional garment, commonly worn by men in the Arabian Peninsula. Different terms for this attire exist in every country.

or "steer away" from their Islamic identity (Shirazi & Mishra, 2010: 52). They believe that due to an Islamophobic climate, especially after the September 11 attacks, not only does the *hijab* influence a negative educational experience for women in Arab countries, but also hinders many opportunities, such as seeking a job or a spouse[26], causing them to feel estranged (Killian 2003; Cole & Ahmadi 2003: 49, 57, 59, 61-62; Shirazi 2019). Opposingly, others wear the *hijab* to protect themselves from sexual harassment or assault, an act that lacks proper legal consequences in Arab societies like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, among others (Eltahawy, 2015). In other cases, there is always the argument that practicing being a good Muslim is far better and more rewardable than "looking Muslim", since the *hijab* is not a pillar in Islam[27] to be judged upon.

On the other hand, numerous studies have argued that the veil and other modest Islamic attire empower and liberate Muslim women in western contexts, such as the United States and European countries, because it screams "authentic" Muslim identity, which must be reinforced no matter the culture or context (Cole & Ahmadi 2003: 56, 62-63; Badr 2004; Haddad 2007; Shirazi & Mishra 2010: 50, 58). This shows how being surrounded by so many other nationalities has crystallised Islamic identity (Mooro, 2019). Naturally, laws that were created to ban certain Islamic attire prompted panic across several non-Muslim societies, fighting for their right of wearing the *hijab* and "keeping their identity" (Croucher 2008; Grillo & Shah 2012; McCrea 2013; Hass 2020). The Muslim struggle for justice and dignity in western communities is found to contradict the purpose of "free democratic" governments. Abu-Rabi (2013: 141) explains that open societies are supposed to respect religion and religious worship[28], in which failure to accept different identities and religious interpretations would otherwise be called narrowmindedness[29] (Eltahawy, 2015). However, since veiling is excessively linked to social stereotypes like oppression and female confinement (Aixelà-Cabré, 2006: 75), freedom to remove the veil is encouraged

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[26] On that note, veiling is not the only oppressive custom. An even more damaging tradition is that of "saving" a woman's hymen for her wedding night (Eltahawy, 2015).

[27] The five pillars of Islam represent the essential foundations that the religion is built upon. They include testimony (*shahada* – šahādah), prayer (*salat*), fasting (*sawm* – ṣawm), almsgiving (*zakat*) and pilgrimage (*hajj*) (Fierro 1997: 86; Dean & Khan 1997).

[28] Ramadan (2004: 181) calls this a moral responsibility. To be a "free" country or society means to also protect the freedom and dignity of others.

[29] Along the same lines, women who do not fight for equal gender rights are called anti-national, anti-progress and closed-minded extremists, as per Tétreault, Rizzo and Shultziner (2012: 24).

because "open" societies do not force a specific dress code on their people, as doing so is against human rights and freedom of expression. Therefore, individuals eschewing to show ethnic or religious identity would not be threatened. In this sense, many European states protect women's agency and "secular values" (Baldi 2018; OHCHR, n.d.: 3). Even so, there is a very fine line between what women choose freely (to wear) because of their religion and what sexist communities force them to do. My research hereby distinguishes between Islam and cultural traditions. Clearly in this sense, the law of the *hijab* in Islam is questioned.

Cole and Ahmadi (2003: 48) showed that Islamic representations are different in every culture and country, which explains why there are different styles in veiling. Acknowledging varying views on this topic implies that the *hijab* goes beyond just a headcover or representation of modesty (Bhowon & Bundhoo, 2016). Cole and Ahmadi (2003: 54) identified veiling as part of family norms (parental expectations), individual culture and peer pressure. It proves that there are traditional and perhaps even familial ideologies behind wearing the *hijab*, little it has to do with religion. Veiling is therefore perceived in many cases as a cultural adornment, not a religious practice or dress code (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003: 57).

As shown, many Muslim women in non-Muslim societies strive to stand out by wearing the veil, while in Kuwait, the opposite seems to prevail. In terms of the advent of western fashion in Kuwait, it is necessary to understand the motives behind choice changes, whether it is due to an Islamophobic climate, especially after the September 11 attacks (Koura, 2018), or a decreasing conviction of the *hijab* and Islamic attire after realising that perhaps it is only a cultural tradition that pressurises them to dress up as such. Additionally, some Islamists encourage the revival of the general role of women. An unveiled woman should be viewed as "pious but not fanatic, who appreciates modern life but is not too Westernized", as stated by Tétreault, Rizzo and Shultziner (2012: 15). This establishes a middle ground to veiling. In Kuwait's contemporary society, where freedom of expression is becoming a human right, defending individual fashion styles; what to wear or what not to wear, appears to only support personal taste not a detachment from religion, and is viewed as a form of liberation (Peeters 2006; De Vries 2018).

On that note, distinguishing between Islam and cultural traditions does not only include matters of women veiling. This brings me to my research in gifting practices. Acknowledging that the research has realised a transformation in certain gender roles, it also identifies a change in cultural practices. Just as before, inadequate awareness served as a symptom of an underdeveloped country and a barrier to progress (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2009: 100). With more religious exploration, increased educational levels and an aspiration for modernisation in Kuwait's society (Al-Mughni, 2001: 51-57), certain practices were viewed differently, like Valentine's Day. By separating activities from religion, or in other words, secularizing them (Modood, 2010), certain concepts developed new frames, which represented a reconciliation between democracy and Islam (Fierro 1997: 90; El-Nawawy & Khamis 2009: 101) and distinguished religious practice from traditional practice. Consequently, in search for new meanings, traditional practices were disrupted, and new values were introduced into Kuwait's society (Al-Mughni 2010; González 2013). Bewildering change in customs is identified, specifically in gift-giving, dating and romantic standards. More individuals do not find an issue with celebrating western occasions as it does not conflict with Islamic Sharia. This however brought on many debates as some activities overlapped certain points in religion, which promoted "modern Islamic discourses" (Al-Mughni, 2010: 170, 180). Traditional Islamist ideology, which had previously discouraged foreign practices, consequently lost some currency. Islamists were sought to explain the absence of opposition in celebrating western "non-harmful" occasions to defend democracy, progress and development for Kuwait (Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner, 2012: 24). Scholars, such as Tariq Ramadan, also attempted to "bridge the gap between secular lifestyle of the West and the traditional values of Islam", as Gaon (2017: 1) announced, in which he faced many struggles (March 2007; Fourest 2008; Carle 2011).

On the other hand, some individuals interpret the significance of Valentine's Day in Islam. Ultraconservative Muslims do not accept of the occasion because it is a "foreign intruder" from occidental contexts. For a long time, this topic was polemic in many Muslim communities. The presence of western fashion and contemporary gender roles that support the "liberation" of women in Kuwait, were also long debated. There are still women groups

that defend their orthodox interpretations of gender roles. They also claim that the *hijab* is an obligation, not an individual decision, as it distinguishes Muslims from non-Muslims (Turshen, 2002: 898).

Due to an increasingly multicultural environment in Kuwait, there is no single dominant view among Muslims concerning contemporary practices. Islam, having spread to several continents, appears to be represented and interpreted differently in every country, even in every family. Therefore, the Islam studied in Kuwait is deeply meshed with Arabian contexts, which is unique from Asian Islamic contexts for example. Since Muslim identities are not similarly articulated, governments of "free" societies should not hold on to one image of Islam, which is usually that of Saudi Arabia or Iran. Furthermore, since an identity marker is not an issue in Muslim-majority countries (Wagner, Sen, Permanadeli & Howarth, 2012: 521), this probably gives more freedom for the people in Kuwait to engage in other habits and practices, while simultaneously upholding one's identity as a believer. Maybe it is the case of "standing out" among a dominant group[30] or the "need for uniqueness" (Schumpe & Erb, 2015), as established from my fieldwork in Kuwait. Studying motives that led to this change in cultural practices can achieve an understanding of what mostly influences this era. In this sense, the future of Kuwait is bound to witness certain social and cultural developments (Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner, 2012: 24).

In addition, it can be argued that this cultural transformation does not necessarily satisfy a western agenda and is not a western phenomenon, but is simply a transformation in celebratory practices, particularly gifting practices (Arenfeldt & Golley, 2012). Above all, celebrating western-originated events or embracing western fashion is a personal preference that expresses individual taste and choice.

Ideologies change over time; taking part in western practices has become more tolerable in the Arabian Peninsula. This transformation was neither steady nor uniform, but it unevenly evolved over a long period of time (Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner, 2012: 20). Interpretation of Islam and the Quran opens a wide array of judgements and is clearly a matter of

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[30] In comparison with "fitting in" in Muslim minority countries.

discussion. Islamic education theology indicates that Islam can be tolerant in multicultural societies, especially among the youth, thus is a religion of sufferance and recognition. Similarly, some Muslim groups call themselves "reformists" or "revivalists" of true Islamic tradition, who restore proper interpretations of the religion (Hashmi & Miles, 2002: 5). Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that tolerance in Islamic constitutional systems does not signify an absolute "liberal" Islam (Abu-Rabi, 2013: 142).

Finally, I stress that the data collected for this thesis refers to a change, or shift, in celebratory occasions, particularly gift-giving patterns in relation to the Kuwaiti context in the 21st century, and not a change of nationalism, Kuwaiti culture, or individual identity. Kuwaiti culture and traditions are well-spread across the country and Muslim identity remain noticeable within the population. In fact, according to my fieldwork, religion and history were the top aspects that distinguish Kuwait among other Arab countries. Alberici (2017) strongly claimed in her online news analysis, "There's no question Kuwait is an advanced country, but it's not Western and has no aspiration to be so". While there is no ground evidence that pinpoints Kuwait's aspirations nor proves Alberici's statement, this thesis argues instead that "advanced" and "western" could be interchangeable terms in Kuwait's social, economic, and political development contexts. Certainly, with more knowledge and research, evidence that determine Kuwait's aspirations can be offered.

History has witnessed abundant fierce movements, war, and activism in Kuwait that brought about political and social change, which builds and shapes the current community. Historians such as Al Faraj (1927-1930), Al-Shamlan (1959; 2001) and more recently, Alebrahim (2020; 2021) were exhaustively involved in addressing the quintessence of historical Kuwaiti features in areas such as politics and international correspondence, and in making Arabian Gulf cultural activities publicly known. Since my research work has a historical base, the gift allows to realise social and economic changes of Kuwait, from colonisation to the discovery and out-turns of oil. I seek to deliver the idea that due to changed material conditions in Kuwait, other concepts in life have been consequently touched, including religion, gender roles, interpersonal relationships, sustainability concerns, and most importantly, the overall symbol and meaning of the gift.

# III. THE KUWAITI GIFT: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In anthropological theory, the initial definition of the gift is averred to embody a gratuitous, voluntary act, performed by presenting something of quality to another person without compensation. It is free, selflessly given, without an expectation of return (Testart, 2013: 250). Forms of gifting have been represented by iconic figures, utilized to bring nations together, such as the Statue of Liberty (Britt, 2013), or dedicated to demonstrate love, such as the Mughal Mahal, the epitome of the romantic gift (Islam 2013; Dirlam, Rogers & Weldon 2019).

This chapter calls attention to Kuwait's cultural gifting habits and the dynamics that revolve around this practice in reference to noteworthy gift theories from the literature. Gift reciprocation in Kuwait is also studied to understand relationship values and expectations. Afterwards, the influence of Kuwaiti culture on the gift and its presentation is examined, followed by an analysis of the gift in Islam. Kuwait's fieldwork also distinguished materialistic, expensive gifts from selfless, symbolic ones, which included the gift of time and surprise gifts. Finally, to reflect on recent circumstances, the gift-giving practice in Kuwait was also studied during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

## 1. Kuwait's Gift Theory: Favours, Reconciliation, Reminiscence, Preferred and Received Gifts

To offer gifts signifies that there is an intention to reassure, maintain or strengthen a certain social relationship, and may even be an opportunity to create new ones (Weiner 1992; Benson & Carter 2008). The idea of gift-giving could have originally begun since childhood, for example when children share food among their friends during recess in school. Today, the gift-giving practice requires more effort. It involves thought, evaluation, and selection of objects or services to complete an obligation towards a certain person, or to achieve a spontaneous moment (Macklin & Walker 1988; Bell 1991). Usually, gifts are selected to represent the occasion, the relationship, and the emotions involved (Pandya & Venkatesh, 1992). To put this into context, for example, a man creates a mixtape of his wedding songs for his wife (the relationship) on their anniversary (the occasion), in aims

of retrieving feelings and reminiscing their wedding ceremony (the emotions involved). His gift acts as a sensory reminder that can bring back those memories. Receiving personalised and highly ritualized gifts reinforces sentiment, connection, and commitment between people, giving meaning to their relationship, and therefore improving the overall experience of the gift (Ruth, Otnes & Brunel, 1999).

This section introduces the gift in Kuwait by analysing the classics of gift anthropology. Dominant theories and research conducted by experts in the field are discussed which determine the gift's meaning in different societies. This information consequently distinguishes the role of the gift in Kuwait and acknowledges its prominent features, after having mixed with its Arab culture and social relations. Gift exchange triggers curiosity as Kuwait is influenced by surrounding nations and is constantly bombarded with foreign production. Gift-giving in Kuwait is a precise yet tricky concept because it is portrayed differently according to the situation, such as when asking for a favour, making peace with someone, declaring a truce, or reminiscing a memory. The gift in Kuwait was investigated in terms of monetary value, advertisement that promotes it, and all distinctive emotions that emerge during the selection, purchase and exchange process. A curious result from the fieldwork discusses the mismatch between preferred gifts and received gifts. Furthermore, gift ideas and decisions do not only differ depending on the occasion or the receiving person, but also depends on age, gender and marital status. Gifts may also signify something completely different when compared to a certain era, or another demographic region, such us the West. I call attention to these matters that play an important role in the gift-giving practice and in Kuwait's contemporary society.

Marcel Mauss, a French ethnologist, underwent a full cultural tribal experience in the Pacific Northwest Coast of Canada and the United States. He studied the anthropological side of gift rituals and practices, specifically the *kula* (or the *kularing*) and the *potlatch*. These traditional practices, or feasts, were firmly linked with religious ideas of the autochthonous population, something that structured their lifestyle, and that is why religion is a factor that highlights the gift practice in Kuwait. He contemplated other factors that fluctuated with the gift, such as politics, economics, competition, rivalry, and sacrifice. He reiterated that there is always a reason, an intention and an emotion behind giving gifts.

Mauss had thereafter taken from Durkheim's ideas and developed extended innovations which agreed with Durkheim, that a gift is derived from society demands, memory and political pressure (Mauss, 1925).

*Potlatch*, a common ceremonial feast practiced to this day, is considered a gift-giving custom among neighbouring tribes and friends. It encourages the distribution and exchange of foodstuffs and property in return of an acknowledged social status. After the *potlatch* became illegal in British Columbia in 1884, anthropologist Franz Boas (1888: 636) described the ban as a failure because it was a good practice with many promising and beneficial consequences to it. It was viewed in line with paying off debt. In this sense, the practice contributed to positivism, sociology, history, and ethnology. Mauss similarly described his study of the gift as a positivist research, as confirmed earlier by Franz Boas. Mauss eventually developed a theoretical foundation on reciprocity in his well-known publication, *The Gift* (1925) with aims to understand the implications that his assessment could have for other cultures. On the other hand, the famous study carried out by Mauss about the *kula* system specifically analysed the significance of a pure, selfless gift. Blood and organ donations also fall under pure, selfless gifts (Bell, 2019a). Andreoni (1990) showed that while donors cannot ask for an organ in return for such spiritual donations, reciprocation may occur in other forms such as self-satisfaction; the feeling of doing good when helping others, just like when giving charity (Anik, Aknin, Norton & Dunn 2009; Surana & Lomas 2014). Mauss therefore emphasized reciprocation, purity of motives and personal sentiment within gift exchanges[31].

Prior to Mauss, between 1914 and 1922, Bronislaw Malinowski's study on the *kula* developed a different stream considering exchange (Murdock, 1943). These ceremonial exchanges later developed further models to Malinowski's reasoning, including the Sahlins model (1972) and the Testart model (2013). While the Sahlins model focuses on types of reciprocation (discussed in the following section), the Testart model proposes the distinction between a gift and a trade (commodity exchange). Opposing Mauss, this distinction does not depend on reciprocation because selfish giving also exists. For

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[31] Many other scholars later studied the gift with immense depth and analysis, Mauss' ideas being the main reference and highlight (Ki 2006: 729-732; Mallard 2019; Yan 2020).

instance, the *baksheesh* (baqšīš), or tipping someone, is performed to show humbleness, but usually to receive more in return, for example to sustain a good service or to become a valuable client. The distinction hereby between a gift and a trade is that the gift giver cannot truly guarantee reciprocation, while the individual who trades, always has the privilege to request compensation. This therefore concludes that the *kula* is not a gift-giving practice but an act of trade since one can demand compensation. Malinowski validated the Testart's model in the *kula* exchange which clearly showed the irregular gift-giving as a key political procedure. This comparatively was not the case with the *potlatch*, which displayed the offering and sharing of gifts and counter gifts among groups. Consequently, Alain Testart re-examined Mauss' theories, particularly that which states the "obligation to reciprocate" (Testart, 1998: 97-110). He criticizes Mauss for not indicating whether the idea of obligation is juridical or simply goodwill, thus darkening the nature and significance of gift reciprocation in history and in society. Conclusively, gift-giving, as Malinowski contended, was not a philanthropic gesture, which is the believed concept among the general public, but is a practice politically encouraged for individual benefit. These propositions are still being broadly debated to date.

In Kuwait, a notion that involves reciprocation is winning a person with a gift. Based on my fieldwork, winning a person with a gift obtained a unanimous agreement for its validity in Kuwait. Seba[32] explained that when a person offers someone a tangible item or an intangible service, it makes them stand out from the rest, consequently "winning" that individual. To win an individual usually reflects the motive of personal advantage, self-satisfaction, and improved social status. The gift therefore assists people to reach a certain end and is a friendly strategy that facilitates asking for a favour in Kuwait. Overall, Neilson (1999) claimed that while gift-exchange relationships received sufficient attention in the literature, favour-exchange relationships have not. Doing a favour for someone is largely widespread in the Arab region, regardless of any payment or gift, and is often called *Wasta*[33] (wāsiṭah) or, humorously, Vitamin "W" (Tlaiss & Kauser 2011; Feghali 2014).

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[32] Seba is a 23-year-old single Jordanian female, born and raised in Kuwait.
[33] The root of the word *Wasta* stems from the Arabic word *Waseet* (wasīṭ), meaning middleman, intermediary or medium, referring to personal social connections or important people in a certain field (Feghali 2014; Ramady 2016).

*Wasta*, a culturally based system of social networking, is very prevalent in Arab societies and highly utilized in Kuwait (Ramady, 2016). Unfortunately, this social practice has received little attention in academic literature. The practice involves contacting influential people who could help in obtaining or accessing something, as a favour doing. While usually referring to social networks or connections, the term *Wasta* in Kuwait is now popularly used to refer to an important physical figure. These figures mostly act on behalf of and benefit family, kin, and members of close social circles, like neighbours. A *Wasta* also benefits members who share similar identifying characteristics, for example religion or ethnicity (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011). In other words, *Wasta* can be a synonym for nepotism, favouritism, or cronyism[34] (Hutchings & Weir 2006; Berger, Herstein, McCarthy & Puffer 2019). Based on this, favours are usually performed when there is a relationship of trust, which is also a component of gift exchange (Neilson, 1999).

The *Wasta* practice, although arguably a large factor of corruption[35] (Tlaiss & Kauser 2011: 473; Ramady 2016), plays a central role in Arab life. It has gradually become a main unit and integral part of Arab society. Arab collectivist societies foster around traditional values which involve helping one another. In many opinions, *Wasta* has less to do with strong positions or reaching a certain end, and more to do with relationship building and unification (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011: 477). Additionally, in current-day contemporary culture, norms are being developed to justify this practice. *Wasta* is relatively viewed as a positive phenomenon demonstrating alliance and empathy with one another. Accordingly, being someone's *Wasta* is a symbol of solidarity and loyalty, since group interests are supposed to override the interests of the individual (Tlaiss & Kauser 2011; Berger, Herstein, McCarthy & Puffer 2019).

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[34] The exercise of power through social, political, and business networks to satisfy familial and kinship goals by befriending influential people, or in many cases, knowing someone who knows someone (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011).
[35] From a Western perspective, the use of influential connections is considered an abuse of power to meet personal objectives (Hutchings & Weir 2006; Ramady 2016). Since *Wasta* is not available to everyone, less fortunate individuals struggle through the normal bureaucratic system and are unlikely to move forward to fulfil private goals. *Wasta* is also often associated with bribery because it causes inequality, unfairness, and inefficiency by giving undue advantages to a person who may not necessarily deserve them (Tlaiss & Kauser 2011; Ramady 2016; Berger, Herstein, McCarthy & Puffer 2019). Studies show that *Wasta* leads to poor performance in many Arab firms and hinders the development of Middle Eastern nations.

There is evidence that the *Wasta* practice has existed for centuries, but it cannot be pinpointed when exactly it first came into general use (Barnett, Yandle & Naufal, 2013). It is certain, however, that its meaning and goal have evolved over time. Its main purpose was to diffuse tribal conflict. Throughout the years, the practice transformed from conflict resolution to economic benefit acquisition (Barnett, Yandle & Naufal 2013; Feghali 2014). Nowadays, it represents a social norm in Arab societies, a way of survival by intercession (Hutchings & Weir, 2006)[36].

Doing a favour for someone, or being their *Wasta* to achieve something, usually does not involve the exchange of money. It is a free service merely used to "speed things up" in favour of another person (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011: 473). This usually means that hierarchy and rules would be dismissed or skipped just for this certain individual. Additionally, *Wasta* mimics a lifehack to ease civic processes or "jump the queue" of many services. In Kuwait, using a central character or a protagonist to get things done is broadly viewed as a way to receive assistance, especially in acquiring a public service like obtaining employment, gaining admission to a university (or graduating university), securing promotion, or landing a business deal (Tlaiss & Kauser 2011: 470; Barnett, Yandle & Naufal 2013; Feghali 2014; Ramady 2016; Al-Twal & Aladwan 2020). This sometimes involves going around a common law or practice, even in legal processes. In Kuwait, services that require legal assistance include visa issuance, driving licence issuance, residency renewals, removal of fines and so on. In other cases, *Wasta* is also used in healthcare systems; knowing someone who is eligible to write medical prescriptions or medical certificates, secure a sooner medical appointment and the like. As shown, the use of *Wasta* by men and women occurs in Kuwait for many life situations, regardless of their age.

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[36] *Wasta*-like practices are also present in many other non-Arab societies (Barnett, Yandle & Naufal, 2013).

Although doing favours or being someone's *Wasta* normally does not involve the exchange of money[37] (Feghali, 2014), Seba explains that it is sometimes complimenting to approach the person with a gift, especially when there is no close relationship with them. A gift can be helpful to start a conversation with this influential person and "win them over". As shown in the above examples, gifts are used for an ulterior motive that is not just personal, but career related. In return, people accept doing the favour because they have been approached with a gift. Sometimes the favour is done before the offering of the gift. In this case, the gift is given afterwards as a gesture of indebtedness or appreciation (Feghali 2014; Hoyer, MacInnis, Pieters, Chan, & Northey 2018). The "thank you" gift is usually symbolic but elicits the emotion of gratitude and respect from the giving side (Berger, Herstein, McCarthy & Puffer, 2019). This represents reciprocation differences in various cultural contexts.

Accepting to do a favour depends on the approach (linguistic factors: politeness and sentiment), the identity of the person (social factors: status and similarity) and most critically, the size and type of favour (urgency and narrative, context of story) (Althoff, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil & Jurafsky, 2014). This indicates that the *Wasta* would not accept to do every favour asked of them. A study showed that socially inefficient favours are easier and more likely to be done than costly favours (Neilson, 1999), especially since effort put into doing a costly favour could be higher than the returns. Therefore, since costly favours or services cannot be balanced with a gift, there must be a stronger reason to why the *Wasta* will accept doing it; a person must *earn* them with an established, strong, respectful relationship with the *Wasta*. This distinguishes the difference between doing favours and gift-giving; the individual is free to decide whether to do the favour or not.

After analysing the act of doing favours and the role of gifts in the *Wasta* process, I argue that favours could be bought in Kuwait. The intended notion is presented as such, "I have

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[37] While giving cash in exchange of one's services is usually condemned or even taboo (considered as an insult), giving gifts may constitute bribery in Kuwait (Hutchings & Weir 2006; Moldovan & Van de Walle 2013). In many cases, gifting and bribery are hardly distinguishable as both involve a similar effect and social behaviour, although giving gifts appears to be a friendlier tactic than a bribe. Ong (2011) calls them "fishy gifts" because they hold guilt and shame. Sometimes, "gifts are exploited blatantly to cover up a less benevolent behaviour", as discussed by Verhezen (2005: 13). To avoid misunderstandings and corruption, some companies or schools in Kuwait underline a no-gift policy in their statements.

bought a gift for you, so you could help me with something else". It suggests that the favour is not being done, but being bought using the gift, and so, the bigger the favour, the bigger the gift and vice versa. This indicates that favours always expect reciprocation; one cannot be left with nothing (Neilson, 1999). Seba realises that not only the Kuwaiti gift is materialistic and selfish, but also suggests that even people may have a materialistic objective. Therefore, accepting to do a favour also depends on what will be received in return, even when the favour-doer, or the *Wasta*, acknowledges that there is no immediate benefit (Althoff, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil & Jurafsky, 2014). In this sense, the favour depicts a (temporary) debt which is supposed to be repaid in the future (Feghali, 2014). Repaying the favour would show that personal bonds are valuable. This establishes that reciprocity[38] is what distinguishes the *Wasta* practice from a bribe (Tlaiss & Kauser 2011; Ramady 2016). It keeps people in long-term commitments through gift exchanges bounded by tradition and culture. Even in non-Arab countries, such as India, it is fundamental to promote exchange by reciprocating gifts, assisting in time of need by doing favours and showing hospitality (Berger, Herstein, McCarthy & Puffer, 2019). Similarly, Seba clarified that the gift plays a major role in social connections and networks within Arab societies. Nevertheless, many favours are performed without receiving anything in return (Neilson 1999; Althoff, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil & Jurafsky 2014). Therefore, I reckon that performing a favour can have similar meanings to giving a gift because of ambiguities in reciprocation (Verhezen, 2005).

Some moral values, however, could be touched during a *Wasta* practice. It is somewhat humiliating for the receiver to be deceived by the gift, especially to reach a different end other than strengthening interpersonal bonds. Therefore, acknowledging the misuse of the gift, the requested favour might be rejected, which would infuriate the gift giver. Neilson's study (1999) revealed that people are extremely unforgiving. If a person ever fails to perform something that was asked of them as a favour, the relationship could be terminated forever. Accordingly, rejecting a gift may signify rejecting a relationship. Graycar and Jancsics (2016) further studied how relationships are compromised due to the ambiguity of the gift practice. On the other hand, gift takers might only accept the gift out of fear of

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[38] Owing or being owed favours.

disappointing the giver, but with no guarantees that the favour will be successfully executed. Another apparent reason for accepting the gift was mentioned by Tahani[39], "It [the gift] is not a measure, people cannot be valued with gifts". Tahani's comment suggests that a gift cannot balance a person's value or position, but it would still be accepted as a small compensation to their efforts. Some favours, especially expensive or troublesome ones, cannot be reciprocated with a gift. This again places social relationships in top position in Arab societies; when there is a firm, recognised bond with a person, a gift is no longer necessary.

Aside from the *Wasta* practice and giving gifts in exchange of a favour, a completely different viewpoint was realised with regards to "winning a person" with gifts. It was found effective when trying to earn someone's support or affection, romantically (Chen, Shang, Lin & Chen, 2015). Gifts are categorised as a smart dating strategy in Kuwait to win over someone who seems reluctant; to try to "win" their interest or care. Lee (2013: 634) described giving gifts as "taking advantage" of someone to induce their love. Nevertheless, this is not strictly a guaranteed outcome. Dunn, Huntsinger, Lun and Sinclair (2008: 477) revealed that certain gifts between recently acquainted individuals had dissimilar reactions between the genders. Their study showed that bad gifts can influence relationship perceptions. An undesirable gift would give a negative signal to a man that the relationship is strictly incomparable, that there is no mutual chemistry, while women were relatively unaffected by the quality of the gift and felt rather elated. Apparently, for women, an undesirable gift would not cause negative consequences to any future relationship. Women would normally overlook the beginning stages of a relationship, which means they will become more judging of gift choices after an established bond is formed. Therefore, it seems that while gifts can certainly bring people closer together and create better relationships, it still does not guarantee a mutual attraction between couples unless sharing similar interests and having a strong emotional connection. Therefore, it would take much more than a gift to develop a desired relationship in Kuwait.

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[39] Tahani is a 24-year-old married Palestinian female, moved to Kuwait by marriage in 2016.

According to the above information and the theories put forward by Testart (2013) and Mauss (1925), the *Wasta* practice in Kuwait, or doing favours, can be acknowledged to depict a trade because something will be done in return, whether tangible or intangible. Also, I agree with Mauss when he realised that gifts have an underlying intention to be (almost) always reciprocated. On the other hand, offering presents to achieve a romantic relationship are certainly gifts because one cannot guarantee reciprocation, or a mutual feeling.

Other than self-satisfaction and an acknowledged social status, Mauss (1925) also identified another purpose for gift exchange, to bring societies together. He emphasized that a gift helps resolve arguments or misunderstandings and could make people and nations of dissimilar characteristics become one. It is a vital element that develops peace and alliances as an alternative to war. In fact, Mauss concluded that gifts are considered the "glue of society" (Whitaker, 2017: 5). Thomas (1991; 1994) also stated that social exchange facilitated through gifts could assuage threats of violence and lend support to different parties. Clearly, gifts can influence decisions. This point was confirmed in Kuwait. Giving gifts is a wonderful way to solve problems, as Joanna[40] affirmed, "I am sure that gifts can help resolve a conflict, especially in a political setting". Due to the political instability that Kuwait has been experiencing, gifts, especially monetary ones as Joanna commented, could be advantageous when presented to high state officials of opposing political parties. Interestingly, gifts can also unite members under the same party. Trying to sort out differences between people that have no personal or close relationship, monetary gifts are viewed more beneficial and persuasive than arguing or discussing the problem.

While Joanna thought of gifts that solve political issues, Qassem[41] discussed a different situation that can also be solved with gifts. He spoke about Kuwait's many tribal groups, and how some can exaggerate their gifts, "People may buy food or plan a big party for someone just to clear things up. Some people go as far as buying a car for others". In Kuwait's culture, this seems normal. Even the most expensive gifts are perceived as a token

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[40] Joanna is a 28-year-old married Lebanese female, raised in Kuwait, currently lives in the United States.
[41] Qassem is a 26-year-old single Syrian male, working in Kuwait.

of appreciation and signal the intention of establishing common ground between members. More importantly, Qassem's comment eradicates Cheal's notion of expensive gifts being viewed as charity. Cheal (1988) determines a base for balancing a return gift to fulfil a "symmetrical" reciprocation. To achieve this, the gift should not change the receiver's moral status or in other words, making them feel better or worse about themselves. The gift should also be sensitive to the receiver's financial status; therefore, it should not be an expensive one, otherwise it will be considered as charity or feeling pity. Cheal's theory of a balanced reciprocation does not appear to be common in Kuwait. It is normal to show generosity and offer big gifts to one another, but this is not very common in other Middle Eastern societies.

Amina[42] relates this difference to the wealth of a country, "Not all countries earn the same amount of money, so consequently they don't behave the same". Naturally, something to keep in mind is individual income. Working in Kuwait comes with many perks, namely a high monthly salary. Adam[43] claimed that people who have not even obtained a university degree are able to work and enjoy a good salary in Kuwait, therefore the value of money is not very appreciated when buying expensive gifts. This means that in other lower income countries of the Middle East, like Egypt or Lebanon for example, gifts are expected to be simpler or cheaper. Furthermore, Bader[44] said that gifts are simpler in other countries due to certain values and buying ability or power, not to mention peoples' habits, accessible gift options and lifestyles, which are also affected by peer pressure. All these factors influence the gift. Therefore, because of the relatively high income in Kuwait, people can afford more things and buying power is correspondingly high.

After acknowledging that gifts can help resolve conflicts that arise within political parties and tribal groups, Seba came up with another situation that can be solved with gifts in Kuwait. As a very common concept, gifts can be used to resolve conflicts within families and in workplace relations. An example she gave was the typical scenario of a dispute between husband and wife, where normally settling things would need much more than a

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[42] Amina is a 72-year-old widowed Kuwaiti female.
[43] Adam is a 31-year-old single Syrian male, born and raised in Kuwait.
[44] Bader is a 47-year-old married Kuwaiti male.

discussion. According to Seba, flowers or jewellery could more likely lower the frustration between the couple. She said, "a gift would soften the situation" and make it easier to reach a solution. Based on this information, the role of the gift is different in two interpersonal contexts. As earlier established, in Kuwait it is less likely that the gift would attract a potential romantic partner but can certainly help romantic couples come back together after a fight. As for workplace matters, Seba mentioned that businesses would sometimes present their competitors with symbolic gifts when needing to close a business deal for example. She finally added that offering gifts to settle problems in general frequently occurs in Middle Eastern Arab countries. It appears that giving gifts is an iconic gesture and not only a mere practice among Arabs.

The most common motive for reciprocating gifts found within the literature was to link tangible things to a specific time or to an important event (Goodwin, Smith & Spiggle 1990; Belk & Coon 1993; Vasheghani-Farahani, Esfandiar & Tajzadeh-Namin 2014). The items that people exchange within close social relationships hold a strong mnemonic value and therefore a sense of responsibility and care is developed towards them. Possessions with strong mnemonic value signifies that they aid the memory, or they are designed to recall a moment in life, which is a grand quality for a gift (McCracken, 1988a). On a further note, Collins-Kreiner and Zins (2011) mentioned that photographs taken on the occasion would be even more significant in retaining memories than gift-giving.

Gifts can help recall memories of childhood or of hardships for example, which stimulates many distinct emotions between close individuals, like family relatives or best friends. The gift is very personal when it signifies something intimate. Consequently, attention is withdrawn from the gift and is focused on the giver and the relationship. From Kuwait's fieldwork, creating memories was rarely mentioned as a motive to give gifts. Only two older male adults[45] expressed that gifts can deliver messages that hint at people's histories. Karam[46] said that giving gifts helps him "remember the person or people who are most dear and close" to him. In this respect, he does not buy gifts for an occasion, but to stimulate thought about others on a more personal level. The gift therefore becomes more thoughtful

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[45] Older adult informants are individuals between 51-60 years of age.
[46] Karam is a 56-year-old married Jordanian male, living in Kuwait since the 90s.

and heartfelt. Issa[47] more specifically stated that "creating an intimate celebration becomes a reminder or a special memory together". Sharing beautiful memories by celebrating occasions was a notion previously mentioned by McCracken (1988a) and Kamptner (1989). Both Issa and Karam are married men who have children and grandchildren. They showed that giving gifts is a special experience that contributes to memory. This interprets the sentimental value of gifts; the more influential they are, the better they are remembered. Based on their age group, it appears that Issa and Karam are passing through life-changing transitions as retirement age approaches. They have also recently become grandparents; or their children have travelled, moved out, or got married. As fewer financial dependents rely on them, older adults become more attached to family relationships, "in contrast to the common belief that older people are isolated from family members and friends", as stated by Walker, et al. (2001: 1). Accordingly, as people age, they exhibit greater capacity to love and work, participate more in social relations, and become more engaged with gift-giving. Gift-giving is therefore a way to boost these social relations where the goal is not to exchange items, but to ensure that shared thoughts and feelings are harmonised with those of others. Above all, older adults exchange gifts to make sure they are remembered, despite their quickly changing circumstances.

After looking into key situations for offering gifts in Kuwait, I have also investigated the type of gift often circulated, which featured several characteristics. According to my fieldwork, the gift is usually materialistic, useful to the receiver and is given to impress or to show-off[48]. This represents the motive of personal advantage. The gift should also be pretty and of good quality. These characteristics describe common received gifts in contemporary Kuwait. It suggests that if the gift were not flattering, it would be exchanged, thrown away or remain unused. An unflattering gift would also be barely mentioned to other people or remembered by the receiver in the future.

Mauss (1925) had expressed that commodities in markets move in a circulation mode among individuals, referring to how items are always reciprocated and exchanged one way or another, mimicking a wheel or a needle and thread. This produces an everlasting cycle,

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[47] Issa is a 60-year-old married Pakistani male, living in Kuwait since the 80s.
[48] Refer to section: Gifts shaped by the Kuwaiti culture.

hinting at continuity and redistribution. Polanyi (1957) also agreed to this notion as a basic anthropological principle. Mauss added that since exchanging gifts produces an everlasting cycle, this keeps people in permanent commitments. Therefore, reciprocity is a commitment that could stay in effect as long as the relationship is ongoing, as Carrier (2012b) stated. Based on this information, usual received items in Kuwait probably do not represent a gift, but rather a trade, as the Testart model (2013) explains. Expensive items insinuate that a compensation, or reciprocation, is required sometime in the future, which again explains why they are not considered as charity. Presenting expensive gifts can be a strategy to sustain the gift-giving cycle with the receiver and remain in a permanent commitment. With regards to many theories discussed in the literature, the occurrence of a "selfish" gifting practice is determined in Kuwait, leading to a continually escalating gift-giving.

In contrast, there was also a discussion about preferred gifts. Fieldwork findings showed that preferred gifts resembled symbolic, affordable items, although the norm was to receive expensive, usually branded, items. Instead of essentialising expensive gifts, Danah[49] for example, appreciates books, clothes and theatre or concert tickets. These are all examples of tasteful, consumed items that convey that the thought behind the gift is more important than its cost. As shown, some individuals pay less attention to the gift's financial value and more on its thoughtfulness and symbolic meaning. Offering simple, symbolic items also does not obligate people to remain in constant gift exchange relationships and would not hint that something is desired in return. This can be a way to stand out from Kuwait's materialistic society; to be the exception to the norm. It again demonstrates the need for uniqueness as a dominant concept in Kuwait (Schumpe & Erb, 2015). Evidently, there is a clash between desired gifts and received gifts. The image of Kuwait's materialistic culture is subverted by what people prefer to receive. It matters to understand this concept to develop gift implications for Kuwait in the future. It suggests that there is a disagreement to the material culture that Kuwait is proceeding towards through gifting.

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[49] Danah is a 67-year-old widowed Kuwaiti female.

This section analysed four main reasons for giving gifts in Kuwait: for an occasion, apology, love, and personal advantage, exactly as Tahani stated. Her comment supports four distinct gift dimensions: festive gifts, reconciliation gifts, and love gifts, as defined by Mauss (1925), and self-beneficial gifts, as defined by Malinowski (1926).

## 2. The Art of Reciprocation: Gift Hunting

A lot of debate has occurred about returning a gift, or in better words, reciprocation, which indicates a relationship of trust between the giver and receiver. The reciprocated gift is determined based on generosity, kinship distance and sociability (Sahlins, 1972). This concept, to constantly give back, may develop varying sensations between the parties involved, including motivation, competition, or frustration (Carrier, 2012b). Mathews (2017: 90) admitted that the gift possessed a dominant role in ancient social customs and then highlighted its importance in "modern economic exchanges". These exchanges reveal that the ideology of the gift is not only an embedded practice among social relations or collective events but is also a factor that determines relationship consequences (Gino & Flynn, 2011). There are also other forms of the gift such as "tipping, self-gifting and volunteering, where relationship development and reciprocation are largely irrelevant", as mentioned by Davies, Whelan, Foley and Walsh (2010: 413).

Understanding Kuwait's market and gift options helped establish the difficulty of reciprocation in Kuwait. My ethnographic findings on reciprocation encourage me to highlight the importance of relationships in Arab societies. This section distinguishes relationships between giver and receiver in gifting occasions. Studying social relationships in Kuwait showed that the gift is not constant but depends on other underlying factors.

Sometimes reciprocation occurs carrying different intentions. There are individuals who return the gift because they are obligated or expected to do so. These events represent situational motives (Saad & Gill 2003; Othman, Ong & Teng 2005; Mayet & Pine 2010). Some gifts are reciprocated on the spot in certain occasions like Valentine's Day, anniversaries, or Christmas. Other gift reciprocations occur later in time, like on birthdays or weddings. Sahlins (1972: 191-210) further describes the types of reciprocation. There is

general, balanced, and negative reciprocation. Usually, there is ambiguity in the time necessary to reciprocate (Bourdieu, 1977). It is also unclear whether to give back cost-similar items. Cheal (1988: 13) proposes rules to balance the gift received or to fulfil "symmetrical reciprocation". To begin with, there must not be any benefit or advantage to the receiver's well-being. The giver and the receiver should have the same position they had before the exchange. Moreover, the gift reciprocated must be something that the receiver may have been able to provide for themselves, because if the gift were far more expensive than the receiver is able to afford, it may be perceived as a charity gift. However, I argue in this case, that it is also important to consider the giver's financial capacity. If the receiver enjoys a high financial status and can provide any item for themselves, it does not mean that the giver should match the receiver's financial capability. On the other hand, in respect to charity gifts, I argue that when a person is financially incapable of providing themselves with a desperately needed (expensive) item, a gift occasion would be a good chance to offer this person with that certain item. Therefore, it would not be a charity gift, but a very considerate gesture. I believe that is the reason why in Kuwait a balanced reciprocity with gifts rarely occurs. It is very normal to receive a pricey item in return for an economical gift because Arabs prioritise relationships rather than dispute over who has bought the higher priced gift. Kuwait's fieldwork findings therefore disregard Cheal's (1988) theory of a balanced or symmetrical reciprocation. Finally, there is the inability to reciprocate (negative reciprocation), which does not necessarily mean that the giver will cease giving.

One of France's most prominent sociologists and anthropologists whose studies contributed extensively to several academic fields and popular culture is Pierre Bourdieu. Pierre Bourdieu's theories included Marxism and Habitus, discussing that motives of individuals should be studied, not the value of objects, therefore symbolic goods supposedly should ensure the coherence and continuity of reciprocation (Bourdieu, 1969). His work involved the gift in a more conventional, sociological manner among various aspects of French education and culture. This perseverance stood out when the gift drew little attention among sociologists, and when it was barely predictable that it would affect humanities and the sociologies all throughout the 20th century. Bourdieu leans towards an

economistic, materialistic, and structuralist direction (Sewell 1992; Evens 1999; Jenkins 2002; Smith 2004). He also argues about the ambiguity of the time frame necessary to return a gift and denied the generous characteristic of it (Bourdieu 1977: 4-9; Schrift 1997). That is because self-interest appears to be greatly visible and inevitable, becoming the highlight in market economies, finally labelling the gift's generosity as a "conspicuous distribution" (Bourdieu, 1977: 192). Bourdieu therefore expressed disagreement with many of Mauss' stances. In his viewpoint the gift is basically an egoistic circulation, and an admiration of unnecessary, unreciprocated generosity. He emphasized the presence of taboos, secrets, and duplicities within gift interactions. When specifically mentioning the case of the *potlatch*, he described it as a process of social experimentation, rejecting the framework of the French pragmatic sociology promoted by Mauss, that the gift is essential to social life. He particularly did not agree on Mauss' subjectivist stance on the gift (Bourdieu 2004; Caillé 2005). He rejected any character of the Maussian gift and ultimately, free and pure gifts. On the contrary, he explains how the gift is a "competitive system of honour" (Silber, 2009: 177) and then elaborates his disagreement to giving sheer materialistic and distrustful items. Bourdieu spoke about a constant divergence to studies and theories, so even being in opposition to Mauss, Durkheim or even Marx, it is difficult to prevent inner contradictions (Alexander 1982; Potter 2000). In other words, nobody is ever fully consistent. Therefore, the main characteristic of gift exchange according to Bourdieu features, "subjective freedom and objective constraint rules and improvisation, game and strategy" (Silber, 2009: 177). This concludes his opposition with Marcel Mauss. Nevertheless, Bourdieu explicitly admitted that Mauss, among others like Claude Lévi-Strauss (1987) who also developed the idea of reciprocity into a basic notion of social trade (Beckert & Zafirovski, 2005: 304), were the ones to shape the gift into a key field of anthropological research and theory (Silber, 2009: 174).

In Kuwait, gift reciprocation is a difficult task for many individuals below 60. My fieldwork revealed that younger buyers, precisely females, have different purchasing intentions, tastes and preferences compared to older ones. This suggests that gifting is essential for young women. They tend to put greater efforts into making the right decision, pay more attention to specific details and worry more than men about the adequacy of the

gift (Hoyer, et al., 2018). An emphasis was made on the type and strength of the relationship, which impacts the final gift choice. Relationships influence several gift aspects: its budget, time spent to choose and buy it, and its details and thoughtfulness. It would be different if it were for someone who is well known by the giver, like a sibling or a best friend, compared to someone of a more formal or shallow relationship, like a work colleague. Therefore, the gifting experience and type of gift varies entirely based on who it is for. Interestingly, Chanial (2014) discussed that if a person wants to change their relationship with the receiver, to improve or worsen it, they must consider changing the type of gift by making it less or more personal. The gift therefore could change relationships based on how thoughtful it is (Chanial 2012; 2014).

Making the right gift choice is essential to meet expectations and ensure pleasing the receiver. In Kuwait, details in gifts are largely sought. When the focus is on sentimental value, it means personalising the gift according to the receiver's personality[50]. Gift-giving is therefore an entrepreneurial activity. It is about discovering someone's latent preferences rather than satisfying their already known preferences. Knowledge of the receiver's interests or taste would help indicate their delicate desires, for example, their favourite colour, favourite flavours, food or clothing allergies, horoscope and so on. A close relationship with the receiver would therefore avoid questioning these specific matters. Serene[51] clarified, "I always try to gift personal things that convey my love and understanding of the recipient", underlining Cheal's studies (1987; 1988) that propose a culture of love formed through gifts. Accordingly, delivering meaningful messages and love emotions guarantees a longer-lasting effect for the gift. Serene's comment therefore highlights two points. First, the more information shared between giver and receiver, the greater potential the gift has on satisfying the parties. Second, the more care put into the gift, the more it ensures the continuity of the relationship, and that more gift reciprocations would occur in the future.

I reckon that when knowing the receiver for a long time and having a close relationship with them, the gift search and purchase process becomes relatively easy, whereas it is

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[50] For example, is a Muslim or a vegetarian.
[51] Serene is a 25-year-old single Egyptian female, raised in Kuwait.

difficult to find a suitable gift for unfamiliar receivers, especially when there is no specific connection with them. Furthermore, lacking a remarkably close relationship causes indifference to gift choice, neglecting the receiver's opinion or reaction towards the gift. Rashed[52] admitted that if the relationship with the receiver is not a close one, then many items are found in shops, and any gift can do the job. Rashed disregards the consequences resulting from a wrong gift choice for distant relationships, which degrades the essence of the gift. It means that in Kuwait, although featuring a rich materialistic culture, a person will not always choose a pricey gift to strengthen a superficial relationship. Accordingly, Rashed would consider giving a special gift when the relationship is worthy. The bond and trust urges him to make an extra effort into gifts. Likewise, Mahmoud[53] conditioned buying a gift only when a person *earns* one, he said, "When someone deserves a gift, it is not bothersome to buy it for them, it is a pleasure".

As shown, gift hunting requires time, thought and effort. It also becomes increasingly difficult every year. Nguyen and Munch (2011: 117) asserted that the gift-giving experience can produce an immense amount of stress and anxiety. One of the reasons why gift-giving is an unpleasant experience is because "the supermarket life makes choosing gifts hard and confusing", as Bader displeasingly explained. Gift givers face excessive options and brands to choose from, which causes indecisiveness. Faisal[54] stated, "It is difficult to find something that goes out of the ordinary and makes a special expression".

Contrarily, the senior age group[55] from the fieldwork showed that albeit the unlimited gift options, they enjoy the overall purchasing process for they are experienced in shopping. Accordingly, seniors find gift-giving a rather pleasureful, easy practice due to their simple interpretation of the gift, therefore reciprocation is uncomplicated. This shows that past to present gift priorities changed; the gift had other meanings compared to our current day. This also demonstrates how material culture has become popularised in the 21st century,

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[52] Rashed is a 30-year-old single Jordanian male, born and raised in Kuwait.
[53] Mahmoud is a 37-year-old divorced Moroccan male, works in Kuwait since 2008.
[54] Faisal is a 34-year-old married Kuwaiti male.
[55] The senior group represents informants above 61 years of age.

imposing high reciprocation expectations among social relationships and demanding impressive gifts from gift givers.

Although a time-consuming, difficult activity, there are modern-day methods that facilitate the search, selection and delivery of gifts. Hisham[56] gave thanks to online buying. Finding something for someone has never been easier, in his words, "a luxury". It also shows that technology has caused changes in consumption and purchasing behaviour. I underline the prevalent use of technology and online platforms during gift occasions in Kuwait in a later section[57]. Other contemporary gift alternatives included gift coupons or cheques. These alternatives are chosen out of convenience, especially for difficult receivers. While others choose relationship-affirming gifts, buying gift cards is basically a strategy of "playing it safe". Abrar[58] admitted she prefers effortless and convenient options over impressing the receiver. I propose that these options represent the easy way of gifting, thus they are "gift shortcuts".

Regardless of the relationship, gift receivers prefer different things. Lunyai, De Run and Atang (2008) have indicated that people are attracted to different things because their preferences are mostly based on love, creativity, shape, colour, and design. Most importantly, people are attracted to something unique to ubiquitous items found in the country; beautiful and traditional items are especially prominent among others. In Kuwait, the gift ought to be something useful, practical and appropriate[59] for the receiver, rather than an aesthetic item[60] or something that is kept away until needed[61]. This supports Bourdieu's utilitarian conception of the gift (1977), which is a common misevaluation of

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[56] Hisham is an 18-year-old single Egyptian male, born and raised in Kuwait.
[57] See section: Gifting in the time of Corona.
[58] Abrar is a 31-year-old married Pakistani female, brought to Kuwait shortly after her birth.
[59] As part of gift ethics and etiquette, inappropriate gifts in Islam are many, for example, food that contain pork, alcohol, gold and silk for men, intimate apparel like undergarments, lingerie, or nightgowns. See: Gifts shaped by the Kuwaiti culture.
[60] Such as a vase or a mirror for decoration.
[61] Like photo albums, serving trays, teacups, or candles.

a "good gift"[62]. Arguably, even when the gift is useful to the receiver, it may not necessarily be the correct "desired" one. For example, if the gift were clothes, although useful to the receiver, they might not be the preferred style or even the correct size. The mismatch between gift choices and the receiver's preference frequently occurs since people cannot pre-empt what others like. The standard economic theory of "maximisation of total utility" proposes a solution. Utility maximisation refers to the notion that individuals seek the highest pleasure and satisfaction obtained from their economic decisions (Ythier, 2006). Undeniably, therefore, offering the receiver with cash as a gift would be the optimal choice. Studies like Principe and Eisenhauer (2009) and Sandel (2013b) explain that cash is superior to gifts as it maximises welfare[63]. Money would allow receivers to choose a gift of their choice and style, thus maximising total utility. However, when measuring employee performance, research shows that presenting non-monetary gifts made a stronger influence on workers' productivity and attitude than monetary gifts (Kube, Maréchal & Puppe 2012; Bradler & Neckermann 2019). According to Mankiw's celebrated textbook, "Principles of Economics" (2020), giving money is considered insulting. Tahani from the youth age group[64] argued that a cash coupon in her opinion lacks creativity as it is an impersonal detail. She always feels the need to demonstrate her unique taste in choosing gifts. Gift coupons also reflect a poor economic and financial status, making an unfavourable impression to the receiver, in addition to the downside of limited gift exchange or return options (White 2006; 2008; Tuten & Kiecker 2009). This does not mean that the theory of total utility maximisation failed, but Mankiw (2020) argues that there are other theories in economics one should consider when giving gifts.

The theory of signalling can be used in gift-giving, where givers hint their intentions and exude feelings to the receivers through their gifts. Accordingly, choosing a good gift is a

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[62] The gift paradigm has been propounded by Alain Caillé who also promotes a complex, economistic, and utilitarian conception of the gift (Bruni & Zamagni, 2013: 44-48). He supports the power of rational individual choice, established in Marcel Mauss' work (2002)[1990]. Caillé argues that the anti-utilitarian concept of the gift is supposed to link political and religious foundations of societies, therefore recognising individual and collective identities, which is rarely the case (Caillé 1989; 1994; 1996; 2000; 2001; Godbout & Caillé 2000).

[63] However, Sandel (2013a) criticizes utilitarianism because it suggests that money is the default method to measure value. It disregards a whole set of human experiences by equivalating them with money or utility, therefore flattening the moral discourse of society. It fails to consider phenomenal gifts that simply cannot be translated into monetary terms, such as friendship or in Kuwait's case, the *Wasta*.

[64] Youth informants are individuals below 24 years of age.

way to signal good intentions and can reflect certain intimacy. So, by using the knowledge the giver has about the receiver, gifts can "signal" love, affection, and care, which cash cannot. Cash gifts would also not really contribute to memory provided that sentimental value, time, and effort are omitted (Waldfogel 1993; Davison, Bing, Hutchinson & Pratt 2008). For a cash gift, even the surprise factor would be dropped to zero, and according to the fieldwork in Kuwait, the surprise factor plays a significant role in gift exchange occasions[65]. Likewise, although giving a prudently chosen gift on Valentine's Day may signal an interest in the receiver, giving exactly what a person needs, such as money, would be viewed inappropriate to a romantic other, even though it can maximise individual welfare more than ordinary gifts (Camerer, 1988). Clearly, emotions are absent in wads of currency notes, even though they might maximise utility or represent a good "signal".

Unfortunately, again, the theory of economic signalling is not sufficient. Gift givers can still spend a lot of time, effort and money into choosing a very incorrect gift, for example, mistakenly gifting a cigarette ashtray to a cigar smoker, which would obviously be of no use to them, thus decreasing the overall utility. Another example that utilizes both theories is gifting an expensive wig to a bald co-worker. While it required time, money, effort, and transmitted good signals, it is still inappropriate to give someone such a gift, no matter how well-intentioned it is. Gifts possess a world of their own, and economic theories fail to consider abstract virtues linked with that world. Sandel (2013b) defends his stance on values of humility and responsibility, arguing that gifts are not signals but are *declarations* of love, affection, and care. They are exchanged to connect and reconnect with individuals, so thoughtfulness is also important. Without a *thoughtful* effort in selecting gifts, it will be difficult to establish a connection with the other person and the intended message will not be conveyed. A wig for a bald man or an ashtray for a cigar smoker thus is insensitive and lacks thoughtfulness. The complex world of gifts, which undoubtedly represent tokens of friendship and expressions of love, continues to be analysed by economic theories.

The theories of maximum utility, signalling and thoughtfulness have explained the mismatch between preferred and received gifts in Kuwait, which was articulated in the

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[65] Read more on the surprise factor in the subdivision: Surprise Gifts.

previous section. Gift givers should not simply get what the receiver wants because mistakes or insults in gifts largely occur. This can be why a balanced reciprocation is often difficult to achieve. Also, a gift would sometimes not be considered one if it is already owned by the receiver. When in doubt, the giver should simply demonstrate thoughtfulness with mainstream, symbolic gifts. On the other hand, while expensive gifts in Kuwait are thought to achieve maximum utility and signal a potential interest in someone, receiver preferences reflect the contrary. Offering culturally imposed, expensive gifts lack thoughtfulness in a society infested with materialistic objectives to increase social status and demonstrate wealth. When the focus shifts towards expensive gifts, it results in poor interpersonal communication and relationship neglection because it ignores the receiver's wants and needs, ultimately buying inferior, wrong gifts (Galak, Givi & Williams, 2016). Givers can be unaware of their misplaced, hyper-specific focus. Furthermore, the mismatch in gifts also suggests misunderstanding and misinterpretation of reactions within relationships in Kuwait. Probably, gift givers believe that a smile from the receiver signifies that they are satisfied and impressed with the gift (Yang & Urminsky, 2018).

My fieldwork established that the type of relationship between giver and receiver is a strong factor that could reassess gift choice and its search process. Gift expectations also change based on the type of relationship. A strong relationship implies that the receiver's interests, preferences, likes, and dislikes are already known by the giver. Therefore, it is expected that the gift would satisfy their desires. However, a trusting bond between giver and receiver also suggests that a symbolic gift would be still appreciated and would not displease the receiver, as proposed by Carrier (2012b). The fieldwork highlighted the importance of utility, sentimental value and personal touches in gifts. The gift is supposed to be thoughtful, durable, and should put the receiver's preferences into account before its purchase, in other words, personalising the gift. Paris (2015: 46) emphasized personalising the gift whenever possible as a rule for gift-giving. This gesture signifies the desire to develop (or maintain) a close relationship with the receiver. Gift personalisation has been especially found within wedding or baby gift registry lists. It is a gift strategy that urges abiding by individual preferences, often used to reduce the mismatch between the buyer and receiver's taste ahead of time. Accordingly, gifts would be unappreciated and

disappointing when not sticking to the pre-set gift list. This tactic could be useful after having established the evident mismatch between preferred gifts and received gifts in Kuwait.

## 3. Gifts shaped by the Kuwaiti culture

Some cultures dictate certain principles of reciprocation and gift-giving in families and platonic contexts. Whereas other various societies disregard the importance of building or strengthening bonds through gifts and reciprocation because there are other means in doing so. There is less of a need for these gift exchanges because key aspects for some cultures include family, self-fulfilment, and sentiment (Joy, 2001).

In the literature, culture was one of the prominent factors that should be considered before selecting a gift. Sociologist Marcel Mauss has highlighted in his eminent book that gift givers should have enough background about various cultural and societal differences of receivers. Some communities even take part in specific gift exchange rituals, which depend on social bonds, the environment, history, and religion of the area (Mauss 1925; Narotzky 1997). Similarly, Parry (1986) after studying a variety of exchange forms, had established that no universal gift practice exists, as gifts are shaped by individual culture and differ according to region, religion, and beliefs (Paris, 2015: 46). In general, it was concluded within the literature that the gift-giving practice does not follow certain state-made laws but rather follows an embedded custom that has been brought down from our ancestors. Between the 20th and 21st century, Carrier (2012b) studied human behaviour; how gifts and people in the Middle East intertwined and connected to one another. A few aspects that he considered within his study were religious beliefs, consumption, and household organization; for example, how a household arrangement and design is related to religious beliefs. He later concluded that all aspects in the human life, which make up societies, are somehow related to one another. It was also interesting that Carrier has differentiated between culture and practice; that they are two completely different concepts. He explained that there are no concrete social laws that humans abide by among specific regions; that people in different situations within the same society transact differently and comprehend matters differently from one another. Matters exactly like gift-giving, described as a social

and economic activity within the context of culture. Studying the Kuwaiti culture in terms of its gift-giving practices was therefore important to consider within this research.

Culture is a critical factor as it can represent a possible entry barrier to some industries. There are also personal ideologies to satisfy and certain cultural taboos to comprehend before purchasing a gift (Quester, Karunaratna & Goh 2000; Robles 2012). Some people feel socially awkward receiving gifts, unless being given for a great achievement. Likewise, many cultures consider certain gifts offending or inappropriate. For instance, previous studies revealed that presenting gifts made in China to Koreans is considered offensive, or that in some societies monetary gifts are rejected. In other countries such as Germany, Spain and France, certain types of flowers are considered inappropriate as they are associated with funerals or death. In Latin American folklore, presenting handkerchiefs is frowned upon due to their association to grief and crying (Morrison & Conaway 1997a; 1997b). For this reason, before a decision is made regarding any gift purchase, it is essential to study the cultural implications that a product or brand may hold (Quester, Karunaratna & Goh 2000; Othman, Ong & Teng 2005).

Evidently, what is culturally "acceptable" and "unacceptable" to buy is identifiable by learning about Kuwaiti values. The Kuwaiti population has distinct characteristics from those in the surrounding Arabian Gulf region, despite the socio-economic similarities like language, religion, and rich in petrol. Kuwaiti families are very much still influenced by old traditions and kinship structures with regards to their consumer identities and purchase decisions (Bahhouth, Ziemnowicz & Zgheib, 2012). As for basic principles in Kuwait, the Islamic community sets certain lines that are taboo to cross with gifts. For Muslims, it is offensive[66] to present a bottle of alcohol or products that contain pork for any celebration (Paris, 2015: 50). The nature of the gift in Kuwait also differs in terms of intimacy. Personal gifts such as swimming suits, undergarments or lingerie, as Abrar stated, are ethically awkward gifts. Men giving these gifts to women is out of the question, even between

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[66] As implied from my fieldwork, one should investigate why it may be offensive to present Muslims with gifts that stand for other religions for example, the cross or sculptures of the Virgin Mary or Jesus Christ, whereas it is normal and accepted by non-Muslims to be presented with a miniature of the *Kaaba* for example, a copy of the Quran, or fancy prayer beads.

spouses it is extremely rare. Most of the time, Muslim men who pass by lingerie shops face social anxiety and embarrassment. Naturally, discussing underwear with the shop attendant is outrageous (Agence France-Presse, 2012). Whenever necessary, men would hint what they like to their wives, and then the woman browses lingerie stores to buy the product herself. If he is accompanying her, he would usually stand and wait outside. Even between women, these kinds of gifts are normally given in private and the giver stresses not to open it in front of others. Muslim men, on the other hand, cannot be offered gifts of gold or silk. Thus, the type of gift in Kuwait differs according to gender, religion, and traditions, which are otherwise very normal in a typical Western or European society. This can be an example reflecting Bourdieu's theory that the gift holds taboos and contradictions (Chanial, 2010). Furthermore, retail commercialised perfume or (cheap) body lotion combo packs are viewed as mainstream and impersonal items, as per Seba, but are very common gift choices due to their omnipresent nature[67]. However, this does not include traditional Kuwaiti perfume or *oud* (ʿūd), musk, *bakhoor* (baḵūr) and other (strong) oriental fragrances and incenses[68] (Hyun-kyung, 2016). These are otherwise considered very high-quality gifts due to their rarity and strong authentic link to the Arabian Gulf culture. These examples are not an exhaustive list, but it shows that many societies have numerous gift restrictions and distinguished gift etiquettes.

According to my fieldwork, the circulated gift in these occasions appears to be a sheer extravagant concept in Kuwait. It is exaggerated, expensive and overdone. It was implied that Arabs in general fancy tangible, material items. Also, the closer the relationship with someone, the greater value the gift is expected to be, and the more emotions are involved[69]. This develops a burden or a load on the individual, as Omar[70] states, "If you want to buy a perfume you should not buy the cheap kind, it should be a minimum of 100 euros to be appreciated or accepted by the receiver". Clearly, the relationship would be jeopardised if the gift was cheap or of bad quality.

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[67] Paris (2015: 48-49) underscored that perfume and clothing are largely inappropriate in the United States, especially for women.
[68] These are types of Arabian agarwood, aloeswood, olibanum or frankincense.
[69] Refer to the section: Emotions and Sentimental Value.
[70] Omar is a 63-year-old married Lebanese male, came to Kuwait for work in the late 80s.

As shown, despite clear globalisation influences, the gift exchanged in Kuwait has some strong cultural characteristics, reflecting interpersonal Islamic values and ethics. We learn that in Kuwait, there are gifts for every certain occasion, and for every certain person. In a way, people use gifts to communicate messages to one another, even to a person one dislikes[71]. These messages hint at the relationship status and individual feelings. Gift intentions are found to strongly affect receivers, so it is important to mindfully choose the gift. Giving gifts that represent a person's own culture, especially edible goods, fragrances or local delicacies, are found widely accepted in Kuwait. Habitually, gifts such as food or sweets are often offered or exchanged to show hospitality in workplaces, homes, hospitals and occasions or ceremonies. These gestures are less concerned with price. Most notably, surprise gifts have also emerged as a general practice in Kuwait. They are gifts offered to someone for no reason or occasion[72].

The Middle East and North African (MENA) region has plenty of celebrations that involve gifting among friends, families and colleagues. Arabs generally tend to exhaust more gifts because of the numerous occasions that involve gatherings. These again are traditional ways to show good manners, hospitality and generosity since cultural values hover over human bonding. Other than typical cultural occasions like birthdays, graduations and weddings, and Islamic occasions like Ramadan[73] (ramaḍān) and *Eid*[74] (ʿīd), there are often parties to rejoice a party. For instance, after a wedding party there tends to be another date set for giving congratulations, gifts, and blessings, that usually also includes catering, music and so on. There are also *hijab* parties (celebrating the wearing of the Islamic veil) and parties for new-borns, commonly known as *El-sobou'* (al-ʾusbūʿ). It typically takes place on the first week of the baby's birth, but in some cultures, it can be set on the 40th day. In certain countries, this festive celebration can be grand, almost resembling a wedding, with relative decorations, gastronomic preparations, and among Muslim families, animal (usually sheep or lamb) sacrifices, otherwise known as performing *Aqeeqa*

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[71] Refer to the section: Emotions and Sentimental Value.
[72] Refer to the subdivision: Surprise gifts.
[73] The ninth month of the Islamic calendar, observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting, prayer, reflection, and community.
[74] Muslims annually celebrate two *Eids* or Islamic festivities, see The Gift in Islam subdivision.

(ʿaqīqah) (Musharraf, 2020). In some Levantine countries like Lebanon and Syria, the appearance of a baby's first tooth is also celebrated.

In the past, Mahmoud recalls his parents gifting traditional Arab objects, a tea set for example, which was what their culture dictated. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the value of handmade gifts. Suzan[75] expressed her love for handmade items that do not resemble a consumerist society because of their unbranded and unadvertised nature, and therefore they carry more sentimental value. This reflects gifts in the past, as they were created out of individual possessions or belongings. People used to take impersonal objects, mark them with personal touches and details, converting them into gifts. For example, a piece of fabric got transformed into an item of clothing. These items were traded or exchanged among neighbours and family members only to improve social ties, social meaning, and personal identity (Johansson & Carrier 1997; Carrier 2012a). In our current day, it is rare that anyone would make something manually since the gift is likely to be bought from a store. This refers to increased production, globalisation, and an improved accessibility to commodities, as Farbotko and Head (2013) further explain. Buying something from the store requires less effort, and even lower when it is bought online. This signifies that when a handmade gift is offered in our current day, it would be a fabulous surprise due to its rarity and originality.

Valentine gifts were also distinguished from others, as receivers mean differently to the givers than in other occasions. Valentine gifts were a talking point to showcase differences between Kuwait and other cultures. In Kuwait, Valentine gifts tend to be jewellery for females; gold or diamond to be specific (Ertimur & Sandikci, 2005). Arabic names are usually engraved or designed on golden necklaces or bracelets and are extremely common among women in the Middle East. When Joanna had moved to the United States, she recalled how fellow Americans were puzzled that she was wearing her own name around her neck, like a pet wearing a name-inscribed collar lest it gets lost. This identifies cultural differences and a conflict in gifting preferences in western contexts. Apart from jewellery, other common gifts include a pricey watch, an airline ticket (or a getaway), a mobile phone

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[75] Suzan is a 30-year-old married Kuwaiti female.

or even a car[76]. Based on the fieldwork discussions, gifts are made and given in Kuwait just to show-off among peers and impress the receiver as soon as they realise the financial value of the gift.

Culture also plays a role when preparing for Valentine gifts, which is crucial in Kuwait. A lack of planning can be an indication of negligence or thoughtlessness, which consequently results in negative consequences for some relationships. Some people tend to exert a great deal of effort and thought when there is a gifting occasion. They would like everything to be flawless. For some couples, it is necessary to plan Valentine's Day from A to Z, as Seba explained. Usually, a full program for the day is prepared. If Valentine's Day falls on a working day, the celebration is often postponed to the weekend to give more time to execute the plan in mind. Gifts and decorations, such as balloons, ribbons and dried flowers, a reserved place (hotel room or chalet, restaurant, cinema, encampment), a rented car (convertible sportscar or limousine) and huge flower bouquets are all part of the love event, with the help of some companies dedicated to this work. In fact, all the above preparations are also considered to embody the Valentine gift. The main idea is that the more money spent, the more impressed the other person will be.

Culture has also influenced presentation and wrapping, which are essential elements of the gift in Kuwait. In many cultures, gifts are traditionally presented in a certain manner and have certain rules[77]. Generally, gifts are wrapped and complemented by a gift note or card, which would mention the occasion, the date, the receiver's name, the giver's name and usually a few wishing words. Common values are acknowledged through the gift-wrapping design especially when gift giver and receiver share the same cultural background (Reitsma & Van den Hoven, 2017). Gift-wrapping methods revealed numerous levels of social

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[76] Valentine's Day should not be restricted to giving flowers, chocolate, and teddy bears. According to an online survey (A.G. Reporter 2013; Berkani 2013), the number one Valentine's gift among residents of the Arabian Gulf was chocolate but it was the least preferred gift. The survey revealed that females would rather prefer receiving jewellery, a holiday trip, or flowers, while male informants prefer smartphones. This is evidence to the luxurious material lifestyle in the Arabian Gulf enjoys and the high gift expectations during Valentine's Day.

[77] Some cultures identify certain colours as appropriate for gift wrapping such as the red colour in China and Japan as it connotes luck but writing cards with red ink could be a threat to end the relationship (Brigham, 1986). Other colours such as white, black, and blue, are better to be avoided as they could symbolise other meanings like death/funerals, sadness, destruction and evil. The meanings of colours contradict in every culture. To avoid all the confusion, the gift could be simply placed in a presentable bag.

significance and demonstrated relationship validity. Wrapping is an innovation design and a differentiation strategy in business competition as well (Zhang, Song & Xu, 2010). The packaging of products influences its marketing and its buyers tremendously because it catches the eye. For example, the packaging design and the colour of chocolate were factors of paramount significance when choosing chocolate as a gift for romantic partners (Giyahi, 2012). This explains why companies change the appearance and packaging of their products whenever a gifting occasion approaches, like Valentine's Day or Christmas. Concisely, Hendry (1989) affirmed that gift wrapping awareness is an essential component to ethnographic investigation. However, so far, little is studied about the importance of gift wrapping (Bradler & Neckermann, 2019).

After numerous signs of the efficiency and functionality of gift wrapping, I chose to investigate the importance of this activity. Bashar[78] finds all kinds of packaging accessories essential to him in gifting occasions. When giving gifts to the opposite sex, Bashar adds a certain scent and dried flowers to the gift box. These extra touches add value to the gift experience. They make the gift presentable and gives off a good impression (Green, Tinson & Peloza, 2016). It suggests that presenting a well-wrapped gift is necessary to look "good" in front of others, especially in shallow relationships. Rashed explained that a close relationship with the receiver signifies trust and understanding, so gift wrapping is a detail to overlook (Hoyer, et al., 2018: 488). Instead, it is more appropriate when sending a gift to a hospital or an office for example, to give off a good impression and satisfy social etiquettes. It is viewed highly inappropriate, even rude, if someone presents a gift to their boss without any packaging or card. It is a behaviour that lacks good manners. The Kuwaiti society gives prominence to enhancing self-presentation, whether through the gift or its wrapping style. It also contributes to the giver's self-esteem, making them more "respectable", so to speak (Green, Tinson & Peloza, 2016). A flawless experience is necessary to achieve this self-satisfaction.

The fieldwork also found that gift wrapping becomes less important when the occasion is more mainstream, like a house gathering, whereas if it was a formal occasion, like a

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[78] Bashar is a 23-year-old single Syrian male who grew up in Kuwait.

wedding, gift wrapping becomes crucially necessary. Amal[79] said that gift wrapping does the occasion justice. It makes the gift look "complete", that without the wrapping, the gift is just an object. Abrar even noted how gift-wrapping changes according to age. She argued that younger individuals show more attention to these details. Apparently, gift wrapping was more important to her during her younger years, especially when she was dating. Probably, gift wrapping is also viewed differently according to marital status. As it is used to woo receivers, it can be a way to win the affection of a potential romantic partner. Consequently, the importance of wrapping decreases in long-term commitments. In Lamya's[80] point of view, however, she specifically considers wrapping as part of the gift. For her, wrapping the gift is important no matter the occasion, age or the receiver.

Fatima[81] has taught herself many gift-wrapping styles and techniques. She believes it is a necessary activity and likes to wrap gifts herself. She even adds more special touches to the wrapping, like small handmade wooden dolls or hearts along with greeting stickers. She also enjoys packaging and decorating gift baskets during big occasions like *Eid* and distributing them among her friends. Fatima believes that even when it is her birthday, she should be treating others, not the other way round. It shows her dedication to the gift as she handles them with utmost priority and care. Evidently, these show that the gift was carefully prepared with love. "A well wrapped gift is a double gift!", she remarked, "It makes your eyes more hopeful to what is inside". This suggests that expectations are anticipated to be met as the receiver excitedly starts to unwrap the gift. Rixom, Mas and Rixom (2020) showed that higher gift expectations are created when more money is paid on wrapping and presentation, which again suggests the presence of materialism in Kuwait. Agreeingly, Adam claimed that the wrapping makes the gift "prettier". It means it boosts the gift's quality by making it *seem* more expensive.

Although wrapping is additional or optional, it can sometime impress the receiver more than the actual gift, which creates a memorable experience. Another advantage is that the receiver's attention becomes divided between the gift and the wrapping. Joanna added,

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[79] Amal is a 58-year-old married Syrian female, came to Kuwait after marriage in the 80s.
[80] Lamya is a 33-year-old single Sudanese female, born and raised in Kuwait.
[81] Fatima is a 78-year-old single Kuwaiti female.

"half the gift is how you present it". If the gift was wrapped poorly or carelessly, it loses significance in the receiver's perspective. Zhou, Hinz and Benlian's findings (2018) indicated reactions of pleasure and excitement when offered a well-presented, colourful package design. Some gift receivers really pay attention to these accompaniments because they "signal" thoughtfulness, deliver an underlying message and communicate a "piece" of the giver's personality. As illustrated by Mauss (1925), the gift is a piece of oneself, like passing along a wedding ring to a granddaughter for example, which holds history and legacy and is a clear representation of the giver.

Wrapping and packaging ideas are also used to manipulate or deceive gift receivers. Seba mentioned examples of gift packaging techniques that trick the receiver into thinking it is something else. This creativity in wrapping gifts has been popular for some time in non-formal occasions. These techniques can help gift givers when they are uncertain or unconfident about their gift choice. Wrapping gives an illusion of quality and depth, and therefore adds value to an unexpensive gift, for example, putting a scented candle in a mobile phone's box, consequently disappointing the receiver after unwrapping their gift. Although it might risk personal relationships, this is done to "humour" gift-giving occasions. Yet, in my opinion, the element of surprise and receiver expectations can be both met using this technique. Contrarily, the gift giver can put their flattering gift, such as jewellery or a smartwatch, in a shoe box. While the receiver unwraps their present and gets the hint that they will have a pair of shoes, little do they know that they are in for a wonderful surprise at the end. The receiver's reaction can be also observed and remembered by the giver, because they have turned the tables around and ultimately impressed the receiver. This is a way to make gifts memorable. I believe this is an opportunity for the gift industry to enhance the element of surprise using creative gift wrapping and packaging.

In most cases, the gift is better given at the end of the occasion, like in a business meeting (Paris, 2015: 49-50). In Arab societies, there is always the question of whether to open the gift instantly in front of the giver, or to wait until people have left and the event is over. In Kuwait, unwrapping presents is an enjoyable activity because it excites the receiver and adds to the "element of surprise". It develops emotions of hope and triggers curiosity,

making the gift more interesting and valuable. Because of this hastiness, gifts are often unwrapped as soon as they are received, which can be a problem if it were an intimate gift, especially during bachelorette parties, wedding anniversaries or Valentine's Day. It represents a lot of shame to receive and unwrap personal gifts during public occasions in Kuwait. It is mostly due to religion and the taboo behind sexually enticing merchandise. Therefore, in these occasions, the gift is unwrapped afterwards to avoid embarrassment or "being put on the spot". It is evident that environmental concerns and social pressures strongly influence this practice (Farbotko & Head, 2013). Nevertheless, there is not a strict rule that necessitates gifts to be wrapped or unwrapped in a certain manner in Kuwait.

To wrap a present is not solely about covering it in colourful paper. It is about the willingness to go one step further. As for the receiver, it is about the avidness, the thrill of discovering what is within. Afterall, gift wrapping was not a prioritised practice in Kuwait. Unfortunately, even when gift wrapping is entertaining for givers and appreciated by receivers, excessive packaging styles that are currently emerging in Kuwait could represent a waste of resources. Some young adult informants[82] view this as a waste of time, paper, and money, and it is preferred that the cost of wrapping would be spent on something more beneficial. Furthermore, more awareness was demanded to be raised about wasted resources when giving gifts. In this sense, wrapping is an unneeded gesture albeit it makes the gift "look prettier". Apparently, while some were remiss to consider gift wrapping, older groups from the fieldwork think it is an important aspect that complements the gift, given that it is not exaggerated. It shows how material culture has spread dramatically in the 21st century and influenced consumption, which explains why more younger individuals notice the dangers of this habit. Responses were also realised to be neutral between the genders. Females and males alike dedicate similar amounts of time and effort on gift wrapping. Nevertheless, most female informants preferred a wrapped gift, which implies that gift wrapping attracts females. With this knowledge, males try to make the gift more presentable in hopes of pleasing female receivers. Generally, it is still important for

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[82] Young adult informants are individuals between 25-35 years of age.

a gift to be wrapped in a simple manner, otherwise presented in a proper bag as a bare minimum.

If gift wrapping is considered wasteful in Kuwait, why does it persist? The reason behind this spectacle is certainly impacted by culture and the need for uniqueness. Even when there are issues of resource exploitation in Kuwait, a well-wrapped gift is always appreciated because it shows that time and effort had been exerted into its overall presentation. This brings attention to an important issue with regards to sustainability and resource conservation. Cheal (1988: 12) strongly expressed, "gift-giving has often been described as an extravagant waste of resources". Accordingly, Kuwait's recycling system and waste recollection methods should be addressed.

The fieldwork found that designated waste bins and containers for recycling were not available or identifiable on the streets of Kuwait as they are not provided by the government (Makhoul 2010; 2014; 2017; Mani 2020). Apparently, Kuwait only has privately held businesses that take responsibility for these issues. Waste bins that are divided into small recycling compartments were only rarely noticed in shopping malls, universities or in certain coffeehouses and retail shops, which are also privately owned by a family of entrepreneurs or big companies. Movements were also noticed on social media, for example inviting people to take initiative and recycle their items or to volunteer for waste separation. Therefore, there is a high possibility that every other business or restaurant never recycles its products or waste. It is difficult to be environmentally friendly in a country that lacks a clear recycling system. So, thinking of the quantity of plastic waste, paper, tin and many other materials that are generated from households, factories, fast food restaurants, and large corporations, creates a serious and critical problem for the future of Kuwait (Global Recycling, n.d.-a). This also questions the destination of used material and rubbish and how they are being reused or disposed. Long-term goals should be identified to solve this significant issue because it also relates to gift waste. As an activity that adds to the exploitation of recyclable material, it begs to question whether gift wrapping, and plastic packaging are necessary in a country that lacks a proper waste management system. There are signs of a "national waste masterplan" to be accomplished by 2021 with the help of German scientists, according to the Global Recycling Magazine (n.d.-b), but since the

COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis have caused a delay in many national projects, one can only hope that the goal would be achieved on time to face the future.

As shown, the gift and its complements are distinguished in Kuwait because of certain cultural implications and Islamic values. Nevertheless, they are different from other Arab countries, as Adam stated. He spoke about Egypt, labelling it a "poor country" and so the gift would be simpler as it depends on the income of the person. In this sense, Anna[83] identifies a big gap between the rich (mostly natives) and poor (mostly immigrants) in the Arabian Gulf, which reveals differences between social classes in Kuwait. "The richer people care about status and commercial materialistic things, and they want to show that they are rich. I think because to over-triumph the others", she explained. This identifies cultural Kuwaiti values. Part of people's habits and lifestyle is to purchase high quality, expensive items, which has become the norm.

Economically speaking, Sahni and Shankar (2006) define how an increase in income affects lifestyle, behaviour, and attitudes towards consumption. People desire (or try) to match the way they live according to how much they earn, which results in a change of identity. Bearing in mind the high average income in Kuwait, trying to match this income becomes a challenge. People are expected to buy more unneeded products to satisfy this income, which clutters homes and takes vain storage space, as confirmed by Medhat[84], "[The purpose of Valentine's Day is] to consume more than what they [people] have". Consumption therefore creates a culture hungry for materialistic objects, which satisfies misleading needs, hence a culture that celebrates Valentine's Day (Sahni & Shankar, 2006). Therefore, the rich would not only buy flowers and chocolates on Valentine's Day but would take an extra leap and buy more eccentric and unusual gifts. Notably, consumption does not only include that of products, but also the consumption of money.

Despite the materialistic direction that Kuwait is taking in gift-giving, spending more does not always guarantee a well-received, appreciated gift. Research has showed that receivers are not likely to evaluate gifts based on their financial value (Waldfogel 1993; Solnick

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[83] Anna is a 24-year-old single female from Switzerland who moved to Kuwait with her family in 2011.
[84] Medhat is a 45-year-old Egyptian married male, who moved to Kuwait in 2004.

1996; 1998; Wooten & Wood 2004). No research in gift-giving has determined whether receivers value gifts less than, as much as, or more than what givers pay for them (Principe & Eisenhauer, 2009). Even though givers may intend well when presenting expensive gifts as gestures of romance, receivers may interpret it as "saving face". Abusing expensive gifts in newly formed relationships is also often associated to bribery and forced commitments. Some accept simpler gifts; meanwhile expensive, branded ones can be insulting. Overall, giving branded items appears to be of minimal concern because they are normally viewed as commercial gifts rather than messages of love, as I quote from Clarke, Herington, Hussain and Wong (2005: 64), "Giving a popular brand name as a Valentine's Day gift does not mean giving a good quality gift". Receivers are more likely to evaluate gifts based on durability and utility (Larsen & Watson, 2001).

The importance of reserving the genuine, simple, and heartfelt nature of the gift was stressed. It is necessary to respect and reinforce symbolic gifts as they are slowly deteriorating in Kuwait. Omar profoundly argued, "The gift signifies I remembered you and thought about you, not its price". A simple gift, such as a keychain, notebook, or a hand-written love letter, even for Valentine's Day, is very common and perfectly acceptable in many societies. These gifts are more detailed, thoughtful; they represent a symbolic meaning and transmit profound sentiments. They also probably result in less waste than usual gifts and relative decorations. The gift should be used as an aid to express love and nurture relationships by spending time with a loved one. Anna recalls Valentine's Day in Europe and claims that it is more about doing an activity together, not about buying something for each other. Regrettably, the gift is being used as a tool, and every year new (expensive) creative ideas are introduced in Kuwait's market to celebrate gifting occasions. Some want these expensive gifts because they boost their ego. As illustrated by Chen and Kim (2013), the attitudes of consumers when *receiving* luxury branded gifts involved pure enjoyment and satisfaction, while purchase intentions towards *choosing* luxury branded gifts for someone else involved self-use. This shows how the preferred gift always satisfies different inner motives and objectives, such as genuineness, thoughtfulness and personal meanings.

It is noticeable that the gifting etiquette in Kuwait is distinguishable among others in the Middle East. Conclusively, the fieldwork confirmed that the gift in Kuwait is materialistic due to the country's wealth and influences of its Arab culture. The gift is usually overdone when celebrating occasions like Valentine's Day. Monetary value is perceived a benchmark rather than sentimental details and meaning. This information gives insight about how people should prepare for gifting events in Kuwait, and probably re-evaluate their gift choices into one that requires "jingling pocket change"[85], as Yousef[86] light-heartedly remarked. There are numerous local and online businesses that dedicate their services to give greater emphasis to the gift. Also, gift wrapping is now custom-made according to set preferences. No matter how small or silly the gift is, gift wrapping adds to the surprise element and deviates attention from the actual item. However, it is still unclear why a rich country like Kuwait has not yet developed a proper recycling system for its citizens. Nevertheless, while gift wrapping and added details such as balloons and ribbons may be perceived as an exaggeration and a waste of resources, we cannot deny the fact that they signal thoughtful intentions and transmit positive feelings, according to the theories of Sandel (2013b) and Mankiw (2020). Hence, regardless of the negative consequences, proper gift presentation and wrapping make the gift "whole" and are always cherished by receivers.

## 3.1    The Gift in Islam

After studying the gift in terms of Kuwait's rich Arabian Gulf culture, this subdivision aims to distinguish the gift based on the Islamic faith. This subdivision also shows the foresight of Valentine's Day in Islam and how people have been influenced by this occasion religion-wise. Being familiar with the Islamic law is important, as it still constructs a critical basis for cultural regulation in the Middle East. I refer to the Quran[87] because Kuwait, as an Islamic country, builds and bases its constitution on Islamic laws and principles, therefore it is necessary to study what the central religious text of Islam says in various regards. Islamic traditions are also based on the *Sunnah*, which refers to the sayings or *hadeeths*

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[85] An Arabic/Levantine expression that hints at spending (more) money.
[86] Yousef is a 32-year-old single Syrian male; whose family came to Kuwait after the Persian Gulf War.
[87] *Quran: Arabic and English in Parallel*. Translated by Talal Itani (2015).

(ḥadīṯ), habits, practices and characteristics of the Prophet Mohammed. The *Sunnah* is the second source of religious knowledge for Muslims after the Quran. Another source for religious knowledge is sermons from preachers (Jones 2004; 2010; 2012).

The gift-giving practice is an act that arises naturally between humans. It is a worldwide instrumental concept and act that has existed for thousands of years (Belk & Coon, 1993). Historically, religion-wise, the concept of the gift was charity, to give free services such as education, healthcare or material assistance and offer food to the less fortunate. In some cultures, gifts were believed to be a sacrifice to the Gods, as it is an act that demands giving without obtaining payment and one that would also please the dead. In return for their gifts, people believed they will be rewarded with happiness and wealth. This act is called "Alms", an ancient morality of the gift which exists in several religions and cultures as a principle of justice (Rosenthal & Gutas 2014; Baqutayan, Mohsin, Mahdzir & Ariffin 2018). Gift-giving is a legitimate concept in Islam, associated with the mercy and benediction of God. Charity has been long encouraged to become part of Kuwait's cultural and traditional identity which makes Kuwait establish a giving culture (Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner, 2012). Most importantly, one of the fundamental tenets in Islam is *Zakat* (zakāt). It also forms one of the five pillars of Islam (Machado, Bilo & Helmy, 2018). *Zakat* is a social justice tool found to alleviate poverty and fill the gap between the rich and poor by ensuring a proper distribution of wealth among the population (Hossain, 2012). It refers to giving a portion of one's wealth to the needy. On an annual basis, Muslims are Islamically obligated to give out a small percentage from the total value of their fixed possessions, in other words, their unused or saved sources of wealth, such as money, gold, resources, livestock, land and real estate combined[88] (Ahmad & Mahmood 2009; Dhar 2013). It is not certain, however, that the entire Muslim community commits to this Islamic obligation. In Kuwait, the government does not impose this obligation as it cannot monitor every person's source of wealth. It remains an act of conscience, whether to follow and obey Islamic instructions or not. Nevertheless, Quranic instructions and prophetic

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[88] Other forms of yearly obligated *Zakat* include *Zakat Al-Fitr* (zakāt al-fiṭr), which must be paid before the occurrence of the *Eid Al-Fitr*. It involves giving enough money for a meal to feed the poor and needy. Furthermore, the recommended yet optional animal sacrifice (usually sheep or lamb) during *Eid Al-Adha* can also be considered as a gift since it encourages the rendering of food among family, neighbours and the deprived.

teachings lay great emphasis on *Zakat*, its importance is often placed next to *Salat* (ṣalāt) or prayer, as repeatedly shown in multiple chapters, such as in *Surat Al-Baqarah* (2: 43, 83, 110, 177, 277) and in *Surat Al-Nisa'a* (4: 77, 162). Generosity in Islam is therefore an obligation and giving gifts is an act to display this generosity (Baqutayan, Mohsin, Mahdzir & Ariffin, 2018).

The gift in Islam is used to spread love among people regardless of the type of relationship since it encourages bonding. It is acknowledged as a "prophetic *Sunnah*", an expression of sympathy that could mend hearts and equally open the closures of hearts. Prophet Mohammed was keen to support and legislate everything that would compose hearts and sow love among people (Tolan, 2019). There are several Islamic *hadeeths* or sayings of the Prophet Mohammed that support the gift concept. Abu Hurairah reported that the Prophet said, "*Tahadou tahabbou*" (tahādū taḥābū), meaning, "Give gifts and you will love one another"[89] or the extension to that is: "Shake hands, for this will dispel rancour, and exchange gifts and love one another, for this will dispel hatred"[90]. Therefore, typically, describing the Prophet's actions, Aisha Bint Abi Bakr, the Prophet's wife remarked that, "The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) used to accept gifts and reciprocate for them"[91]. In this case, the Prophet tended to accept gifts and reward the gift with something better than it, so that the blessing would increase and supreme satisfaction of God, Allah, would be pursued. The Prophet said that it is preferable to return the gift by giving something similar or better: "Whoever does you a favour, then respond in kindness and reciprocate, and if you cannot find anything to give them, then make *duaa'* (duʿāʾ) and supplicate for them (pray for them), and keep doing so, until you think you have done enough to repay them"[92]. Therefore, as Islam commands generosity; it does not only encourage giving gifts but also reciprocating them with something better, because whoever is stingy and withholds what Allah has given them, will be stingy to themselves, and that is not for their benefit, as stated in *Surat Al-Imran* (3: 180) and *Surat Mohammed* (47: 38).

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[89] Narrated by Al-Bukhari (2021) in *Al-Adab Al-Mufrad*, 594, Book 30, Hadeeth Number 57.
[90] Narrated by Malik in Bin Anas (2021), *Al-Muwatta*, Book 47, Number 16.
[91] Narrated by Aisha in Abu-Dawood Al-Sajestani (2021), *Sunan Abu Dawood*, 3536, Book 24, Hadeeth 121.
[92] Narrated by Ibn Umar in Al-Nasa'i (2021), *Sunan An-Nasa'i*, 2567, Book 23, Hadeeth Number 133.

The Prophet explained that the gift is one of the best deeds with Allah and consequently is great in its reward. On judgement day, Muslims believe that people will be asked how much they drew between hearts, and how many souls they brought closer. Allah rewards the charitable who spend their money night and day, in secret and in public. The secret charity however is considered of greater benefit and higher reward, and although performed in secret, nothing goes unseen by God, as mentioned in *Surat Al-Baqarah* (2: 197, 284). Likewise, *Surat Al-Imran* (3: 92) specifies, "You shall not attain to righteousness until you give (benevolently) out of what you love; and whatever thing you spend, Allah is aware of it". Giving gifts and charities with a pure heart appear to have double the credit, thus their reward is multiplied in God's measures. *Surat Al-Baqarah* (2: 272) clarifies, "…Whatever good you do, will be returned/repaid to you, and you shall not be wronged (in loss)". The Quran repeatedly emphasizes in many chapters the importance and necessity to give charity, as this will be reason to atone peoples' sins and will be counted among their good deeds (*Surat Al-Baqarah*, 2: 245, 271-274; *Surat Al-Anfal*, 8: 60; *Surat Yusuf*, 12: 88; *Surat Al-Hadeed*, 57: 11, 18; *Surat Al-Taghabun*, 64: 17).

As for Islamic occasions, the gift given during Ramadan is worth much more in spiritual returns and blessings, as it is a month to get closer to God, through fasting, helping community and getting rid of bad habits, such as smoking, and adopting better ones, such as prayer. Muslims who are unable to fast during Ramadan, due to sickness or other reasons[93], can also use the gift[94] to recompense and participate. In the two Islamic festivities, *Eid Al-Fitr* (ʿīdu al-fiṭr) and *Eid Al-Adha*[95] (ʿīdu al-ʾaḍḥā), the *Eidiyyah* (ʿīdīyah) acts as an Islamic ancient gift custom that has not lost its lustre till today. It is derived from the word *Eid*, which means the multiplication of reward and returns[96] by Allah to his worshippers, while the gift *Eidiyyah* literally means "to be repeated"; the hope that blessings, joy, kindness, and generosity are to be repeated the next year. The *Eidiyyah* generally represents gifts of cash that are distributed among (younger) family members. It

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[93] Sickness, menstruation, travelling, permanent disability (mentally or physically) and old age are valid reasons that exempt from fasting (*Surat Al-Baqarah*, 2: 185; Fierro 1997: 87).

[94] Through monetary, clothing or food donations.

[95] One celebrates breaking the fast after the completion of the month of Ramadan, and the other celebrates the end of pilgrimage or the duty of *Hajj*.

[96] Which can be both material and spiritual returns.

is deliberately presented in the form of money so that *Eid* would be distinguished from other occasions such as birthdays, graduation and so on. Even when the gift is cash, a symbolic *Eid* must also be sensed, so, the money is usually freshly printed new wads of currency, presented in a colourful envelop or another creative approach. This ensures the *Eidiyyah's* moral value rather than its monetary value. Kholoud[97] once gave her nieces and nephews a fresh 10 Kuwaiti Dinar bill, stapled and presented in a stack of quarters. Other well-known traditions during *Eid* are wearing new clothes, gifting sweets, visiting relatives, and going on collective trips to the cinema, amusement park, the zoo, aquarium, commercial centres and the like. Other Islamic holidays that encourage gatherings, gift reciprocity and hospitality include *Eid El-Mawlid El-Nabawi* (ʿīdu al-mawlid al-nabawī) that celebrates the birth of Prophet Mohammed, and the *Hijri* (hijrī) New Year that marks the beginning of a new Islamic lunar year. Satt (2017) specifically studied how stock market prices are significantly influenced by the approach of such religious holidays.

Besides the *Eidiyyah*, *Sadaqa* (ṣadaqah) or giving charity is another strong concept in Islam (Rosenthal & Gutas, 2014). In *Sadaqa*, one can give as they please in the amount they desire, which can be in forms of food, clothes, money, and the like. This hereby differentiates *Zakat* from *Sadaqa*, as *Sadaqa* has no pre-set quantity or time. This too is the purest most selfless gift of all, since it is believed that it can save a stranger from distress, thus purifying human beings from their sins[98] (Abdullah & Suhaib 2011; Dhar 2013).

Omar, a senior informant, explained how essentially Muslims have two festivities or *Eids* to exchange gifts, and correspondingly for Christians, those would be Christmas and Easter. His response suggests that gifts are only supposed to be exchanged on religious events when celebration is permitted. As for any other occasion, it is certainly not one for Muslims. He remains unaffected by the temptations of the West. In this sense, Valentine's Day does not correspond with Omar's Islamic beliefs and is not considered an event to

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[97] Kholoud is a 44-year-old married Lebanese female, moved to Kuwait by marriage in 2002.
[98] There exist comparable significances of selfless charities in Judaism and Christianity, which denote acts of righteousness and extraordinary deeds (Donin, 1972: 48). For example, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Charity (10: 7-14) explains that the act is of greater reward when it comes out selflessly without being asked or forced to do so, or begged from, because it is humiliating to the other person and causes hurt (Sefaria, n.d.). In the Bible, Luke (11: 41) explains that giving gifts with a good heart will surely have its reward, "So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you".

celebrate and be sharing gifts. Valentine's Day is frequently interpreted in Islamic terms. Muslims analyse Valentine's Day to understand whether it is religiously acceptable to celebrate, among many other western-originated occasions. Since the meaning of "love" can be easily distorted, celebrating Valentine's Day in Muslim communities could lead Muslims to think that Islam has accepted showing love physically and emotionally in non-marital relationships, which is not the case. Omar explained that the Muslim community should not blindly follow others but take a moment to think whether Valentine's Day is suitable for the reputation of Islam.

For many, Valentine's Day is an *invented*, man-made creation. It is simply a story, as Seba pointed out, like Romeo and Juliette, which eventually became a followed norm to celebrate annually. Bashar clarified, "calling Valentine's Day a feast means we have incorporated it in our religion, which is not true". The fieldwork therefore determines that Valentine's Day is a pageant practice, demeaned in Islam and does not match Kuwaiti or Arab traditions. It shows the strong role Islam possesses on the Kuwaiti society. In the West, Valentine's Day is not linked with religion at all. Even when Valentine's Day is an acknowledged western-originated occasion, it is not a *religious* Christian occasion, but was simply established from a Christian saint (Van Dyk, 2013). Logically, it was not mentioned in any religious book. This distinguishes Valentine's Day as a cultural gift-giving occasion rather than a religious one.

Although Omar's statement clearly restricted festivities to the two Muslim *Eids*, he still claimed that Valentine's Day's purpose is "to better social relationships". This shows that Islamic beliefs do not conflict with the essence of a certain occasion, as long as it is created for the right reasons that are not Islamically forbidden. Based on this, Omar considers Mother's Day and Father's Day far more appropriate occasions to celebrate. Conclusively, he believes that there are only two Islamic occasions to party, but also supports plenty of situations that require the exchange of gifts. Omar frequently surprises his wife with gifts, sometimes for reconciliation, and regularly brings back home a little something for his children, which can vary in value, from a mug to a laptop for instance.

It is crucial to acknowledge that Islam does not prohibit love any less than it prohibits dating, however it is conditioned to marriage (Rashid, 2017). The Islamic religion supports and ranks love as one of the top principles to follow, as per the teachings and characteristics of the Prophet Mohammed, who articulated love to his wives (Al-Shammari 2009: 31-69; Debas 2009; Naseem 2019), neighbours, companions, and fellows. In fact, Islam commands to communicate love, compassion and kindness towards others, and to *perform* everything with love and good intentions.

Nasir (1994) states that as per the Islamic law, gifts are only to be romantically exchanged with spouses, and returned to its owner when a marriage contract is legally broken or void. However, the Quran instructs differently. In matrimony, the Quran clarifies that if either party offered a gift at one point and afterwards there was separation or divorce, nothing presented to the other person before this incident should be taken away, no matter how valuable or insignificant it is. *Surat Al-Nisa'a* (4: 20) reads, "How would one take back something unjustly by slandering the other and committing a manifest wrong, when clearly the time and relationship have changed?". Gifted items remain in the possession of the receiver even after the marriage has ended because it would make no difference to the situation for the better. If anything, more gifts should be given to convince the reunion of the parties. It is also considered culturally rude to return a gift to the giver.

The Quran also orders to believe in all the other "Abrahamic faiths", or heavenly religions, their books and prophets, and not to make any distinction between them, as mentioned in *Surat Al-Baqarah* (2: 136) and *Surat Al-Nisa'a* (4: 152). Therefore, I would also like to embark on Prophet Moses' story, which revolves around favour-doing. *Surat Al-Qasas*, chapter 28 of the Quran, explains his story in detail. Precisely, I want to highlight the help that Prophet Moses offered to the Bedouin ladies in *Madyan*[99] after fleeing Egypt, for which he was later rewarded by their father (*Surat Al-Qasas*, 28: 23-28). Prophet Moses performed a selfless favour to people who were strangers to him. The Quranic verses contemplate that he helped the ladies for no apparent reason, and then went to sit under a

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[99] Historically mentioned in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible and the Quran, *Madyan* is a geographical area, the location of which, in our current day, would encompass the northwest Arabian Peninsula, southern Jordan (Gulf of Aqaba) and the Egyptian Sinai peninsula (Bosworth 1984; Dever 2003).

tree's shade, praying to God for any good to be bestowed upon him. This implies that even when doing such favour, it was not in Prophet Moses' intention to receive another favour in return. He had simply offered his unconditional help without being asked or obliged and above all, he did not expect it to be reciprocated. The ladies' father, however, still felt he had to thank and reciprocate Prophet Moses' act of kindness, which was not materialistic, expensive, or tangible. In a way, personally expressing gratitude is also considered a gift in Islam. Clearly, Prophet Moses was deemed deserving of the reward because the thoughtful, unselfish help he offered was a great aiding service to the *Madyan* ladies and a favour to their father. The Quran praises these selfless deeds; and not to be arrogant, self-deluding, or boastful only because charity or help has been given to those in need (*Surat Al-Nisa'a*, 4: 36). For these reasons, the gift according to Islam also includes a genuine gesture or a selfless service, just like the one Prophet Moses performed, which eventually brought him closer to the *Madyan* tribe as God's reward for him[100]. After all, this shows that doing a favour is certainly a gift, but only if performed out of good will and intention (consciously doing good), and not for an exchange of something else.

Intentions behind gifts are significant, as similarly portrayed by Mauss (2002: 81), "You have given gifts, but you have not given gifts of love, you have not given with a kindly heart". This can also somewhat relate to Marxism, a socioeconomic approach that began to emerge in the mid-19th century, which claims that value could be measured not by the worth of objects, but by the actions and efforts of individuals (Heyman, 2018). Along the same lines, Godelier's captivating studies about gift exchange were also based on Mauss' ideas. He links the significance of gifts in our current day to charity and social solidarity, while reflecting upon Durkheimian sociology, Marxism, religion, and psychology (Monaghan 2003: 411; Morrison 2006). Godelier (1999) dedicated the first chapter of his book, "The Enigma of the Gift", to honour Mauss' name, calling it "The Legacy of Mauss", and undergoes his own ethnographic experience in Melanesia. His conclusion was that the

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[100] He was then offered to marry one of the *Madyan* ladies, received a job and eventually revelation came to him to become known as *Kaleem Allah* (kalīm allāh), meaning the converser of Allah (*Surat Al-Nisa'a*, 4: 164; *Surat Al-A'raaf*, 7: 143; *Surat Al-Qasas*, 28: 26-30). These all represent the reward Allah bestowed on Prophet Moses for helping the ladies of *Madyan*.

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gift in the religions of many ancient state-level societies is a forever debt that a person owes to their God(s), in return for a dignified existence and respectable living conditions.

Throughout the years, the Islamic community has strived to demonstrate the true purpose of Islam, which is caring for one another by providing social services and sponsoring cultural activities (Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner, 2012: 13-14). Therefore, gift-giving is one way to boost affection, relieve distress, and select neighbourhood. And if the gift is one of the keys to the hearts, then as per Islamic teachings, it is also permitted to support, give and accept gifts with nonbelievers (Fierro, 1997: 88). In this sense, the gift in Islam can attract non-Muslims to the Islamic religion because it shows cooperation and stimulates invitation. Based on this, "winning someone" in Islam could refer to encouraging togetherness, bringing the distant closer, reaching out to outcasts and stimulating respect and acceptance between distinct groups of people, as defined in the Quran in *Surat Al-Tawbah* (9: 60). Similarly, whenever two parties or tribes are found in dispute or battle, one should reconcile between them, as explained in *Surat Al-Hujurat* (49: 9). That is why Prophet Mohammed advised people to guide and assist one another; to bring tribes together, hence the Arabic term for gift: *Hadiyya*, which stems from the word "guidance" (Hidāya). God has created diversity among mankind and describes this diversity in the Quran. *Surat Al-Hujurat* (49: 13) and *Surat Al-Roum* (30: 22) explain that God created various groups of people to get to know one another to acknowledge each other's differences. From this we can understand that the gift has wondrous and profound effects not only as a cultural practice but even in religion, as it extracts resentment and ill-will, making enmity disappear. Accordingly, gifts in Islam are a supplication for affinity, used to soften and purify hearts, to resolve conflicts and create or maintain harmony among individuals.

Despite being a country that materialises gifts, it was established from the fieldwork that symbolic gifts were favoured over expensive ones. The gift in Islam is defined as a sincere and selfless concept, as simple as offering blessings. Indeed, this shows that when you act in kindness and benevolence, love becomes an exchange with another person, and that is its truest form. I suspect that non-material gifts, like well-intentioned help and favours, as well as spending time with one another, can be more appreciated by people in Kuwait in

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the future, which determines the transformation of Kuwait's society. Anna for example was not a fan of material gifts. She commented how nowadays everyone has everything. She would rather reserve the pure essence of the gift and reciprocate non-material things. Anna prefers giving, and receiving, a symbolically valuable gift, like her love or time.

## 3.2    The Gift of Time

Time, a curious concept as a gift. Time as an intangible gift is rarely explored and barely mentioned in gift-giving literature. The "gift of life" is another understudied gift research area. The gift of life is the privilege to be alive, free, safe, healthy and loved, under no threat or fear. Other "gifts of life" include family, friends, animals, nature, food, the change of seasons and other blessings that exist (*Surat Al-Nahl*, 16: 18). Certainly, this also includes saving other people's lives, whether medically or physically (Bell, 2019a), and therefore granting them more time to live and a new perspective on life.

Time is the most important factor in our existence. It contains a personal history of who we were and how we lived. As for the gift of time, it is part of unconditional love. It means giving someone from your time, to make memories, to share an experience or an emotion together, to listen, to support, or simply to be there regardless of the circumstances. These are all concepts that build stronger relationships and contribute to the individual's well-being, which reflect Islamic community principles. Chan and Mogilner (2016) investigated types of gifts that best connect people, whether materialistic or experiential ones, evidently reckoning that people feel more chemistry and connection with the giver when being offered experiential intangible gifts[101]. This proves the validity of the well-known saying, "it's the thought that counts". I underline this point by showing that non-material gifts can also trigger reciprocation. Money and tangible products are obviously effective and useful, but is time also a worthwhile gift to offer someone?

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[101] As for tangible gifts, Paris (2015: 48) mentioned that the best gift during travels would be something from one's home country, as it delivers a piece of the giver's identity.

The gift of time appeared to be unrecognized yet highly valued in Kuwait. The chance of spending quality time with a significant other, a long-time friend, or a close relative, is desired and treasured, but not quite common. People are not sharing time with others as much as earlier years, so time has been replaced with giving gifts. In other words, gifts sometimes substitute the physical presence of a person in an occasion. With overwhelming work hours, duties and other responsibilities that cause chaos and hurry, families nowadays usually only get together on the two Islamic *Eids*, or on sporadic celebrations, such as a grandchild's first birthday, a graduation party, or other more serious circumstances such as a funeral. Since leading hectic lives, very little time is spared to other people. Therefore, time, when given to someone, is considered an irreplaceable and very precious gesture. In Tahani's opinion, meeting up outside of any occasion and spending some personal time with another person, to listen to them and support them, would be the best gift. With reference to the "best" gift, a study by Branco-Illodo and Heath (2020: 418) confirmed that, "the best gifts ever are often associated with unforgettable and life-changing experiences". Suzan similarly expressed that people must think about their overall gift message, so spending time with a specific person, sharing experiences and reinforcing sentimental memories would be more appreciated than offering a perishable item. These notions make the gift practice a successful one. Maier (2020) develops further ideas that encourage spending quality time with loved ones. Quality time includes sharing activities together such as hobbies or doing house chores. Nevertheless, people in Kuwait rarely consider spending time and sharing experiences together as an alternative for giving gifts.

As a collective society, Arabs in general always like gathering and planning events with each other, however this constitutes part of their social lifestyle, not gifts. For example, on a birthday, having a cup of coffee with someone or a planning a barbecue picnic is not considered a gift. A material, tangible gift would still be expected during those outings. Rashed expressed, "I do not see that they appreciate the concept of time. It is not an understandable concept. Time in the Arab world generally does not have a great value to consider it as a gift". Accordingly, the gift of time, although is a "good signal" and an obvious declaration of love and care, does not maximise total utility. Because the gift of time is not really comprehended in Kuwait, Qassem stated that even time management

seems to be a complicated issue. People frequently arrive late to meetings or even postpone it to a later date. This time management flaw has been also implied by Joanna who commented that, "if a Kuwaiti in a high position sits down with you and gives you their time, then this is an indication that you mean something to them". This suggests something in terms of men in the political or domestic sphere. Authoritative Kuwaiti figures, probably a *Wasta*, are mostly dominated by men. They seem to boost their ego by deciding who is worthy of their personal time. Being granted their time can therefore be viewed as a gift because of its scarce characteristic.

The above information determines that material, tangible items validate a gift in Kuwait and not sharing time, love or care. No matter how much a person would prefer or crave the company of other people, the material gift always seems to take a prevailing stance in the Kuwaiti society. Probably, Kuwait's culture disregards the gift of time, but time put into the tangible gift might be evaluated and appreciated. At this point, I tackle the gift of time from another perspective.

Since the gift of time is scarce and more material gifts are exchanged in Kuwait, I wonder whether the time put into the gift is appreciated and valued instead. Is receiving a gift that required a significant effort to find, or prepare for, as equally touching to the receiver?

Informants were asked about the time they take to choose gifts. The fieldwork revealed that time spent in gift search and purchase depends on the giver's personality, gender and age. In the younger age groups, more females than males demonstrated their deep attention to gift planning and decision-making. Abrar and Seba said they do not like to feel rushed into buying a gift, especially considering the variety of gift choices to pick from. The redundant options was a factor that impedes gift purchase and because of this, looking for a gift can start a month or two before the occasion for close relationships because it ought to be expensive, thoughtful and personal. This time frame ensures selecting the "best gift" and delivering sentimental value. Evidently, people in Kuwait strive to maintain bonds by showing care through gifts. On the other hand, if there is no strong relationship with the receiver, gift planning would be significantly reduced. Proving that relationship strength

directly affects gift purchase, Aseel[102] admitted that if it were for someone she does not know very well, the gift would be bought on the same day of the occasion. Brigham (1986: 322) explained that it is usual to offer inexpensive gifts to colleagues and acquaintances, whereas expensive or amorous gifts are believed more suitable among close friends, romantic interests, or relatives. However, to reiterate a point concluded in an earlier section, a strong relationship also means that the receiver would be equally as pleased with a symbolic gift, as suggested by Carrier (2012b), whilst in other circumstances it would be necessary to give a work colleague or an acquaintance an expensive gift, usually to boost ego and receive something (or a favour) in return.

Other than enough time, a pre-set budget is also necessary when considering an expensive gift. It also depends on when the salary is credited. Informants who considered the financials of the gift were not Kuwaiti. Living costs and expenses form an obstacle for immigrants and hinders the purchase of luxury items since they are at a disadvantage against Kuwaiti citizens who receive many benefits from the government. Chowdhury, Ratneshwar and Desai (2009) showed that when working on a budget, gift motives changed. A high budget makes individuals investigate more pleasure-seeking gift choices, causing to buy several low-priced gifts instead of just one costly item. Accordingly, a high budget indicates why Valentine gifts in Kuwait tend to include more than one item or gesture. Paris (2015: 46) however warns about over-budgeting for a gift. At some instances, something as simple as a hand-written card would be enough.

In Kuwait, monetary value is more important that the meaning of the gift. In this respect, the message communicated through the gift heeds at its financial worth to impress the receiver and maintain the relationship with them. This gives an idea about the role of the gift when monetisation was low in Kuwait, especially before the discovery of oil or during war. Mauss (1925) described the gift-giving practice as a system of economic benefits. A lack of resources and property in the past gave a greater appreciation and value to the gift. Strictly speaking, it represented the transfer of a good or a service to another. Gift exchanges occurred in forms of clan treasures, state property, land donations and charity,

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[102] Aseel is a 29-year-old single Canadian female of Egyptian origin, who grew up in Kuwait.

which did not only improve one's social status but also signified alliance between neighbouring families (Mayade-Claustre, 2002). Godelier (1999), in reference to Annette Weiner's insights, described these items as "unexchangeable" as they are sacred and crucial to identity and social reproduction. The *kula* and *potlatch* also aim towards similar objectives. Although cultural interpretations vary, the status of a specific family in a clan or village was not measured by the amount of their possessions, but instead by the amount they gave away. Therefore, the more lavish and bankrupting the *potlatch*, the more prestige gained by the host family. Values of generosity, unity and welcomeness are reinforced in these practices, where people make gifts to entire communities or families for a variety of complex reasons. Since land donations and other forms of gift exchange no longer take place due to the introduction of money and currency, this taught us today to measure our gift. Budgeting is now essential to buy expensive items to reach similar goals: alliance and togetherness. The literature is therefore continuously in conflict to whether the gift practice is a system of economics and politics or a social humanitarian activity.

Senior informants revealed similar patterns demonstrated in younger age groups. Two females, Amina and Mervat[103], explained that they would start preparing for a gift months before the occasion. They would normally buy something they see suitable no matter how early it is; "Christmas shopping can start as early as September!", Mervat disclosed. They also commented that gifts are bought regardless of an occasion; if something catches the eye, it is likely to be purchased. Furthermore, none of my senior informants mentioned the necessity to budget for a gift before selecting one.

However, middle-aged[104] informants, men and women alike, buy the first accessible gift they find a day before the occasion, or even at the last minute. Last minute purchases were connected to their hectic lives and busy, rigid schedules. This reflects why the gift of time is a rare concept in Kuwait. Tasks are frequently procrastinated because of jobs and occupations. Some of these informants have children and take care of their senior parents. We may judge that with age and more (financial) responsibilities, the pace of taking part

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[103] Mervat is a 64-year-old married Jordanian female, came to work in Kuwait in the 80s, currently lives in Jordan.
[104] Middle-aged informants are individuals between 36-50 years of age.

in gifting events tends to slow down. Selecting "the best gift" and intending to please the receiver was not mentioned, and only Bader from the age group stated the importance of a pre-set budget before buying a gift. Despite being Kuwaiti, Bader faces some personal issues which caused him to lose some citizenship benefits. This shows how difficulties arose to some Kuwaiti citizens as well, which in turn influenced the gift-giving practice. This also shows that social class in Kuwait is easily visible through the gift.

Kuwait's gifting habits revealed that relationship strength and identity of the receiver are crucial, which in turn affect search time and budget. The stronger the relationship, the higher the budget and the more time consumed on gift preparation, whereas the weaker the relationship, the less care and effort are put into the gift. Gift givers also try to convey the relationship value through the cost of the gift. In other words, a high-quality gift signifies that the receiver is very special. Moreover, in potential romantic relationships, Arab Muslim culture has conditioned gift-giving habits among men and women. It is probably taboo to reveal intimate feelings in a conservative society, so underlying feelings are delivered through items rather than communicated with words. This is when the gift comes in handy. The more desire and interest a person has in someone, the bigger and more expensive the gift becomes.

Kuwait's fieldwork found that young individuals and seniors have more time for gifting occasions. Findings also showed that women consume longer periods of time in gift hunting than men (Hoyer, et al., 2018). Male informants proved to be more subtle and uncomplicated when choosing gifts, whereas women prioritise the gift because they probably have more free time or are unemployed, which establishes gender values from an Arab Islamic perspective. Furthermore, regardless of home or work responsibilities, women *make* time to strengthen personal bonds and reach out to others. They then look for a positive reaction from the receiver that compliments their efforts. However, free time was almost non-existent for middle-aged informants, so they usually resort to last minute purchases, which can show negligence and would disappoint the receiver. Curiously, a factor that was overlooked by the informants was the receiver's gender. As per Shanka and Handley (2011), more time is needed to search for gifts for the opposite sex.

Time is significantly precious in Kuwait because of its scarcity in individual schedules. The gift of time, or giving someone time as a gift, was a debatable, unsupported concept. It is curious to understand whether the gift of time can exist in Kuwait's society albeit the repeated mentions of the materialistic gift. The common misconception in Kuwait is that the more (financially) valuable the gift, the more it expresses one's appreciation. The usual gesture is steered towards a lavish party, a fairy-tale-like evening, and splurging away with branded items. However, the gift's financial worth is not enough to determine the sincerity of relationships and gift-giving, as a complex part of human interaction, cannot always guarantee positive consequences. If people are unable to express their appreciation to others due to a lack of personal interaction, pricey gifts are unlikely to express that appreciation either. Receivers would be disappointed to realise that the giver had spent so much money on an undesired item. Receivers would then fake unbridled enthusiasm for something they will either donate or regift. Many receive expensive gifts and still feel underappreciated because they prefer something symbolic. Therefore, gifts do not express appreciation, people do. According to Kuwait's fieldwork, quality time needs to be reinforced, especially between family members. Gift-giving is certainly a strange custom (Mankiw, 2020). People in Kuwait have the time to pick a gift for a *Wasta*, but not the time to spend with someone special.

Favouring personal time over tangible gifts can also imply Bourdieu's notion of "disinterestedness". When critically analysing the interpretations of the gift in society, Bourdieu (1998: 90, 201) stresses his ideology of "disinterestedness" reflecting pure, autonomous, strictly cultural, or aesthetic concentrations resulting from capitalism and neo-liberalism. Bourdieu's general theoretical approach of "disinterestedness" in the gift reflects growing dilemmas and tensions to the point of self-contradiction, calling it the "double truth" (Silber, 2009: 173). The "double truth" in Kuwait's context occurs when receivers are not certain of the gift's truthful message since expensive gifts can be offered for false intentions. Additionally, receivers cannot accurately calculate the time and effort spent on gifts. Therefore, even when some informants admitted that they can spend months finding a suitable gift, receivers might be unable to measure sentimental value. Therefore, they prefer non-material gifts, like the gift of time, and symbolic gifts, like books and

clothing items, to reserve the core of personal relationships, pure intentions, trust and loyalty.

From a different perspective, Kuwait's culture and wealth suggest that material gifts are expected to satisfy societal expectations. Jacques Derrida, in opposition with Bourdieu, argued that as soon as people acknowledge that an exchange will occur, the gift loses its disinterested dimension (Silber, 2009: 180). Derrida and Marion (1999: 67) declared, "I am ready to give up the word [gift], since this word is finally contradictory". Derrida's views reveal constant curiosity of the gift, no matter its financial worth or its underlying message. Tangible gifts in Kuwait are appreciated because they demonstrate significant amount of time and effort. Accordingly, intangible gifts are disregarded and receivers might lose interest in the relationship.

Evidently, the gift of time, whether demonstrated through the gift or shared with people, is strongly desired in Kuwait, no matter how rare it is. The fieldwork established that while material, thoughtful gifts cannot substitute time spent with the person, time spent on pursuing them is appreciated instead. The relationship would then endure and collective community goals would be achieved. Kuwait's gift-giving practice and values might change in the years to come. More people might realise the significance of the gift of time and the cruciality of maintaining bonds with people. These things cannot be bought with material wealth. In the end, unity and alliance are recommendations of the Quran to the Islamic community (*Surat Al-Imraan*, 3: 103).

## 3.3    Surprise Gifts

As Mauss suggested, a selfless gift is offered without a purpose, without a motive and most importantly, without a foreseen event or occasion. Selfless gifts do not fall under any calendar-marked date where gifts are expected, such as anniversaries, Valentine's Day, and birthdays. This subdivision elucidates that not only expensive occasion gifts exist in Kuwait but also those that come spontaneously. Furthermore, with aims of encouraging historical consciousness, we must look at the past to understand present-day realities, thus

developing a framework about the historical meaning of the gift in Kuwait. This subdivision therefore also forms an understanding about gift changes throughout generations, identifying the essence of peoples' gift-giving habits in Kuwait.

Giving gifts "just because"; for no underlying reason represents tactical motives, which involves satisfying feelings of pleasure, security, or escape (Belk 1995; Saad & Gill 2003; Hume 2013). When the gift is spontaneous and unplanned, it signifies care, love and other powerful sentiments, as Belk and Coon (1993: 410) described, "buying from the heart instead of the head". Kaell (2012) revealed that giving gifts from time to time without an occasion apparently boosts the spiritual welfare of others. Moreover, when a gift is unexpected and still satisfies the needs of the receiver, it indicates shared history and good knowledge of their preferences (Belk & Coon 1993; Areni, Kiecker & Palan 1998; Robles 2012). Consequently, the unexpected gift is thoughtful; therefore, successful and appreciated by the receiver (Francisco, et al., 2015).

While unexpected gifts or surprise gifts are especially by receivers, they also build feelings of pleasure and excitement for givers. Good product deals and brand names are less important when buying surprise gifts. They are often bought on the spot, called an impulse purchase, where less information is sought, and less time is consumed in planning as compared to ordinary gifts. Surprise gifts, since bought on the spot, tend to be very symbolic and trivial, satisfying feelings of pleasure. The giver therefore takes a bigger risk, so the surprise gift should include a refund or an exchange option. Unfortunately, however, topics such as the giver's intention to surprise and consequences of surprise gifts were not thoroughly studied in previous literature (Vanhamme & De Bont, 2008). Despite this, surprise gifts emerged numerous times from my fieldwork's conversations, which revealed that it is a rather common practice in Kuwait. They represent pure and symbolic forms of gifting, just like the "gift of time" and the "gift in Islam" explained in the preceding subdivisions.

Several concepts of "surprise" were established from my fieldwork. As acknowledged earlier, the first concept of surprise lies within the wrapping[105]. The second concept of surprise related to the receiver's feelings of astonishment and joy. Tarek's[106] objective is to choose a gift that would astound the receiver, and this allows him to witness their reaction. Qassem explained that he often buys surprise gifts for no underlying reason but to share an enjoyable experience. He particularly likes the humour in surprise gifts; making the receiver laugh. People sometimes catch the receiver's reaction on camera to create a special memory. Giving a gift for no reason can therefore be a way to cheer someone up; to offer support and care. Both Seba and Tahani called this, "the most beautiful gift". My fieldwork showed that surprise gifts carry extraordinary feelings as they hold a greater meaning. Rashed explained, "a gift for an occasion, is like an obligation to get it. But when there is no occasion, it would strengthen the relationship with the person and makes them feel worthwhile, that this person has remembered me".

Although giving surprise, unsolicited gifts are considered more thoughtful and genuine by receivers (Gino & Flynn, 2011), it does not mean that they liked the gift or that the right gift choice was made. The economic theory of total utility can hereby achieve two spectrums, the utility derived from the gift itself, and the utility obtained from being surprised (Kapteyn, 1985). Despite the good intention behind surprise gifts, poorly chosen items that do not meet expectations would be a bad surprise and can disappoint receivers, ultimately lowering total utility. On a different note, if someone receives something they already wanted, surprise utility would be at the lower end of the spectrum. For example, a teenager who desperately wants the latest video game would not be surprised to receive it. Under those conditions, a cash gift would not be a bad idea because it would contribute to total utility and help in buying their video game. Accordingly, gift givers should decide on the utility they want to satisfy more, consumption utility or surprise utility.

Given the visibility and necessity of the gift in Arab Islamic societies like Kuwait, Seba claimed that Arab women are especially fond of surprise gifts because it makes them feel worthy and recognised by their significant other. They are reassured of their relationship

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[105] Refer to section: Gifts shaped by the Kuwaiti culture.
[106] Tarek is the youngest informant. He is a 17-year-old single Jordanian male, born and raised in Kuwait.

because the gift was not subject to any event, so it must have come from the heart. This satisfies feelings of security. Assumingly, Arab women prefer to be shown gratitude and validity through tangible items instead of words of affirmation or affection. Moreover, men also offer surprise gifts to women for reconciliation, to avoid an unfavourable argument. This satisfies feelings of escape, escaping from certain trouble (Minowa & Gould, 1999).

Joanna clarified that surprise gifts are given to someone you truly care about, "I would say that this happens mostly in either families or in romantic relationships because you have that philanthropic or unconditional type of love for them". Joanna has ruled out providing surprise gifts to superficial relationships, such as one's *Wasta*, co-workers or recent acquaintances. Accordingly, gifts for superficial relationships are usually only given during marked occasions to save face, or to ask for something in return, like a favour or a promotion. However, I would like to point out a conclusion from the "Gift in Islam" subdivision and argue that surprise gifts are also to be given for people with whom you feel conflicted. Furthermore, the Quran, in reference to Prophet Moses' story, implies to demonstrate generosity even to strangers, and not to be stingy, as demonstrated in many chapters such as *Surat Al-Nisa'a* (4: 37).

Despite the fieldwork showing the appreciation for voluntary surprise gifts, results revealed that there are always motives in doing so. For example, surprise gifts would be given to cheer someone up, to apologise, to restore a lost friendship or to clarify a misunderstanding. All these motives indicate an obligation to give a gift. Surprise gifts exist in Kuwait because givers feel they owe the receiver something. Based on this, Mauss (1925; 2002: 3) claimed that gifts are obligatory, which are often disclaimed and mistrusted. This supports the theory of Bronislaw Malinowski (1926) that the gift has an egoistic nature and a materialistic self-interest. An unexpected gift that comes without reason, or "out of the blue", should be given when the relationship is going completely well. It should not represent any self-gain, interest, or occasion, in other words, it should not be the definition of a Malinowski gift (Parry, 1986). Also, my fieldwork found that surprise gifts in Kuwait are largely associated with the concept of giving something without an *occasion*, rather than without a *motive*, which in turn does not fully match Mauss' terms of a purely selfless gift. Gifts, in theory, are voluntary because they should not involve any sort of stipulation.

They are given to show gratefulness and respect. However, when there are underlying motives, such as reconciliation after a quarrel, the person on the receiving end might already expect some sort of compensation, so the gift better be something they desired from the beginning. Conclusively, surprise gifts are those given without an occasion *and* without a motive. Apart from this, ambiguities in surprise gifts develop an uncertainty of reciprocation due to their nature of being non-anticipated. Kuwait's culture has strong reciprocation expectations; therefore, surprise gifts should be planned carefully to avoid disappointment. This once again reflects time ambiguities of return gifts previously explained by Sahlins (1972) and Bourdieu (1977).

The third concept to surprise gifts related to past and present meanings. Older informants claimed that gifts in the past already carried the "element of surprise" within them. Any gift was a surprise gift primarily because there were limited events that allowed to exchange gifts as compared to today. As an uncommon, unexpectable practice among people, there was more focus on social relationships, as Tahani mentioned. On that note, I reckon that the gift of time was probably more prevalent during the former years. This shows that by studying history, interpersonal relationship values can be distinguished.

Most importantly, it was because people lived in a time of war and experienced crucial financial limitations due to economic disruptions. Before the popularity of Valentine's Day and even before oil wealth and affluence revolutionised the lifestyle in Kuwait, people lived in poor conditions and struggled to make ends meet, especially during Iraq's invasion in 1990. The sorrow, mental exhaustion and fear immobilised people. There was no time to dedicate to the gift, let alone celebrate it. Other essentials were worthier of people's time and money, such as food and caring for children. This information suggests that before Kuwait's welfare was visible, keeping up with daily expenses was difficult, so gift-giving was risky. Therefore, the concept of the gift was idolised for its sacred nature. Gifts in Kuwait have evolved radically ever since, providing new insights into their meaning and value.

Even informants who spent their childhood in other Arab countries like Lebanon, Egypt, or Syria, also relate to tough war times and major upheavals in financial markets. These

circumstances made the "wartime gift" a rare and surprising concept. People thought less of the gift since very little money can be spent. Kholoud mentioned that buying a gift required "a great economic effort where any small detail would be a big surprise because people had the minimum indispensable". The unexpected gift turned into a more genuine, precious, and heart-felt gesture, as Nahla[107] described. When remembering the so-called "simpler" times, the winning idea behind the gift was its overall significance and thoughtful intentions. Khodor[108] reflected on his parents' reaction in the past. When they received a gift, they considered it as a prize. Struggling with money and poor mental well-being during times of war made the simplest of things a great treasure, like food, clean water, clothing, security and safety.

People lacked things and were unable to provide for themselves, therefore usually, the gift represented desperately needed or desired items which compensated what was missing from everyday life. Informants from differing age groups, like Tahani, Mahmoud and Amal, described gifts in the past as symbolic, meaningful, and simple, such as a soap bar, a bag of sugar, or a homemade cake. This implies that gifts did not require a pre-set budget or effort. Assumingly, during times of war, people shared similar financial backgrounds and therefore the necessities were similar. This also suggests that luxury items were hardly ever exchanged in Kuwait during wartime or before the discovery of oil.

Gifts in the past were merely rituals. They were punctual and exchanged on very concrete dates. People waited patiently for an occasion in hopes of receiving something they desire. Certainly, it would be a big surprise if the anticipated item would be the one they received. Fares[109] said, "Before, it [the gift] was something that you would receive with a lot of hope, or expectations, or feeling of joy and satisfaction. Now it is more just to meet the day". His comment, "To meet the day" implies that the gift has become predictable on pre-set occasions and is only given to satisfy social and societal expectations. Fares finds that gifts in our current day no longer hold a surprising factor filled with anticipation. The gift nowadays resembles completing a task; rarely is it given for no reason. Surely, gifts were

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[107] Nahla is the oldest informant. She is a widowed 87-year-old Kuwaiti female.
[108] Khodor is a 36-year-old single Belgian male of Algerian origin, came to work in Kuwait in 2012.
[109] Fares is a 55-year-old married Egyptian male, came to work in Kuwait in the 90s.

profoundly cherished and valuable, unlike today when they are becoming excessive, as Khodor claimed, "more habitual, less surprising". Nowadays, gifts are given for everything and nothing, "even for achieving a high mark", as Omar expressed. People can turn anything into a praiseworthy accomplishment that deserves a reward. In addition, gifts are now mostly given in hopes of receiving something in return, it represents a selfish characteristic. Bashar explained that reciprocation has become an obligatory matter in Kuwait's society because people would get upset if someone did not take part in an occasion and offered a (expensive) gift. As implied, marked dates like Valentine's Day promote exchange of tangible items while overlooking the true role of the gift, that is showing care towards others. The increasing number of commercialised events that we notice today only "promotes consumption" in Tarek's opinion, ultimately ending up devaluing the gift's significance. Accordingly, "the element of surprise" in gifts is slowly fading throughout generations.

During the period of post-war, the situation calmed down. Maha[110] remarked that it was only after her parents had retired and started receiving their pensions, that they slowly started dedicating more time into making and giving gifts.

The surprise factor in gifts was a plus to my research but is unfortunately becoming very scarce since gifts became normalised and more expected. The above information shows that the meaning of "surprise gifts" has changed throughout generations. Fieldwork results found that younger individuals relate differently to objects than older ones. Carrier (2012a) clarified that this happens because people had developed a different impersonal experience with gifts and products in 20th century culture. Younger informants recognise that there are hidden motives to gifts when they are given spontaneously. Their unexpected nature can represent alternative ways to apologise and ease the giver's guilt. Moreover, they can be a way to gain affection or ask for a favour. The gift hereby creates important social cues.

On the other hand, older informants reflected on a war era when speaking about surprise gifts. From a historical viewpoint, war factors are very important to consider but were

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[110] Maha is a 61-year-old married Lebanese female, who moved to Kuwait in the 80s.

poorly mentioned in gift literature. Wartime gifts during collective occasions like Christmas for example were rare and therefore surprising, a description that was missing from earlier studies. Even wrapping paper was scarce. Gifts were usually wrapped in cheap, low-quality brown paper, newspaper or sheets of cloth (Castelow, n.d.; Imperial War Museums, n.d.). Back then, total utility was not sought as much as surprise utility, any item was perceived to come in handy. In short, the gift positively influenced mental health during times of war. Therefore, older individuals today seek the surprise utility in gifts because of what they meant in the past. They represented scarce, few, necessary and exceptional items that often couldn't be afforded. They were given impulsively and required more thought from the head, more work from the hands and less money spent. They were dearly treasured and people held onto them for a long time. Gifts were rendered to feel excitement, elation, and appreciation, and surprises did not influence relationships. I believe that the older generation still generally perceives gifts as valuable treasures that would always leave them in awe because of the life they lived and because of their childhood experiences. Apparently, the constant subconscious idea of lacking or struggling with money, which served as an imprint rooted from their history, has impacted their current lifestyle. Therefore, for them, gift budgeting is not important, as concluded earlier[111]. This today contradicts gift exchange occasions in Kuwait, which are celebrated to bring out the "richness" of the population and to boast individual wealth. This demonstrates the changes of Kuwait's society, thanks to the meaning of the gift, a clever way to explore how societies change within cultural encounters, globalisation and increased production and welfare. I question whether gifts will always be viewed as simple and more sentimental during the earlier years compared to the time we live in now. In other words, I ponder whether the coming generation would look back on gifts of the 21st century and describe them as symbolic, valuable, and non-materialistic.

From this subdivision, and from a historical point of view, we can establish that gift experiences were not very evident in the past and this shows that lavish gift-giving in Kuwait is a recent practice. It certainly draws attention to the contemporary notion of objects in the 21st century. It is customary to give gifts on certain occasions but giving

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[111] Find the priority of budgeting among different age groups in "The Gift of Time".

spontaneous gifts stand for tokens of appreciation and I believe can contribute to the gift of time because the person has thought of the receiver outside an occasion and spent from their time and effort to surprise them. Additionally, surprise gifts relate to the significance of the gift in Islam, to be given motiveless, without occasion, and regardless of who the person is. The real generosity is to do something delightful for someone without their knowledge. Above all, this is a strong "signal" of thoughtfulness rather than a societal obligation (Walczak 2015: 506; Mankiw 2020). It shows that the pleasure is in the giving not in the reaction of the receiver. An unexpected gift should demonstrate the pure, selfless characteristic that resembles something we once had in the past: a treasure.

## 4. Gifting in the Time of Corona

This section studies the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on gift-giving practices in Kuwait, and how they differ from other neighbouring countries in the Middle East. It speaks about the technologies and selling platforms that have facilitated buying and sending gifts directly (Vidovic, 2019). As part of the globalised world and Valentine's Day festivity, the success of ecommerce businesses shaped new roles for the gift in the Kuwaiti society. This in turn has enhanced traditional gift ideas that undoubtedly influenced the economy. This section will first define the gift during a pandemic and second will identify a change (if any) in gifting practices and motives. Due to travel restrictions which suspended ethnographic fieldwork (Buxo i Rei & González Alcantud, 2021), some informants were recontacted virtually to realise the implications of the pandemic on social practices and relationships in Kuwait. Beyond any particular geographic setting, understanding the effects of the pandemic on interpersonal relationships and social customs also contributes to theoretical conversations about the gift. In terms of a global pandemic, this area has not yet been thoroughly investigated.

Social media and selling platforms play a very influential role in Kuwait. They are mediums to share information, spread awareness, promote products, and facilitate exchange. It is considered the easiest, fastest method of knowledge acquisition and purchase. The ecommerce industry had developed shopping experiences and became tremendously successful because of the increasing rate of return customers. Furthermore,

geolocation, socialisation and customisation are concepts that have extended because of the competitive advantage that online methods enjoy, which in turn have changed lives and habits (Coy 2013; World Trade Organization 2020). According to the fieldwork, social media has also given opportunities to open side businesses stemmed from individual hobbies and interests.

As a fieldwork implication, the internet is considered as a marketing mechanism to encourage consumption and sale in Kuwait. Products have become very accessible, and the entire purchasing process has evolved into a simpler, much easier one. Therefore, social networks and platforms are additional ways to commercialise products and to spread trends, to achieve marketing and profit goals.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the gifting industry had already been flourishing. There were many online businesses in Kuwait that received gift requests. The gifts would be customised to be wrapped, shipped, and delivered to relative available destinations. Abrar argued that the gift-giving practice has become drastically easier, thanks to technology and the internet. Gift varieties, options, selection and delivery have never been so convenient. With the help of the internet, people are only a click away to compare prices and evaluate brands. Many people use this option when sending gifts for parents, relatives and friends who live abroad, like sending a cake or a bouquet of flowers on Mother's Day for instance (Coy, 2013). It is a thoughtful gesture that also possesses the element of surprise because of the receiver's unawareness of getting a gift. The internet also introduced online gift cards or vouchers for restaurants, coffeehouses, and numerous online retail shops, which are especially popular among teenagers and young adults. This explains the success of online retail businesses in the 21st century.

Accordingly, young individuals use their time gift shopping online to show love to their family and friends. In Kuwait, young female informants use the internet to identify market trends. It helps them realise their gift options and broaden their product knowledge, and possibly compare different vendor prices as well. This means that sometimes, a person would consider a completely different item that was not in mind before, just because of how popular it is – a "trend". Abrar viewed online options especially beneficial when

looking for gifts for children, while Anna expressed that the internet particularly influences her gifting decisions about clothes or jewellery. Tahani even uses gift ideas from the internet and implement or "copy" them using her own accessible (cheaper) resources at home. This reflects on traditional handmade gifts which are considered a better alternative than those being advertised. It is a gesture that demonstrates effort and time put into the gift, which holds greater sentimental value and therefore signifies that the gift had come from the heart. The internet represents a beneficial advantage for younger age groups as they become more aware of alternative "non-conventional" gift ideas, helping them stand out as creative gift givers.

The fieldwork therefore revealed that older age groups[112] would not turn to online gifting options due to their unfamiliarity with such practice and their limited knowledge of the internet and technology. They are not influenced by social media or the internet because they cannot relate to this buying behaviour. They proposed the concept of convenience. It is more convenient for them to buy something from a place close to where they live than to search for it online and waste their time. Older informants preferred to stay in their comfort zones where they feel more secure. They showed they are distrusting of online platforms that impose many risks. For example, sharing banking information with a nonphysical business is a suspicious operation, as they are aware of the possibility of fraudulent ecommerce websites. This shows resistance to change old habits. It is defined as "the safety of the familiar" that is found common not only among human beings but also in businesses and workplaces. This similarly applies to celebrating Valentine's Day since it also suggests a change of habit. Bourdieu (1969) discusses in his theory of Habitus that people usually accumulate a hard-to-change, widely regular set of habits, which they learn from social environments and experiences. Through their repeated use, these habits become critical individual traditions, making people act in predictable ways though not following conscious rules. Many studies have been dedicated to uncover why people refrain from changing, or even trying to change, known habits and practices. In fact, changing habits was shown to improve individual moral, business efficiency and status (Dudovskiy 2012; Struijs 2012; Horvat & Perkov 2013). According to this information, older individuals are

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[112] Above 36 years of age.

less likely to resort to online gift options during a pandemic but would rather think of ways to acquire the item within their given circumstances and financials.

In Kuwait, online gift registries and platforms are found on many mobile applications and websites and have become a profitable business across the country. Services include selection, customisation, and delivery of gifts. Another option is creating a wish list, where desired gifts are chosen beforehand for others to view, pick from and deliver. This strategy is time efficient and decreases the giver's risk of choosing a wrong gift. It is arguable, however, that when a gift is already specified, there would not be as much thought or effort and would not have the same impact on the receiver. The element of surprise would be eliminated thus weakens the essence of the gift. Furthermore, since it is a very broad gift approach, the strength of the relationship between the parties is difficult to determine. Since social relationships play a major role in gift-giving, and vice versa, it is questionable how this "easier" method of gifting would contribute to personal relationships, or as discussed earlier, to resolve a conflict. Physical presence, voice and touch certainly complements a gift. Online gifts would not bestow the same effect as compared to those presented in person. It is however a thoughtful "signal" and alternative for those who live in different countries and want to mark their presence on a specific (special) day, especially during a global pandemic when any social contact is needed and appreciated.

Online gifting by gender has mimicked the overall results of traditional "in-person" gifting[113]. In Kuwait, it seems that more women would turn to online gifting than men. This shows that women relate differently to gifts and have a special emotional connection with them. Throughout the past decade, women have been found to purchase more gifts and donate more money than men (WPI 2015; PEW Research Center 2019; Vidovic 2019; Travers 2020). Then, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, women overall have shown more enthusiasm than men in embracing online gifting, according to a research from the Women's Philanthropy Institute (2020). Studies conducted on certain charity centres also

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[113] Refer to the section: Dating and Romantic Relationships: Gender roles and gift expectations in an Arab Islamic country.

showed an increase in online financial donations and contributions during the pandemic (Travers 2020; WPI 2020).

Technology has widely impacted gifts in our current day. The internet has introduced people to new, useful gift ideas and business accounts. Gift exchange was realised an excellent method to connect with others during the COVID-19 pandemic (World Trade Organization, 2020). Sending gifts has been shown to be significantly efficient during periods of enforced lockdown and visit restrictions to grandparents and people at high risk of infection. Buying gifts online as an established trend showed a growing percentage from 2019 to 2020 (Travers, 2020). Sullivan (2020) found that this was especially common among people between the ages of 15 and 39. However, although sending gifts during a pandemic was an easy task, overlooked expenses and risks were faced, such as shipping charges and border closures. Nevertheless, these technologies were not solely methods for ecommerce or buying gifts. In 2020, many concepts began to be perceived differently. Establishing a digital connection without personally meeting people alleviated some of the challenges faced in combatting the virus, such as the closure of public spaces, working remotely, social distancing and inability to travel (World Trade Organization 2020; Silberner 2020). Emotional and physical gaps were able to be bridged since staying in touch with loved ones during the pandemic was not an impossible task. The internet has facilitated this objective and helped bring families together albeit behind a screen. According to the World Trade Organization (2020: 1), COVID-19 has "ramped up online shopping, social media use, internet telephony and teleconferencing, and streaming of videos and films". This would have been certainly unfeasible had the pandemic occurred in the 80s or 90s.

The difficult self-isolation, quarantine period in 2020 carried several traditional gifting events in Kuwait, such as Mother's Day, Easter, and Father's Day. That period also witnessed the month of Ramadan and the first Islamic *Eid* of the year, *Eid Al-Fitr*. It was challenging for Muslims to maintain the spirit of these pious occasions, and to sustain a positive, united and above all religious experience within their families. Ramadan, the month of fasting, prayer and reflection, passed melancholically on the Muslim community of Kuwait considering the closure of mosques and restrictions to visit family members in

other neighbourhoods. Therefore, many social, traditional, get-together rituals during Ramadan, such as the celebration of *Gergean*[114] (qirqiʿān), occasional *ghabgat*[115] (ḡabqah) and *fotour*[116] (fuṭūr) invites could not be done.

Considering a far longer lockdown period and de-escalation phase than in other countries, as well as excessive curfews (Gasana & Shehab, 2020), Kuwait's shops remained closed until the end of *Eid Al-Adha*, which fell on the beginning of August 2020. The long-time tradition of visiting elders, sharing food, exchanging *Eidiyyah*, buying and wearing new clothes, and offering sweets and gifts during *Eid* was highly challenging. This also meant that the religious duty of *Hajj* (al-ḥajj: one of the five pillars of Islam) was highly unlikely to take place as a usual practice. To perform the journey of *Hajj* is reckoned as a fundamental dream to many Muslims, and a precious asset for those who had already performed it. It signifies the solidarity of Muslims by stripping away all indications of social status, wealth, and pride in terms of clothing, accessories and jewellery. Above all, the duty of *Hajj* represents an annual opportunity for Muslims to repent and faithfully worship their creator (Gatrad & Sheikh 2005; Davids 2006; Clingingsmith, Khwaja & Kremer 2009; Ascoura 2013). Because of the virus, their wishes had to be postponed. In 2020 and 2021, Saudi Arabia announced the decision not to receive any international pilgrims to prevent the spread of the virus. Instead of around 2 million Muslims visiting Mecca, Saudi Arabia had to accept only a few thousand citizens and residents from inside the kingdom, as it was not prepared to compromise the safety and health of its visitors. The duty was performed in an abnormal manner[117], as health protocols were issued regarding usage of prayer rugs, touching the *Kaaba*[118] (al-kaʿbah) and the *Hajar Al-Aswad*[119] (al-

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[114] A social festivity that takes place during the month of Ramadan (usually between the 14th and 16th day of Ramadan), which typically involves knocking on neighbourhood doors for the exchange of sweets, celebrated by children with the help of their parents.
[115] A shared meal served late at night, which takes place between *fotour* (the meal that breaks the fast at sunset) and *suhour* (suḥūr: the meal before starting the fast at dawn).
[116] The meal that breaks the fast at sunset, also known as *iftar*. The terms generally mean the first meal of the day or breakfast.
[117] This evidently has happened before during the plague and cholera infectious diseases (Al Khatib, 2020).
[118] The *Kaaba* is a cuboid-shaped shrine made of stones. It is the direction of prayer for Muslims and the building that pilgrims walk around during *Hajj*. It is located at the centre of Islam's most important mosque, *Al-Masjid Al-Haram* (al-masjid al-ḥarām) in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It is the most sacred site in Islam.
[119] Arabic for The Black Stone. It is a stone set into the corner of the *Kaaba* encased with silver, revered by Muslims as a sacred Islamic relic. Part of *Al-Hajj* ritual is to stop and touch or kiss the stone.

ḥajaru al-ʾaswad) and mandatory social distancing (Al Jazeera 2020; Karadsheh & Qiblawi 2020; BBC News 2020a; 2020b). With COVID-19 restrictions, the practice resembled a disciplined military rather than a unity of Muslims. This serious pandemic situation has changed ritualised Islamic holidays and their significance and it is still unclear when life will return to its normal state[120].

During the second half of 2020, with the approach of popular gift exchange occasions, such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year, people were still urged to keep their distance and opt for gifts that can be sent online during the health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic posed a further obstacle to the reunification of families, as country borders remained closed and authorities had scaled down their local activities. Most travel plans were put on hold and so traditional gifting holidays took on a different form. Everything along the lines of social gatherings with older family members, hosting at-home festive meals, food gifts, trick-or-treating, holiday shopping, and collectively wrapping presents, which are all lifelong customs of celebration, seemed to have an unusual aspect in 2020.

The global pandemic had therefore caused an elevated creativity in the gift industry. Numerous blogs and reports were created to suggest virtual gift ideas that can be delivered with zero contact and still provide a sentimental emotion during the quarantine and self-isolation months (Baillie 2020; Sullivan 2020). It was recommended to consider gifting an experience rather than a tangible product during the holiday season since the virus had not been contained yet. Gifting no longer meant giving away a product or an object, but rather offering something memorable which respected the ethical aspect of the gift. The pandemic has therefore encouraged sustainable gifting. Less raw materials are consumed since online experiences do not require gift wrapping, delivery, or human workforce (Baillie, 2020). Experiential gifts are cherished over tangible items since they are more effective in improving relationships and can foster more grounded connections. Receivers therefore become emotionally evocative as these experiences are more likely to contribute to well-being and memory than physical things (University of Toronto 2016; Chan & Mogilner 2016). Exchanging experiences online were used to reinforce happiness and solidarity

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[120] Occasional mobility restrictions, closure of the airport, curfews and limiting in-person gatherings in Kuwait sustained throughout the year 2021.

during the pandemic. It points out how the Kuwaiti gift has changed. When the pandemic began, gift principles and values that were previously impacted by rich Kuwaiti culture have turned into symbolic gestures of appreciation and support.

Online sales were logically deemed to rise since very few stores were open during the lockdown period. Shipping and timing suddenly became two important factors that impacted buying decisions. COVID-19 has considerably impacted consumer shopping practices and boosted retail ecommerce, generating a billion-dollar industry in the digital economy (Sullivan, 2020), even after the reopening of physical stores and self-isolation not being mandatory anymore. The ongoing social distancing further created an increase in demand. Online buying is expected to further increase substantially as people arrange their gifting from home.

Convenient gift options during the quarantine included greeting e-cards, where wishes could be typed down and signed by several people online to be sent to the receiver[121]. Another gift that the receiver can immediately enjoy is one that supports their hobbies, such as a digital subscription for video streaming services, e-books, audiobooks, online cookbooks, and a variety of online classes (Baillie, 2020). Other gift experiences during the pandemic included gym membership trials which can be used online or once normal life resumes. This fills the receiver with hope for the future. An exceptionally clever gift idea that stood out was gifting online medical consultations with health specialists and doctors. The gift giver would think about the interests of the receiver with regards to health and well-being and then offer them a consultation with a professional. Personally, I have seen friends gifting others breastfeeding, childcare and psychological online counselling sessions during the COVID-19 restrictions. Consequently, the receiver develops an emotional attachment to these gifts which can be used frequently.

As shown, offering experiential and environment-friendly gifts is a feasible task when store browsing is ill-timed in a global pandemic era. The pandemic gave a grand incentive and opportunity for businesses to consider offering their products and services online, contact-

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[121] However, holiday greeting cards and gift cards that can be shipped or virtually sent online can be viewed as a less personal gesture.

less. Most importantly, every shop, bar and restaurant should now strive to develop their digital gift card strategy. In 2021, in the United States, restaurant vouchers, store discounts and free beer were gifts offered to encourage people to get vaccinated against the virus, as informed by Joanna and Hisham.

Along the lines of gifting medical consultations and psychological counselling sessions, there is plenty of evidence that showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected physical health, but also emotional and mental well-being. It is vital to reflect on the influence of the pandemic on the state of mind (Bhaumik, Dasgupta & Paul 2020; World Health Organization 2020; The Lancet Infectious Diseases 2020; Vich 2020; Schäfer, et al. 2020; Adiukwu, et al. 2020). The state of alarm, lockdown, travel immobility and strict curfews, along with numerous deaths in families, influenced mental health. The COVID-19 pandemic has gravely injured the world's economy, trade, and development (UN 2020; CCSA 2020). Serious consequences to this were high rates of unemployment and therefore poor financial conditions on national terms (ILO 2020a; 2020b; Kalenkoski & Pabilonia 2020; Burhamah, et al. 2020; Falk, et al. 2021). Furthermore, women were faced with limited job opportunities, bringing back gender discrimination and inequality issues in the Arabian Peninsula (Khamis & Campbell, 2020). Post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, social disconnection, and the phobia of gathering with people, were common psychiatric problems derived from the pandemic. According to a study conducted in Jordan, social relationships were negatively affected to a high degree (Naser, et al., 2020). Social distancing and security measures had affected peoples' perception of sympathy towards others. Most exposed groups were children, college students, frontline workers and those stranded abroad away from their home countries (Pfefferbaum & North 2020; Saladino, Algeri & Auriemma 2020). All these factors have caused the pandemic to resemble a situation of war, in this case a biological war instead of a political one (Summers 2020; Bernhard 2020).

Most countries were unprepared for such drastic change of lifestyle. It was necessary that governments and relative authorities provided educational campaigns that can better sociological health. Creating online gifting platforms given these circumstances was not the priority. From this perspective, digital mental health services were created in several

Arab countries to aid people and decrease the negative effects of the pandemic using telepsychology and technological devices, hotlines and messaging facilities (Saladino, Algeri & Auriemma 2020; El Hayek, et al. 2020). Still, mental health services remain very limited in the Middle East (UN: ESCWA, 2016: 28). Considering all the above hardships and outcomes of the pandemic, gift exchange should have contrarily decreased because people were focused on other matters and had the minimum to spend and consume.

From this perspective, Yara Hawari and Rosita Di Peri studied Middle Eastern conflict zones, particularly Lebanon and Palestine, during the COVID-19 pandemic[122]. Di Peri remarks that the geographics of countries should be studied along with their political, economic and geopolitical contexts. She explained how the lockdown in Lebanon caused the border with Syria to close, a long-time trading place of food and goods after the Beirut port explosion on the 4th of August 2020. This meant that the two countries would lose social contact as people who live from territorial exchange are now left unemployed[123]. Beirut's airport was the only means of trade for the Lebanese republic. Therefore, there was a limited entry and delivery of goods. In this sense, the country remained isolated from the rest of the world. This certainly compromises mental health because the option of receiving goods from people abroad to aid the country was no longer available. The poverty line is currently high in Lebanon due to the revolution of October 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic occurring shortly after. It is important to underline given these circumstances that people won't be buying online products. Lebanese citizens would therefore not be involved in traditional celebrations and gift exchange due to harsh circumstances. Additionally, Hawari highlighted that occupied territories have no deliveries or addresses, and she is not aware of any online buying statistics in Palestine. Accordingly, there is no data about gifting in conflict zones. The ongoing political instability along with pandemic problems have caused preoccupation and stress, making gifts purchase the least of peoples' concerns.

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[122] Their COVID-19 studies include Tartir and Hawari (2020), Hawari (2020a; 2020b; 2020c) Di Peri (2020), Carpi and Di Peri (2020).
[123] This is a similar story to the closing of the Moroccan border with Melilla (Spain) which wrecked both economies (Panayotatos 2020; Redondo 2020; Handaji 2020).

This information suggests a very important conclusion to this section. Online gifting, or online buying in general, may not be a common practice in every country because it depends on the country's context. It is inaccurate to assume that online sales will only increase during the pandemic. Considering the above discussions, online buying is considered a luxury, even a privilege, enjoyed by only a handful of non-conflict Middle Eastern countries, like Kuwait. Furthermore, Belbagi (2015: 3) shows that the youth constitute much of the population in the Arabian Gulf states, a third to half of the population being under 25. This age group, as mentioned earlier, represents the number one user of online purchasing platforms. Therefore, according to every country's circumstances, online gifting could either thrive immensely or fail miserably. Since this privilege is available in Kuwait, it encourages to assist other disadvantaged neighbouring countries that cannot enjoy these amenities given the current conditions. This would surely achieve the unity of humans. After the COVID-19 situation, I suspect some drastic changes in Kuwait in terms of the economy, politics, resource allocation, culture, and human rights. However, it is too early to determine whether these changes would be positive or negative.

Gift-giving during a pandemic represents a challenge but also a positive adoption. Given the alternative culture that COVID-19 has created through the digital world, people are advised to avoid going back to the life they were living prior to the virus. The economic and health crisis left lots of people unemployed, hungry, and poor, and this certainly deserves a moment of contemplating where to spend our next dollar. A congruence of war would revert the gift as a scarce and precious concept as it was in the past, therefore being more appreciated and cherished by people in times of crisis[124]. The quarantine period and staying at home also produced new meanings of time. It was crucial to decide what to do with all the time that was given to us. Creative ways to communicate and show care for loved ones therefore emerged, whether giving them an experience to enjoy later, a kind word through a phone call, or a thoughtful gesture from afar. The true spirit of *Eid*, Christmas and Valentine's Day in times of a pandemic is a reminder that our most precious gifts are not found wrapped in ribbon and paper, but among the hearts and laughter of those

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[124] Refer to the subdivision: Surprise Gifts.

who are with us. The pandemic can be considered an opportunity to renew values for connection and appreciate these kinds of experiences together, but apart.

## 5. The Quran and Islamic Religion: *Wasta* and Prodigality

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the gift in Islam impacts Arab Muslim practices when bearing in mind its significant benefits. It removes grudges and strips away hatred, hostility, and cruelty between people. Therefore, Muslims act upon the obligation of generosity in Islam. The Kuwaiti gift requires effort and is often fancy. The more elaborate and expensive the gift is, the more it represents this generosity, thus a greater reward from God. However, although Islam commands generosity in reciprocating a "better gift", there is no evidence that it should be of a high financial value. Nevertheless, because religion has been mixed with Kuwait's culture, hospitality and reciprocation construct a strong basis to uphold the community. Apart from *Eidiyyah*, *Zakat* and *Sadaqa*, people in Kuwait look for more events to exchange gifts that demonstrate their generosity, affection and above all, their wealth. The concern lies when intentions are fallacious and gifts are misused. *Wasta* and giving gifts in exchange for *Wasta* are certainly questioned in terms of Islam.

Giving a gift in return for a favour, a common practice in Kuwait, appears to be a way of social networking. The gift here communicates gratitude, debt and reciprocity. Formally dispensing favours through *Wasta*, the system of benefitting individuals from close circles, is an important component in Arab society, the motives to which remain largely unclear (Althoff, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil & Jurafsky 2014; Ramady 2016). *Wasta* critically affects decision-making in Middle Eastern societies. Any effective achievement, or sometimes restriction, is connected to this "hidden force" (Feghali, 2014). This system of networking differs in western contexts. In Kuwait, the *Wasta* influence can sometimes have no direct relation to the individual, "anyone can perform the *Wasta* action or mediation", even people from other countries, as Tlaiss and Kauser (2011: 475) clarify. Therefore, this practice is recognised as a method to evince power and to acquire prestige, more than a method to assist people (Tlaiss & Kauser 2011: 477; Feghali 2014). Islamic guidelines clearly abstain from using this approach.

First, the Quran frowns upon *Wasta* or doing a favour just to receive more in return, as *Surat Al-Muddather* (74: 6) indicates. Similarly, the gift should not have underlying intentions of achieving a goal or bettering personal status; it should be performed with clear motives and a selfless conscience. Islam strictly forbids corruption and the unjust practice of taking advantage of others. To exploit someone by bribing them results in a grave sin, as explicated in *Surat Al-Baqarah* (2: 188). While many people in Arab Muslim communities take the Quran's injunction seriously, it is troubling to learn that *Wasta* is slowly becoming a way of life to triumph others rather than a way of assistance and support (Feghali, 2014). Certainly, it is natural to help one another out of good faith since trust and favours are key values in the Islamic community but this does not mean depriving others the advantage of potentially flourishing in their lives. Islam encourages principles of justice and high value is emphasized on integrity and fair treatment among people, as stated in *Surat Al-Nisa'a* (4: 58) in the Quran, meanwhile *Wasta* is biased as it acts on behalf of family and tribal relationships. In reference to Prophet Moses' story, anyone including a stranger is eligible to receive help, not only family members or close kin (Ramady, 2016). It is specifically highlighted in *Surat Al-Nahl* (16: 90) that Allah enjoins justice and the doing of good to others therefore egalitarianism as a core Islamic principle would annul *Wasta* in Kuwait (Harbi, Thursfield & Bright, 2016).

Second, and from another point of view, Manolopoulos (2007: 1) argued that the gift is an individual creation and is inevitably a practice for delivering "gratuity, reciprocity, excess and exchange". He inspected the gift idea under two dimensions: the religious and the irreligious, in which its religious scope preserves and respects the dual cycle of thanking and reciprocating, whilst its irreligious scope reflects its "egoistic" nature of taking and enjoying. According to this, *Wasta* in Kuwait can be determined to fall under the irreligious scope, while the gift in Islam fits under the religious one.

For these reasons, using gifts in return for *Wasta* is argued to be unethical, manipulative and offensive because the gift is selfish; not coming from the heart. Givers even err with their gift choice because the act is egoistic and not pure. It contradicts Islamic principles. *Surat Al-Baqarah* (2: 262-264) explains several points about this. First, one should not give back in aims of achieving something else. More importantly, a person must not announce

their good deeds, like doing a favour or assisting someone, or giving *Sadaqa* or *Zakat*. They must not stress their benevolence to be popular among their peers as this causes harm and humiliation to the other party. Consequently, this would nullify the entire act and the reward from God would be substantially lessened. Instead, forgiveness and giving blessings to one another is better than a tangible gift, charity or act of kindness that is followed by hurt or demeaning behaviour. In this respect, giving gifts and doing favours are better rewarding when done in secret, not as an established public act of cultural networking[125]. This again shows a clash between the Kuwaiti gift and the gift in Islam, which commands considerable public and academic attention.

Despite the negative connotations associated with *Wasta*, it is frequently interpreted as a sign of respect. It signifies reciprocal acceptance and highlights the beginning or honouring of an established bond, which here reveals similarities with western business customs (Weir, 2003). Haase (2012: 95) explains that Kuwait enjoys a relationship-driven culture; to help or give someone *Wasta* is also widely considered as a family obligation even when it is linked with injustice and corruption (Feghali, 2014). People often agree to do favours even when they are unable to comply. The offer to help though would still be appreciated and reasons why the favour was not fulfilled would be understood. Therefore, if a gift was offered before the favour, a person cannot ask to take back their gift. Similarly, the *Wasta* cannot withdraw their service if a conflict arose or a gift was not offered.

It is argued that the absence of laws preventing this practice permeates the *Wasta* into Arab countries that lack equal opportunities (Al-Twal & Aladwan, 2020). Accordingly, it is unlikely for *Wasta* to diminish or become irrelevant in the near future because of its traditional, intrinsic role in business and social life. The *Wasta* practice as a well-acknowledged strategy in Kuwait will continue until there are demands for social change, "until the dissatisfaction of those disadvantaged by *Wasta* becomes a significant political issue", as bluntly stated by Cunningham and Sarayrah (1994: 36). *Wasta* is frequently

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[125] Similar notions appear in Christianity, as shown in Matthew (6:1), it is advised to give charity without belittling the suffering of the needy, because doing so would be corroded by God, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven".

linked to oil wealth, however it remains a grey area because of the difficulty to assess such a sensitive matter (Hutchings & Weir 2006; Ramady 2016).

Haase (2012: 95) reckons that Kuwaitis judge on appearances, for instance, good quality clothes and high education could mark individual status and prestige, which insinuates a *Wasta* figure. Certainly, the gift can also mark similar attributes in the Kuwaiti society. For example, an expensive gift signifies high status and class. Moreover, a Chinese study found that the type of gift depends on personal values and other social cultural aspects. The personal values reflected in the study included materialism, secular-hedonism, face-saving, and social connections (Yau, Chan & Lau 1999; Chen & Kim 2013). Accordingly, the gift in Kuwait reflects similar values since its culture and wealth pushes consumers into fancying and essentialising expensive products. The fieldwork also recognised that unwrapping presents is a highlight in gifting occasions. The value of any gift increases when nicely wrapped, which again refers to the importance of "appearances" in the Kuwaiti culture. However, no matter how enjoyable the activity is, gift wrapping is considerably recognised as unnecessary and a big waste. At most times, the resources used in wrapping and decoration are later thrown away, in a relatively small country that does not have a clear waste recollection system. It is worrisome that Kuwait, as a country of limited capital, could be at a resource risk.

Due to these interconnected topics, several aspects in Islam had to be investigated with regards to sustainability and prodigality. Özdemir speaks about the excessive production and consumption activities with regards to earth's finite natural resources, and their approach in Islam as a religion of moderation (Alpay, Özdemir & Demirbaş 2013; Özdemir 2017). From an Islamic perspective, *Surat Al-A'raaf* (7: 31) warns to take care of our planet and not to over-consume: "God does not love the wasters". Islam does not permit thoughtless consumption and wastefulness. *Surat Al-Isra'a* (17: 26-27) similarly advises not to splurge wantonly, as this act is associated with the *shaitan* (šayṭān: devil). On the contrary, it is preferred that people spend in moderation, neither being stingy nor wasteful, as stated in *Surat Al-Furqan* (25: 67). Prophet Mohammed also advised not to use, eat, or buy, more than what is needed, and these rules do not exempt *Eids* and Ramadan. Even in Ramadan, there should not be an exploitation of food that would result in squandering,

because the "holy" month should represent contemplation and self-reflection to better oneself; not to indulge in wasteful habits. Kowanda-Yassin (2018) explains the concept of a "Green Islam" or "Eco-Islam" in her book. In Ramadan, the concept can be applied by having a "Green *Iftar*" (ʾiftār), which refrains from food squandering, especially that the religious month inspires people to get together in large gatherings. As for *Eids*, surely, it is necessary to show generosity through hospitality. It is also permissible to celebrate and have nice clothing, but not to squander, and not to buy more than what is needed.

The relationship between humans and nature is an often-ignored part of Islamic civilisation. The interconnection between sustainability and product "gift" consumption is of particular interest because it relates to moral responsibility towards the country and entire planet. As an Islamic country, the rules and principles found in many chapters of the Quran urge not to mischievously cause corruption in the earth when it has been in order (*Surat Al-Baqarah*, 2: 60; *Surat Al-A'raaf*, 7: 56, 74; *Surat Hud*, 11: 85; *Surat Al-Shuara'a*, 26: 183). Therefore, wastefulness is not only an inconsiderate consumption of natural resources but is also disrespectful towards God. Özdemir (2003) stresses the necessity for an ecological awakening that "man is not separate from or above nature" and calls on humans to take responsibility and act immediately. Defending the natural environment and protecting earthly resources also in a way relates to global charity, since founding of land, cultivating the earth, and planting trees also count as alms.

Additional waste management information is needed to be researched in Kuwait. Most importantly, explanations to solutions, such as a separate waste recollection system, should be provided with instructions on how to implement the system step by step. The public should be aware of this issue to consistently adhere and stick to the system. This eco-friendly system should not be pressured or imposed on the people, but rather be practical as to how this can be implemented efficiently. Consequences to littering should also be strictly outlined because if people are not encouraged to "think green", then there is no use of implementing such system in the first place. Primarily, there should be a public will and a positive response; a contribution and collaboration from the people to separate their waste starting from their homes, to create a "greener" world. Afterwards, more feasibility measures, financing and funding plans should be dedicated on this waste management

project. There is a realm of opportunities for Kuwait as a rich, developing country, so this project must be executed to ensure a better image for the nation.

Özdemir (2003) also comments on the predominant view of science and technology that was supposedly created to satisfy humanitarian needs and solve its problems entirely, without creating new ones. Nevertheless, these inventions were realised to harm the planet as well[126] because the focus has become on satisfying selfish desires, boosting the economy and wealth of a country. These views were more comprehended during the COVID-19 global pandemic and complete lockdown, which in a way did not only signal a health crisis, but also an environmental crisis. These circumstances brought back the simplicity of the gift while dehumanising social contact. Gifting experiences were more appreciated than material gifts when health and safety were the number one national concern. COVID-19 gave perspective to the gift of time, which was an unrecognised concept due to hectic lives and distractions before the pandemic. Before 2020, occasional encounters with people were often planned ahead of time to make sure they do not clash with other commitments. When the COVID-19 hit, and people were obliged to stay at home during the lockdown, the importance of "staying in touch" was recognised and people had plenty of time to do so. They were eager to maintain connection and relationships, since physically attending special occasions was no longer an option. Typically, people started resorting to other feasible solutions to achieve this objective, online calls and online gifting. It required a pandemic to achieve this global sense of unity around the world. Islamic terms and Mauss' theory show that true happiness and fulfilment is not found in material things, it is found within the company of others. Pandemic culture has created a new phenomenon not only in gift-giving but by putting appearances and competitions aside and paying attention to other critical matters, such as one's health, family elders, and other human dimensions, such as sustainability and religious action. As for the post-COVID-19 lifestyle, social platforms and the internet are expected to be key to gifting occasions.

As demonstrated, the Quran and Islamic religion can be sources of guidance and inspiration to those who seek to ponder on the meaning of Islamic traditions, as it holds divergent ways

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[126] Through vehicles and pollution, excess production, commercialisation, globalised markets, misinformation through social media etc.

and different paths of thought. For this research, Islamic guidelines were contemplated upon for Kuwait only to draw attention towards concerning areas and to avoid potential problems in the future. Above all, it helped develop a sense of motivation to be committed to a certain (better) lifestyle. For concerned Muslims in Kuwait, an ethical imperative and responsibility was deemed necessary to maintain and preserve the balance of ecosystems. Kuwait's findings realised areas of concern with regards to levels of consumption. The solution to excess consumption and waste cannot be solved in an individual manner but through a nationwide movement and initiative.

When mindfully paying attention, Kuwait might witness a growth in sustainability and increased market revenue. As a job more critical now than ever, it will be of Kuwait's interest to proceed with sustainable solutions, primarily a waste recollection and recycling system, to guarantee an improved gift exchange experience. Surely, business models involving retail and sale will have to be reformulated completely if Kuwait is going to respond to all these changing market activities. Fortunately, awareness about these issues, environmental responsibility and ecological consciousness are already proceeding. Kuwait's fieldwork consisted of many young, well-educated informants who were inherently more likely to be sensitive and informed about sustainability. There was a strong inclination towards going back to the simplicity of the gift and the reinforcement of personal relationships. Likewise, several contemporary Muslim environmentalist researchers and groups are increasingly being inspired by Quranic verses that emphasize the conservation of nature. While Kuwait's rich culture still stands, the country has limitless opportunities to improve on an economical, educational, and social level.

## 6. Conclusion

The gift-giving practice has many interdependent and interconnected themes in Muslim societies. Reciprocation occurs in many shapes and forms, whether by exchange of gifts or acts of service, such as preparing dinner or doing a favour for someone. A balanced reciprocation is a troublesome concept in Kuwait because of certain gift ambiguities and relationship expectations. My fieldwork showed that these ambiguities included gift adequacy, price or budget, time and effort required to choose a gift.

After learning about the gift and its meaning to people in Kuwait, I establish that gift exchange, as an economic form of transaction, is a manifestation of larger societal values (Mauss, 1925). The practice is incredibly powerful, once a gifting tradition is set, it will be hard to break that tradition. It creates a sense of obligation, often moulded by requirements of society. In Arab Islamic cultures, bonding and maintaining relationships are highly valued customs that support the society's social structure. When a person decides not to share gifts with their family members for example, it suggests that they do not truly care about those relationships. Evidently, gift relationship dynamics and reciprocation are complex phenomena (Ashworth, 2013).

Difficulty in reciprocating gifts in Kuwait depended on the existing relationship with the receiver. The stronger the relationship, the more thoughtful, useful and memorable the gift experience becomes. Focusing on the receiver's unique traits, their personality, interests, and preferences is performed for relationship continuity. Accordingly, a positive reaction, such as surprised, joyful emotions, means gift expectations have been satisfied and relationship intentions have been clarified. This consequently fills the giver with feelings of accomplishment and pride.

It is still a question whether knowing the receiver's preferences and interests makes the gift experience an easier or harder process (Cheek & Goebel, 2020). When the giver knows the receiver, the objective becomes to reflect this knowledge through the gift that is chosen, thus going that extra mile and paying more attention to detail. This becomes an exhausting task. On the other hand, knowing the receiver, or having a close relationship with them, signifies that the list of potential gifts is already known by the giver, making it an easy task.

The fieldwork also proved that not only the type of relationship shapes gift choice, but also gifts play a strong role in relationships. If someone wants to reject or discontinue a relationship, then the gift should change to a more impersonal or uncreative one, one that would instead decrease total utility and discard thoughtfulness, like cash gifts or vouchers. Also, these gift choices hardly contribute to memory for their non-sentimental nature.

Most importantly, I highlight strong female roles with regards to gift-giving in Kuwait, a country where women are underrepresented in some areas, hence it is an opportunity to produce an improved female image in the Arabian Gulf and Islamic countries. Young, single females have a growing role and interest during gift exchange occasions, in terms of social media, consumption, online purchasing and gift wrapping. The fieldwork concludes that as part of gender values, gifting is essential for young women, and they are more selective during their shopping, so they make and take more time than men in preparing for a gift.

Generally, gifting was a difficult task for younger individuals due to the immense gift options that deliver different meanings and intentions. Excessive options causes confusion and makes the gift experience a non-enjoyable, "painful" one (Amir & Ariely 2004; Barkley-Levenson & Fox 2016). The accessibility and availability of products weakens the essence of the gift, as put forward by Johansson and Carrier (1997). An excess in production and consumption has created a mess in the marketplace with brutal competition, an overload of similar goods, and an overflow of brands, chain stores and shopping places. Indecisiveness leads gift givers to resort to last minute purchases, probably buying something that the receiver already has, thus reducing total utility. Therefore, appreciation of the gift would decrease due to the increased facility of choosing anything [127]. Indecisiveness could also lead to choose (easier) gifts, like online gift cards, vouchers or subscriptions. Online gift alternatives were found to be chosen because of convenience and mostly when the giver is not very familiar with the receiver. In all cases, it would not satisfy expectations for lacking originality and thought.

Senior informants argued that gift-giving is supposed to be a simple, comfortable and pleasurable practice. Online gifting and social media influences were not found particular in older generations. Their attachment to the gift mirrors its significance in the past, embodying a prize or treasure. Due to limited resources during an era of war, any item, irrespective of how small or symbolic, was considered precious and valuable. Gifts in the

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[127] Despite this analysis, sometimes having plenty of options to choose from can be a positive, hedonic experience for decision-makers. It can be a pleasurable activity because of the curiosity and excitement, as Tang (2017: 98) affirmed, "A person may wish to prolong this state, for instance, in the process of picking the best possible gift for a loved one".

past were also surprising because they were least expected and very scarce. Naturally, it is difficult to disregard these items for once representing something greater than a gift. Accordingly, older individuals are more likely to purchase surprise gifts; regardless of an occasion, reason or cost because of the war-rooted understanding that gifts can elevate people from distress. Comparably, the gift nowadays has become very mainstream and no longer exciting. Curiously, however, gifts during the COVID-19 pandemic have mirrored similar attributes to wartime gifts: precious, rare and difficult to personally purchase. Since surprise gifts are a highly respected and an admired concept in Kuwait, future research should confirm the intentions behind offering surprise gifts and should identify whether givers make accurate predictions of the receiver's reaction. Are surprise gifts as equally appreciated as anticipated ones? This would also distinguish relationship consequences when offering expected gifts compared with unexpected ones.

Although reciprocation ideas and surprise gifts showed no changes with regards to nationality, more non-Kuwaiti young informants mentioned budget-setting and financial planning prior to gift events. First, this shows that immigrants struggle with their financials in a culture that has high expectations and disregards income status during gifting occasions. Kuwait's culture strikes to encourage a materialistic lifestyle, one that expects a good-quality gift without excuses. Second, it shows that older adults and seniors do not focus on the price of the gift but on its simplicity, which contradicts Kuwait's materialistic gift culture and shows different gift standards from past to present.

Preferred gifts in Kuwait represented characteristics of utility, simplicity, adequacy, good quality and style, while received gifts represented expensive, branded items. Selecting a good gift depends on how the item will provide value to the receiver, rather than how good it will look when they unwrap it. Relationships therefore are expected to strengthen with pricey gifts. They are offered mostly to please the other person, avoid humiliation, attain social status, achieve favours in terms of *Wasta* and show-off. Furthermore, a gift to resolve conflicts, as a confirmed concept in Kuwait, can be a manipulative approach to please or "make peace" with someone without discussing the problem. Solving conflicts with gifts were identified in politics, workplaces, among tribes and between romantic couples. Assumingly, a simple apology and expression of regret is not sufficient to completely

reconcile after a quarrel. Presenting gifts as means to sort out problems between people was claimed to be recognised in other Arab countries as well. Conclusively, the fieldwork showed that giving a gift is not restrictively an altruistic act in Kuwait. It is given in hopes for reciprocation or possibly for an underhand purpose, like asking for a favour or service (Braiker, 2004). This again puts forward the Testart model (2013) used by Malinowski, that the gift is exploited to accomplish individual gain and benefit. Nevertheless, the "ideal" gift should achieve these three dimensions: maximum utility, good signalling, and thoughtfulness. On the other hand, simply asking people what they want still appears to be morally inadequate in Kuwait.

Because of Kuwait's contemporary and busy lifestyle, exchanging gifts has become the substitute of time spent together to converse and maintain personal bonds, causing the deterioration of communication skills. Time, although a pure, appreciated, and desired gift, was "invalid" in Kuwait's society for lacking tangible or material value. This could be more evidence to Kuwait's materialistic gifting culture. More money than time is spent on social relationships. There were also notions of giving a gift only when *deserved* and a Kuwaiti influential figure would only spend their time with another if deemed *worthy* of it. Similarly, more time is spent preparing a gift for close relationships, but if it were for an unfamiliar person, effort put in the gift is not necessary, so again unworthy of their time. Memory recollection during gift occasions, although a very powerful concept in gift literature, was also rarely mentioned in the fieldwork. Typically, you cannot reminisce memories with someone you do not have time for. Older adult informants appreciated making memories through gifts more than younger ones, as they experience life transitions that urge them to interact with others. The gift of time, or whether time is a sufficient gift to give someone on Valentine's Day, is a concept to develop and comprehensively elaborate in future studies.

On the other hand, the gift in Islam, the religion Kuwait follows, is very significant, regardless of the price value of the gift. It can be as little as an act of kindness or a good word. As for reciprocation, it should only be made selflessly, in hopes for a greater reward from God. Islam validifies the reciprocation of symbolic and non-material gifts. Mauss' (1925) views on reciprocity are in accordance with the Islamic description of the gift. The

significance of the gift in Islam reflected community values, bringing harmony among hearts. Gifts with regards to religion shed light on the importance of generosity and psychology of giving. Simplicity, thoughtfulness, and pure intentions are the characteristics of the gift in Islam, but above all, non-tangible things, such as time and assisting one another, are immensely appreciated. However, it is difficult to become closer to people, serve them and perform selfless acts of kindness when time to share with one another is limited in Kuwait. More time is spent at work than with loved ones. In my opinion, when the love is real, you do not have to find time for each other, you will *make* time. After conducting lifestyle research in Kuwait and analysing the gift in Islam, findings showed that the simple gift is remotely sought. Even when the Kuwaiti gift is used to demonstrate one's generosity, it still insinuates success and status. Again, as shown, the gift is ever-changing across eras.

For these reasons, there is a noticed change in Islamic values and teachings in Kuwait, and a concentration on the commercial world that overindulges branded, quality items. With the purchase of such items, it suggests a spendthrift society and the presence of materialism in Kuwait has become a cultural value during gift exchange. Through the above-mentioned ideas and learning Kuwait's gift-giving habits, I take that Kuwait's culture encourages purchase and consumption in a world of limited resources. Conclusively, the work shows that both gender and social class can be traced by the gift in Kuwait.

The gift has opened many areas of debate, culturally and Islamically. It is undoubtedly a "fundamental cornerstone in a rich and complex theoretical edifice", as I quote from Silber (2009: 187). My fieldwork shows that there are many intercorrelated matters occurring in Kuwait, most of which are invisible in Muslim communities because of understudied or unpublished work in these disciplines for the time being. Areas of future interest involve building on the influences of war and distress, rethinking cities in a post-COVID-19 world, the psychological variable (how psychology plays a role in choosing gifts for example), and the need for uniqueness, prestige, and ego matters in the Arabian Gulf.

## IV.       THE KUWAITI VALENTINE'S DAY

As demonstrated, gift theory is a prominent topic area in many academic fields and disciplines, explicitly in anthropology (Mauss 1925; Malinowski 1926; Sahlins 1972; Sherry Jr. 1983), consumer behaviour (Belk & Coon 1993; Belk & Sherry Jr. 2007), business and communication studies (Lombardo, 1995), history (Davis, 2000), religious studies (Moufahim 2013; Heim 2015; Davies & Thate 2017), sociology (Cheal 1988; Giesler 2006), and even philosophy (Derrida, 1995). Gift-giving is a ritual that has been established from cultures and subcultures, which involves adding meaning to mere goods and services to be presented to other individuals or groups (Otnes & Lowrey, 2004). The gift and non-monetary exchanges have made a crucial impact in the Near East, in both urban and rural settings. Valentine's Day has been chosen as an event to examine how these cultures and subcultures have influenced gift-giving rituals in Kuwait. The main motive for this choice is that Valentine's Day is a cultural event for almost all age groups to celebrate, declare love and emotion through simultaneously giving and receiving gifts. It is therefore easy to realise primary sources for this research as no fixed criteria is required (Leslie, 2001). Another motive for choosing Valentine's Day is because it has clearly received less attention as a gift-giving occasion compared to Christmas for example (Otnes, Ruth & Milbourne, 1994). What makes Valentine's Day unique from all other gift-giving occasions is that it is the only one that communicates romantic gift-giving (Otnes, Ruth & Milbourne 1994; Clarke, Herington, Hussain & Wong 2005). Leslie (2001) has described Valentine's Day as a spiritual occasion of non-material nature because it represents relationships of the soul. Even consumption can be linked spiritually where individuals can enjoy the essence of a consumerist culture and material presence amid romantic atmospheres. He therefore has linked spirituality with religion and claimed that this image of Valentine's Day has been quite hidden by the media and within previous literature. This chapter precisely analyses Valentine's Day in terms of religion, consumption and romantic relationships in Kuwait.

Having started in Western Europe, festivities such as Valentine's Day have become a significant trend in contemporary Kuwait and other Arab countries. This festivity has influenced gender, age, ethnic origin, level of education and marital status (Kovzele, 2019).

A culture-wide event like Valentine's Day provides a useful opportunity to explore potential influences on Kuwait's society and investigate the effects of cultural events on gift dynamics and interpersonal relationships. The following sections describe the influences that made Kuwait, as an Islamic nation, adopt Valentine's Day as a gift-giving practice and debate various viewpoints about the festivity. This information supplements the limited literature on Kuwait's Valentine's Day gift-giving rituals.

In many cultures, the western-originated occasion has been considered an opportunity to enhance romantic relationships by celebrating love and affection through gift-giving (Chopik, Wardecker & Edelstein, 2014). The occasion is celebrated and perceived differently in the Arab Islamic world in general and in Kuwait in particular. The meaning and purpose of Valentine's Day depends on each person's relational goals. Nonetheless, Valentine's Day is believed to bring upon positive thoughts and feelings to those in a relationship (Close & Zinkhan 2006; Quintero González & Koestner 2006).

As in the rest of the world, Valentine's Day is celebrated in Kuwait on the 14th of February. People in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region are slowly being accustomed to the relatively recent celebrated event. It is difficult to pinpoint the precise beginning of this large-scale cultural celebration in Kuwait. Yet, testimonies of informants and shop owners claim that Valentine's Day was not widely recognised nor celebrated in the 90s. They indicate the start of the 21st century as the beginning of Valentine's Day.

To understand the economic background of the Arabian gulf region, it is necessary to undergo an anthropological study and acquire rudimentary knowledge about relevant languages, especially Arabic. Valentine's Day has several names in the Arab world. Some call it, *Eid Al-Hubb* (ʿīdu al-ḥubb) – "the festivity of love", or *Eid Al-ʿushaaq* (ʿīdu al-ʿuššāq) – "the festivity of lovers", or humorously, the Arabized version of the original name, *Al-falantayn* (Kreil, 2016). Based on the Arabic names for Valentine's Day, the occasion seems to be restricted to couples who share an intimate relationship: lovers. Overall fieldwork results in Kuwait showed that both genders condition Valentine's Day to a romantic relationship; no celebration will take place if a person is not romantically involved.

Valentine's Day is portrayed differently in the Arabian Gulf than in other regions of the Middle East. The spread of Valentine's Day seems to have taken a steadier path in the Arabian Peninsula. There were attempts to ban Valentine's Day in many Muslim societies. Former Kuwaiti orthodox ruling figures viewed it as an extravagant, almost immoral celebration because it does not reflect Kuwaiti cultural traditions and, based on Islamic premise and thought, physical dating before official marriage is not allowed. Opponents of Valentine's Day in the Muslim community portray the event as a Christian revelry, which consequently influenced its ban in Kuwait following Saudi Arabia in 2008, however the approval of the ban never took place (Elias 2008; Garcia 2011; Brosius & Wenzlhuemer 2011: 47).

The influence Saudi Arabia has on the Arabian Gulf countries is significant for being an icon of conservative Islamic culture, the home of Prophet Mohammed, and the site of prayer and *Hajj* at the "holy" land of Mecca, as Tahani explained. In turn, religion is often seen as central to the conception of Saudi Arabia. The broad salience of Valentine's Day has become more polemic to preserve the image of Islamic indicators. Allegedly, taking part in Valentine's Day carries dangerous repercussions including the loss of Islamic identity and pure religious practice of Muslim communities (Gardner, 2000). Outside influences and practices therefore were believed to promote anarchy among the Muslim believers. Several religious bodies condemn the event, arguing it is a bad innovation that encourages sinful passion and desire between unmarried couples, occupying individuals with shallow thoughts and objectives (Ismail, 2013). Moreover, Islamic rules and Kuwait's rigid societal structure do not allow public displays of affection, despite the knowledge that Valentine's Day is "the festivity of lovers". Therefore, the presence of the event disregards Islamic laws. This shows the discordance in Islamic principles in the region. Tarek thinks it is better to launch cancer awareness campaigns for example rather than promote Valentine's Day. Other religious scholars in the Middle East argue that Muslims should only celebrate the two Islamic festivities[128], *Eid Al-Fitr* at the end of Ramadan and *Eid Al-Adha* commemorating the sacrifice of Prophet Abraham (Kreil, 2016).

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[128] A claim mentioned earlier by Omar, see: The Gift in Islam.

Joanna strongly disagrees with these notions. She claimed, "These are simply cultural beliefs that have no basis in the true foundations of Islam. Islam is an all-encompassing religion that encourages critical thinking and progressive change. There is nothing in the religion that admonishes love, it is quite the contrary". Conversely, some scholars are less strict in their condemnation towards Valentine's Day. The interpretation of Islam was requestioned to seek a midpoint between modernity, tradition and religion. This midpoint offers rational and flexible methods to cope and conform to the current century's international standards, while enriching family values and glorifying the past; the wish to be original. Thereafter, a changing reality was acknowledged. Religion became elastic since the contact with the West. For many people, religion existed only in the background and was only truly witnessed in occasions of joy or grief. *Surat Al-Baqarah* (2: 225) states that Allah judges based on what the hearts have earned. Therefore, if intentions are sincere, there is no harm in celebrating Valentine's Day. Bashar, Seba and Tahani shared positive ideas regarding the occasion and claimed that it is a beautiful day to strengthen relationships and to truly bring out underlying feelings towards other people. Despite not being part of Islamic festivities, Bashar said that it could be a good opportunity to communicate a certain message, probably also to declare a romantic interest in a person, thus, it is a day that contributes to happiness. Muslim communities usually do not condemn the event itself but condemn the debauchery that is incited among the youth and unmarried couples who "alienate" themselves from their religion by enjoying their "forbidden" relationships. In fact, there was no religious alienation at all. The attachment to religious traditions were found to be more prevalent than in the earlier decades, but the local version of Islam was disappearing (Palme, 2009).

Based on the above information, this presents the concept of voluntariness. In the future, it is a personal preference whether someone wants to change their viewpoint on Valentine's Day or keep their religious customs and principles, as Rogers (2006: 490) bluntly expresses, "no one is holding a gun to the heads of people" forcing them to act in a certain way. Apparently, since Valentine's Day can boost Kuwait's economy, contradictions with the West are resolved by voluntariness. Along the same lines, Amina stressed that there are limits to a country's transformation, "Kuwait will not magically become London because

we started taking on new events or customs, it will always be Kuwait, with mentality of Kuwaitis or Arabs, with Kuwaiti parliament, monarchy and rules".

The popularity of Valentine's Day is controversial yet inevitable in Kuwait. It has developed into a widely celebrated practice in the country. Acknowledging that is it an event to show care and affection, the fieldwork revealed that Valentine's Day is especially popular among the younger generations and celebrations are noticeably expanding every year. I would like to point out two informants' answers, mother and son, Amal and Qassem. While Qassem claimed that it is an occasion increasingly being celebrated by teenagers and adolescents, Amal, on the other hand, claimed it is more popular among youngsters and young adults, which is Qassem's age group. It seems that every person distinguishes Valentine's Day as an occasion for the "younger" ages, i.e., younger than them. Similarly, Fatima claimed, "nowadays young people celebrate anything they hear about, no matter how small or silly". No informant mentioned that Valentine's Day is popular among their own cohort and peers, but rather accused younger age groups of being more invested in the occasion. This interprets that as years pass by, older individuals become less engaged in celebrating and more younger people start taking on foreign practices. Abrar mentioned that Valentine's Day has become less interesting throughout the years after getting married and having children. Despite having celebrated it in the past, she became more religious throughout the years and more heedful to her Pakistani traditions. This shows that values and interests before marriage vastly change to that after marriage. Sometimes, before marriage, young Muslim Arabs feel curious to go out of their way and try different things from their family traditions, like celebrating Valentine's Day. Once they experience them, they grow out of these curiosities and settle down when they are married. Others, on the other hand, use marriage as an excuse to untangle from traditional household rules and be able to celebrate Valentine's Day freely, which was before controlled, or unallowed, in their parental household. From another perspective, even when certain people place importance on Valentine's Day, they probably realise after marriage that their partner's expectations and interests differ from theirs, thus the importance of the occasion diminishes.

Lamya commented how there are both extremes in Kuwait and Valentine's Day varies depending on every collective family's culture and religion. Likewise, Bashar claimed that some families are more attached to their original norms than others. Reassuringly, Joanna added that Valentine's Day is "restrictive to conservative families". Accordingly, in Arab Islamic societies, culture and religion form material constraints that impose on habits and thoughts, consequently influencing individual practices (Block, 2015). This is especially the case in terms of gender roles, familial values and traditions. However, culture and religion are widely confused as interchangeable, interdependent concepts, when they are, in many situations, very much incompatible (Bonney 2004; Rees 2017).

Many cultural concepts refer to collective knowledge that does not trace back to religion but is rather a way of life and generational upbringing, such as dress code, social standards, and traditional rituals. Accordingly, religious or spiritual principles and customs vary depending on the cultures or context they exist in. For example, a Muslim child raised in a western context like the United States would be different to a Muslim child raised in Saudi Arabia because of the distinct cultures they were brought up in. Some families set certain principles at home for their children to follow, as Lamya clarified. For example, they focus on education, sports, career, religion, or travel, which represent essential foundations to that very family. Other families indulge in hospitality, gifting, socialising, and practicing various cultural occasions and celebrations.

Abrar described how her family accepts the celebration of Valentine's Day. This identifies a shift in cultural gifting practices within families and explains an adaptation to outside concepts. Furthermore, it was often remarked, that although Valentine's Day is not usually celebrated within respective families in Kuwait, it is still a widely popular occasion among friends and colleagues. Abrar's father normally gets a flower for her mother, and interestingly added that he does so because "everyone else is doing that". This highlights the influence people have on each other, especially among peers and social circles. Integrating new lifestyle practices and celebration rituals will cause others to copy and conform; if someone is seen giving a flower on Valentine's Day, their friends or relatives will eventually start doing the same. By this, I succinctly articulate the idea that Kuwait's society exists and is constituted not by autonomous individuals, but by the practices in

which individuals and collectives engage. This too relates to essentialism, as explained by Bucholtz (2003: 400), where attributes and behaviour of socially defined groups is determined in reference to cultural practices or biological characteristics, believed to be inherent to the group.

Similarly, Joanna's family usually does not celebrate the event, but she claimed they still set a certain ambience to remain in the spirit of Valentine's Day. Valentine's Day in the Middle East revolves around the main colour, red. Women often clad accordingly. Clothing items and many other products display English words such as "love" emblazoned in bright colours (Kreil, 2016). She said, "I remember my mother having a *hijab* with red lines that matched her sweater of red hearts, and she always liked to wear that on Valentine's Day for fun. She always asked me what I was going to wear too. But for me, I see that this is nonsense and ridiculous, it can be a reason for people to make fun of me". Receiving criticism from others shows that Valentine's Day is not a normalised practice in Kuwait and that its significance is still controversial and strange to the culture.

As shown, Islamic principles and values widely differ between Muslims; their views are expressed without the direct affiliation to Islam, hence the varying levels of tolerance towards non-marital romantic relationships (Halliday 2003; Pappé 2005: 263). Some scholars distinguish between Muslim ethnicities. For example, Muslim Arabs were realised to have different doctrines and public spheres than Muslim Asians (Lipset, 1994). As for my fieldwork in Kuwait, my research study found no association between the informants' level of religious spirituality (or attachment to religion) and race, ethnicity, nationality, education, or socio-economic status. In this respect, through the ideas of Sana[129] and Mariam[130], there are observed disputes even among Kuwaiti tribes over ideological differences. Eickelman (2001: 194) asserted, "It is incorrect to assume that Muslims, more than the followers of other religions, are guided by religious doctrines". Islam is variant, accommodating, and open to new interpretations, where demands and propositions vary with time and place.

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[129] Sana is a 38-year-old Lebanese married female, was born and raised in Kuwait, currently lives in Jordan.
[130] Mariam is a 66-year-old married Syrian female, came to Kuwait shortly after its liberation in 1991.

Joanna and Abrar served as two informants who expressed how their parents somewhat celebrate in their own way, but among other responses, Valentine's Day is generally not approved and viewed as "outlandish" by parents, as Qassem stated. Parents and elders are set in their ways and believe Valentine's Day is a foolish, non-beneficial event. Joanna in her statement described implications of Valentine's Day in Kuwait, "I believe that in Kuwait, due to its conservative culture, there is a majority of people who believe that it encourages sin and is not approved by parents and elders as they believe that this is just a made-up, Western-born event that does not reflect their own values and traditions". Seba similarly highlighted that in her parents' view, the occasion conflicts Arab Muslim ethics and morals. This gives reason for some youngsters not to celebrate Valentine's Day so that they would not displease their parents. Doing so would imply distancing from family traditions and individual identity.

It is somewhat taboo to talk about western festivities with elders in Kuwait. It would be more appropriate to discuss them within similar young age groups. Anna mentions how she does not prefer to live up to contemporary societal expectations just to satisfy social trends. She would much rather demonstrate love spontaneously without being tied to a specific date. Nevertheless, she *does* look forward to Valentine's Day among her close circles and has expectations for it. This again demonstrates the youth's indecision; the puzzling dilemma of whether to celebrate the day or not. It suggests that in Kuwait, young people hold in their emotions and unusual opinions to make them more acceptable. When they keep their opinions about foreign practices to themselves, less harm would be done to Kuwait's (Islamic) society's image. This forms a struggle to show their whole self with their community today. Celebrating western practices could reveal how they are easily swayed by society changes. Afterwards, they veer far from their culture and be viewed as someone who trades traditional Arab Islamic celebrations with western "sceptic" ones, a person who "abandons" their original identity. Because of these reasons, the young prefer not to "belong" to a certain hype so they will not be attacked by the public. Anna's answer also reveals that her opinion changed when living in a different country. Living in Kuwait made her realise certain cultural differences and barriers compared to her European

identity, which developed inhibitions. Seba finally remarked it is necessary to have an "open mind" so that the festivity would be celebrated by the young and old.

The fieldwork has showed that Islam and tradition are two different concepts. Apparently, even with occasional criticisms and attacks from ultraconservative Muslims trying to cease the occasion and traditional families trying to stick to their usual practices, there are still plenty of people who celebrate Valentine's Day, as Bashar claimed. It shows the inclination of Kuwait towards other lifestyles and the beginning to adopt, albeit slowly, an obvious culture of love (Cheal 1987; 1988). I reckon that celebrating Valentine's Day is not a matter of opposing Islamic rules and teachings, it is a personal preference which may disappoint or upset parents and family elders. This brings me to a conclusion that people do not reflect their religion, nationalities, or families, they reflect themselves.

Kuwait is increasingly being exposed to other cultures, histories, practices, and lifestyles. More education enriches the society and encourages openness, freedom of speech and opinion. Education systems in Kuwait have been greatly influenced by globalisation, trade and commerce, and technology. In the field of technology, changes and growth in the Middle East were evident during the early 20th century. Pappé (2005: 322) asserted, "Competitive markets and global media became the norm". The gradual rise in education and technology levels in Kuwait ever since the early 90s has triggered a receptive, prejudice-free perspective in its contemporary society. They caused more global and cultural awareness, knowledge, and a rise in movements about sensitive matters, such as gender equality and role of women in Arab societies (Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner, 2012).

To be openminded and embrace knowledge is to become less ignorant, as Bashar expressed. Consequently, this has altered parent ideologies. Abrar shared how her mother's views and upbringing have changed, "My mother started accepting things for my children that she did not accept for me when I was their age because of technology. She is now arguing that I should let my children make their own decisions and depend on themselves, which was not an option when I was a child". All these factors contribute to the change of a society, transferring "changed" values to children, paradoxically slowly turning Kuwait

from a collective society into an individualistic one[131] (Ghabra, 1997). According to the fieldwork, kinship affiliation is not a main factor in Arab or Kuwaiti societies like it was in the 1950s. Yousef views Kuwait as a community that tries to act as a collective society, although he believes otherwise. People are becoming more independent and establishing their own separate identities without the decision-making of groups or collective families. The youth consequently adapted to the society they live in; they could not follow the same ways of their parents, a change that was both evident in, and spread through, the media. As times have changed, Khaled[132] commented, original culture cannot always be emphasised because "it may not match with our current time". Most importantly, this proves the tolerance and acceptance of foreign values and customs by the youth of Kuwait.

Arguably, "open-mindedness", a term that was sufficiently used by fieldwork informants, is not only limited to people, but also to nations and constitutions. To have an "open mind" can be a complicated phenomenon. Respective surroundings of where one lives must also be in accordance with this impartiality. For example, it would not be compatible to support LGBT+ movements in countries such as Saudi Arabia or Kuwait where Islam and the regime repress this collective (Rehman & Polymenopoulou 2013; Qibtiyah 2015; Zahed & Bharat 2019). To practice "open-mindedness", the country should primarily possess a relative social, religious, and political climate that establishes certain cultural tolerance. Afterwards, using the example of homosexual movements, this altered climate would allow, for instance, the freedom to protest for homosexual rights. However, this sort of "extreme" tolerance is out of the question for Kuwait, even in the distant future. Tahani discussed that even though homosexuality rates are increasing, it would still be an immense problem to come forward as a homosexual in Kuwait because it is Islamically outrageous. I reckon that at the moment, it is about finding the balance. Valentine's Day, as a cultural practice widespread among younger generations, does not cross any "major" Islamic lines. The occasion highlights common relations between the East and West and represents one of the products of an "openminded" Kuwait. Comparably, if the government senses that

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[131] Individualization is a key characteristic of modernity. Beck (1992) provides more detail about how individuals today and, above all, individuals coming from wealthier parts of the world, are less constrained by social structures than they perhaps once were in more traditional societies.
[132] Khaled is a 20-year-old single Lebanese male, born and raised in Kuwait.

Valentine's Day encourages homosexual acts, the occasion will indisputably be abolished and definitively banned. Here I question the role of Islam in Muslim communities, seeing that some concepts are tolerable while others are extremely non-negotiable. The notion of an "unclear Islam" will be tackled in a later section.

Other theories argue that migration helped address political and social issues of the Muslim world. Migration processes are a factor to 21st century cultural and religious reality (Aixelà-Cabré, 2006: 76). The aspect of Arab-Muslim migration in the 19th century is often retold in popular memory but rarely discussed in academic work. Travel and the exposure to many nationalities, ethnicities and religions entering Kuwait play a large role in its society and celebrations (Eickelman, 2002a). People who were from over-populated large countries have migrated to oil-rich states, like Kuwait, because those states hold a lower number of inhabitants and higher job opportunities. "Kuwait has welcomed populations of different origins coexisting despite their differences", as Sahar[133] stated. Furthermore, an increasing number of immigrants augmented the probability of marriage and reproducing offspring with dissimilar cultures, thereby raising children in a mixed household, turning Kuwait into a multicultural society. Immigration changes societies, as identified by Gamero Cabrera (2015). It involves postmodern concepts and the anthropology of boundaries. He calls them "new approaches to transnationalism". Kholoud claims that immigrants have adapted to Kuwait's customs and lifestyle while simultaneously practicing their own. A significant concept in migration studies discusses immigrants' sense of belonging to the host society. It relates to theories of assimilation, cultural appropriation, and transculturation, where people incorporate another country's cultural expressions, linguistic words and phrases, rituals, artifacts, history, technologies, and ways of knowledge to their own, regardless of intent, ethics or outcome (Atiyyah 1996; Rogers 2006). Those acts indicate acceptance or positive evaluation of a culture. Studies show that immigrants' identity, sense of belonging and their subjective well-being are deeply influenced by overall life satisfaction and religious motivations in the host country (Amit & Bar-Lev, 2015). Evidently, Seba explained that due to Kuwait's cultural diversity, national origins of people are difficult to pinpoint. The accents and common language have also diversified, she clarified, "Most

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[133] Sahar is a 37-year-old Syrian married female, born and raised in Kuwait.

people talk in English. We can only know if they are Kuwaiti from their style (the way they dress). As foreigners here, we are also following their style and speaking the Kuwaiti (Arabic) accent". This shows how children of immigrants in Kuwait, or third culture kids, would demonstrate different skills, values and probably even different interests than their parents'. For example, a Lebanese national who was born and raised in Kuwait would adopt Arabian Gulf characteristics and express themselves differently from a Lebanese who was raised in the United States[134]. Both would not represent a typical Lebanese who was born and raised in Lebanon. With different developed ideologies, political environment and cultural ethics, they would only demonstrate half the knowledge about their country: the knowledge transmitted by their parents. Conclusively, Hall and Gay (1996: 4) proposed that identities are about questions of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming not "where we came from" or "who we are", but rather "what we might become" or "how we might represent ourselves".

The increasing mix of nations and people in Kuwait causes "a loss or blur of customs", in Faisal's opinion, even more so, it will create "delusions of the person's own culture", according to Ghada[135]. In other words, when there are changes in typical homeland and familial customs, a person's exact tendency towards a particular culture cannot be pinpointed. Earlier studies showed that these changes can lead to identity issues, as well as ethical or cultural dissonance, distress, and in some cases, mental health problems (Thompson 1997; Bhugra 2004; Lee & Mjelde-Mossey 2004; Bhugra & Becker 2005; Lim & Lim 2010; Lillevik 2015). This is because it is difficult to understand and accept other lifestyles, so criticising what is not appropriate to Kuwaiti culture is troubling, as Loulwa[136] explained. Other consequences to migratory flows include instability, diaspora and deterritorialization of a nation[137], which, as Appadurai (1996) suspects, will continue to take place as formations of new ethnic and religious movements increase in a country, resulting in population divisions and conflicts with oppressed minorities (García-Canclini, 2001: 316). There are constant tensions between tribes, *Biduns* and traditional groups in

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[134] In the 1800s, a huge number of Arabs in Lebanon and Syria began to migrate to Europe, West Africa and the Americas. There were even greater population shifts by the 20th century (Mackintosh-Smith, 2019).
[135] Ghada is a 36-year-old single Egyptian female, born and raised in Kuwait.
[136] Loulwa is a 37-year-old married Jordanian female, born and raised in Kuwait.
[137] A clear characteristic of modernity, as per García-Canclini (2001).

Kuwait, which are observed in the media. In addition, the imbalance between a low number of oil-producing countries and a high population headcount has led to educational and occupational competitions and provoked issues in the region (Kamrava & Babar 2012; Abdalla 2015; Al-Waqfi & Al-Faki 2015). Sahar underscored that during the recent years, the increasing number of foreign population entering the country caused conflicts with respect to the Kuwaitis for their different privileges. Immigrants therefore feel alienated and challenged in Kuwait. Aseel and Adam recognise that many negative views about immigrants have generated traditions that are derogatory to humans, which permit status recognition, discrimination, racist and sexist prejudice, xenophobia and uniformity. Some Kuwaiti nationals accuse immigrants of disrupting typical Kuwaiti tradition and culture[138]. In the words of Amina, "Each person enters the country with their own beliefs, preferences and way of life", therefore, it is only natural for their customs to disseminate within the environment they live in. García-Canclini's analysis (2001: 316) concludes that "all cultures are hybrid and borderline", and territories are all full of tensions and differences, or in the words of Appadurai (1996: 188), "the whole planet has become a deterritorialized, diasporic and transnational". García-Canclini (2001: 36) states with a markedly post-modern accent that "cultures are impossible to delimit".

Gamero Cabrera (2015) contrarily feels that it is a luxury to enjoy cultural richness and benefit from diverse migration groups, an outlook that both Appadurai and García-Canclini overlooked. Fatima argued that Kuwait could use its diverse multicultural society as an opportunity to learn about or even adopt some values from other nations, for example, citizenship rights, national security or pension plans. "It will make the country better", she added. In this light, interactions with other cultures enrich a society and cause openness and tolerance to other ideologies. People would also adapt to non-traditional lifestyles and explore other societal roles, Hisham believes this would "make them smarter".

Albeit a complex and vague process, Kuwait's transformation or development was also associated with external factors falling beyond the individual's immediate circle, for example colonialism (Carrier, 2012b). Halliday (2003) argued that the subject of Islamic

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[138] Similar views were found in Egypt, see Kreil (2016).

intervention with the West was identified for over a millennium ever since a conflict of civilisations was confirmed. However, more precisely, Winstone and Freeth (2018: 56) wrote, "Kuwait before the days of oil was a Muslim state barely touched by outside influences". The Arab Gulf states slowly became affected after the British suppression of 1839 and then the expansion of oil trade in the 20th century. The West and United Nations began to deeply intervene in the Arabian Gulf region especially after the oil discovery of Bahrain in 1932. This in turn influenced Kuwait's wealth and resources. Kuwait's political independence from Great Britain was therefore a priority. Undoubtedly, state independence and migration are strong factors that have influenced the Middle Eastern and Arabian Gulf situation (Schofield & Schofield, 2016). It involved the ratification of Islamic values and authority. Islamic passages were reanalysed to match time changes, for example to encourage democratization. Goldschmidt Jr. and Al-Marashi (2019) claimed that specific events in the Middle East, such as the Palestinian Israeli cause and the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, have triggered the evolution of Islamic institutions and culture, and the reconstruction efforts of Middle Eastern governments. More tension on the Middle East from the West was specifically provoked after the September 11 attacks (Halliday, 2003).

Inevitably, war affected Kuwait's practices. The Persian Gulf war was a transformative event for the Middle East. It appears that war had uncovered many "buried" issues within social groups and country practices (Al-Mughni 2001; Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner 2012). It generated new social consciousness amongst the population and efforts were put towards a more desirable, appealing lifestyle to suit an independent Kuwait (Al-Mughni, 2010). In fact, some Islamists were attempting to reform modernity, not reject it (Safi, 2003). They attribute modern or liberal explanations to Islamic texts to achieve assimilation. This differentiated Islamic practices from local familial traditions, in which Khurshid (2015) stated was a "tool" of Western imperialism. Disciplines within the Kuwaiti society; social habits and norms, were in alteration by the government and the media. As Emile Durkheim affirmed, people who act collectively can transform their "traditional" society into a "modern" one (Fararo, 2006).

Most notably, Kuwait had installed a US-based military which was necessary for its liberation from Iraq in 1991 (Terrill 2007; Lilli 2018). The United States presently has a

big impact on Kuwait. Apart from security, Kuwait's special relationship with the United States involves economic, diplomatic and political affairs, protection of Kuwait's sovereignty and independence, provision of an extensive range of products and the establishment of many company and restaurant franchises, in return for oil[139]. Generally, Kuwait's liberation caused a social and cultural transformation with regards to urbanisation, women, employment, politics, and education (Hidayati & Apipudin, 2018: 369-374). The Persian Gulf war specifically put a lot of gender roles in question. The theoretical debate of "feminism" arose, discussing several new insights about the general image and combat position of women during the war. The scope of women activities was then expanded from the domestic sphere to many global economic development activities, improving women's status in Kuwait (Al-Mughni 2001: 151; Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner 2012: 18-21). An entire generation of young Kuwaiti women are growing up with choices never afforded to their mothers, just as Aixelà-Cabré (2000) established in her study about women in Morocco. Several females from the fieldwork like Majida[140], Serene, Joanna and Anna, argued that several outdated traditions need to be obliterated. Sarah[141] strongly believes that "Kuwait has to 'modernise' so that the women would have a place in society to be more free and liberated". These responses from female informants suggest new directions in feminism in the country. Accordingly, granting women life-changing opportunities to reach their full potential and allow them to express their role in society would show a "modern Kuwait". Plenty of rules and policies that hinder gender equality are being changed or eradicated in Kuwait, and more rights are sought to be provided particularly in matters of employment, marriage, and women representations in the public sphere. Debates about women rights and remembrance of war martyrs have aided in nation development and history reinforcement. Curiously, Amal, Issa and Maha also linked Kuwait's transformation to modernism. Modernism, modernity, and modernisation are concepts very disputed and segregated in academic literature, where "modern" has no

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[139] Abrar specifically connected Kuwait's identity with the United States of America and Saudi Arabia and added, "these are one of the reasons of an oppressed society". For its dependence on other nations, Kuwait is neither an industrial nor a touristic country, "even foreign labour is imported", as Fatima disclosed.
[140] Majida is a 31-year-old Egyptian single female who grew up in Kuwait.
[141] Sarah is a 65-year-old married Egyptian female, who lived in Kuwait during different intervals of her life.

precise definition to date (Barzinji, 2013). García-Canclini (2001: 44) admits that modernity is a problematic and complex phenomenon.

Conclusively, changes in Kuwait's society were a result of education, technology, migration and social belonging, colonialism, war and globalisation. The growth of globalisation in Kuwait had generated many positive and negative opinions. According to Danah, it can simultaneously enhance economies and impoverish the richness of cultures. On the one hand, Nahla, the oldest female informant, argued that change benefits societies, "Our image would be improved if we try to fit in". The Middle Eastern image that can improve might relate to the strict patriarchy, women oppressive representations (González Vázquez, 2013), and their expressions of "religious" clothing that generate popular misconceptions and stereotypes about the Arab Muslim world. Other examples relate to "backward" traditions and ideologies that are sought to be abolished, such as child marriages, virginity testing and honour killings[142]. To improve the image is necessary in an increasingly Islamophobic or Arabophobic climate, whereas to resist change and stick to tradition is to turn a blind eye to basic human rights, such as the women suffrage and anti-discrimination systems. Serene believes that several gaps and issues within tradition should remain in history books, she said, "we don't need to live in the past to maintain our identity". Young, single male informants like Adam, Yousef and Rashed think that it is good to preserve certain traditional customs but it would be a mistake to avoid all means of foreign influences. Cultures are not static. There are many exemplars where new customs coexist with others (Todorov 2010; Zhang 2016; Banban 2018).

In terms of the present study, Valentine's Day was a welcomed concept. There was a significant recognition of Valentine's Day emotional characteristic in Kuwait. We can acknowledge that showing love for one another can represent freedom of rights and expression, as Karam stated, which are positive qualities in a contemporary society. This gradual cultural alteration allows Kuwait to evolve as an Islamic society, respond to current changes and be more aware of cultural diversity.

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[142] For more information on these issues, see Cohan (2010), Riyani (2014), Oberwittler and Kasselt (2014), Abboud, Jemmott and Sommers (2015), Eltahawy (2015), Alsaidi (2015), Sadath (2019), UNICEF and UNFPA (2020).

On the other hand, Kholoud believes globalisation destroys individual identity and makes cities look the same everywhere. Despite the exposure to the West, the Kuwaiti society is conservative in some respects because of the Islamic religion, strict regime, and strong commitment to customs and traditions. Family connections are strongly believed to be the basis of tribe formation and values are set around a collective society to maintain control of tradition or how parents were raised. To this day, Joanna claimed, people still relate to their "original" tribe and follow the larger family unit in Kuwait. Arabs following western trends would allegedly make them outcasts in their own country. Fieldwork implications show general resentment or discomfort regarding Valentine's Day. Negative connotations associated with the event draw upon overlapping religious, nationalist, anti-consumerist, and moral arguments. The reluctance to celebrate Valentine's Day was justified with the strong desire to hold on to the Arab Islamic identity and traditions. Kuwait enjoys many traditional gift occasions; feasts, gatherings and coming together, especially during Ramadan and *Eid*. Fatima acknowledged that Valentine's Day is a celebration imposed from the West and in her opinion, celebrating one's authentic traditions is more important, such as the celebration of *Gergean*, which is not practiced in other countries outside the Arabian Gulf. Celebrating Valentine's Day, in this sense, is unnecessary.

Furthermore, love is celebrated regardless of a commercialised occasion. As inferred, love is not dependent on one day that is predetermined by "westerners". Many ideas involved "copying" other cultures' trends, specifically the United States. Practicing national identity differentiates people from others, whereas to copy, as per Tahani, or in better words, to transnationalise, would slowly diffuse Kuwaiti culture and character. In her words, "certainly Kuwait would lose its sense of originality to follow blindly". On this note, many western practices are adopted in Kuwait without comprehending their history or what they stand for. More research and awareness should be directed towards other cultures' habits or customs before deciding to be part of them. Instead of implementing a love occasion, Adam believes more promising and beneficial concepts can be learned from the West. Focus should be directed towards the development of Kuwait with regards to human rights, such as retirement plans, universal healthcare, free education and the like. Since these concepts are absent in Kuwait, I realise that copying others in celebration rituals relates

more to marketing techniques' success in attracting consumers and not a response to western culture.

Danah recognises a risk of having a diverse nation: the disappearance of small cultures by a greater economic or political weight. Probably, due to the awareness of other cultures and migration, offensive gifts in Islam that were previously discussed, such as alcohol bottles, would start to represent casual gifts presented to non-Muslim homes. Therefore, it is a concern to lose the essence of unique Kuwaiti festive occasions since celebrating western practices creates a vague and mixed culture. For the long term, Tarek, Qassem and Eman[143] prioritize Arab Middle Eastern traditions. They believe this would protect heritage and sustain traditional practices among younger generations. Some efforts are made to emphasise these traditions in the television industry for example. Accordingly, not celebrating Valentine's Day would also preserve traditional Arab marriage rituals, as discussed in a later section. Nahla claimed that many countries hold conventions, have prosecution groups and start revolutions so not to forget their history, roots, origin and identity. Therefore, even when Valentine's Day is popular in Kuwait, it does not mean it is common across the country. Rural areas and suburbs still appear to many Kuwaiti nationals as a stronghold of tradition.

Kuwait is embracing foreign cultural practices while not detaching from its own rituals and traditions. Valentine's Day appears as an incentive to discuss the contemporary subject and Islamic viewpoints. There is an obvious indication of a change in employment, gender roles and now festive occasions in Kuwait. Valentine's Day and its yearly institutionalization of romantic gifting offered new paths to the experience of intimate aspirations that connects love to transnational imaginations. However, Kuwait's Islamic constitution and monarchy have not publicly revealed this transformation, making the country quietly continue its pre-war routines. Khaled affirmed that cultural diversity is implied but is "not widely expressed in the culture or the region". The gifting field, among many others, should be examined to show Kuwait's tolerance in accepting and adopting other practices to its culture.

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[143] Eman is a 68-year-old Saudi Arabian married female who moved to Kuwait after marriage in the 70s.

# 1. Dating and Romantic Relationships: Gender roles and gift expectations in an Arab Islamic country

Arab Islamic notions of identity are defined by traditional gender roles, usually constructed around a typical androcentric understanding (Aixelà-Cabré 2000; González Vázquez 2013). Islam therefore has been widely comprehended as a "masculine" or "male-centred" religion (Amiraux 2003; Aixelà-Cabré 2006). However, gender remains vaguely defined yet complex in the Arab world because of constant changes and movements in society's layers of taboo, stigma, and inequality. In the recent years, the academic world began to interpret expressions of gender within Arab nations, but the gendered Arab identity had been fundamentally stereotyped. The criteria of masculinity and femininity have been closely observed during the research of this thesis (Jones, 2009), and the findings have fortunately set out performative aspects of the Arab Islamic identity and clear gender roles with regards to gift-giving, Valentine's Day, and societal relationship expectations. This can mirror what an Arab Islamic society would favour for males and females in terms of social practices, as the theory of Habitus suggests (Bourdieu, 1969).

We often hear the perception that women in general are drawn towards the "emotional" side of any matter. They are widely stereotyped as the "warm, sensitive" sex in many cultures. Also, they are not expected to be ambitious or career-oriented, otherwise they would be criticised and labelled as "bossy". Men, on the other hand, are the more "assertive, serious and rational" sex (Broverman, et al. 1972; Fischer & Manstead 2000; Brody & Hall 2000; Plant, et al. 2000; Hatfield, Rapson & Le 2009; Sandberg 2013). On that note, Jones (2009) depicts stereotypical definitions of gendered identities, where men are brave fighters who do not shed tears, while women are defenceless and habitually cry.

In consequence to these characteristics, the sexes tend to take on certain hobbies and interests[144]. In society, men take on positions of power and leadership[145] and automatically

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[144] Accordingly, this suggests the invisibility of the LGBT+ community in Arab Islamic countries since Islam and the regime repress this collective.
[145] Not only in the business field as Vice Presidents or CEOs, but also as tribal chiefs and warlords (Chanial, 2012). Sardar (2013: 3) declared, "The favourite pastime of men is, of course, war, perpetuated in the name of religion and ideologies … Men and violence go together".

assume they are entitled to a fulfilling personal life and a successful career, while women are told by society and the media that eventually, they will have to compromise between career and family (Sandberg, 2013). As an enforced gender role since childhood, women are more focused on the daily care of children and strengthening family bonds (Tétreault, 2001), using many approaches, namely gift exchange. These roles are usually given to women to "save face", bind friendships, build and ensure the continuity of relationships (Silber 2009; Shanka & Handley 2011). Gift exchange occurs in one-on-one intimate family relations, or in bigger contexts such as tribal dimensions, making women and gifts the "glue of society" (Whitaker, 2017: 5). As shown, in many Muslim communities, the woman has been recognised to belong in various circles of socialisation, not solely Islamic ones (Amiraux, 2003), which proves that the patriarchy cannot observe this complexity.

Historically, most Kuwaiti women were housewives, but during the past few decades, the improvement in democratization and social development in Kuwait have opened doors for females to hold distinctive, authoritative, influential positions politically and in the labour sphere. They have risen to high ranked roles such as ambassadors, educational directors, and business entrepreneurs (Al-Mughni 2001; Al-Suwaihel 2010). The rise of feminism has also made an impact on the development of consumption sociology, which encouraged further studies relating to fashion, shopping, and household management (Campbell, 1995: 98-99). Women made a significant contribution in this respect because most consumers were realised to be women. Women shop more because allegedly, they make the majority of household buying decisions. They also shop out of habit and not out of rational decision-making. Furthermore, during shopping, they are more engaged with sales associates and seek additional information (Wharton University of Pennsylvania, 2007), which explains why women would generally take more time in choosing a gift, or preparing for one, than men would. Evidently, as Kuwait's fieldwork confirmed, women were more invested in the gift shopping experience on many dimensions. Budgeting, timing, evaluating and comparing, and finally choosing a gift were all realised as precise details that women pay attention to during a gifting occasion. Women therefore have a gift gender role of socialising and understanding before purchasing gifts (Otnes, Lowrey & Kim, 1993). Bourdieu views women as structurally predisposed to be less concerned with symbolic

profits, freer to pursue material profits, and therefore closer to the "economic truth" of exchange than men (Bourdieu, 1977: 171). Strathern (1990) even studied "the gender of the gift", her main viewpoint familiarises the commodity with an anthropological, feminist direction. Gender, clearly, is an essential element to consider in the world of gifts. Usually, studies about gifts in non-western societies tend to overlook gender because they would rather focus on the actual ceremonial exchange practice although in fact, both factors share equal importance when selecting a gift (Shanka & Handley, 2011).

A gift from a woman even holds different characteristics than that from a man. It is commonly noticeable that a woman's gift, albeit a small one, would carry great underlying emotion, detail, and care, despite anthropological literature showing that utility and individuality are the key characteristics of the gift. However, the definite characteristic of care has been demoted from modern society because male gifts were viewed the most important since they dominated the public sphere, namely politics, rituals, and war (Chanial, 2012). In contrast, women were confined with gifts that involve the intimate and private spheres, therefore their gifts were unrecognised, long negated and devalued in traditional societies. Yet, female "gifts of care" have now taken over because they remind us of our original frailty and dependence on women (Chanial, 2014). This shows social changes in gifting rituals, where women are not only more involved in gift-giving than men but are also better gift givers (Pollmann & van Beest, 2013). Women are now recognised as the primary caregivers as well as the primary gift givers in societies and families (Sherry Jr. & McGrath, 1989). Apparently for women, gift-giving vitalizes the feminized perception of love (Cheal, 1987). Literature also shows that women possess more control in gift rituals. Women, gifts and power are somehow related to one another[146] (Osteen, 2002).

Studying Valentine's Day in Kuwait is an emotionally charged topic that has allowed to uncover many cultural and religious standards in gender roles and expectations of romantic

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[146] In Japan, when Valentine's Day was first introduced in 1958, women used to give gifts of chocolates to men, but men did not give any gift to women (Ogasawara 1996; Minowa, Khomenko & Belk 2011; Jordan 2013). This Japanese custom somehow reflects two ideologies, inequality between the genders obligating solely women to buy gifts, or power over men so they feel vulnerable on this occasion.

relationships. The occasion specifically brings forward notions of relationship security and status (Wood & Wilson 2003; Chopik, Wardecker & Edelstein 2014). From a cultural point of view, having a romantic partner on Valentine's Day was crucial for the validity of the celebration in Kuwait. The high recognition of Valentine's Day has drawn couples into misusing the day as an *excuse* to be romantic and exchange gifts, as Farbotko and Head (2013) explained. Valentine's Day was even welcomed by senior informants like Nahla who wish to celebrate the love occasion if there was someone to celebrate it with. Single people therefore feel compelled to satisfy this condition. In the ensuing analysis, it turns out that the downside of being single was the least liked aspect about Valentine's Day, mainly because frequent public displays of romantic love reinforce feelings of inadequacy. On the other hand, married or romantically involved individuals feel frustrated about satisfying their partners and worried about breakups (Morse & Neuberg, 2004). I reckon that commercialisation has influenced peoples' habits by fostering materialism, shaping gender roles, and encouraging togetherness (Close & Zinkhan, 2006).

Minowa, Khomenko and Belk (2011) claim the persistent gender asymmetric nature of Valentine's Day. Marketing efforts have portrayed it as a female-oriented occasion. Mass-media has reinforced ads showing that women are supposed to receive special attention and be showered with gifts by men; specifically depicting happy women receiving roses and jewellery (Belk & Coon, 1991). The occasion in Kuwait therefore triggers high expectations of happiness because the media depicts it that way. When women are presented with gifts, it boosts their self-esteem and pleasure, which positively impacts relationship satisfaction (Nguyen & Munch 2011; Kaell 2012; Hyun, Park & Park 2016). As illustrated by Illouz (1997), romantic love urges to attain happiness through communicating feelings, which influences the success of relationships. Even in conflict, women look for the consideration of their feelings, while men prefer the more logical and "less emotional" approach to the problem. A gift can therefore be enough to avoid discussing the problem (Mauss 1925; Thomas 1991; 1994; Minowa & Gould 1999). It reassures the woman of her "value" and validity in the relationship. In this respect, I add that the gift represents kindness and a method for asking for forgiveness, which reflects on my earlier notion about "winning a person with a gift". The gift is also an instrument of

love; to judge the sincerity of the relationship, and the fancier the gift, the more it encourages women to post about it on their social media[147].

Women tend to be more affected by the internet and this shows high education and technology levels in Kuwait. As young women, their role is more indulged and courted in lavishness. Young women like to play the "princess role", as described by Close (2012), and expect lavishness to escalate year after year because it provokes excitement, envy, and attraction. They are significantly influenced by their peers and are provoked to compete over having "the perfect relationship". They try to outdo one another by showing off their possessions and gifts on social media platforms, a rite to reconfirm their gender identity. We can determine that women possess more power in gifting occasions in Kuwait, which indicates their control in the relationship. Close (2012: 15) declared, "This is especially interesting in light of how marketing and advertising often position Valentine's Day as the one day that highlights and embraces femininity and womanhood".

The media usually portrays and promotes the image of a "happy" couple during an idyllic romantic date, which has become the society's normalised perception of Valentine's Day (Close, 2012). Quarrels, separation, or break ups should not occur around Valentine's Day, or any other major collective occasion, such as birthdays, Christmas, or New Year because the overall atmosphere is supposed to be "happy". This also shows the pressure that Valentine's Day has on peoples' mood. A notion implied from the fieldwork argues, "I'd rather be happy than be alone on Valentine's Day". Even in long term marriages, the day is carefully planned beforehand, and a good gift should be prepared to impress romantic partners[148]. Several male informants, like Issa, Fares, Bader, and Mostafa[149], do not approve of the occasion, but it is their priority to make their wives happy. The importance of making someone happy forms an obligation to purchase a Valentine gift. Because of the

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[147] See subdivision: Social media and content display.
[148] After studying people from the Arabian Gulf and MENA (Middle East and North African) region, online surveys showed that more than two thirds of people would make plans in advance, typically a few days up to a month before the event (AG reporter 2013; Berkani 2013; 2014). Even if they do not plan to celebrate, almost half the participants from the survey admitted that they intend to be nicer to their significant other on this day. Top responses showed they would celebrate Valentine's Day to "show their partner they care for them" and because they enjoy the event themselves, meanwhile only a very low percentage expressed they would do so because of "pressure from their partner".
[149] Mostafa is a 68-year-old married Kuwaiti male.

marketing image that positions and surrounds Valentine's Day, men feel obtruded by women to be "gentlemen"; to give gifts that demonstrate "advertised" standards of love (Goodwin, Smith & Spiggle 1990; Mayet & Pine, 2010). They feel pressure from the media, their significant other, and their peers. Men feel the need to repeat this practice every year for the sake of "saving" the relationship, which indicates a mutual gain (Rugimbana, Donahay, Neal & Polonsky, 2003). Nguyen and Munch (2011) discuss in their study that some people might perceive romantic gifting as a chore, where obligation depicts an anxious attachment to do something remarkably different from the year before, and this might not be equally reciprocated by female counterparts. This highlights the importance of romantic relationships in an Arab culture, yet it imposes a burden on men (Otnes, Ruth & Milbourne, 1994).

Valentine's Day expectations have therefore also become negotiated in terms of relationship rejection (Van Dyk, 2013). Not receiving a gift on Valentine's Day can compromise the relationship (Belk 1976; Ellsworth & Smith 1988). If there is no gift, Mahmoud stated, he would "look *bad* in front of her", and Yousef commented he would "*fail* in her eyes". Men in turn, also have the power in affecting women's emotions and reactions. They enjoy this cultural freedom and the temporary opportunity to deliver mysterious gift meanings on this day. Men usually pay more attention to women on Valentine's Day to meet their expectations and elevate their relationship by offering gifts that have been previously desired by their female partner (Otnes, Lowrey & Kim, 1993). Based on this, the male gift gender role aims to please, provide and compensate. The Kuwaiti society has gendered the occasion as one that cares for females and pushes to look after them even when they are competent to do so themselves. Evidently, studies show that men spend about twice as much as women do on Valentine gifts (Chance & Norton 2011; Wilson, Wang, Banerji & Carlson 2015; Zayas, Pandey & Tabak 2017). In contemporary western societies, women were found to simultaneously give and *receive* more gifts than men (Caplow 1984; Cheal 1988).

From this, we can understand that the male gift could represent altruistic, selfless motives because they have put the other person's happiness before theirs. Tworek and Cimpian (2016: 1109) also link this to systematic bias, arguing that due to inherence, "people tend

to judge what is typical to be also good and appropriate". They found that people usually relate objects to intrinsic facts, for example, men believe that since red roses are beautiful, it is good to give roses on Valentine's Day. I also use inherent bias to support my findings as such, "Valentine's Day makes my partner feel happy and special, so I have to celebrate it". Romantic gifting has shown to separate between self-esteem and narcissistic motivations. Narcissistic individuals are not likely to resort to gift-giving as an instrumental act to maintain a relationship.

While married and non-married men from my fieldwork expressed their obligation to celebrate and give gifts on Valentine's Day, married women on the other hand, believe it is not necessary[150]. In fact, celebrating Valentine's Day and validating the relationship on social media varied depending on age, marital status, gender, and lack of other prominent roles, for example a mother. Abrar, a mother of two, conveyed a different gender role from those who do not have children. She stated, "life became tiring for us, so we don't really pay attention to this event". Women who have more serious relationships and families of their own have answered that they opt out of celebrating Valentine's Day. Valentine's Day, for them, is an occasion infested with "society-pressured" gifts, so it is not the main occasion that keeps the relationship "alive". They realise that expensive, fancy gifts might not hold positive consequences since it does not guarantee or promise anything for the couple in the future. The awareness on consumerism and consumption generated reversed reactions towards the commercialised product.

Married women are more focused on true romance and meaningful, sincere gestures which determine the quality of the relationship. Eman for example, emphasized non-tangible gifts, something as simple as "a kind word, a hand-written letter, helping around the house or fixing something". She argued that Valentine's Day is an occasion to *give*, most of all, to give time to loved ones. These are all "signs of love", she declared. Joanna also mentioned that non-material Valentine gifts are acceptable, such as "gifting an

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[150] Contrarily, men feel that Valentine's Day is a big deal for women, as Tarek stated, "maybe for girls there is a more romantic or sentimental value to the occasion … the gifts are very important for them in that sense". The importance of the occasion was then realised to differ depending on the woman's marital status.

experience[151] or a homemade meal". Married women showed that baking a homemade cake or sharing any activity, such as helping with house chores, could still count as "eligible" Valentine gifts. This way, activities related to housework that are largely linked to female gender roles would then be performed with pleasure rather than imposed obligation. Even sharing quality time with one another was considered enough to celebrate and appreciate the occasion. This explains why men usually pay twice as much on gifts. Men are typically more price-conscious and practical with gifts, while women are more concerned about the gift's emotional significance. This similarity was demonstrated by Kamptner (1991: 209), "Younger and male subjects emphasized the active, physical, instrumental, immediate qualities of possessions, while females and older subjects emphasized symbolic and interpersonal features".

Non-material gifts have conquered many forms, "the gift of time" as illustrated earlier, and now "the gift of a spotless home", "the gift of a home cooked meal", and even "the gift of peace" (T.O.T. Team, 2017). An important perspective is now emerging that rejects the individualistic view and focuses on the importance of social interactions in human lives. Individual consumption of brands does not define our lives but rather meaningful established relationships, as proposed by Cova, Kozinets and Shankar (2007). In this sense, none of my female informants mentioned the need to receive a special gift on Valentine's Day. I conclude that cultural expectations and commercialisation compel men to buy gifts and prepare for Valentine's Day, which mostly excite single, young women who are exploring romantic relationships. This supports studies that found that single people spend more on Valentine's Day than married ones (Chance & Norton 2011; Wilson, et al. 2015; Zayas, Pandey & Tabak 2017).

Evidently, the study on Valentine gifts in Kuwait has provided knowledge on materialism, and helped underline gifting identities and motives during social, romantic interactions. As supported by several previous studies, obligation, self-interest, and altruistic motives dominates the giving for men in Kuwait (Wolfinbarger 1990; Goodwin, Smith & Spiggle 1990; Rugimbana, Donahay, Neal & Polonsky 2003). Generally, a lot is expected from

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[151] Studies show that one of the best gifts are experiences because they involve deeper meanings (Otnes & Beltramini, 1996).

male figures in Arab Islamic societies. Men are supposed to be the bigger givers and are expected to show care and desire by pampering their women. For many generations, until today, men are expected to provide for the family. Belk and Coon (1991) affirmed that these expectations existed ever since the 18th century, probably even earlier. They even argued that it is the man's obligation to pay for dates in romantic relationships. In Islam, being providers forms part of male responsibilities, gender roles and social identities (Aixelà-Cabré 2000; 2007b; Bani & Pate 2015)[152]. Therefore, Valentine's Day advertisements further pressurise the cruciality of a man's presence in a woman's life. The intention to demonstrate true feelings is weakened when acts are done out of obligation, to meet expectations and satisfy marketplace pressures (Otnes, Ruth & Milbourne, 1994). The eagerness to impress someone by "manipulating" them with a gift can probably create a fake, non-genuine emotion (Cheal, 1986). In moments of vulnerability and gratefulness, even genuine emotions are not permanent. Regrettably, Robles (2012) said that normalising fake emotions during gift exchanges implies that "everyone has to lie".

Valentine's Day has been polemic in many Islamic communities. It is largely viewed as a social and religious transgression because it distracts the youth and turns them away from authentic traditions, according to Brosius and Wenzlhuemer (2011: 47) and Kreil (2016). In Kuwait, as transnational circulations started to increase since the 1990s, associating romantic love and "Islamic" marriage with western modernity has become an evident social struggle (Cole & Thomas, 2009). The occasion is perceived as a false representation of love. It gives wrong ideas about relationship standards, elicits expectations from partners and obstructs marriage because young couples get comfortable with their relationship situation since nothing binds them legally. Traditionally, elders refuted the idea that love is fundamental for marriage and believed that the young have love affairs only for the purpose of fulfilling their lustful passions (Kreil, 2016). This shows clear differences from romantic love in European or Western contexts, an important gap to be addressed.

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[152] Providing for women does not indicate men superiority, domination/subordination, or gender inequality. These stereotypes have been changing in various Arab Islamic countries since the early 20th century. Women in fact have been acquiring new social responsibilities, reconstructing gender roles, and intending to dissolve the patriarchal hierarchy (Aixelà-Cabré 2006: 74-75; De Bel-Air, Safar & Destremau 2018).

A high percentage of marriages in Arab societies are arranged by parents or elders and still take place using the traditional method: marrying from the family, lifelong neighbours/family friends or close acquaintances. The couple's opinion or wishes are often disregarded and any relationship that have resulted from "secret dating", like meeting on Valentine's Day for example, is not recognised (Mooro, 2019). However, in some families, marriage is also viewed necessary when two are in love. As per the Quran, *Surat Al-Baqarah* (2: 189) instructs not to enter houses from the back, but to enter them from their proper door, and to fear Allah. More colloquially among people, this verse has been interpreted into, "enter the house from its door, not from its window", in better words, do not go behind the parents' back and date in secret, but come forward, introduce yourself and make your intentions known to gain permission to date or marry them [women] (*Surat Al-Nisa'a*, 4: 25). Typically, this is meant for men since they are the traditional proposers of marriage.

Introducing oneself to the family imposes tremendous pressure on romantic couples. Because of its taboo nature, dating in the Middle East automatically translates to, "When will he propose?" or "When is the engagement?". There is no space or time for romantic relationships to grow and flourish without the pressure of these formalities. To truly know someone, casually and slowly without expectations, is very difficult, so the relationship remains secret. On a further note, even friendships with the opposite sex are complicated, often questioned and provoke gossip in Arab societies. In many Muslim families, these friendships are prohibited, and for a married woman, they are typically out of the question because it makes her seem "unrespectable" or "promiscuous". Since it is difficult *not* to be friends with the opposite sex for work or educational purposes, these platonic relationships are therefore also secreted.

Whether an arranged or a love relationship, marriage holds many standards in Arab Islamic societies. As an unwritten rule of marriage, the groom must come from a good family, and from a similar financial, educational, and cultural or ethnic background. Above all, the couple should have the same beliefs and religion. The bride also faces a lot of expectations from the groom's family. She is supposed to be pious, well-mannered and shows signs of good "kitchen and cleaning skills". In other words, she should show that she would be a

good housewife and is fit to mother the offspring of the man. Inevitably, these traditional "outdated" standards provoke feelings of misogamy and further delay marital commitments.

When these marriage standards have been satisfied, what follows is the actual marriage process: the proposal, engagement, marriage, and wedding. Since marriage is a costly endeavour in many Arab countries, it constitutes an economic hurdle to romanticism. To marry without the parents' financial help is practically impossible. The intermediary period between the engagement and signing the marriage contract is used to prepare for costly requirements, such as the dowry, the down payment, housing and furniture, gifts for the wedded couple, and finally the wedding, which normally becomes very long due to financial limitations[153]. Based on this, monetary constraints on marriage seem to tame romantic ambitions, leading to breakups.

These unrealistic, traditional marriage standards and heavy financial burdens have made Valentine's Day prominent in exploring relationships, conveying feelings and promoting love ideals among non-married individuals, in other words "love modernism" (Kreil, 2016). The occasion clearly supports conflicting conceptions of love in an Islamic society. It fulfilled the need to be loved and cherished as young adults (Abela, Vella & Piscopo, 2020). The convenient access to affordable commodities has also formed a big success on Valentine's Day. Valentine's Day became an opportunity to accept dating openly and not to put so much pressure on making relationships all "buttoned-up" in terms of marriage out of fear of "what people will say"[154].

As I have explained in the previous chapter, although Valentine's Day is not related to religion, the conduct that takes place during the event is still questioned in terms of religion.

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[153] In every Arab country, these marriage conditions differ. Many ask for an "impossible" amount of money, others practice the *yusr* or lenience concept in Islam (Al-Oueid, 2012), meaning to facilitate marriage with a symbolic amount of money. Other families split the marriage costs between the bride and groom. These methods are used to speed up the marriage so the couple would not fall into sin and lust when the intermediary period is long. Additionally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these rules and requirements were overlooked since wedding ceremonies and social events were banned to take place. Many couples simply announced their marriage on social media or text messages.
[154] This refers to the concept of *'aib* or shame in Arab societies. See section: The Quran and Islamic Religion: *'Aib* and Ostentation.

Valentine's Day is believed to oppose Islamic teachings, as Tahani expressed, since it encourages intimate non-marital relationships, which Islam forbids. Nevertheless, the Kuwaiti government does not prohibit celebrating the event, but celebrations should be held within religious boundaries. Kuwait's conservative society has shaped Valentine's Day to match with the country's religion and beliefs, and this differentiates the occasion from other regions. Even though the government allows it, Abrar mentioned that couples discreetly celebrate it. There are no public displays of affection but rather a quiet dinner to avoid suspicion. Anything beyond holding hands in public would be frowned upon, Joanna stated.

On this day in Kuwait, couples meet at city spots that most people find romantic. Abrar explained that non-married couples make sure they would not get "caught" by authorities. Since Kuwait follows the Sharia Islamic Law, unwed couples are not allowed to cohabitate or book a hotel room without a marriage contract. Nonmarried children live with their parents and are under their responsibility. Therefore, when a man is with his girlfriend on Valentine's Day, or any other day, authorities who suspect the couple would inspect their IDs and then ask for their legal guardians to pick them up from the police station. As Joanna clarified, "Girlfriends/boyfriends do not frequently go out in public displaying their relationship before a more formal, legal relationship is established with the family approval". While some parents might be fully aware of their child's relationship, an unmarried couple found together in suspicious areas is usually punishable by law in Kuwait. Consequences include deporting from the country or paying a large fine.

Since relationships between people who are not married are a relative taboo in Islamic societies, young individuals try to conceal their relationship not only from public authorities, but also from their parents and family. Although dating and Valentine's Day are popular in Kuwait, women are especially more discreet about their romantic relationships since it is perceived negatively in a conservative society. Women usually claim that the gifts they have received on Valentine's Day are from female colleagues or friends. They use social media instead to "live their lives" outside of said society and away

from prying eyes, in other words, independent of family views[155]. Joanna stated that the female youth prepare extensively on festive occasions. They visit the beauty salon and tend to dress fancier and apply heavy makeup and perfume as casual attire is not encouraged for most occasions in Kuwait. Generally, Arab women are judged on their appearance. They feel under tremendous pressure to look beautiful and physically attractive, an aesthetic that is usually defined by European physical traits (Mooro, 2019). Being attractive tempts flirtations in academic institutes, workplaces, and coffee shops. These practices are used to open doors, create opportunities, and imagine love, where the role of courtship gifts is to satisfy a romantic partner and probably even attract a potential spouse (Belk & Coon, 1991). This is called the Halo effect.

Adam spoke about an individualistic culture in Kuwait, where "everyone is doing what they please, especially the girls, some even lie to their parents. They say they are going to camp with their friends but in reality, they travel to Dubai or wherever to do things and express their freedom". This can be an indication for enhancing religious gender liberty in Islamic communities.

As implied, Valentine's Day in Kuwait is not about "pure love" but about the love without commitment found in alliances between boyfriends and girlfriends. "Boyfriend" and "girlfriend" are commonly inappropriate terms that do not belong in Islamic societies, unless intending and publicly announcing to marry the person, then the correct term for the couple would be "engaged", replacing boyfriend/girlfriend with fiancé/fiancée. This becomes labelled "halal[156] (ḥalāl) dating", a way for Muslims to get to know one another and decide if they want be married (Ali, et al., 2019). Arab Islamic societies discourage romantic love outside the context of marriage, therefore being engaged or married is considered an "official legal" relationship and casually dating someone with no clear commitment intentions does not count as one[157]. My fieldwork findings reveal that

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[155] Refer to the subdivision: Social media and content display.

[156] *Halal* in Arabic translates to "permissible". In Islam and in the Quran, *halal* is the opposite of *haram* (forbidden).

[157] In the West, "single" signifies "not in a relationship", whereas in Arab societies it means unengaged or unmarried. Young Arab men and women who are romantically involved have to explain their relationship statuses when approached by potential romantic interests.

Valentine's Day is popularized among young, single individuals; therefore, Valentine's Day in Kuwait is an occasion that attracts those who are not in an "official relationship".

With Valentine's Day, this forms a great debate since the government cannot fully prohibit non-married couples from celebrating or meeting together. Apparently, Kuwait will always face this issue. Curiously, how can marriage happen in a country that looks down upon dating and forbids affection? This once again questions the true role of Islam in Kuwait.

It seems necessary to elaborate that while Kuwait does not consent to dating, Islam tolerates love in all its forms, according to Osman, et al. (2013). It is permissible to love but with the parents' approval and respecting the country's boundaries. To condemn non-marital relationships during Valentine's Day because it jeopardises marriage plans and defames Islamic principles only protects Kuwait's morality and reputation, for being almost as conservative as Saudi Arabia. Tradition has taught that marriage in romantic relationships is compulsory and is the end goal, but Islam taught that a meaningful, respectful and fulfilling relationship is the goal, marriage becomes a by-product. Therefore, it is not about the "reputation" of Islam. It is about the reputation of Kuwait and how to develop to accommodate to an era of technology and globalisation, to combat oppression and intolerance, thus the concept of voluntariness (Kilani, 2011). Qassem confessed that there are parties in Kuwait where alcohol and drugs are shared "under the table". This shows that Kuwait's prohibitions cannot be justified in the name of "Islam", but certain changes to the typical culture were in order because current times no longer match with past ideologies, hence the consent to celebrate Valentine's Day for representing an occasion like Mother's Day. Adam suspects that Valentine's Day will become more popularized across Kuwait in the future, "even beyond what is there in the West", he affirmed. He implies the instigation of more incidents against the Islamic religion, probably homosexual and non-marital sexual relations.

Kuwait's research concluded that celebrating the event and exchanging gifts was focused on two major aspects: age and marital status. Generally, it showed that if the individual were single and young, they would like to celebrate the day, whereas if the individual were married and young, they would probably not. Finally, if the individual were old and single,

they would not either. As for a gender analysis, men were the bigger gift givers during Valentine's Day, but women were bigger fans of the occasion.

Throughout years of literature and research, women have overshone men in their gifting ideas, creativity, and thoughtfulness. Studies have supported gift exchange as a female domain, mostly because men are perceived to dislike being involved in shopping. However, the study of Palan, Areni and Kiecker (2001) showed that the male gender role in gift exchange is a typical misconception by society. External factors were found to improve the male participation in gift-giving as compared to the past (Otnes, 1994). Likewise, Kuwait's fieldwork showed that men are taking on more divergent social roles associated to the private sphere. Despite their aversion to shopping, men were the bigger gift givers during Valentine's Day. Although they feel obliged to prepare expensive thoughtful gifts, they still agree to do so to attain social status and respect, and most importantly, not to indicate relationship rejection or denial. Women, on the other hand, celebrate out of love. Married women represented a different gift gender role than single ones, where they usually present emotional non-material gifts reflecting "gifts of care". Based on these results, I agree with Mauss (1925) that gift exchanges are at most times obligatory and I conclude that while women are the main gift givers in society, men dominate gift-giving during Valentine's Day.

## 1.1    Amour-Propre: Modernisation, Education, Women Empowerment

Previous studies and literature have primarily focused on the prevalent norm of interpersonal gifting and have shown that women are the main gift givers in society. That said, my fieldwork revealed that women are also creating alternative approaches to gifting during Valentine's Day in relation to the contemporary, globalised, and commercialised lifestyle in Kuwait. This subdivision discusses distinct concepts of love during Valentine's Day, specifically *Amour-Propre*, or self-love, which has developed from several women from the fieldwork. This concept consists of self-pride, self-esteem and self-respect, fuelled by the good opinions of others to better the general image of Arab Muslim women

worldwide[158]. The information is then used to analyse modernisation, education and women status in Kuwait.

In historical Islamic feminist literature, women coming from the Middle East, or as defined "third world countries", continue to be treated as a sub-category and are only included during debates about race or colonialism (Coello de la Rosa, 2008). Indeed, with the general view about Muslim women being oppressed under a rather "masculine religion", the Islamist position towards equal gender rights appear to be problematic (Aixelà-Cabré 2006; EI-gousi 2010; Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner 2012; Platt 2013; Saddiqui 2020). So much of Kuwait as a Muslim state takes its cues from Islamic teachings. During the 1980s, gender inequalities and interests of women were barely articulated in Kuwait's society. Instead, they were expected to follow traditional roles; obey the husband or a dominate male figure, and their roles were strictly dedicated towards the family and house chores (Hidayati & Apipudin, 2018: 370). Owing to a male domination and an anti-feminist ideology, women were denied many contributions and rights on a societal level, in terms of employment, political participation, mobility freedom and safety from domestic violence, which made them feel estranged and disoriented. Women were compelled to stick to the private spaces which included family relations, close friends or neighbours, and not to interfere with "masculine affairs". This was even more provoked by gender-segregated areas in Kuwait, such as work and educational places, which cut off women from having access to the opposite sex. This shows how the Arab Muslim identity can condition gender. These oppressive views were common misapprehensions and stereotypes stemmed from little to no cultural religious exposure (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003: 57-58). It was appropriate thereafter to challenge these views that represented regressive ideologies.

Fortunately, the proliferation of voices during the late 20th century highlighted common gender issues; openly debating the role of Islam in contemporary society. Consequently, the androcentric structure or the "male-controlling individual" within a typical Arab family was slowly fading and women became more powerful. It was only until the 1990s when new roles for women began to emerge in the public sphere in Kuwait (Al-Mughni, 2010).

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[158] Read about Jean-Jacques Rousseau's prominent philosophical argument on *amour-propre* compared to *amour de soi* in Bass (2013) and Wang (2017).

The Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991 was proof to women's nationalism, loyalty and political competence (Kohn, 2020), which proposed their potential in the country's development. There was a strong desire to "modernize" Kuwait, believing that implied the emancipation and education of women, and it was considered vital to achieve it. Women rights were redefined as a national issue. Consequently, many Kuwaiti women were engaged in "soul-searching" to assess "who they are", which involved religious exploration and a reinterpretation to Islamic texts, since many concepts in society were linked to religion (Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner, 2012: 23-24, 28-29). Islamic exploration, or *ijtihad* (ʾijtihād), clarified fundamental rights and obligations of both men and women and specified their roles in social development. This was impacted by the revolution of modernity, as studied by Eickelman (2002a), which legitimised and denied many religious and political system activities (Martianov, 2018). Eickelman (1998; 2002a: 40-42) spoke about social change *and* validated being Muslim and modern in the Middle East, calling the concept "Modern Transnationalism". The concept involves globalisation, public diplomacy, open communication and secular human rights movements towards goals that improve human conditions. In fact, he declared, "Many voices and practices in the Muslim world call for or tend toward more open societies and diverse religious interpretations" (Eickelman, 2002a: 41).

The ongoing alienation of women in society does not trace back to the teachings and enjoins of Islam (Al-Mughni, 2010). With an increasingly Islamophobic climate after the September 11 attacks and due to militant groups such as ISIS and the Taliban, Muslims find themselves defending their community and faith against those wishing to exploit (mis)perceptions of Muslims. They are especially relegated to playing terrorists and oppressors. This is very detrimental for children who only see prejudiced versions of themselves displayed in the media. Without proper education and role models, kids can become apathetic, and potentially even perform the stereotype (Mooro, 2019). Therefore, the Islamic faith and Sharia are continuously being clarified, justified and distinguished from the actions of groups or leaders claiming to act in its name, an exhausting demand that is missing in other faiths, i.e., an armed group or war criminal claiming to act in

Christ's name for example. I take this as an opportunity to educate, question double standards, propagate against bigotry and challenge bias.

The normative teachings of Islam are antithetical to the current treatment of women. In fact, there is no evidence in Islam that men hold the power and right to control female lives (Ranchod-Nilsson & Tétreault 2000; Al-Mughni 2000). As it turns out, Islam provides a balanced system for the sexes in a way that women are not weak nor inferior neither are subordinate to men (Elius, 2012). Submission, dependence and conformity are simply cultural female stereotypes (Almadanat, 2018). Islam in fact teaches that men are responsible for women; their roles and duties include respecting, supporting, protecting, and providing for them (Bani & Pate, 2015). Because of more financial responsibilities (towards women and children), this is also why a male has double the right in heritage than a female (*Surat Al-Nisa'a*, 4: 11). The disparity between male and female therefore lies upon responsibility, performance and strength (*Surat Al-Imran*, 3: 36; *Surat Al-Layl*, 92: 3-4), whereas we realise that in terms of God's judgement and creation, males and females have been complemented alike biologically and psychologically (*Surat Al-Najm*, 53: 45-46) , and the parity between them exists in work, in merits and penalties (*Surat Al-Imran*, 3: 195; *Surat Al-Nisa'a*, 4: 124; *Surat Al-Nahl*, 16: 97; *Surat Ghafer*, 40: 40). As shown, women, although equal before Allah, are unequal before man (Ali 1998; Kia 2019). This constitutes a big difference between what Islam wishes for women and what culture and tradition have forced women to do.

Islam permits women to define their own norms; participate in elections, hold ministerial positions, work and choose their own life partners and destinies (Al-Mughni 2010; Anggadwita, Mulyaningsih, Ramadani & Arwiyah 2015). For instance, Khadijah Bint Khuwaylid, Prophet Mohammed's wife, was a successful and wealthy entrepreneur (Razwy 1990; Koehler 2011; Peracha 2017). Khadijah was also widowed twice before marrying Prophet Mohammed. Many of Prophet Mohammed's wives were widowed and/or divorced (Mus'ad 2001; Al-Hashimi 2011; Demireşik 2012). This would cause controversial disputes and shame if it were to happen today.

Marriage is a minefield of stifling, impractical expectations for women in the Arab world. Women with previous marital relations are disfavoured because Arab societies are "closed" conservative societies. Traditional families taboo divorced and widowed women as they are commonly viewed as "second hand"[159], "neglectful parents" or "licentious", and widely blamed for failing to "keep" their husbands, thus they are unlikely to be remarried (Savaya & Cohen 2003; Nassar 2015; Soukayna A 2018; Mooro 2019). Above all, divorce is considered a concept that contravenes basic collective values and social traditions of Arab culture. Although permissible in Islam, it is illustrated as "the most hated *halal* to Allah"[160]. Expectedly, these societies have focused on the adjective "hate" and overlooked divorce's nature of "*halal*". This adjective has quickly turned divorce into a social stigma that particularly affects the life of divorced women. As a result, women sustain the marriage and endure abusive or toxic husbands to avoid the harm of demeaning stereotypes or, in many cases, for the sake of their children (Mooro, 2019). On the other hand, single women below 30 are conditioned to "secure" a partner early and are rushed into marriage before they reach "spinsterhood" and suffer from damaging labels (Herouach 2019; Khalifah 2021). Ironically, this pressure and haste from families can be reason for the high divorce rates in the Middle East. This shows the difference between how Islam projects females in marriage and how tradition has distorted that projection, ultimately regressing Middle Eastern countries. Gender inequality and female oppression is claimed to be a result of the discontinuation of the practice of *ijtihad* (Al-Mughni, 2010).

Many girls and women attend Quranic schools to use the attained knowledge to argue for better rights and freedoms from an Islamic perspective (Zoepf, 2016). With religious exploration, females produced, fostered, and reinforced the feminist ideology in Islam, which is often linked with orientalism (Abu-Lughod 1998; Abu-Lughod, Yegenoglu, Arat, et al. 2001; Aixelà-Cabré 2006; Platt 2013; Al-Nakib 2020; González Alcantud 2021). The transformation of culture began with the collection of thought, experiences, beliefs, values, and assumptions set by a self-sustaining group (Jandt, 2010). It encouraged the improvement of a modernist Islamic discourse which involved advocating the separation

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[159] Or "unfit for marriage". This is mostly debated over virginity notions.
[160] Narrated by Abdullah ibn Umar in Abu-Dawood Al-Sajestani (2021), *Sunan Abu Dawood*, 2178, Book 13, Hadeeth 4.

between the state (Kuwait's liberal ideology) and religion (Kuwait's Islamists) (Al-Mughni, 2010). The focal objective was to dismantle traditions that included female obedience to a male figure, housework as a gender role and purpose, and the obligation to marry and reproduce. These traditions represented barriers to their ideas, creativity, and capabilities.

Education played a key role in reforming endeavours. It was believed that education would develop Arab cultures into a less oppressive one and so, women were encouraged to pursue an education, take on jobs and depend on themselves. They slowly began to face down religious and social tradition, and started transforming their daily routines, creating new purposes[161]; delaying marriage, travelling more, driving their own cars, pursuing professional goals, fighting for equal salaries, filing for divorce, owning houses and launching businesses (Zoepf, 2016). Women's education was believed to "modernize" Muslim societies and challenge an "unmodern" Islam (Khurshid, 2015). In fact, Islam's teachings emphasise the importance of seeking knowledge, for both men and women. In the 1919 Egyptian revolution, education was the main reason for the women's movement and feminist activism, which expanded their social circles outside the common familial walls (Al-Ali 2002; Ramdani 2016; Linhares 2018). This educational and social development had a positive impact on the family environment. It meant that mothers will be more aware about proper methods of upbringing, and life practices would be based on hands-on knowledge gained from education, not from cultural myths and traditions brought down by great grandparents.

Within the Arabian Gulf region, specifically Kuwait, this "shift" of women roles took place later during the second half of the 20th century. By the 1980's, the female percentage enrolled in universities exceeded that of the male's, in Bahrain 53%, Kuwait 56% and Qatar 57% (Pappé, 2005: 256). Young Arab women currently continue to outnumber men in educational rates (UN: ESCWA 2016: 32; Zoepf 2016). The discovery of oil in Kuwait and its liberation from Iraq in 1991 notably influenced the high enrolment rates for women, which consequently also affected the female ratio in the labour force (Garrison 2015;

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[161] Other than the typical, culturally imposed purposes: to marry and procreate.

Alzuabi 2016; Momani 2016). New professions were available to women, especially in the fields of dentistry, pharmacy, and medicine. As part of 20th century modernism, Islamists specifically encouraged the medical field as a very appropriate domain for women in the Middle East since it meant that women could now examine other women[162]. Furthermore, women were attaining leadership roles which empowered their social communications, increased their self-confidence, and supported their independence and personal growth (Al-Mughni 2010; Al-Suwaihel 2010; Hidayati & Apipudin 2018). These opportunities have equipped women to compete on a more political, economic and social level in Kuwait (AlAzmi, 2014). Women in Kuwait have shone in the public sphere, continuously striving to be involved in positions that were previously only entitled to men. Women are proving that the "sensitive sex" can achieve self-growth as protagonists, making an impact in society by adjusting laws and fighting for their rights. More importantly, there was a strong emphasis that marriage and having children are now personal choices and not traditional obligations.

Education particularly was one of the factors that facilitated the end of subordination to men (Aixelà-Cabré 2000; 2006: 72). Women's education represented a potentially better future for the Middle East, liberating women from oppressive roles, transforming a given status quo, encouraging freedom of choice with regards to family and marriage, and taking control of their destiny (Arenfeldt & Golley 2012; Khurshid 2015). Later, coeducation became popular, leading to the gradual diminishment of segregation. Even though "Islamic" morals were known to contain women and prohibit pre-marital relationships, there were less-conservative Middle Eastern families that accepted male and female relations if they were in a group or in a work context (Bowen & Early, 2002). Mixed schooling contributed towards "love modernism", which facilitated romanticism, thus the noticeable popularity of Valentine's Day (Kreil, 2016). Gender-segregated areas that are still common in Kuwait include some schools, university halls, cinemas, banks, gyms, spas,

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[162] Arab Muslim women are largely embarrassed from male practitioners and doctors examining them. Others are forced by their husbands or families to be examined by a female doctor for religious reasons. After Islamic exploration, these views were found erroneous, since medical check-ups or life-threatening situations are urgent and desperate measures. In these cases, the *yusr* concept in Islam is applied to simply ensure health and well-being (Al-Oueid, 2012).

and hairdressers or beauty salons. Probably, genders are organised as such in public spaces not because of discrimination but to avoid harassment and ensure personal comfort.

Gradually, there have emerged new viewpoints and practices demonstrating women empowerment and stability, liberating them from traditional values that reflected the pre-Islamic era. The diversity and transition in the Arabian Peninsula have promoted feminism and postmodernism in Kuwait, and inspired changed ideas about marriage, work, and lifestyle that resembled features from both the Western model and the traditional collective family model (Tétreault 1993; El-Haddad 2003; Rashad 2015; Tijani 2018; Al-Khraif, Abdul Salam & Abdul Rashid 2020). Arab traditions and western culture were blended where popular demands included social justice and equality in the participation of men and women alike in public life (Al-Mughni 2001; El-Aswad 2010). Females transformed their worldviews, including societal images of themselves. Joanna remarked that women have pushed the boundaries from being the main caregivers of family units and caretakers of the households to being leaders in other fields.

Even Valentine's Day concepts about gifting and love have shifted. Women are fighting the image that the media and society portrays of the desperate necessity of having a man, not only during Valentine's Day, but in their lives. Suzan, a married woman, remarked, "I do not need a man to show me love on Valentine's or any other day". Suzan's answer stresses that a woman can show love to herself any time, regardless of the occasion or purpose. This shows feminist views and indicates a female revolution in Kuwait (González, 2013), eradicating the common belief that the lives of Arab Muslim women are incomplete without marriage. These ideas, and people who believe them, degrade and disrespect women. Clearly, this represents a change of Muslim gender conceptions.

Fieldwork results showed that females not only triumph in interpersonal gifting but in self-gifting as well. Self-gifting was previously only studied in Western cultures, particularly the United States. Tynan, et al. (2010: 1112) suggested to "reflect on the meaning of this behaviour in non-Western countries". They believe that self-gifting is less self-oriented in collective societies. Nevertheless, quite the opposite was found in Kuwait as a collective non-Western country. Self-gifting was a very recognised concept, particularly with young

women. Ghada, Abrar and Suzan, claimed that they very much use this method to self-indulge and make themselves feel better (Mick & DeMoss 1990; 1992; Ward & Tran 2008). Along these lines, Cullen (2018) also emphasizes the concept of "me time", an informal slogan that became popular in western contexts and then spread to Arab countries. It refers to time spent relaxing rather than doing things for others or working. While the usual expectation of Valentine's Day is to be spent with a loved one and shower them with gifts, Cullen explains that more younger individuals are adapting to the idea to indulge and simply spend quality time by themselves on this overcrowded and overrated occasion. "Me time" was also common in Kuwait. Accordingly, self-gifting was not restricted to buying tangible gifts. A woman could gift herself services, experiences and wellness treatments. Abrar, a married woman, views self-gifting as a reward after having worked so hard on something. She takes a portion of her earnings to spend on herself and gift herself. She called this a form of "self-appreciation". She explained how these rewards represent something greater than just mere items, "These things, or gifts I buy, are very dear to me because they represent the long working hours and the hard achievement of their price. It means I don't need or don't wait for Valentine's Day to get what I want because I already know how I can reward myself". Chapman (2014) identifies the offering of gifts as one of the love languages. Women possibly express their love language to themselves using gifts to obtain emotional fulfilment; thus, these concepts are realised as a chance to reduce stress or restore energy.

The fieldwork showed that Valentine's Day could be shared with non-romantic partners as well, who are also loved (Close & Zinkhan, 2006: 356). Two young single females, Seba and Majida, stressed that there is no rule that obligates exchanging gifts solely with romantic partners on Valentine's Day[163], it is merely an option. They discussed that the occasion can be spent and celebrated with whomever you love; parents, siblings, and close friends, since some of these relationships might have lasted longer than a romantic one. Seba for example wants to change the norm that pressures being romantically involved during Valentine's Day. Instead, she gives flowers to her friends to express her love and

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[163] However, contradictorily, according to several other informants, being single was found to be inconvenient. Just like wedding anniversaries, Valentine's Day is an occasion originally meant for couples, and when a person does not fulfil this criterion, they feel they have been excluded from the event (Otnes, Ruth & Milbourne, 1994).

gratitude. This shows the distinction of emotions that are present in the occasion. In reference to the literature on emotions, platonic relationships involve showing care and appreciation to one another, conveying feelings of love, affection, closeness, and friendship (Rosch, et al. 1976; Smith & Ellsworth 1985; Shaver, et al. 1987). Majida even started a Valentine ritual among her friends. She said, "Yes I participate, between friends we give and sometimes make small gifts as a tradition". This idea stops the circulation of Valentine's Day's typical cosmopolitan gifts like flowers, chocolates, and teddy bears. Apparently, celebrating with friends or relatives creates better memories and bring out individual originality. Women celebrating Valentine's Day with friends and family has been found in the study of Otnes, Ruth and Milbourne (1994). An explanation to this is that apparently, men consider a "significant other" to be a romantic partner, while women consider a significant other to be a well-trusted friend or lifelong companion[164]. The occasion would be spent socializing with other single friends who have no plans for the day[165]. This information does not necessarily imply that romantic love is on the decline in Kuwait. The reality is that people are displeased with Valentine's Day's commercial trends and expectations.

Conversely, I believe that men might have been misjudged in Arab societies. As a male gender conception in many cultures, showing emotion is forcefully believed as a sign of vulnerability, so men try to suppress their feelings or tend to shut them out. Instead, they are pressurised to convey characteristics of "masculinity", such as strength, reliance and responsibility, which make up some traditional gender roles as well (Jones, 2009). Therefore, as probably interpreted as a sign of weakness, less men engage in gifting to family or friends during Valentine's Day for the concern of being perceived as "emotional". On the other hand, women are more naturally comfortable displaying their emotions and are more elaborate with their gestures and body language (Hyde 2007; Hatfield, Rapson & Le 2009). In addition, BBC News (2017) showed that male figures become role models to their sons. Therefore, if the father was observed to give gifts to his

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[164] Not to mention that even in Islam, love and kindness are to be demonstrated towards God, homeland, family, neighbours, and even passing strangers (Kreil, 2016).
[165] While single women on Valentine's Day enjoy the company of their friends and family, romantically involved men realise it is self-rewarding to spend intimate quality time with their "other half" (Otnes, Ruth & Milbourne, 1994).

family and friends, his son would follow accordingly. Similarly, a young man helping his wife in the kitchen might have seen similar doings from his father growing up and consequently mimics the same at his own home. Gender roles are therefore created within household walls, not dictated by society pressures.

Women are progressively leaning towards anti-Valentine gift options, such as gifting an experience, spending time with friends, or treating themselves. Self-gifting and non-romantic gifting are very welcoming, popular concepts in Kuwait during Valentine's Day. They compensate the absence of a romantic relationship, relieves the pressure of feeling "alone" on Valentine's Day and teaches how to be resilient. This establishes that the notion of "being happy rather than being alone" is essential for these women. Nevertheless, although these methods are an "appropriate alternative" when someone is not romantically involved, it was not specific to single people. Even though Arab societies have emphasised the man's presence in a woman's life, these gifting approaches are expressions that show that happiness can be attained regardless of marital status. Evidently, women realise that self-respect starts with loving oneself and not following societal or familial expectations. Furthermore, not only do these methods reinforce happiness, but also represent independence and the ability to satisfy personal needs. Women therefore display their independent status to draw attention of others towards an "unfamiliar" love concept, as the fieldwork established that showing-off was a common motive for gifting among young women[166].

I highlight the above female informants who transmitted different approaches to celebrating Valentine's Day in Kuwait. Those approaches reunite two purposes: self-reward and self-love. These informants have admitted the stereotypes of being a woman in the Arab world and recognised the challenges of being fully dependent on themselves. I conclude that due to the culture's influence, Valentine's Day has become diverse and nowadays represents an opportunity to visualise and empower women, simultaneously communicating to men that the occasion does not necessarily concern them. Above all, women use these gifting methods to manifest balance, inner peace and self-sufficiency, not

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[166] See the next subdivision: Social media and content display.

to manifest in material things. For these women, this was not only a cultural success but a personal success too. It shows they make their own decisions to satisfy their needs when they do not sense a desired response from their significant other[167] or when they lack one. More importantly, since dating and non-marital relationships are frowned upon in Kuwait's society, these alternative methods would be approved by the public thus reducing criticisms during Valentine's Day. The occasion has become more about "feeling involved" than "spending special time with a romantic partner", which suggests renaming Valentine's Day in Arab societies to *Yawm Al-Hubb Al-ʿAlami* (yawm al-ḥubb al-ʿālamī), "The International Day of Love", rather than *Eid Al-ʿushaaq*, "the festivity of lovers".

As shown, basic principles of a gifting ritual were applied to Islamic ideology (Starrett, 1995), which generated "*halal*" concepts. Women were able to express their gifting identities through their lifestyles and individuality, which are both features of a "contemporary modern mentality", as discussed by Morgan and Pritchard (2005). Female social realities and gender roles in Kuwait have developed according to global circumstances and time changes (Strathern, 1990), including the emergence of modernisation, migration and openness to the West, as Tahani mentioned. The cinema, popular music, globalisation, education and the increasing rate of divorce and domestic violence were all powerful conveyors of female aspirations to change outdated cultural traditions (Anser 2013; Alzuabi 2016; Parekh & Wilcox 2020; Rehim, Alshamsi & Kaba 2020).

This social transformation consequently altered women's fashion and work dress codes to a more western representation (Bowen & Early, 2002). Even with Kuwait's strict governmental bureaucracy, women have become more elaborate in self-expression. Fatima recognises that women's clothing is starting to resemble European styles. Extravagant haircuts and dyes, tattoos, and piercings are also on the rise as forms of self-expression in Kuwait. Furthermore, with the introduction of social media, women have become famous makeup artists, fashion designers and media influencers in the Arab world, exposing their

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[167] In reference to the previous section, this again shows that the "obligation" that men feel to celebrate or give gifts on Valentine's Day can be a misunderstanding or even an illusion. Female informants continue to stress that if the man does not wish to celebrate Valentine's Day, it would not jeopardize the relationship.

long-hidden talents and personalities and making a living from home. Maha admits Kuwait's individualistic character, although slowly emerging, where liberty expressions and individual preferences are being demonstrated without the influence of peer groups or kinship relations. These highlights drew politicians' attention and inspired scholars. Pappé (2005: 317) claimed, "The Middle Eastern city is thus simultaneously closer demographically to the western world than it used to be, and yet very distant politically and economically".

Nevertheless, this freedom of self-expression is subject to plenty of criticism, physically or verbally, for representing something unusual to the Islamic religion and family values. Islamic rules are claimed to be originally created to precisely control this frivolous, dangerous behaviour of women (Mernissi, 1975). Omar expressed that these signs show that people have *abused* the privilege of education in Kuwait. Instead of nation development, increased exposure to outside values caused abandonment of Arab identity and principles (Bowen & Early, 2002). The change in gender roles has developed ambiguous situations in numerous countries. For example, young female adults often find it difficult complying between traditional customs and the increasing crave for heterosexual intimacy. Therefore, women to this day are restrained with marriage and are pressured to focus on "making their own families". These pressures are generated from parents that resisted contemporary changes and were not convinced of explanations from religious exploration. Fatima finally claimed, "Arabs now prefer the foreign country to their own nation, because of social pressures, because of racism and discrimination". Clearly, there are no taboos in western countries; limits and boundaries end in the homeland. Outside, Arab Muslims are "free".

Despite significant advances, there were numerous contradictory views and conflicts as people from the rural areas, such as villages, small towns, and country sides, did not fully accept these changes. Modern Muslim legislation still separate women duties from women rights (Aixelà-Cabré, 2007b) and this cripples Arab communities as it changes cultural modes of life (Sharabi, 1988). Islamic fanatics are still incapable to acknowledge the intellectual and spiritual transformation of women (Kreil, 2016). The stereotype lingers in place; women are held to a higher standard by society, their families and themselves

(Mooro, 2019). They are expected to comply and carry out traditional "Islamic" responsibilities and roles due to deeply rooted creed, as it is believed they do not possess enough social and public skills. This indicates that in many instances, the female figure is disempowered and abused in the name of religion (Eltahawy, 2015). Many people refuse to tolerate the necessity for women contribution in the public sphere because they have different religious interpretations. They resist women empowerment, feminism, and gender equality, and are unlikely to follow a female leader in politics or society (Al-Mughni 2010; Al-Suwaihel 2010). Apparently, these social concepts are considered to represent Western countries which have "lost sight" of all restraint in values and religion (Kreil, 2016). Islamic fundamentalists therefore claim that reinforcing and educating women should have been the final step to economic modernisation, which significantly contributes to the backwardness and repression of some Islamic nations (Pappé, 2005).

The situation of women in the Middle East is widely related to their family dependence. Any familial trauma would fall upon the female since she is more in charge of domestic matters and household duties and is the initial caregiver to children (Al-Mughni, 2010). For instance, if women were to expand their social circles due to education and a career, this might lead to family neglect, as they will be unable to balance between family care and job responsibilities. This does not signify that women disapprove of their gender roles; it signifies that they can accommodate them to their liking (Oláh, Kotowska & Richter, 2018). Work can probably even trigger sinful behaviour or ideas, such as extramarital relations. However, this does not pardon male behaviour. If they refuse to carry out their traditional and Islamic roles, like taking responsibility and providing for the family, it can also bring shame to the household, but not to the extent a female can.

The overall emphasis is on the female sex because the female icon has been overlooked or minimized in many studies (Aixelà-Cabré, 2007a). Throughout the Arab world, women stories and voices have not yet been told or heard (Zoepf, 2016). Women feel they should constantly prove themselves in a society that expects little of them and their capabilities. For that reason, women who attain titles and achievements in numerous distinct fields, such as politics, architecture and business, are applauded and prided to remind Arab nations of what they are capable of. This also means that there can be plenty of talented and skilled

women but are hindered by the androcentric system and the stereotype of being the primary caregiver (Almadanat, 2018). The female position has only risen in Kuwait due to her noble contributions and competence during the war, so beliefs and practices modified over time (Shaaban 2009; Al-Mughni 2010). In search for new meanings, conventional views on women were questioned and more rights were demanded. Some "less sceptical Arab feminists" realised certain gaps or injustices within their households and responded more favourably to gender equality and solidarity (Bowen & Early, 2002).

After examining various sources, I find that antagonism towards women stems from patriarchy, tradition, conservative religious interpretations, and the concern and threat that women will be competing with men for the same public positions (Ballington & Karam 2005; Al-Mughni 2010; Eltahawy 2015). Accordingly, I reckon that these are simply psychological barriers derived from cultural stereotypes among Arab populations.

It is assumed that all women are condescended upon in the Middle East, which is an exaggeration, since this depends on the origin of the women being studied (Pappé, 2005). Women's statuses vary from one area to another, depending on the extent of which Islamic rules are being complied by (Milani, 2014). In Kuwait, women are believed to be progressing towards modernisation more rapidly than women in other Arabian Gulf States (Archibald 2011; Alzuabi 2016). This shows that every country has progressed on different levels, creating different versions of Islam. However, it is too premature to claim the presence of an established Islamic feminist movement. The Middle East is still behind especially in female political representations (Ballington & Karam, 2005). Women still face challenges in social, cultural and political domains, as well as discrimination in several situations. Above all, they remain being treated as "dependants" of men under the Kuwaiti law and as "second-class citizens" across the Middle East and North Africa, rather than individuals with equal rights and duties (Eltahawy 2015; Alzuabi 2016). There are two controversies of women in Kuwait: oppressed and free. Some females approve of their roles and understand their differences with men, so they are unlikely to opt for an equal gendered system. Women will not excel in Kuwait's society without a social awakening to overcome cultural bias and taboos, to ultimately achieve a serious turn in gender equality (Eisenstadt 2003; Destremau, Latte Abdallah & De Regt 2013).

Women empowerment and gender equality (or views of equity) are areas of interest that require further investigation in countries like Kuwait[168]. The Middle East is a promising region to build theories, develop arguments and explore world history. In this subdivision, I hope to have underscored the differences between the "Islamic role" and the "traditional role" of women. Intriguingly, the process of transition from traditionalism to modernity in the Arab world can affect both genders. As a start, men emotionality or vulnerability should be normalised, and divorced or widowed women should be viewed as brave, inspiring and competent individuals (Alterman 2000; Tétreault 2000). The question remains whether Kuwait would prefer to improve the gendered situation or maintain tradition. With reference to several studies showing the attempts to separate state from religion, and after identifying the different practices of Valentine's Day gifting, I propose a secular Kuwait in the distant future (Munavvarov & Schneider-Deters 2003; Wu 2007; An-Naʿim 2008; Al-Rawashdeh & Al-Rawashdeh 2014). The secular movement calls for the dignity and respect for the female gender, packed in a Western content. It pleads for a transformative social power that publicly legitimises the political and communal practice of women. Despite the discussed gender rights and opportunities available to women in Kuwait today, Das (2012: 91) debates the true meaning of women empowerment, "Women can be empowered only if they are given education and made aware of their rights and hence, they themselves prioritise their lives. Violence has to be completely eradicated from her life, then and only then can the dream of empowerment become a reality".

## 1.2   Social media and content display

Social media is a powerful tool that subconsciously influences us. There is no question that social media, or social network sites (SNSs), have impacted our lives in countless ways. It caused paradigm shifts on communication, self-expression and knowledge (Fotis, 2015). It facilitated education acquisition, developed thought, created new meanings to online and offline relationships, and influenced individualism in many cultures (Liu 2010; Miller, et al. 2016). Social media is transforming into an ever-growing foundation to everyday relationships and tasks. On the other hand, we cannot overlook the harm social media

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[168] Just as Hoza (2019) investigated whether feminism exists in Saudi Arabia.

possesses on physical health and activity, mental health and well-being and certainly, the risk of deception, hate crime, propaganda and the spreading of fake information (Lomanowska & Guitton 2016; House of Commons 2019). This subdivision studies the influence of social media and online platforms on romantic relationships during Valentine's Day. It examines how the internet has created further motives to celebrate a gift-giving occasion. I also question whether the extent of social media exposure threatens the privacy of romantic relationships in Kuwait.

The display of personal content on social media plays a strong role in Kuwait's society. Its influence is generally significant in the Arabian Gulf (Reyaee & Ahmed, 2015). In Kuwait, social media is a decisive actor that had changed, and continues to change, society. The impact is tremendous on peoples' lives irrespective of nationality or social class[169]. It increased awareness about understudied regions, as Lamya said, "With the internet, the world is a small place. Kuwait is getting exposed". It has brought together a multiplicity of narratives by introducing people from different tribal groups and ethnicities to each other. The internet is a powerful platform for social change (Eltahawy, 2015). Omar explained that since we can see what other people are doing in other continents, we learn about their nations' crises and natural disasters and understand their cultural norms in clothing, food, individual expression, and practices.

On an international level, the use and rise of social media have challenged discrimination and stereotypes about the Middle East. Social media therefore gave a voice for minority and underprivileged groups (Arab Digest, n.d.). It constituted a medium to broadcast and protest against political, cultural issues and fight for rights that constitute individual motivations, like gender equality (Askool 2013; Davies 2015). As a learning resource, it helped raise awareness about numerous matters in Kuwait's society, such as women rights, sexual harassment, social myths and taboos, and unjust laws. Social media has also created opportunities to launch businesses and attain jobs. Many women use these platforms to spread news, express dissimilar talents and share advice on skincare and beauty, pregnancy, motherhood, marriage, cuisine, and the like. Many Kuwaiti women have become well-

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[169] According to Kuwait's fieldwork, social media usage was dependent on age and gender, where young female users below 35 are more active than their male counterparts.

known entrepreneurial figures, "online celebrities" or "influencers", representing distinct fields (Bria 2013; AlAjeel 2018; Altarkait 2019). Companies recognise the power of social media in marketing. They target these influencers to communicate corporate messages with the public, sending them free products and gifts to advertise to their online followers during several occasions, thereby becoming "online representatives" and "sponsors" (Duffy & Schwartz 2017; Mashino 2019). It is true that this means income depends on the continuity of social media, but it is very convenient especially for women to generate this income at home without neglecting their "duties", families, and household responsibilities. Therefore, social media played a key part in women empowerment and social mobility (Loiseau & Nowacka 2015; Abubakar 2018; Thanavathi 2018; Mądra-Sawicka, Nord, Paliszkiewicz & Lee 2020). Clearly, social media disseminates public information and is therefore a strong factor that impacts globalisation.

The introduction and then popularization of Valentine's Day in Kuwait was claimed to be prompted by media communications. The younger generation specifically is easily affected by other cultures (Radcliffe & Abuhmaid, 2020). Seba explained that Kuwaiti satellite and cinema, among other media service providers and mass media technologies, broadcast many English-based channels and Hollywood filmography (Satti, 2013), that develop awareness about other parts of the world. Commercials, programs and shows affect public awareness towards Valentine's Day. Anna claimed that Valentine's Day has been made known with the introduction of the internet and social media that showed its popularity in the United States and helped spread certain conceptions of love, mainly presenting chocolates and roses. She added, "Through increased use of smartphones, information exchange and exposure, I grasped an idea of Valentine's Day and how to celebrate it, even if the Islamic community resents the West. We people are like mammals sometimes. We follow things that we see. With the role of social media, we see people are very happy because of roses and gifts!", when they are in fact not measures of happiness.

This awareness of other country's practices brought Valentine's Day to the attention of Kuwait's locals and business franchises, bringing in its relevant products. This established the acceptance and adoption of Valentine's Day into Kuwait's norms. As Serene described, this cultural tolerance "makes for a more peaceful and enjoyable environment in Kuwait,

rather than a judgemental and divided community"[170]. Cultural deviation was evident with globalisation, travel, ease of internet access, along with the increasing number of expatriates of different nationalities and religions entering Kuwait. Social media did not only influence education, gift exchange and celebratory practices, but has also become a reference to relationship expectations, relationship "success" and a measure that determines social status (Gunter, Elareshi & Al-Jaber 2016; Lenze 2017).

Adam believes that Valentine's Day's reputation has been degraded because of the competitive environment present in Kuwait, especially that couples always think of it in a sexual point of view. Having learnt about Valentine's Day from social media, young individuals would assume as part of ritual that the love holiday should end in sexual relations (Close & Zinkhan 2006; Close 2012), otherwise known as *zina* (zinā), a serious sin in Islam for the unmarried (Shahnaz Khan 2006; Dialmy 2010; Adamczyk & Hayes 2012; Akande 2015).

In general, people resort to posting online when there is a grand celebration. However, in Kuwait, a grand celebration is also a motive to show-off. On Valentine's Day, posting online valuable, expensive gifts from romantic partners is practiced to attract attention and admiration from others. This is achieved by receiving likes and comments on online posts, new ways of showing interest in someone. Seba claimed that this is very common among young female Arabs who show on social media how they are pampered with luxurious services and pricey gifts by their male counterparts to reflect a flourishing relationship and to establish their ideal self and boost their self-esteem (Cheung & Gardner, 2016). Ghada confirmed that girls use these pictures and videos to convey to others that, "My boyfriend loves me so much he got me an expensive [x]". Apparently, posting these gifts online gives others the impression that the relationship is successful because "he takes care of her". Abrar remarked that teenagers who are more influenced by social media act like "love-birds" during Valentine's Day because "they are not mature". These online love posts are

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[170] Adam commented that Kuwaiti nationals are proud individuals who flaunt their privileges on others, discriminating other nationalities (Human Rights Watch 2001; Jureidini 2005; Janahi 2015; Kuwait Society for Human Rights 2017; AlTaher 2019; Ulla, Lee, Hassan & Nawaz 2020). He calls for social justice so Kuwait can be a welcoming and loving nation.

not admired because they are perceived as cliché or clearly fake (trying to copy western "fairy tale" love stories). This therefore offends the credibility of social life. Social media has turned youngsters into gadget freaks, attention seeking individuals (Sundaram, 2017).

The objective of this practice, as Joanna declared, is to "out-do one another with shows of affection, showing the world how extravagant you can get and induce jealousy". It is a way for women to compete with their peers by flattering themselves and bragging during events like Valentine's Day, anniversaries, and birthdays. Seba described the content of many women's social media accounts in Kuwait. They show personal moments and post what they have received from their partners, and even sometimes post a video of the entire celebration for everyone to see. Tahani further described the competitive celebrations shared on social media. It would usually be a surprise party on a yacht, or a trip to some exotic island; mostly anything that appears unique and distinct. With social media in the picture, there is a completely different audience or a "sea of followers" to impress. This practice provokes other young women and makes them desire a similar treatment from their significant others, which initiates conflicts in romantic relationships (Yacoub, Spoede, Cutting & Hawley, 2018). Affirmatively, Mauss (1925) indicated notions of rivalry and competition within gift exchanges. Grange (2020) explains that from an early age, we learn that life is a competition and that winning is a must, or at least doing better than others. This message is drilled into us by parents, peers, teachers and coaches, and on some level, many people are afraid of failure.

Adam said the reason why he should celebrate Valentine's Day is so that his girlfriend can show others what he has prepared for her or bought for her[171]. He added, "Mostly, it is a big expensive bouquet that they [women] take a picture of to show-off on social media. They are deeply influenced by social media, and movies from the West influenced their thinking". Similarly, Yousef explained that girls especially show-off expensive jewellery. He added that they would wear the piece of jewellery every day and feel special when others comment about it, remarking that her boyfriend or husband got it for her. In this sense, a prevalent gender conception indicates that men are expected to demonstrate certain

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[171] Women eager to show others what they have received on Valentine's Day again suggests the obligation towards men to give gifts and celebrate the event.

traits that prove to their partner, and everyone else who is watching, that the relationship is not mediocre. The male figure is again expected to provide for the woman and take care of her. Lindholm (2006) pointed out that romantic expectations have changed. Social media has perverted and ridiculed true representations of love. When people are pushed to post about their gifts and relationships during Valentine's Day, it creates untrue emotions of celebration and invalidates relationship sincerity. It suggests that it is better, or more convincing, to show affection by giving someone a tangible pricey item. Accordingly, a symbolic gift would otherwise harm the relationship. Philippe Chanial (2008: 19) sensed sorrow in Bourdieu's (2000) writings who claimed that despite the importance of shopping and gift-giving in our lives and culture, the gift has lost its true meaning and has formed "either an utterly interested rational strategy or an impossible ethical prowess".

Social media platforms have caused fundamental changes in how people communicate and project themselves. Women can easily shape their "ideal" relationships online and demonstrate how they are maintained by their significant others (Butler & Matook, 2015). This practice in Kuwait suggests that women feel forced to post about Valentine's Day celebrations on their social media accounts to achieve a "sense of belonging". Chukwuere and Chukwuere (2017: 9966) disclosed that "social media refines how females think, interact, communicate, and fall in love". In fact, they realise that social media has become an addiction for female students. On the other hand, Aguiton, et al. (2009) found that the more people engage in adventurous behaviour and show-off, the more likely they will be making new friends.

As shown, the amount of content or self-disclosure that is displayed on social media establishes one's identity on the internet. Social media use is especially a concern for the "smartphone generation" that engage with both local and global audiences (Griffiths, Kuss & Demetrovics 2014; Aljazzaf 2017). Rana[172] blames parents who exert no effort into monitoring their children's internet use and are unwilling to place certain rules on their upbringing. Parental control over media exposure is critical considering its influence on children. They are deeply influenced by what they see, imitating the West and chasing after

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[172] Rana is a 31-year-old single Jordanian female, raised in Kuwait.

a materialistic lifestyle to keep up with Kuwait's social expectations. By conforming to what others are doing, it helps these youngsters to play a role in society and position themselves among their peers. Omar stated, "God knows what these children are doing or displaying behind their parents' back". In this respect, the exposure of intimate content comes to the fore with regards to social threats. In a rather conservative, collective society like Kuwait's, posting lustful online stories, pictures of romantic settings, and amorous texts on Valentine's Day are likely to be attacked and disrespected by the public and are considered distasteful to family elders. Since love relationships are concerned with private lives, some people do not wish to know about them. Furthermore, these romantic posts hurt individual integrity because it gives a wrong image to the youth about love standards, causing them to fantasise about a "perfect love" and opt for online "dating" to explore romantic relationships, which are troubling concepts in Islam outside the context of marriage (Bajnaid & Elyas 2017; Rochadiat, Tong & Novak 2017; Ali, et al. 2019).

Technology grants many communication benefits, facilitates intimacy and affection, especially in long distance relationships, and possibly even helps to encounter a significant other (Lo & Aziz 2009; Finkel, et al. 2012; De Rooij 2020). However, deception and intentionally misleading information are widespread on social media. It does not show the full picture of a person's life because everybody tends to display certain parts of it, which are usually the good, positive parts: the rich and successful (Sanchez, 2016). This creates many prejudices by the public. Followers usually believe this information and then try to apply it on their own relationships. However, showing-off gifts on social media is not the determining factor on a successful relationship. In fact, social media is sometimes an escape to cover for an unfaithful partner, therefore relationship authenticity cannot be assumed (Murray & Campbell, 2015). Stillman (2018) in her online newsletter titled "The more miserable you are, the happier your social media posts", provides disturbing examples of real individuals claiming to have displayed the opposite of their actual lives on social media. Research shows that people resort to social media when they are dissatisfied with their lives to create "fake realities" which only produce temporary pleasures because apparently, social media has no direct influence on life or relationship satisfaction (Hand, et al. 2012; Tiggemann & Anderberg 2019; Buchanan 2020;

Arikewuyo, et al. 2020). On the contrary, it is more likely to have a strong negative impact on well-being and mood (Bao, Liang & Riyanto 2019; Orben, Dienlin & Przybylski 2019; Raza, Qazi, Umer & Khan 2020). Social media, although a strong factor of individualism, has replaced face-to-face social interactions, and because the focus has become on the next content to post, it diminished physical quality time, energy, and affection for romantic partners, leading to loneliness and social fragmentation (Underwood & Findlay 2004; Miller, et al. 2016: 181; Sanchez 2016; Carrier 2018; Bouffard, Giglio & Zheng 2021).

Mounting number of studies show that the use of social media has an unfavourable impact on relationship dynamics as it blurs boundaries between online and offline relationships (Hertlein, 2012). Social media also influences our relationships with ourselves. Users start to compare themselves with peers, for example when they show off holiday photographs, making them feel inferior (Tandoc Jr., Ferruci & Duffy 2015; Miller, et al. 2016: 83, 195, 202). Because social media is a trigger to self-comparison and self-esteem, it leads to problematic obsessions and causes social anxiety (Elhai, et al. 2016; Christensen 2018; Jiang & Ngien 2020). Individuals feel curious about others' daily life, endeavours and achievements, and fear missing out (FOMO) on a social opportunity or situation, so they constantly stay connected.

Nevertheless, the jealousy-enticed strategy is still very popular. Social media is receiving a growing importance in the lives of Arab youth[173] (Radcliffe & Abuhmaid, 2020). Even with the knowledge that social media cannot represent a realistic lifestyle, young individuals feel an increased desire to share, or find something to share, online. It has given an incentive to spend more money on appearances, and further indulge in tangible commodities thus promoting a material culture. Tahani expressed that in Kuwait "success is measured by the amount of money you own, not your education or manners or behaviour". Apparently, social status and respect is determined based on the luxurious items a person owns. This reflects the level of consumerism and materialism of the country and its potential response to Valentine's Day and other cultural occasions. Therefore, this judgement also depends on what is shared on social media. Joanna explained, "It is only

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[173] The fieldwork showed no association between people's education or socio-economic status when it comes to the tendency of posting online.

natural for the Kuwaiti population to feel a satisfactory inflation of their ego whenever they get to show-off what grandiose gifts they have given and received". Competing with peers on who has received "the best gift" sets a very high bar for those who are unable to keep up with Kuwait's opulent, materialistic lifestyle. Joanna realised a problem behind this, "Being part of the consumer masses sets a very high expectation for people to adhere to these made-up occasions". Criticism of Valentine's Day was widely generated from people stating to belong to the market-oriented middle class (Geiger 2007; Kreil 2016). More non-Kuwaitis have criticised the overrated, unrealistic standards of romantic gifting. Every year, new celebration and gift ideas emerge, making it more difficult to compete since not everyone has equal monetary acquisitions or privileges in Kuwait. Consequently, young individuals experience various feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration, discomfort and self-inadequacy from not being socially compatible with others in Kuwait's society. They may choose to completely withdraw from social media because they do not "fit in" (Sanchez, 2016). This can be experienced by conservative Muslims who can't celebrate Valentine's Day, or single/recently separated individuals.

Studies cannot ascertain whether social media triggers happiness or comfort (Miller, et al., 2016: 193-196), but Kuwait's fieldwork has shown that it provokes envy, jealousy, isolation, unhappiness, stress, and disappointment (Muise, Christofides & Desmarais 2009; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson 2011; Utz & Beukeboom 2011; Kross, et al. 2013; Tiggemann & Slater 2013; Tandoc Jr., Ferruci & Duffy 2015). The rivalry of "displaying a utopian lifestyle and demonstrating an impossibly perfect life", as Joanna described, "may hurt the generations to come in the long run". The constant comparison and competition with others are "killing" the Kuwaiti society.

In an era of transition, social media is a privilege but it cannot only be beneficial, it can be abused. When thinking of Kuwait, Khaled describes it, "desert country, social media and trends". The momentum that makes us attached to social media through influential icons eventually leads to following certain trends in fashion or dance for example. Qassem explained this is "to portray the openness and globalised mindset and to be cool", or according to Amal, it is followed "as a showcase of so-called modernism". These trends do not enrich tradition but opposingly causes to lose local customs. Fieldwork results found

that at this rate, social media can only influence people negatively, as Omar claimed, "This internet caused a loss of morals, I could say it might have ruined the world".

Instead of manifesting in false standards of love, self-comparison, and showing-off, social media can be used to increase awareness about Kuwait and the Arabian Gulf region because until now, Maha believes it is "a very quiet country although it is diversified and modern". The general idea about Kuwait is petrol-rich and a "sheikh" theme, according to Kholoud. Seba said that foreigners are shocked when they find that English is widely spoken in Kuwait because they assume it is an ignorant society. This shows social media has not properly portrayed the region. Apart from invalidating widespread stereotypes, the social media can also be an opportunity to discuss topics and resolve plenty of issues within the Middle East. On a separate note, I can disagree that the main reason of social media during festive occasions in Kuwait is to induce jealousy among couples. Some humble individuals show their holiday photos and gifts just to stay in touch with their family or friends and to share their experiences. Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, this competitive activity would have significantly lessened considering the quarantine, lockdown and inability to purchase expensive items or celebrate extravagantly. Lastly, it was acknowledged that social media was a main factor that popularised Valentine's Day in Kuwait, but I also assume it can be used to promote opposing, hateful propaganda towards the love event.

## 2. Promoting the Love Occasion in Kuwait and Arabian Gulf countries

Valentine's Day has been picked specifically because it falls outside of the typical Kuwaiti Islamic culture and its relative celebrations. This section provides a better picture of the ambience of Valentine's Day in Kuwait to understand western event preparations in an Islamic society and their influence on people's habits. These preparations include decorations, commercialisation methods and advertisements, which offer an insight into the careful positioning of Valentine's Day. Many studies have concentrated on mass popular culture in western countries, it was therefore appropriate to acknowledge this culture in a country that represents a different community, ideology and beliefs. Finally, I

comment on how commercialisation has become part of Kuwait's culture in supporting a ritual of shared meanings and symbolic representations, consequently concluding possible implications for the future of Kuwait. This information contributes to the understudied area of Valentine's Day celebrations in the Arabian Gulf region.

The first dedicated study on Valentine's Day was conducted in 18th century England (Holloway, 2019). The study argues that over the course of about 200 years, the occasion had been refashioned as a modern ritual. The transformation included replacing older customs, such as lotteries, with newer ones like the exchange of Valentine cards. At that moment, commercialisation of the event started thriving with the creation of homemade cards filled with passionate forms of expression for those who were unable to convey their own loving emotions (Van Dyk, 2013). Groom's study (2018) revealed a curious connection between early methods of celebration in the 1800's and traditional practices. He argued that mass print culture and literature, such as poetry and writings of William Shakespeare, have provoked the spread of celebrations, precisely Valentine's Day and Halloween. Similarly, in the United States when printing and manufacturing methods had advanced by the 1840s, Valentine's Day became a significant commercial endeavour. The gradual transition to a commercial celebration was affected by the appearance of Valentine's Day writers which demonstrated a rise in the occasion's popularity. By the end of the 1840s, the occasion was established as an immensely popular, unofficial American holiday (Weinrott, 1974: 160). This example of an emerging consumer society had evolved from folk tradition. It illustrates that commercial culture can certainly boost, challenge, and eventually reshape practices of love into a mass popular cultural phenomenon. Based on this, every era had developed its own unique traditional identity, rejuvenating or even "reinventing" social practices, which consequently contributed to early modern history.

Valentine's Day has been strongly labelled as an event-marketing strategy that had risen in the United States and Great Britain during the 19th century (Schmidt, 1993). Since then, the 14th of February has become a worldwide phenomenon for the celebration of romantic love. The marketing industry plays an intense role in (and is therefore responsible for) creating, maintaining, developing, and finally legitimizing ritual celebrations and cultural norms. Studies show that marketers exhaust their efforts into constructing these norms to

gradually shift us to the following stage in the transformation process (Cross, Harrison & Gilly, 2017). A change in lifestyle choices, values and practices determine the transformation of a certain nation. These marketing efforts usually pressurise people to succumb to a certain occasion. For example, after studying consumption and material culture, a survey in 2003 showed that the media significantly influenced Valentine's Day celebrations in India (Sahni & Shankar, 2006). Similarly, Wilk (1994) studied the link between consumption and media, rather than consumption and identity or lifestyle. The media method chosen by Wilk at the time was the television. He recognised the link between choice and impact of timing, how new commodities are introduced to be consumed depending on the time period. The television was then determined as a disruptive medium for changing present preferences into future ones. Nowadays, numerous other technological platforms and media devices have been introduced that impact our decision-making processes.

Valentine's Day has enticed merchants and advertisers to acquire a larger consumer base. Historically, the holiday primarily involved young men and women (Van Dyk, 2013), but the celebration was expanded among other age groups in Kuwait through aggressive marketing techniques. Advertising was instrumental in attracting large crowds. Seba added that the immense promotions during Valentine's Day do not only attract single people, but also the young and old who recently came out of a relationship, which does not represent the essence of the occasion[174]. Merchants at one point also tried to include children in the holiday by creating a "juvenile Valentine's" (Schmidt, 1993: 229). Single people, older people and people who do not support or celebrate Valentine's Day are eager to know about the occasion's offers and discounts, therefore eventually accepting the presence of the western occasion. Marketers expanded the popularity of Valentine's Day by prolongating the duration of the celebration year after year (Schmidt, 1993: 227). Recently, Valentine's Day's campaigns start as early as January 2nd, soon after New Year celebrations end (Farbotko & Head 2013; Gursky 2016). Marketing strategists control the message,

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[174] Qassem called Valentine's Day promotions and displays "little gimmicks", which he finds annoying. They neglect the feelings of separated or widowed individuals. Those people would feel unloved and left out, naturally afterwards criticising Valentine's Day due to loneliness. This again indicates the essentiality of having a romantic partner on Valentine's Day, hence its name in Arabic, *Eid Al-'ushaaq*, "the festivity of lovers".

location, and timing. Roses and chocolates are noticed more often and people's reactions towards these items rise in positivity and love association (Zajonc 1980; Zayas, Pandey & Tabak 2017). This is called customer attention which is usually achieved by means of product exposure and eye-tracking, therefore triggering customer preferences and sales. Accordingly, customer attention is captured in Kuwait when a "hype" is followed or a product is increasingly purchased, signifying the success of advertising (Otnes & Scott 1996; Florack, Egger & Hübner 2020).

The informants from the youth and young adult group highlighted the increased giveaways, discounts and offers in shops, restaurants, spas, and hotels during Christmas and Valentine's Day. The same is done during Islamic occasions like Ramadan and *Eid*. On the other hand, businesses also use these occasions to increase product prices. Flower shops precisely earn a sizable component. On Mother's Day and Valentine's Day for example, flowers cost triple their usual value in Kuwait. Strangely, there are two extremes on Valentine's Day with regards to pricing strategies; raising the cost of flowers and chocolates, meanwhile reducing prices in retail outlets and service-based businesses, all for the same purpose, to promote and welcome the event. Despite the various Kuwaiti and Islamic celebrations, businesses feel inclined to be involved in other commercial occasions to practice their PR and generate (more) money. Berkani (2013), who had studied Valentine's Day across the Arabian Gulf, wrote in her online report that "gift deals and advertisements from local restaurants make it hard to ignore the increasing popularity of the holiday". As shown, Valentine's Day awareness has spread to neighbouring "conservative" countries as well.

Although Saudi Arabia's Valentine's Day ban in 2008 greatly influenced Kuwait's practices to adhere and follow accordingly, risking the businesses and jobs of many people (Garcia, 2011: 2), the decree refused to execute it. Nevertheless, Valentine's Day is discreetly celebrated in Kuwait, as Omar expressed, "people try not to emphasize it". Siddiqui's study (2016) similarly showed that Valentine's Day celebrations in India occur discreetly, and some media intend to cover it. In Kuwait's case, it is controlled to avoid "ill-disciplined" behaviour that does not coincide with the Islamic religion. This establishes that despite the obvious commercialisation and popularity of the event, Valentine's Day in

Kuwait remains very subtle compared to other countries in the Middle East, like Egypt or Jordan for example, as Bashar, Seba and Qassem stated. It is because of religion that Valentine's Day is believed to be "more daring" in the West. Garcia (2011: 2) contrarily claims that decorations and celebrations during Valentine's Day in Kuwait are "just as extensive as western countries". Aseel lived in Canada for several years before moving to Australia; she claimed that "It [Valentine's Day] is the same thing". This shows the gradual resemblance between gifting occasions in Arab societies and western ones.

In 2018, Saudi Arabia lifted the ban, arguing that Valentine's Day can represent occasions like Mother's Day (Al Arabiya English newspaper 2018; Dorsey 2018). As a consequence, a significant shift was noticed in Kuwait's markets. The media, shops, and vendors showed special interest in the love event and promoted it further, especially after Saudi Arabia, the "reference" to Islamic tradition for many Muslims, has allowed it. This normalised Valentine's Day marketing campaigns. Suddenly, Islamic opposition to Valentine's Day regarding nonmarital sin among romantic couples was not in question and it no longer represented an "alien" practice (Garcia, 2011: 2). Instead, the newly recognised holiday was excitingly praised (Schmidt, 1993: 214), stating that a love culture is needed and is not Islamically forbidden. This raised serious disapproving arguments, especially about it resembling Mother's Day. Adam unravelled the situation, "Saudi Arabia allowed a lot of things to happen at once, and an oppressed society like this one with this sudden freedom is a negative change". This started the transformation towards a "liberal" economy. Now, promotions in Kuwait do not differ from those of any other occasion, Islamic or non-Islamic. Valentine's Day, an established marketed holiday, became "one of three greatest gift-shopping days of the current era" (Van Dyk, 2013: 1), alongside Ramadan. On a similar note, Anna stated, "It [Valentine's Day] is like Christmas. There are many expectations to be happy". In my opinion, it is unusual to compare a social cultural event like Valentine's Day to a very collective religious holiday like Christmas, but this shows the similarities in global event publicity.

With Kuwait's wealth and accessibility to foreign production, Valentine's Day has become a progressively successful occasion for the welfare of the economy and market (Geiger

2007: 83; Van Dyk 2013). Commercial occasions are just like tourism, while they represent distinct industries, both are tools to jumpstart the economy.

Economic growth was predictable in a consumer culture that advertises consumer rituals. The love event in Kuwait starts before the 14th of February and lasts longer because restaurants, stores, offices and brands promote Valentine's Day by throwing parties, exchanging gifts and providing discounts. Numerous venues also hold special events. Merchants and marketers engage in the distortion and commodification of romantic love and "dramatize" the holiday products as items of allure, romance, fantasy and magic that will be viewed valuable to consumers to ultimately increase their profits (Schmidt 1993: 224; Rogers 2006). In Kuwait, vendors research Valentine's Day celebrations in other parts of the world to "copy" some rituals, gifts, and decoration ideas. For example, the Beauty and the Beast rose was a magnificent hit when it reached the Kuwaiti market a few years ago. The rose that allegedly never dies was expensively sold in a golden plated glass dome. It was viewed as a worthy Valentine gift for females. Valentine merchandise is therefore "familiar", in which De Koning (2009) describes as successful in mastering globally dominant cultural codes. The production of affordable Chinese products, like teddy bears and stuffed hearts, have spread to many residential neighbourhoods in Kuwait. The extensive popularity of Valentine's Day and its mass-produced commodities fit excellently into the definitions of popular culture, as presented by Storey (1993). Furthermore, many inscriptions on Valentine products are in English, which shows the strong connection between the celebration of the event and access to "cosmopolitan capital". In this sense, Mahmoud light-heartedly remarked, "We are just a Chinese copy of the celebration of the original American Valentine's Day". Van Dyk (2013: 2) concludes, "Valentine's Day can be classified as popular culture due to its status as an unofficial holiday in which many people participate, primarily due to the popularity of commercial items being representative 'of the people' and made 'by the people'".

More iconically, one cannot fail to realise the countless red flowers, balloons, hearts and boxes of chocolate that are put together for this day. Bashar specifically stressed the red heart as a symbol of Valentine's Day. These symbols mostly interest young individuals. Fatima disclosed that an absurd event full of hearts and decorations of Cupid arrows does

not suit her age as she "grew old for these silly things". She prefers simple, classical gifts, like music, poetry, books, and glass items, something that is not "stained" with the media's excessive advertising. The fascination with classical objects reveals emotional ties to the past. These examples embody a pure gift, something coming from the heart, as depicted by Mauss (1925). Jewellery stores also offer heart-shaped necklaces, bracelet charms or earrings. They also customize jewellery by writing the person's partner's name on a golden ring for example. Another idea that flourished in the jewellery business not so long ago was to record the voice of a significant other saying something like "I love you" then taking that voice frequency and designing it on a golden necklace to be worn by the woman[175]. This creativity reveals the importance of gold and jewellery gifts in Kuwait.

As Valentine's Day approaches, the red colour instantly stands out in Kuwait's shopping malls, hypermarkets and coffee shops, and many people wear the colour as a sign of celebration. Some shops start decorating in red, stocking their shelves with red products or wrapping their products in red. These shop displays come with music, colourful sights, lights and visual attractions, triggering consumers into buying, or at least window shopping. "Everywhere you go you would see, "For you and your loved one!"", as Qassem claimed. People become constantly reminded that they must take part in the event by purchasing gifts and getting together with loved ones (Mortelmans & Damen, 2001). Constant visual reminders represent societal pressures (Otnes, Ruth & Milbourne, 1994). They urge people to buy by targeting their emotions, deceiving them, which evidently signifies that marketing psychology plays a significant role in our decision-making processes.

Sales of advertised products remain on the rise in Kuwait. The government has ensured jobs that nourish highly skilled human capital to achieve those sales (Belbagi, 2015: 4). Rashed said that salesmen sometimes work double shifts on such big occasions, some work till after midnight to fulfil customers' needs. This shows that although Valentine's Day was designed to encourage love and strengthen romantic bonds (Morse & Neuberg, 2004), consumption is dominant in Kuwait, thanks to commercialisation and the media. In the

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[175] Islam prohibits men to wear gold and diamond, but not silver (Al-Qaradawi, 1999: 79-80).

evening, Kuwait's streets are over-crowded with traffic and restaurants are packed with people, Aseel stated, "you are unable to dine without a prior reservation"[176].

According to the fieldwork, Valentine's Day is another *invented* corporate occasion and a high budget is annually exhausted on its commercialisation in Kuwait[177]. It is normal, Tahani argued Arab countries in general tend to exaggerate these celebratory occasions, including weddings and dowry payments[178]. In her opinion, it is an irresponsible spending of money. Maha claimed that misspending money to benefit multinational companies is an indecent manipulation of those who are in love. Valentine's Day in Kuwait is widely viewed as following a trend or copying other cultures' practices that set standards on how love should be demonstrated. The adherence to these "repetitive mass events" are disliked and impersonal for Mahmoud and Medhat. Joanna expressed that events like Valentine's Day "suck consumers into the hype", a smart marketing strategy to get people to spend their money. Apparently, for these informants, brand creativity and promotions are not always anticipated during Valentine's Day; the more people are pushed to buy, the less they want to be part of the occasion, which contradict the findings of Otnes, Ruth and Milbourne (1994) and Othman, Ong and Teng (2005)[179].

The concept of romance has been reshaped by excessive commercialisation on Valentine gifts. Instead of declaring amorous sentiments and sharing memories, Valentine's Day has become "commodified", encouraging material culture and setting abstract relationship standards. AG reporter (2013) declared in an online statement that, "Valentine's Day consumerism has reached such staggering proportions that it makes you wonder if love has succumbed to the most fickle of emotions". Valentine's Day reconceptualization have

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[176] Al-Fuzai and Fattahova (2014) developed a newspaper column raising awareness about Valentine's Day and suggesting more ways to celebrate in Kuwait.

[177] Concrete data regarding the financial amount spent individually in Kuwait, or collectively in the Arabian Gulf was not studied, which introduces a subsequent research area.

[178] This is further discussed in: Dating and Romantic Relationships: Gender roles and gift expectations in an Arab Islamic country.

[179] Results of these studies revealed that people are more willing to purchase romantic gifts due to the success of some commercial advertisements during Valentine's Day. Whereas my fieldwork showed that the business-tainted event is pressurizing and manipulative to an extent that people deliberately do not take part in it. They acknowledge that Valentine's Day is becoming a programmed technique amidst capitalism.

therefore produced a materialistic consumer-driven culture in Kuwait, successfully redesigning a historical ritual into a market-oriented celebration.

Some defend love modernism, while loudly oppose Western models. Albeit the successful commercial advertisements, there were still negative views towards Valentine's Day propaganda. Apparently, so much money is consumed on an event that does not "trace back" to Kuwaiti traditions. Before Valentine's Day became a popular occasion, Kuwait annually celebrated *Hala Febrayer* (hala fibrāyir: Arabic for "Hello February"), which is also a period of increased sales and promotional offers during February. This shows an obvious adoption of material culture, that businesses take advantage of any occasion to boost their profits.

Other occasions that are widely popular are Christmas, Halloween, Black Friday, Mother's Day and Father's Day. More recent gifting events in Kuwait that are also implied by the West include Secret Santa, baby/bridal showers, gender reveals, and bachelor or bachelorette parties. Qassem declared that this change in conventional practices does not necessarily signify a cultural or religious transformation, but simply a result of globalisation and advanced technology, and this alone indicates Kuwait's fast-developing culture. The luxury of internet and media access have made the younger generation easily influenced by other cultures. Globalisation therefore has a hand in Kuwait's transition period and promotion of western notions. It has affected heritage discourses and practices and the diffusion of new ideas (Vesajoki 2002; Al-Nakib 2020). Al-Ghanim (2015: 6) called this the "modernisation phase" in the Arabian Gulf. Contemporary debates on globalisation argue on its positive, dynamic effects and qualities (Wang 2007; Kashima 2014). For example, it has reconstructed masculine bias, addressed gender equality and reinforced awareness of diversity of national culture and identity (Benería, Floro, Grown & MacDonald 2000; Kolářová 2006; Metcalfe & Rees 2010; Budianta, Budiman, Kusno & Moriyama 2018). As an international event, Valentine's Day has become an esteemed sign of modernity and urban belonging; therefore, participating in the event gives people a sense of purpose in society. In Bader's opinion, "[Valentine's Day is] getting closer and closer to be a global phenomenon to unite the world in a single day, which is good, disregard politics, religion, society etc.". It makes the Kuwaiti society relatable to other

cultures, thereby establishing a "closeness" with other people from different regions. However, these views are widely disputed since globalisation also consists of negative outcomes, for example it undermines national identity and increases cosmopolitanism (Shah 2004; Ariely 2019).

Following Kuwait's liberation in 1991, the nation attracted considerable political attention and business affairs. This induced the establishment of several international schools (American, British, French, Indian, and Pakistani institutions that follow diverse curricula), which play a vital role in the social structure of Kuwait. Some schools implement certain skills and concepts that others do not, such as a desegregation system and participation in western celebratory events, like prom and homecoming. Seba disclosed that many students now study western lifestyle and background. Apart from studies on the Arabian Peninsula, schools in Kuwait also teach European and Western history. Seba explained that although some may think that it is pointless to learn about the scandal of Wallstreet for example, she finds it essential to learn about other countries and world facts, "People who do not know world history would have no future", she affirmed. Other informants like Adam, Lamya and Sahar agreed that gaining cultural knowledge makes a nation more developed and tolerant to external norms[180].

Even when diverse schooling systems and curricula represent components to Kuwait's development as a nation, the fieldwork revealed that many parents and elders blame these systems for their westernized and somewhat secular methods, consequently passing certain unfamiliar values down to their children. Many social media hashtags, challenges, among other movements are followed by the youth and parents link this to a faulty upbringing and education system. Seba argued that parents cannot enrol their children in foreign (non-Arab schools) and worry about losing their mother tongue or Arab identity. She added, "Some parents force their kids to speak in Arabic at home and leave their foreign personalities in school". This is critical since the Arabic language is inextricably associated with Islam

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[180] In contrast, Gobert (2014) found in respect to education in the United Arab Emirates, that students are more interested in reading indigenous literature. Learning about one's own culture apparently fosters a sense of belonging and identity. On the other hand, English language learners are faced two conflicting choices, modernizing (learning English) or perpetuating their local culture and traditions.

because it is the language of the Quran (Mall 2001; Wekke 2018). The English language particularly constitutes an important part of Valentine's Day opposition, with slogans like, "Sorry Valentine's Day, I am Muslim" (Kreil, 2016: 141). In the future, the occasion poses a threat for Arab Islamic culture. Parents like Medhat, Amal and Omar were concerned that their children are more aware about Valentine's Day's than the approach of Ramadan or *Eid*. Ramadan (2009a) recognises an identity crisis due to globalisation. Preferring a unified type of practice sometimes leads to detaching from own culture. Raikhan, Moldakhmet, Ryskeldy and Alua (2014) found that young individuals specifically no longer take an interest to own culture, a result also realised from Kuwait's fieldwork[181].

From this information, I determine that Valentine's Day's target market is the youth, whose age ranges from the teenage years to the early twenties. Seba argued, "Why do we stay up to celebrate New Year's Day, while we sleep on the *Hijri* New Year?". The youth transformation in Kuwait, as addressed by Alnaser (2018), proposes that due to globalisation, the media and an increased exposure to western practices, it is now common to adopt foreign celebratory ideas and see a Christmas tree in Muslim homes for example. Based on the fieldwork, these practices, or "copying foreigners", were repeatedly linked to being "modern", "civilised" and "developed" people. Abrar argued that these concepts of modernity are widely misinterpreted. On the contrary, for her, these practices reflect a lack of awareness. Despite Kuwait's noticeable growth since the late 20th century, there are still many gaps that hinder its success and development, which are measured by productivity; what was achieved, not what is practiced. In other words, the concept of "modernity" includes much more than incorporating western festivities. She spoke about the lack of achievements or "signs of modernity" in Kuwait. Innovation in transport systems, communication methods, industrial and agricultural processes, and work structures, not to mention basic human rights policies, are absent in Kuwait. She mentioned the poor infrastructure and the declining economy, and finally remarked, "the only thing that is still doing well is petrol". Clearly, outcomes of a "modern" society include an enhanced,

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[181] This was also the case in India. During the late 20th century, India's liberalised economy has popularized Valentine's Day especially targeting the urban youth. Exchanging cards and gifts as means to express feelings of love and affection, with an evident display of red decorations and roses, have made this festivity a predictable routine. Even academic campuses were decorated for the event, with red hearts painted on walls and red roses brightening up many offices (Patel, 2014).

dignified life and better social stability; however, it does not always mean that it is a positive change, or that it lacks drawbacks.

Modernisation carries traditional tensions and hostility when implementing western components into a non-western country, according to Naofusa (1983). Trying to assimilate new concepts to an existing culture developed Islamic challenges and arguments, both in the West and the Middle East (Klausen, 2012). Before a transformation happens, the reaction of the citizens must be considered, especially of those who are greatly attached to tradition and ancient practices. Hirai Naofusa in 1983's symposium argued in favour of coexistence, "Our lives have become much more affluent, convenient and comfortable than ever before… (but) how can all nations establish coexistence and coprosperity? We should tackle these problems… beyond ethnic and national backgrounds. Traditional cultures need neither to reject modernisation nor to be absorbed in the streams of modernisation. These two must harmonize and complement each other". Likewise, regarding the case of education in Kuwait and leaving "foreign personalities" in school as Seba pointed out, Musah (2011) proposes that balancing between collectivism and individualism can be simultaneously achieved by innovation and accountability.

Evidently, the influence of the West on the Middle East was endogenous to Kuwait's society and Islamic culture. A social transformation towards a democratised society and Islam (Fierro, 1997: 90), which was especially recognised in the Arabian Gulf after the British withdrawal in 1961 (decolonisation), gradually abolished ideologies of "medieval fanatics" who promoted political Islamic fundamentalism, repression, and terrorism (Esposito & Piscatori 1991; Kepel 2002; Ruthven 2004; Hunter & Malik 2005; Voll 2006; Ettmueller 2006; Peterson 2016; Islam & Islam 2017). I here argue that tolerance for other lifestyles is determined according to each country's culture, history and colonial impacts.

During the 19th and 20th century, European imperialism in Asia and the entry of Europeans in the Arabian Gulf, alongside increased religious exploration, caused a cultural revolution that altered ideas regarding Arab and Islamic practices today. Diverse opinions and lifestyles are witnessed within the region and many Islamic traditions are influenced by the globalised world. Global migration trends (Shah, 2004), and the inevitable ethnic and racial

diversity that followed in Kuwait's case, influenced changes including the restoration of citizenship policies, the establishment of international schools, the adoption of foreign cultural practices and the practical withdrawal of sex segregation in social events, schools and organisations, thereby prompting gender equality discourses (Aleinikoff & Klusmeyer, 2000).

Islamic studies therefore incorporate decolonial theories and debate the uncertain character of the contemporary Middle East. Its issues are discussed in terms of orientalism, Marxism, and postmodern, postcolonial perspectives (Abu-Lughod 1989; Pappé 2005; Bhambra 2014; Wilcox 2018; Tayob 2018; Sparkes 2020; González Alcantud 2021). These studies radically argue that Islam is not one phenomenon but many. In every country, or even every household, Islam is practiced differently. It suggests that Muslims treat their religion and beliefs based on their respective cultures, with varying restrictions and degrees of openness towards western traditions[182]. Every era dictates certain traditional practices and social commitments. Manar[183] linked this to the "influences of evolution", reasoning why it is difficult to pinpoint Islamic dogmas from cultural codes.

The fieldwork shows that there is not just one version of being Muslim or Arab: it is a whole spectrum. There are over fifty Muslim states[184] and there is no single body, political or religious, that speaks for the Muslim world. In fact, Mackintosh-Smith (2019) claims that the Arab world has not been politically unified since the 7th century, and according to Halliday (2003), the only common foundation found in the Middle East is the historical suffrage it experienced during the colonial epoch. Modernity shifts and changes, some nations adapt, others are slower to change. To reach a definite conclusion is difficult since every country is formed with distinct political patterns. It would be erroneous to identify Islam as one religious body, just as it is impossible to identify one African or Asian body for example. This would raise criticism based on prejudice, as Ramadan (2009a) declared.

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[182] For example, older age groups from the fieldwork were found to strongly abide by Islamic principles.
[183] Manar is a 51-year-old married Jordanian female, born and raised in Kuwait.
[184] As per PEW Research Center (2011) and World Population Review (2021).

I therefore ultimately debate the notion of "No Clear Islam", or in better words, "The Dissimilar Islam" across the Middle Eastern-North African region.

A shift in lifestyle practices is much more complex in Kuwait. Indulging in commercial exchanges, spending money and benefitting companies were argued to encourage a spendthrift society, which oppose Islamic instruction (Metwally, 1997). The anti-consumerist argument insists on the celebration's product exploitation and useless expenses to express lavishness (Close & Zinkhan, 2009). Latifa[185] for instance views these commercialised promotions on products as scam or fraud[186] because they manipulate the public. Evading Valentine's Day commodities relates to moral avoidance which, as described by Lee, Motion and Conroy (2009), occurs when the buyer believes that the brand or product would deliver a negative impact on society because it contradicts with their principles or ideologies. This has happened in India. Valentine's Day provoked hostile reactions because of rapid changes to traditions, specifically impacting the arranged-marriage system (Patel, 2014). There were two fanatic groups fighting contra Valentine's Day. One group claimed that this occasion is just an undesirable western effect of neo-imperialism supporting commercialisation and targeting the Indian middle class. The other group was convinced that Valentine's Day is a conspiracy theory brought by the West, resulting in "cultural pollution", defaming the traditional Indian identity and culture. Some card and gift shops got destroyed, and young couples were attacked by Hindu and Islamic extremists, who are usually more physical in their protests.

For now, development of civic life has not matched with economic growth in Kuwait. Conservative families seem to remain unaffected by Kuwait's cultural transformation and have resisted this Islamically controversial change, especially parents and elders. Consequently, many young informants like Seba feel hesitant to take part in Valentine's Day because they seek validation from society or their family. Because the Kuwaiti

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[185] Latifa is a 62-year-old married Kuwaiti female.

[186] Scam or fraud is "an act of deception or misrepresentation that violates ethical standards" (Chop & Silva, 1991: 166). Additionally, fraud involves "the breach of good faith and fair dealing … for money; an intentional deception made for personal gain or to damage another individual" (Gupta, 2013: 144). According to these definitions, celebrating Valentine's Day is a misrepresentation of Kuwait's traditional practices and standards, and because it involves over-consumption and purchase, it causes people to misspend their money, which determines an unethical behaviour.

community still functions as a group; youngsters follow collective family practices rather than individual choices. Parental pressure and expectations on specific matters, such as marriage and reproduction, are still important and stressed, although this is noticeably changing through increased religious exploration and reinterpretation of religious scriptures (Ahmad, 2011). It is a concern, however, whether Kuwait's "moral avoidance" would reach to India's extremism in the future since the fieldwork identified a strong desire to stick to traditions and marketize Islamic holidays (Armbrust, 2002). On the other hand, I also put forward the theory of conservatism. While many families put an emphasis on traditions to maintain an Arab Islamic society and protect heritage, some aspects of liberalism are demonstrated outside that society, for example owning houses in Paris or London to enjoy a different, western lifestyle.

Another motive to moral avoidance in Kuwait would be to show unusual consumption behaviour (gift resistance) and not conform to majority views therefore avoiding Valentine's Day. As per psychologists, this is known as the "need for uniqueness" (Schumpe & Erb, 2015). In Ghada's opinion, there are other occasions more worthy of exchanging gifts, such as birthdays and anniversaries. Extended theories that explain these behaviours involve individualism and the use of other means that substitute consumption, such as offering experiences or reinforcing personal meetups.

Evidently, the fieldwork revealed that feelings during Valentine's Day commercial period do not only include excitement and happiness, but also defeat and loneliness. There was an overwhelming love-hate relationship towards the marketing campaigns in Kuwait. Senior informants for example spoke more about materialism and the commercial aspect of Valentine's Day. There were less responses about love and more about consumerism, mass consumption, and the wasteful spending of money (Darr, 2017). In fact, answers involving consumerism were repeated more often than those involving religion or tradition. Repeated ideas included "following blindly" something that does not represent original traditions and the youth conforming with the occasion. Understandably, it would be difficult for Kuwait to draw back from celebrating Valentine's Day and the benefits that come with this commercial occasion. However, as many informants emphasized, there should be an equal focus on encouraging Kuwaiti traditions to enrich its culture. To do that, there must be a

balance in promotions with regards to time preparation period, types of offers and their duration in the market. In the meantime, it is expected that Kuwait will continue to celebrate love discreetly, whilst encouraging responsible consumption and minimising "exaggerated" commercialisation.

The fieldwork determined that this "fad" attraction depends on age, where younger individuals prefer to take part, and even more if they are single. Valentine's Day does not only signify making plans to spend the day with a loved one, but also buying products and services during the promotional period. In other words, people participate in Valentine's Day as a response to a commercial holiday rather than a love occasion (Otnes, Ruth & Milbourne, 1994). Valentine's Day is therefore popularised through mediatization, a concept put forward by Hernàndez i Martí (2006). Despite this, promoting western occasions in a conservative Islamic society is a perilous game. Kuwait could be at risk from ultraconservative Muslims who seek to return the country back to its prior conventional state using hostility and violence, which has occurred in several Islamic societies in the past (Shirazi, 2019).

## 3. The Quran and Islamic Religion: *'Aib* and Ostentation

As implied in this chapter, there seems to be a conflict between what is practiced in Islamic countries and what the Islamic religion dictates and commands. Many societal views, standards and customs are confused with the Islamic religion (Fierro, 1997: 88), bearing in mind that something which is *haram* (ḥarām) is different than *'aib* (ʿayb). *Haram* coincides religious beliefs and means forbidden, while *'aib* means socially inappropriate, disrespectful or shameful (Al Jallad, 2010). Jaffe, et al. (2014: 12) finds that "shame societies" include Arabs. Arabs are cautious about what others think of them; hence they concentrate on appearances and a demonstration of a "successful dignified" life[187]. For example, it is not *haram* to speak of love and show affection, but it is considered *'aib* as one must convey modesty even in their discourses and behaviour. A better example with regards to Valentine's Day, while it is not *haram* to date, it is however *'aib* to declare

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[187] As implied by the fieldwork, many parents pre-set their children's future, enforcing education and careers in engineering, medicine, or law, while emphasizing close tie-ins to religion, a social proof of a "blessed Muslim".

having relationships outside of matrimony (having a boyfriend or girlfriend). In that sense, depending on each's beliefs, some Muslims are more sceptical than others and may consider Valentine's Day as *haram,* while others may simply view it as *'aib.*

In addition, ideas raised about many topics concerning women remain undiscussed including divorce, sexual intercourse, breastfeeding, childbirth, and menstruation. These topics are still largely taboo in Arab societies because they have also been distorted and misinterpreted by culture. Controversially, these topics are all openly discussed in the Quran and in Islam, however silenced and shamed in society. Religion is very pervasive, but common confusion tends to stem from social criticisms that cannot level with contemporary cultural practices and the essence of Islam (Kluijver, 2013: 27). Tahani defends this by saying, "Our religion is beautiful, but our Arab society has given it the ugliest image". Other fixed concepts in life such as marriage, reproduction and dress code are also commonly non-negotiable with parents or family elders (Ali, 2006). Also, much of women oppression and "religious extremism", such as child marriages, virginity testing and honour killings that are exercised in several Muslim communities, are largely performed to avoid *'aib*, or social humiliation, but are claimed to be performed "in the name of Islam" (Abu-Odeh 2010; Paulusson 2013; Alsaidi 2015; Eltahawy 2015; Sadath 2019; Chen 2020). Even when religious decrees have been issued against these concepts, they do not seem to take effect on limiting or stopping their practice in Arab and Islamic countries. Evidently, the Quran repeatedly mentions that neither religious preachers nor philosophers nor law makers base their opinions on knowledge, but on mere guesswork and conjectures (*Surat Yunus*, 10: 36, 59). Consequently, people follow their forefathers and religious or worldly leaders on the "inherited" assumption that they were great people, therefore they must be right, and the tradition continues for generations to come. These ideas and social standards about *haram* and *'aib* are also intentionally delivered by schooling systems and television programs to further spread a "conservative" culture.

Firstly, regarding schooling systems, Joanna stated that her conservative views have been significantly shaped by the Kuwaiti government's-imposed teaching curriculums. She added, "I also attribute this to my own conservative parents' upbringing of myself and my siblings. Kuwait's culture has definitely affected my personality in that I am not as social

as I would like to be, and my habits and practices are docile in comparison with people who grew up elsewhere". Bashar also mentioned the education system. In Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for example, Islam is obligated to be taught in schools to Muslims, forming a rather early conservative culture among the youth, whilst other Arab governments are lenient to such educational material, creating secular thought freed from religion (Kilani, 2011). This determines that children of immigrants, or third culture kids, are influenced by Kuwait's culture, and, during adulthood, they realise differences among their peers or cousins who have grown up elsewhere. This certainly questions individual attributes, whether they truly form a person's personality or they have been acquired from external factors, such as their upbringing, social circles, or government's bureaucracy. Accordingly, attributes that have been acquired from a person's surroundings would change if they had lived in different environments.

Secondly, the fieldwork seems to corroborate that influential groups and elites control national Kuwaiti television and media due to "political interest and power", as agreed by Ghada, Faisal and Latifa[188]. A religiously conservative image is portrayed to emphasize strong cultural ethics and "preserve what is left of tradition", as Adam claimed. Western dominance in television and songs created a threat to the Muslim community, especially when they were viewed as a self-deceptive invention. Western styles were also fused in music, fashion, and philosophy (Eid & Karim, 2014). In Iran for example, Sreberny-Mohammadi (1990) explained that revolutionaries who once acknowledged the television as a threat were now creating their own subjectivities and trusting its content "as if it were the Holy Quran itself", as described by Pappé (2005: 322). Therefore, transmitting a sense of Islamic belonging and stability controls society by preventing people from becoming too individualistic, according to Sana and Amina. This demonstrates the regime's resistance to change the conventional depiction of the Arabian Gulf region.

In Kuwait, the government imposes censorship on television, cinema, the internet and educational material. This is to make sure that the information transmitted and published is acceptable for the Arab Islamic image. For example, graphic sexual material or

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[188] Along the same lines, religion has been distorted due to the egregious conduct of self-proclaimed groups like the Islamic State or ISIS in aims to attain their updated Caliphate prophesies (Mason, 2017).

pornographic websites are banned, and intimate scenes are cut out from cinema and television filmography. Movies that involve ideas about God or religion are also banned to be broadcasted. Some textbook data has also been tempered with and censored in schools, for example content about politics, Israel, nudism, or phrases that disrespect religion is redacted. This is done to ensure the political security of the country and for the preservation of future generations by suppressing sinful behaviour or ideas that conflict Islamic tradition. Historically in the Middle East, several libraries were destructed and books were banned to be sold or even burnt for similar reasons (Fierro, 2014). Eickelman (2000) argued that governments can no longer control what their people know and how they think. Serene linked this to hypocrisy, arguing that the media does not acknowledge the openness and change of many religious conservative values and views, and thus this does not display Kuwait's true lifestyle. With other sources of media communications and online streaming, viewers become confused as they struggle to differentiate between western social values and true local ideology and culture (Sardar, 1988). There are mixed feelings and contradictory ideas that oppose the West, but at the same time the desire to imitate or follow western achievements is still present (Bowen & Early, 2002).

As shown, much of Arab tradition is somehow enforced by media systems and educational curricula, which may contain falsified or biased content and misinterpreted or forged Islamic scripts and Prophetic sayings (Fierro, 1997: 82, 85). The main emphasis often lies on humility and modesty as key characteristics. Since the media and television generally do not announce the event's celebrations, and after having established that couples discreetly celebrate Valentine's Day in Kuwait, other regions may consequently perceive it as an oppressed, backward society. A country cannot be judged based on what it displays on their media, an explanation to the many misconceptions about the Arab Muslim world. Fatima explained that the government of Kuwait is interested to reflect the old time Kuwaiti folklore and the image of how "religion" was practiced: "a shy woman with traditional clothing". She added, "When you show the desert, the camel, the buying and selling from the floor, it gives an image for the entire world that this is Kuwaiti culture, not the modern reality that we have: the most expensive, newest cars, technology, infrastructure". This reflects the lack of awareness about Middle Eastern practices, it can explain why

Valentine's Day is an understudied occasion in the region. Rashed elaborated that apparently the world believes there is a chance that people in Kuwait still ride on camels and live in tents. This also generates wrong perceptions about Muslim Arabs, associating them with pejorative stereotypes and attributes about their character and upbringing.

With religious exploration, Muslims "reconstructed" religion, community, and society throughout the years, in aims of distinguishing the *haram* from *'aib*, in other words, they were able to differentiate between the new and the traditional. Islam has been objectified in the consciousness of many people in the Arabian Peninsula through mass education, mass communication, technologies, access to new media and ease of travel. This constitutes "Islam in the Modern Era" or "a new era of post-Islamism" as studied by Eickelman (1992; 2001: 193-194). Developments in many Middle Eastern societies suggest a period of profound social transformation. Initially, there was a lot of resistance towards the implementation of foreign cultural activities. However, this awareness defined alternatives to dominant ideologies. Joanna reflected on Kuwait's substantial social and economic growth when the population have come to terms with the necessity to accept foreign ideas and embrace other practices.

In fact, studies show rapidly emerging levels of literacy in the Arabian Peninsula (Eickelman, 2001). Language, music, poetry, film and humour are strong features in Arab communities, playing a larger role than that in Asian or African communities. Therefore, a nation labelled as "oppressed" generates distorted judgements, leading to racism, discrimination, and prejudice towards others. Acknowledging that the Middle East and North African (MENA) region does not have one concrete Islamic constitutional entity, academic and journalistic investigations reveal that the proper way to be familiar with the region is by analysing and studying "Islam" (Eickelman 2002b; Madsen & Strong 2003; Sweet, et al. 2008; Masud 2009; Abusharaf & Eickelman 2015). There needs to be an understanding of distinct histories, ethics, and politics before an analogy between Middle Eastern countries is made, or more specifically Islamic countries.

Besides schooling systems and the media, there were other factors generated from the fieldwork that interpret a dissimilar Islam in the Middle East. First, it is worth noting that

Kuwait is still in its early stages of growth and development, only founded in the 1940s, as Joanna explained, while other Arab nations like Egypt or Lebanon for example have had thousands of years of civilisation and history. The western influence and colonialism were also introduced at a much earlier stage than in Arabian Gulf countries. Secondly, immigration and transnationalism impacted the dynamics of social religious transformation within the Muslim diasporic space (Habti, 2014). The population of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia for example are predominantly Muslim, unlike Egypt or Lebanon where a large percentage of nationals are non-Muslim. Rana argued that different religions existing in one country influence its Islamic legislation, where the government accepts or rejects many concepts, thereby shaping individual lifestyle and thought. Clearly, the geographical proximity Kuwait has with other countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia also suggest strong Islamic ties. Likewise, Abrar spoke of tourism. Religions and social practices become catered when more ethnic nationalities are welcomed into the country, therefore Kuwait as a non-touristy destination is "more conserved when it comes to Valentine's Day". By this reasoning, the ideology behind Valentine's Day becomes either normalised (receptive culture) or taboo (hostile culture) depending on the country's diversity. Finally, Anna relates a dissimilar Islam to a country's wealth. In a privileged, rich-majority society, Valentine's Day celebrations differ when "they [men] can buy their girlfriends a car for example". Her statement shows that oil plays a major role in Kuwait's lifestyle. This sets different relationship expectations among Arabs in other geographic locations and triggers many debates regarding the Islamic instruction on splurging[189].

On that note, it seems necessary to analyse the presence of ostentation, or showing-off, in Kuwait in terms of Islam. From an Islamic perspective, the Quran acknowledges a competitive behaviour among humans. *Surat Al-Hadid* (57: 20) reads, "Know that the life of this world is merely diversion and pastime, and an adornment and source of boasting with one another, and a rivalry in the multiplication of riches and children". Because of shallowness and arrogance, people believe that their possessions give them supreme success or status. However, we must not overlook the severity of evil that comes in return

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[189] A discussion on squandering and splurging is provided in the section: The Quran and Islamic Religion: *Wasta* and Prodigality.

from envy, as mentioned in *Surat Al-Falaq* (113: 5). *Surat Al-Hijr* (15: 88) recommends not to look towards the life pleasures that God bestowed on other people. The reason for this is provided in another verse from *Surat Al-Baqarah* (2: 61), "Will you trade what has benefit for you with what is inferior?". The Quran therefore dissuades from showing-off these "worldly" things, as they are created to mislead humans into believing they are predominating and strong (*Surat Al- 'Alaq,* 96: 6-7). In numerous verses, the Quran does not cease to remind us of our "temporary life" and that everything a person earns from this "temporary life" is created to allure them, as mentioned in *Surat Al-Imran* (3: 185), "The life of this world is nothing but the enjoyment of deception", and *Surat Al-Hadid* (57: 23), "Do not rejoice over what has been given to you, God does not like every arrogant human". The Quran explains that Allah has created different social classes and bestowed gifts of wealth, health, beauty, position, and noble lineage among people and nations only to observe what good will be done towards others, for example charity, as implied by *Surat Al-An'aam* (6: 165) and *Surat Al-Qasas* (28: 77), "Do not forget your share of the world and do good as Allah has done good to you". Unfortunately, Kuwait's fieldwork shows that these gifts have only resulted in the subjugation of some by others, as also predicted by the Quran (*Surat Al-Zukhruf*, 43: 32).

As discussed earlier, Kuwaiti citizens enjoy various governmental benefits which form a competitive advantage over others. These privileges set standards to discriminate against other individuals coming from the middle and lower social classes, mainly expatriate workers, which shows that social stratification and xenophobia exists in Kuwait. Consequently, judging others as inferior is created on false premises. *Surat Al-Hujurat* (49: 11) specifically orders not to scoff or look down upon any person, man or woman, because they may be better in God's judgement. Islamic teachings clarify that a person's heroism is to be humble and modest, as that would attain a higher degree in Allah's sight (*Surat Luqman*, 31: 18). Allah only helps a nation through their supplication, prayers, and sincerity, "and in that let the competitors compete", as *Surat Al-Mutafifeen* (83: 26) explains. Thus, the real pride is in pure intentions, in work and in achievement. Finally, *Surat Al-Qasas* (28: 83) states that the heavens are rewarded to those who are not boastful

or corrupt. This shows a clash between Islam and Kuwait's society and that even the purest of concepts like love and religion have become increasingly materialised and negotiated.

As there is no "pure culture" in the world, there is no "pure religion" either. There are countless explanations to justify why it is highly unlikely that two Muslims would act identically, even if they come from the same country, religious background or family. This also determines that being an Arab is one identity and being a Muslim is a completely different one, ever existing in one person (Fierro, 1997: 81-82). Despite numerous studies being made about Islam in the Middle East, and sources being easier to access, it remains a rather difficult region for westerners to comprehend and an insufficiently studied topic; often still viewed as a shallow, distorted media stereotype. The West has already created an image and made assumptions about the local culture of the Middle East: a great contradiction between an "enlightened" western lifestyle and a "vile" Arab-Eastern lifestyle. These debates occur precisely because Islam cannot be studied as a cultural tradition (Fierro 1997: 88; Bowen & Early 2002). In fact, Islam does not educate people about whether they should embrace "modernity" or "conventionality" (Halliday, 2003). Islam is based on three fundamentals: creed, code of ethics and legislation. While all prophets and messengers received the same revelation and religious instruction (creed and code of ethics) (Fierro, 1997: 82), the changing element was legislation (Eickelman, 2009). Despite having the same religion, every Islamic country has a different history and government that interprets its customs in a distinct form, thereby creating different Islamic legislations and practices. Affirmatively, the Quran acknowledges a nation that will never cease in differing (*Surat Hud*, 11: 118). Issa calls these differences the "shades of religion".

## 4. Emotions and Sentimental Value

The gift-giving practice, as an act of socialization, embodies complex emotions to endure ties between people. Emotions and sentimental value are a prevailing gift-giving aspect integral to be discussed as a tool to communicate identity, ascertain misunderstandings and define demands that continuously operate in communities and civic life (Delgado, Fernández & Labanyi, 2016). Peoples' social influences and individual motives can also be interpreted by studying how they express, experience and value certain gifts. For

instance, the research in Kuwait showed that gifts can facilitate moving on to the next stage within romantic interests and attracting a potential spouse. However, it requires effort as well as bravery to make the move and offer the gift. The history of emotions is an area of growing interest and a potential field in the study of culture (Escolano-Benito, 2015), or in a contemporary love culture (Cheal 1987; 1988). This section gives perspective on the emotions that gifts possess in Kuwait and contributes to the study field of affective science.

Many gifts are driven by social emotions. Emotions are generated from a thought and knowledge process and are deemed perilous because of their power to move people and influence perceptions, making them a major component of social and political life. Emotions are recognised in interrelationships, education, language, religion, diversity and cultural heritage; therefore, they determine interconnections (or a meeting point) between local and transnational relations. In other words, emotions underline differences or similarities in race, ethnicity, gender, and are significant in inter-faith and inter-cultural relations (Soto & Levenson, 2009). Studying emotions can encompass lifestyles, value systems, traditions and beliefs of a society, but more specifically we can understand individual culture that constitutes of spiritual, material and intellectual characteristics (UNESCO, 2006: 12). Therefore, emotions can identify inside and outside culture, individual and collective values, and mind and heart rationing.

The role of emotions in social movements in Kuwait drives historical change because it reveals contradictions and confrontations with certain aspects in that very culture, such as religion. Emotions demonstrate how Islamic communities react towards many notions and cultural practices (Medina-Doménech, 2012). Studying Valentine's Day provided knowledge about Kuwait's tolerance towards individual expression and western ideology, which consequently triggered intergroup dialogues and produced new spaces, to the extent that social norms can be challenged (Brosius & Wenzlhuemer, 2011: 47). The gift-giving occasion encompasses several gender roles and expectations within interpersonal relationships since it fuses the material with the immaterial, allowing to construct "emotional communities" (Ahmed 2004; Fernández 2016; Highfill 2016). Articulating conceptions of love and freedom proposes that genuine emotions reveal a country's social situation and civic life, which mesh societies together (Zambrano, 1996). Valentine's Day

as a diverse, international practice therefore crosses borders and connects directly to people's sensitivities (Council of Europe, 2008).

Several studies have reflected upon peoples' sensuality and emotional presence during gift exchanges. Individuals with higher emotional understanding are more likely to purchase gifts and experience joy when gift-giving (Pillai & Krishnakumar, 2019). They can express certain unspoken messages or communicate feelings through them to the receiver (Close & Zinkhan, 2006). In western societies, it has been emphasized how gifts in their nature play a role of sentiment. Cheal (1987: 150-169; 1988: 40-55, 106-120) dedicates his work to address emotions of love, affection, and care, which have not received much attention in social sciences. He explains that gift reciprocity reinforces confidence between the parties involved and gives perspective to the continuation of the relationship. It is another way to say "I love you" or express gratitude to parents, spouses, employment, even to religion, the past, present and future. Finally, he validates that "the gift economy in western societies is actually part of a culture of love" (Carrier, 2012b: 288).

Kuwait's fieldwork realised different forms of love through gifts: "Eros" in young relationships, "Ludus" in potential romantic attractions, "Storge" in platonic gifting, "Pragma" through satisfying cultural relationship expectations, "Mania" through showing-off on social media and "Agape" through surprise gifts (Lee 1973; Ferrer-Pérez, et al. 2009). Islam also advises that love should be a prevailing emotion in society (Osman, et al. 2013; Mian 2018), therefore creating social bonds and feeling a connection are essential goals in Kuwait's society. Furthermore, we cannot deny the significance of the gift in Islam and charity that demonstrate kindness and forgiveness. These voluntary gifts cause emotions of humility and compassion. As for age influences in gift-giving, the fieldwork showed that empathetic, companionate love lies within older generation due to their frailty, often gifting experiences. For Medhat, gifts are a reward for something significant, such as "a long friendship or a dear wife". Older people reminisce about the past and reflect on their life purposes to defy aging (Minowa & Belk, 2018).

Besides love, the gift in Kuwait generated other positive emotions. Prior to receiving a gift, emotions like excitement and anxiousness occupy receivers. The fieldwork found that

hand-made items such as a gift basket, chocolate box or mixtape are worthier than typical economic products. The selection of the gift also depends on the emotional value and strength of the relationship between the giver and the receiver (Caplow 1984; Shanka & Handley 2011; Pillai & Krishnakumar 2019). For example, as part of gift ethics, the daughter's gift should be more valuable and special than that of the niece, or that two daughters should have equal gifts in value. Accordingly, special gifts remind us of the giver. After the occasion is over, the emotions that were exchanged linger around. Recalling these memories foster pleasant feelings and prompt heartfelt sentiments, which increase emotional attachment towards the gift. We develop long-term relationships with certain gifts particularly because of the sentimental value we attribute to them. This consequently develops a "feeling of duty" that keeps us from disposing the gift, such as empty perfume bottles or dried flowers (Hetherington 2004; Daniels 2009).[190]

Valentine's Day typically involves a myriad of passionate and intimate emotions. People take this day as an opportunity to reveal feelings to the beloved on a romantic night. Qassem offers gifts to deliver emotions of sympathy, love and support. Informants from older age groups, Bader, Ghada and Sahar, reflected other sentiments including praise and comfort. Valentine's Day is a time to compliment and cherish significant others by expressing gratitude, commitment and reassure fidelity to them. Giving thanks and showing appreciation is extremely essential on this day (Wolfinbarger 1990; Weiner 1992; Clarke, et al. 2005; Quintero González & Koestner 2006). It also includes making the other person feel happy and special[191]. A dedicated day for loved ones means to consider their gift preferences, to always be there for them by showing care and desire, and finally to acknowledge that money is worth making them smile (Belk & Coon 1993; Areni, Kiecker & Palan 1998; Kaell 2012). Evidently, Valentine's Day is a celebrated occasion to indulge in its significance, rituals and be romantic.

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[190] Areas of future interest should focus on the material and sentimental attachment to objects in general (importance of objects), not only in the field of gifting.
[191] Although many informants stressed the importance of pleasing and elating the receiver with a gift, none expressed whether those emotions are reflected on them as well. Future research can explore whether the receiver's pleasure also brings the giver pleasure.

Regardless of supporting or condemning Valentine's Day, there was an emphasis on the occasion's expressive aspects in Kuwait, especially its popular commercialisation. Although the fieldwork established that Valentine's Day is a celebration for those who have yet to marry, the media and shop advertisements exert great efforts to convince even married couples that the event concerns them, and that romance is key to celebrate the event (Kreil, 2016). With the pressure to explicitly foster love by signs of affection (through caress or body language), flirtations and sweet talk, Valentine's Day has been projected as an opportunity to revive long-term relationships besides daily worries and responsibilities. Older and married informants emphasized the preciousness of symbolic gifts or gestures. Aesthetic presents such as love letters, non-materialistic gifts and a dress code have been realised to create a happy occasion among married couples. For them, true love is determined through congenial cohabitation after marriage, whereas anything before that is considered temporary appeal or attraction.

Love letters, according to Orsini (2006), are an ideal medium to create and convey intimacy in a protected "secret space", where certain emotions can be expressed that cannot be vocalised face to face. Furthermore, there is a resonant corpus of love poetry in the Middle East, where at one point some believed it had reached its all-time zenith (Hamori 1990; Sells 2000; Chittick 2014; Kreil 2016; Mackintosh-Smith 2019). Poetry is an identified source of historical content, which has reinterpreted meanings of love. The refinement of the Arabic language began to create a unified voice in terms of art, identity and politics. Moreover, the poetic language and message of the Quran particularly attracted, and continues to attract, believers and scholars. It was this cultural and linguistic harmony that made the unity of both Islam and Arabs possible (Mackintosh-Smith, 2019). Poetry is widely popular in Arab culture and Islam in terms of expressing loyalty to God, praising his creations and praying for his blessings. Poetry also articulates divine respect to parents, women, and circle of life (Sanni 1990; O'Donnell 2011; Ernst 2013; Borg 2015; Shehabat 2016; Athamneh 2017; Fortier, Kreil & Maffi 2018; Fortier 2021).

When expressing feelings is a challenge, writing sentimental proclamations down by dedicating original poems, verses of poetry or songs to romantic partners on Valentine's Day is an effective method to indicate relationship intentions. Bader emphasised that gift

cards and letters play a very important role in gift-giving in Kuwait. They add a special touch, especially handwritten ones. Cards and hand-written letters were preferred to accompany the gift, sometimes even considered to be the gift (Subrahmanyan, 1999). They were mentioned at least once among all fieldwork age groups, thus established as a special favourite for all generations. These gestures do not carry any material significance, yet they hold tremendous symbolic and sentimental value, making the gift more memorable and durable, tying individuals together (Wilk, 1996). Apparently, cards give a bigger impact when reciprocating gifts because they trace back to the occasion. Therefore, when the gift has been used, eaten or even thrown away, the card still leaves a mark and creates a lasting, special effect. As confirmed by Otnes, Ruth and Milbourne (1994: 159-164), cards are part of the package that influence gift-giving practices. Evidently, gifts are "somehow bare without cards attached".

For younger couples, however, showing love on Valentine's Day is a constant struggle bound to stereotypical counterattacks in Islamic communities. For them, Valentine's Day is more than just superficial words and genuine gestures. Contemporary expressions of love require to spend more money to satisfy the same gift expectations. Tahani explained that interpersonal bonding has been replaced by gifts and brands in Kuwait. Young men feel obligated to demonstrate their love by giving something valuable that conveys that emotion. Relationship satisfaction ultimately showed that it does not depend on emotionality or sensitivity. Arguably, abusing love as a strong melding emotion would falsify enduring communities, according to Nussbaum (2013). On the other hand, societal pressures urge young women in Kuwait to share their flattering received gifts on social media to show-off and compete with other couples. The ritual of posing before a camera became convenient with personal smartphones and the internet. Self-perception can therefore be aligned with social perception to achieve a sense of belonging. Irritation, envy and jealousy are triggered with this competitive virtual activity, which Adam Smith (2005) classified as "unsocial passions" because they involve self-reflection and self-evaluation. Apparently, engaging in this practice indicates insecurity instead of fulfilment (Ngai, 2007). People are forging relationships with their personal circles and with their own selves, according to Carrier (1990), and it is due to the growth of shopping and retailing

practices. This reveals how technological modernity encourages the transfer of emotions. The role was first taken up by the radio and subsequently the television in the 20th and early 21st century, whereas now with the digital media, emotions can go viral (Highfill 2016; Ferrándiz 2016). Users frequently share their emotions online about what they are experiencing and even declare their emotions to others more easily than in person. As shown, studying gift emotions can provide information about the dilemmas and pressures faced during Valentine's Day and other occasions (Otnes, Ruth & Milbourne, 1994). Demonstrating love in Kuwait on Valentine's Day was found to vary in terms of marriage, age and gender. Indeed, it is correct to presume that love is a deluxe gift when it is reciprocated.

Relationships and gifts are directly related to one another, consequences are captious especially during unbalanced reciprocations. The fieldwork showed that gifts in delicate contexts, like when asking for a favour, reassuring a relationship, or self-comparing with other couples on social media, can also trigger negative emotions which tend to occur without much cognitive processing, such as hatred, frustration, disappointment, humiliation, and anger (Belk & Coon 1991; Fischer, et al. 2018). Not only are these emotions critical, but also intentional because they involve an orientation towards an object (Ahmed, 2004). Additionally, intimate gifts such as lingerie in wedding or bachelorette parties can provoke embarrassment and shame in Muslim communities, which are self-conscious emotions. Thus, there is a fine line between the emotions of humiliation and satisfaction in gifts (Álvarez, 2016). Just like before, hating the gift can lead to hating the giver as well, which as per Charnon-Deutsch (2016) can still bind communities together in terms of physical or cultural stereotyping.

Gender studies are also significant in the development of emotions. Previous literature confirmed that gifting is traditionally a woman's interest, so the focus has become on women emotions (Caplow 1982; Cheal 1988; Fischer & Arnold 1990). Previous 19th century literature described women as unrestrained, destructively passionate, emotionally violent and irrational, thus feminising sentimental emotion because it "disempowers" (Miguélez-Carballeira, 2016). Hatfield, Rapson and Le (2009: 34) remarked that awe, disgust, distress, embarrassment, fear, guilt, happiness, love, sadness, shame, shyness,

surprise, and sympathy were considered "feminine emotions". Only anger, contempt and pride were thought to be "masculine emotions" (Plant, et al., 2000). Based on this scientific evidence, women differ than men by displaying a wider range of emotions along with more facial expressions (Hall 1984; Kring & Gordon 1998). It is fascinating that throughout different eras, upbringings and cultures, male and female emotions have remained roughly the same.

In gifts, men and women possess different emotional ideologies in their close relationships (Pizzetti, 2016). According to the fieldwork, they displayed different levels of passions, feelings, and trust. Cultural gender stereotypes depict the same. Men and women vary on how honest they are about their exhibited emotions. In most cultures, it is more acceptable for women to display or express emotion (Pleck & Sawyer, 1974). Women also prefer direct communication and demonstration of emotion, through words, gifts and physical contact because they take relationships more sensitively than men, therefore they have more expectations during gifting occasions (Close, 2012). Firestone (2003: 126-127) stated, "Women live for love and men live for work". Love can be expressed in numerous forms, for example, women are often portrayed as the caregivers, taking care of the family's well-being, maintaining a neatly organized and clean home, and offering gifts. Likewise, men generally exhibit their strong points by working and providing for their family. Their efforts tend to be directed towards wealth growth and striving for a dignified life. Although it seems like a truism, women act for emotional fulfilment because they are barred from significant social activity in society, and men advance more rapidly in societal practices because of the love "poured" onto them (Dinnerstein, 1999).

Gift-giving practices must also be studied at different time periods of history (Zaragoza-Bernal 2013; Gouk & Hills 2019). Extreme conditions including World War II, the Persian Gulf War of 1990 and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic were key objects that triggered plenty of intense emotions during gift exchanges in Kuwait. My fieldwork revealed that war generated the most passionate responses. During war and moments of crisis, the role of emotions in public life was omitted or ignored. Mainly, there was grief and emotional insecurities, thus more positive emotions had to be stimulated through other social means, namely gift-giving. To express feelings through gifts has been established from the

fieldwork as an essential method used in the past to comfort and connect with someone. This plays a role in today's "emotional capitalism" and in the history of modern and contemporary political thought (Illouz 2007; Moscoso-Sanabria & Zaragoza-Bernal 2014).

Historically, women emotions were needed in times of conflict or war, when men experienced chronic instability and terror (Fernández, 2016). Thus, women emotions were redefined as a necessary tool for public life and historical survival. Notions of granting equal gender rights were reconsidered, such as the women's suffrage, or simply a better representation of women in public social contexts. Similarly, after Kuwait's liberation in 1991, women's emotional competence helped in restructuring a "modern" Kuwait (Tétreault, Rizzo & Shultziner, 2012). This suggests that men are considered to lack emotional competence, they can however learn it from women. Accordingly, the concept of emotionality, specifically love, seems to relate to hostility, where emotional incompetence is a strong factor in gender violence (Delgado, Fernández & Labanyi, 2016).

Emotions, although a subtle phenomenon, are complex due to their high sensitivity to personal and contextual circumstances; therefore, explaining them requires a long, careful analysis (Ben-Ze'Ev 2000; Barrett, Lewis & Haviland-Jones 2018; Berrios 2019). In other words, not all our emotions are retrieved from what we have previously gone through, but we also interpret situations differently to create more arrays of emotional experiences (Fox, Lapate, Shackman & Davidson, 2018). It is an opportunity to study emotions to understand how some gifts deliver different gender values and intentions among romantic couples. As discussed earlier, for men, gift-giving signifies care and appreciation. For women, gift-giving can mean an opportunity to be independent, not to wait for gifts from men, yet still maintain a close contact and a good relationship with them. When we focus on emotions, it unties knots influenced by culture that contain romantic expectations and principles. Emotions give perspective to our motivations, truths and identity, which are everchanging. Emotions can also help change a country. The women's suffrage in Kuwait for example was driven by the multiple emotions expressed by men and women to attain those rights. Additionally, during times of war and a pandemic, emotions were necessary to maintain an optimistic, positive environment. Demonstrating love emotions helps sustain nations and relationships, prevent deterritorialization and connect with diaspora populations. Without

emotions, social communication is lost, transnational cultural interactions are elusive, leading to a melancholic, uniform life.

## 5. Conclusion

Valentine's Day has achieved brilliant success in the Middle East. Valentine's Day's ambience in Kuwait mainly includes red decorations and clothing, an extensive variety of huge rose bouquets, and unbelievable traffic. It is not just a day, but a season. Evidently, Valentine's Day is a "culturally hybridized and popularly celebrated consumption ritual", as defined by Minowa, Khomenko and Belk (2011: 44). Despite the popularity of Valentine's Day in Kuwait and its success in attracting customers, the intensity of promotions can also develop negative opinions because they pressure people to buy, a clever marketing strategy often linked to mass-production, materialism, consumerism, capitalism and unethical manipulation of shops. In popular, material culture, these concepts have reduced gift significance and sentimental value, simultaneously developing strong sentiments towards anti-consumerism and anti-commercialism, as thoroughly discussed by Close and Zinkhan (2006) and Carrier (2012a).

The chapter has given explanations about the different versions of Islam that exists in every Muslim-majority country, rectifying the widespread misconception that Islam is mainly about machismo and piousness. During the 20th century, Pappé (2005: 282) declared that "Islam was a very powerful factor, more focused and more orthodox than in the past decades and yet powerful as never before", and there was an attempt by Islamists to liberate countries from western dominances. Some Islamic cities in Asia have been accepting market trend changes while rejecting to adopt western ideology and norms (Weller, 1998). Nevertheless, "dependence on the West continued into the postcolonial era" (Pappé, 2005: 47). Indeed, Kuwait combines western practices to its Islamic society since traditions and family values were realised to be separate from religious dimensions or the Islamic *Sunnah*. This shows the obvious distinction between ethnic backgrounds, even if they belong to the same religion. Initially in Islamic tradition, notions of secularism, modernisation, and gender equality are generally rejected (Halliday, 2003). It was not normal to separate between important life principles such as religion, social relations, and political

organisations, but these changes have been a result of colonialization and post-colonization and being part of the international marketplace (Watenpaugh, 2012). Globalisation, and words like freedom, democracy, choice and justice are not pleasantly intercorrelated in Arab Islamic societies (Fierro, 1997: 90). The "development of traditionalism" was a complicated concept because it brings forward a lot of matters that question ideologies of culture and authenticity of religion. These ideas build on intense emotions, and emotions are contagious, spreading from one body to another by uncontrollable means. Nowadays, the ongoing objective in Arab Islamic communities is to effectively balance Arab nationalism and Islam with theories of globalisation. Islamic states that remain strongly connected to the Islamic concept are Iran and Saudi Arabia (Al-Naqeeb, 1990).

Kuwait strives to enrich its original traditions, indigenous knowledge, Islamic identity and Arab nationalism, and not be led by global phenomena. Valentine's Day was recognised as an occasion that does not "belong" to Kuwaiti norms and seems to pose a threat to the authenticity of Kuwaiti culture. This has been described as a western political manipulation to the region (Joffé, 1987). Middle Eastern Arabs come from a very tight, collective society, which means that decisions are made in groups, between close-knit tribes, kinship ties and family (Greene, 2013). Even day to day activities are structured around the family's convenience and routines. In a traditional culture, individuals get together and share their experiences and emotions. For example, when a small group live in a town, they would already have habitual practices and defined styles that they are accustomed to, like the way they wear their hair or fashion their clothes, and these styles would then be brought down to their offspring. Traditional concepts have the tendency of remaining longer periods of time. Modernity in the Arab world was more common among Christian communities, while Muslim communities remained longer attached and loyal to their traditions (Pappé, 2005). Furthermore, change was clearer among politicians and businessmen, more than among rural people who were hesitant to modify their customs. Kuwait is basically a conservative system, but this does not mean that new ideas are not accepted and incorporated from time to time. There is no guarantee that children will continue to practice things similarly when they grow up. Young individuals are developing new understandings of western revelries that allow them to celebrate adequately in an

Islamic society, without being subject to any criticisms. Some people believe that it is possible to strengthen Arabism; to preserve culture and maintain traditions while being "modernised" at the same time because the powerful influence of the west in economics and technology cannot be denied (Bowen & Early, 2002). Evidently, fieldwork results showed that being attached to traditions, although important to maintain heritage, was not necessary in a changing society.

Much has changed throughout 50 years of gifting culture, namely the incorporation of Valentine's Day in Kuwait. Religion no longer exerted a strict control over Muslim lives because conformity to some rules were no longer "relevant" in a contemporary society (Kluijver 2013: 27; Winstone & Freeth 2018). Kuwait in its part played a major role as an oil producer and subsequently adopted the contemporary paradigm despite the continued strong presence of Islam. During the recent years, western culture has widely extended, encouraging drastic changes. It supports core principles such as freedom, equality, and democracy, which were missing in the traditional culture (Horn, 2009).

Kuwait's research has revealed that the West has a big influence on Kuwait, its cultural practices and occasions, politics, business operations, and circulated commodities. "The West" referred to Europe, but more often the United States. Contemporary Middle Eastern and North African states are based upon European roots and systems (mainly British, French and Spanish), therefore slowly inheriting their ideologies and reshaping the cultural, economic and political structure. This typically refers to the historical process of secularization, where religion loses its identity in a social or cultural context (Carrier, 2012b). Allegedly, the fieldwork revealed that copying liberal, secular lifestyles gives an "openminded, modern" image to others. "Modern" (the term not the theory) was exhaustively mentioned by informants to describe Western countries, western cultural practices and people from the West. It has become one of the most used and abused adjectives, overstated to the point of becoming void in significance. The idea that Arabs perceive European or American lifestyles as "modern" is an interesting, emic and

problematic concept. Since no research has confirmed it[192], the ideology behind this statement is fairly unknown and faulty[193]. Therefore, subsequent research about this topic is necessary to be considered as part of contemporary history.

Further factors have influenced individual practices in the Middle East. In Kuwait for example, apart from religion (Islam), the political regime, economic system, social ties and kinship values are considered. The country's diversity also possesses a key role within the community. During the end of the 20th century, thousands of people from various nationalities fled their countries to take on new job roles and career paths in rich, oil-producing nations which created mixed, changing cultures. In Kuwait and other Arabian Gulf states, ethnic diversity has been increasing substantially. People fly in from different regions and bring along their own customs and traditions, which blend in with the country's public and its marketing practices. Eventually, a small percentage of Kuwait's population constitute of natives, while the rest are immigrants. Kuwait's local culture became compromised through the adoption of other religions, lifestyles, cuisines, music, and fashion. Subsequently, Kuwait's Arab Islamic society was affected by migration flows, globalisation, and the western market and politics (Babb 1990; Wilk 1996; Crapo 2003). Rogers (2006: 498) has interestingly remarked "Culture is never fixed, never fully seen in its totality, and is always changing, because it is a network of relations, not an entity". However, more studies should be dedicated on the xenophobic climate in Kuwait and the reason behind resisting cosmopolitanism, as Ullah, et al. (2020: 203) confirmed, "Xenophobia has not received sufficient attention although anti-migrant sentiments and practices have been on the rise in receiving countries".

The invention of new technologies such as telephones, televisions, airplanes, mass communication, and computer systems also contributed to modernisation since they helped broaden world views and personal outlook of life (Naofusa, 1983). The research on gifting

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[192] In the European framework, Mardin (1974) specified that the goal of civilisation in a modernising context was achieved by establishing the European Union as a global and regional transformation, thereby inducing "superwesternization" (Hearn, 2004). Civilisation in a modernising context is yet to be defined in the Middle Eastern framework.
[193] Instead, "transformation" can be used as a substitute term to modernisation in Arab countries, i.e., they have transformed, not modernised.

celebrations in Kuwait has examined those outlooks and identified a shift in cultural practices. When religion is not emphasised or intervened in culture by the state, it can either promise national development or national disgrace. According to the fieldwork, the latter is more likely to occur as it is believed that too much of something is harmful. For instance, too much of women independence, equality, commercialisation, or social media activity is believed to result in negative consequences.

Valentine's Day has been countlessly described by men and women from the fieldwork as a consumerist event that promotes the misuse of money. Demonstrating generosity has been misshapen by dissipation and splurging to the extent that the exaggerations amounted to ingratitude and extravagance that Islam forbade. Romantic gifting in Kuwait became a reason to show-off on social media. Despite bothering some groups, displaying private relationships and personal lives online has somewhat become normalised, used as a method to acquire validation in society. This activity is not concerned about the significance of events, but about increasing one's prestige and self-worth; to feel important with the help of social media, as put forward by Halina (2019). The misuse of these technologies, which have been undreamed of by our grandparents, has created problems in society in racing for a better "perceived" standard of living. This again stresses that Kuwait is a proud, money-oriented nation. My fieldwork has shown that Mauss' theory of a pure, selfless gift is rare in Kuwait. Expensive gifts are necessary to achieve something in return, in this case, to draw attention on social media. Therefore, people who do not receive flashy gifts would not be praised by their peers. Excessive commercialisation and marketing communications provoke this activity and designate gender roles within romantic relationships.

Men in celebratory events face tremendous stress to be providers and spoil their significant others with gifts, while women compete to show a "successful" relationship. Romantic couples cushion themselves against societal pressures and expectations by displaying a dreamlike and rather unfeasible lifestyle to project an "ideal" image of themselves, thus achieving moral honour, as Mauss (1925) and Malinowski (1926) proposed. This manipulative mechanism creates unreal social positionings and inaccurate conclusions to one's lifestyle, consequently enlarging the gap between the rich and poor in the country.

From an Islamic perspective, boasting is a symptom of arrogance, hypocrisy and pride. The boasters cling to appearances because of the illusion that expensive possessions signify a successful life. Islam, as a religion of moderation, advises to find a middle ground in every way of life; one must act with humility not with ostentation (Özdemir 2003; Ushama 2014; Islam & Khatun 2016). A bold statement from Rasoulallah.net (2009: 6) declared, "The fact is, that we ruined our lives by materialism, by forgetting our religion, our Islamic civilisation, and the teachings of the Prophet". Furthermore, social media deludes individuals from the truth because it forges instant communications and information. Social media influence is dangerous for young "gullible" individuals, especially females, who believe that others have a better romantic life than them. However, the fieldwork showed that there were no noticed changes in the relationship whether the couple celebrated Valentine's Day or not. Some only support Valentine's Day in the name of love, but love was not restricted to Valentine's Day. Little daily gestures turned out to have a longer-lasting effect in romantic relationships than celebrating one commercially enforced holiday. To this end, I reckon that not every Valentine's Day is for lovers, but it is also a funeral for countless hearts that have been disappointed in a generation of digital media, incapable to express true forms of love. As a study still in its early stages, it is necessary to build on the notion that posting on social media is a motive for gift exchange. Further research should also examine the hostility towards romantic content display on social media in Arab Islamic societies.

The wide spread of Valentine's Day has become a very controversial topic among Muslims with regards to societal views and religious adequacy. Its origins are often blurred by the public, insisting on its bad influence on the youth who shy away from religion to obtain the approval of others. The occasion is also viewed to obstruct marriage for young adults because it encourages long-term "sinful" dating. Furthermore, it is believed that romantic aspirations encouraged by Valentine's Day are crushed by "realistic" choices. The dream-like ambience that the occasion creates does not demonstrate real relationships and the sacrifices, responsibilities, effort and perseverance it takes to maintain one. There was also the concern that teenagers and young adults would turn away from Islamic occasions like

*Eid* and celebrate western practices like Valentine's Day[194]. As implied, the youth do not realize that these actions may hurt and scandalize their parents' and grandparents' beliefs. This transformation in gifting practices and romantic expressions has disrupted and destabilized Islamic communities.

These discussed issues and stigma encouraged a change of the overall image of Valentine's Day and its association to the West. Depictions of intimate heterosexual couples exchanging cheap Chinese commodities, which promote a global strategy, are slowly being eradicated by young women. In Kuwait, romantic relationships were not a rule to abide by. Albeit not falling under Islamic or Kuwaiti celebrations, Valentine's Day can celebrate kinship and platonic relationships (Close & Zinkhan, 2006). Women probably identify friendship as a key component for trade and gift-giving, that without it, exchange would be a bit of a gamble (Carrier, 2012b). Therefore, Valentine's Day can be a day to spend with friends, cherish a parent, or have a night out with work colleagues[195]. Kuwait has created its own domain of Valentine's Day, where the celebration was tweaked to suit the Muslim community "for the right reasons". This introduces the idea that daughters can now ask their fathers to be their Valentine, a typical representation of the saying, "a girl's first love is her father" – a "*halal*" concept. This in turn decreases criticisms and pressures of societal norms and media expectations. The concept of self-gifting was also common among young women. It is established as a force of habit necessary to express self-care. Cultural gifting occasions therefore condition how to be men and women in Arab societies, but most importantly, they identify that women can take a leading role in gifting, however not restrictively offered to men or romantic interests. This implies that perhaps in the future, the definition of Valentine's Day could be altered, its purpose being to show love to whoever and whatever, even to yourself[196].

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[194] This concern suggests both coexistence and deterritorialization situation in Kuwait. Future research is suggested to confirm which of the two is the prevailing concept.

[195] An online survey in the MENA (Middle East and North African) region concluded that a large percentage of parents, close friends, and other family members also expect to be wished a "Happy Valentine's Day" (Berkani, 2013).

[196] Future research is suggested to focus on self-gifting and platonic gifting, as they lacked sufficient supporting literature. Additionally, more research should favour gender-related gift studies, for instance, the evaluation of male and female spending habits during Valentine's Day in Kuwait, or the Arabian Gulf. Lastly, gender implications suggest developing a research that could identify an "ideal" gift for both men and women, as put forward by Shanka and Handley (2011).

Through religious exploration, new customs can be justified to be accommodated into Kuwait's culture by checking what both society and religion accept as "morally correct" to be practiced, while leaving out the bits that do not suit them. In other words, separating society into independent components: religion, economy, politics, social relations and so on. Consequently, different approaches and versions of an occasion, or "idea", would be created in an attempt to fuse western ideology into traditional Islamic "honour" structures.

Commercialisation and social media were important factors that influence Valentine's Day's celebration in Kuwait. The research raised a lot of debate about whether people participate in Valentine's Day because their beliefs changed, or it was simply a shift in response to globalisation and marketing. Results revealed the latter. Likewise, if the popularity of commercial occasions had to assume that Kuwait is evolving into a western society and adapting to their values, my fieldwork results invalidate that assumption for the time being. It was clear that people romanticise material, popular culture while showing signs of market resistance. The dominance of Western methods and thought may be a historical fact in Arab societies but it does not necessarily indicate a permanent situation. Kuwait still enjoys a deeply rooted, rich Islamic culture. Despite global media, rise in education, modernisation and hybridisation, people in Kuwait did not withdraw from their own traditions (Bahhouth, Ziemnowicz & Zgheib, 2012). Maybe it is finally a question of the gift, reciprocity, and consumerism, and not a deep cultural change for Kuwaiti people. This determines that Valentine's Day did not have a blanket effect on the Kuwaiti population, and this leaves room for further investigation.

Conclusively, Kuwait is leading its way towards a diversified culture within Islamic limits and religious principles. Living in a globalised world, it is natural to encounter some inconsistencies within a certain society. With reference to inherent bias (Tworek & Cimpian, 2016), I propose that resisting this occasion is reasoned with the idea that, "Valentine's Day is derived from the West, so I should stick to my traditions and not celebrate it". On the other hand, adopting this occasion is reasoned with the idea that, "Valentine's Day would make me more relatable to the western world, so I should take part in it". I assume that Muslims celebrate Valentine's Day to seem more approachable and knowledgeable about other cultural practices, portraying in a way that they are

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"openminded". This may improve Muslims' political status as a minority group in western communities. I acknowledge that Kuwait is steadily heading towards an individualistic direction with a salient feminist activism; a dynamic culture that does not fail to aspire for uniqueness (Moghadam 2010; Sreberny 2015; Doaiji 2017; Hoza 2019).

With the vast spread of Islam across continents, from West Africa to Indonesia (Mackintosh-Smith, 2019), it is still difficult to pinpoint how a relatively small country like Kuwait would have dissimilar views about religion and lifestyle practices among population groups. This suggests that neighbouring countries, such as Bahrain or the United Arab Emirates, would also reveal a completely different culture, social life, and common values, despite having the same geographic and religious background as Kuwait. In every country, and within every family, religion and perceptions of it are expressed differently. The mainstreams of Islam have been manipulated through Arab nationalism or, conversely, modern secular ideas, so they became interpreted and implemented in different ways (Lambton 1981; Eickelman 2002b: 13). Even dress code or rituals during Islamic festivities differ. This shows that Islam is not one strict system of mandatory rules, but some principles are adjusted according to the country's constitution, heritage and history. Because of this, contradictions are found within the same population. Even the Quran and the five pillars of Islam, which are unchanging among Muslims, are interpreted differently in terms of practice methodology. In other words, while the original scripture of the Quran has allegedly remained unaltered since its revelation, unlike other religious scriptures (*Surat Al-Imran*, 3: 78; *Surat Al-Nisa'a*, 4: 46; Fierro 1997: 82, 85), and the five Islamic foundations of testimony, prayer, fasting, almsgiving and pilgrimage are consistent in Muslim communities, many Quranic verses or the correct manner of prayer for example are largely disputed among Islamic scholars and religious leaders. Conclusively, even with the Prophet's teachings, Islamic texts and the Quran, there is no explanation or guide to how religious material should be interpreted or acted upon. In the meantime, we acknowledge that Arab societies can confuse religion with tradition (Fierro, 1997), while western nations believe that Muslims act solely upon religious instruction.

# V.     FINAL CONCLUSIONS

The Middle East is an essential region to be scrutinized among other geographies to generate conclusive theories and knowledge. It is reckoned that building more awareness about the Arabian Gulf, as a non-conflict region, could have enormous growth in generating theories for academic literature. It appeared to serve other functionalities and purposes, away from the international scrutiny of being a problematic region criticised for its oppression, gender inequality, vulgarity, war, and conflicting individual differences. These views have provoked and generalised hate towards Muslims in European and North American contexts (Heindl 2017; Saira Khan 2020). The initial aim of this study was to understand the process that led to successfully adopting and integrating western practices into Kuwait's culture using a historical approach, and how this impacted Kuwait in terms of gender, religion and social class today. I employed qualitative methods, precisely in-depth interviews, for an exploratory understanding of this social, cultural, historical and emotionally charged topic. This research has shown how transformed Kuwait has become as compared to the past century and how cosmopolitan occasions,  like Valentine's Day, are tolerated and welcomed to be celebrated.

The topics of this thesis are curated in a way to defend the main statement of Kuwait's progressively globalised modernity, specifically shedding light on Western liberal modernity, as expressed by Aixelà-Cabré (2018). It suggests that every person is free to choose their actions and therefore is held responsible for the consequences. I similarly put forward the concept of liberalism that is slowly emerging in Kuwait, enlarging the gap between seculars and Islamists. Some Muslims desire to follow western practices to abandon certain traditional "religious" customs that reveal cultural backwardness. Doing this, they can represent a different image that better demonstrates their roots, religion and cultural richness. This study therefore simultaneously promotes individuality and conformity. In many cases, the fieldwork narratives in Kuwait showed signs of progression and openminded ideologies but the country itself is not supportive of them. In other words, albeit Kuwait's residents favour equal gender rights or freedom of expression for example, Kuwait lacks these concepts, and this is where notions of oppression arise. These notions are fought to be changed to represent a better Kuwait and more importantly, a better Islam.

More information should be produced on the complexities and the steady secularization of the Arabian Gulf region after the 20th century. In the meantime, the fieldwork has proven the presence of transnationalism and modern traditionalism in Kuwait that has become evident during the 21st century (Galland & Lemel, 2008). This is the argued case that could be associated to Kuwait as an Islamically devoted country. For example, Valentine's Day is adopted after checking how it can be Islamically applied and accepted into the culture as a common practice. This establishes one of the main arguments of this thesis, proving cultural deviation in Kuwait and validating a dissimilar Islam within Muslim-majority countries. This pedagogy and knowledge about accommodating western practices within Arab Muslim lives can create new forms of dialogue between academics, public intellectuals, activists and policy makers in different societies.

The second aim of this study was related to how Valentine's Day unveiled social gender construction in Kuwait, which changes in terms of age, romantic relationships and societal expectations. This was identified by historically and anthropologically analysing the significance of the gift between couples in Kuwait as an Arab Islamic country. Finally, the third aim was related to how the gift during Valentine's Day has allowed to reveal social stratification and consumerism in Kuwait in terms of class and migrations. Conclusively, the work shows that both gender and social class can be traced by the gift in Kuwait.

Valentine's Day gift research identified many interrelated topics that affect interpersonal relationships and celebrations during the 20th century and the present. This thesis examined gifting habits, distinguished different interpretations of the gift, its intentions and social values, and above all, analysed Valentine's Day's gift givers and receivers. However, Valentine's Day was largely considered a petty or silly topic, representing a consumerist "made-up" holiday, which creates the assumption that it is an unworthy field of research. This explains the lack of supporting literature on Valentine's Day in the Middle East. In fact, the research of Valentine's Day was mainly key in identifying issues that have no relation to the occasion itself. I was able to uncover many topics within the Middle East that gave a deeper insight about Muslim actions and behaviour. In this sense, the Islamic doctrine and instruction was a strong reference to form an analogy with 21st century culture, which revealed challenges and misconceptions about Islam in several contextual situations.

As Valentine's Day forms part of material culture, the occasion was examined on commercial, social, religious and economic dimensions, which also showed Islamic misapprehensions, sustainability and consumption issues, cultural change, and versatile gender roles. Thanks to the study on the gift and Valentine's Day, there is now a better understanding about the role of women, the contradictions between culture, tradition and religion, and the ideologies within Arab societies that are influenced by many underlying variables, like family, hierarchy and importance of the patriarchy. Despite this, the Arabian Gulf Peninsula remains relatively underexplored in contemporary contexts. More studies should concentrate on the Arabian Gulf region in general and on its prominent features, like collective values and habits. National or civic concerns can also be a focus, for example, the condition of ecosystems, sustainability and resource allocation, familial versus individual principles, how children behave or think differently than their parents and what factors have affected that outcome. In that sense, given the social and cultural approach of my thesis, it is of interest to analyse some notions individually, such as gender roles, freedom of self-expression, intimate relationships, family standards, clothing and fashion. Evidently, cultural history can be exercised in various fields including politics, kinship, religion, economics, gender and all their interlocking and overlapping domains.

Cultures and geographies change, and their changes are highlighted in history, language and material life. My fieldwork showed that not only science, medicine, technology and climate are everchanging, but also much detailed practices that form day-to-day activities, like gift-giving. A formal definition for the gift is rarely defined because it contains many interconnected theories and is influenced by various phenomena, particularly globalisation.

Globalisation has influenced large-scale historical shifts (Appadurai, 2000: 1). It has spread throughout Asia and the Middle East causing not only the popularity of Valentine's Day but also the emergence of other cultural gift-giving innovations, such as New Year celebrations. Gift exchange rituals in Kuwait reflect marketplace trends and gender expectations with strong tie-ins between contemporary culture and religious values. Gifts in Kuwait are grand gestures, mainly used as means to an end, to incarnate a specific intention or an emotion, which can either be admiration or disappointment. Therefore, the gift has been converted from a simple beautiful practice, into a confusing economic duty.

However, considering the COVID-19 global pandemic, the simple gift and a kind word are more likely to prevail, reflecting definitions of the gift in Islam. During crucial conditions like wars and pandemics, the choice is likely to be steered towards what is good for the soul and planet, rather than what is good for one's ego. Furthermore, time is considered a very important gift since we are not entitled to it neither can we control it, but a person can choose how to celebrate every moment they are given. Amid an Arabian Gulf country, concepts of Islam and spirituality could be demonstrated with an active role in preserving resources and encouraging togetherness and charitable acts.

Festivities are also everchanging in terms of their functions, customs and even attitudes and knowledge of people. As Kovzele (2019: 71) claims, "Festivities are one of the most stable forms of spiritual culture which undergo significant transformations as the result of globalisation". As a region often interpreted as an exceptionally orthodox Islamic one, this thesis establishes that Valentine's Day has been a result of a remarkably successful marketing campaign in Kuwait, evermore resulting from a globalised culture.

Valentine's Day was deemed a non-monotonous occasion, increasingly gaining popularity in Kuwait, laden with cultural rituals and ideologies communicated through romantic conversations during card and gift exchanges (Close, 2012). Furthermore, it was recognised that high value is placed on careful following and recording of social activity on media platforms and public networks. Allegedly, Valentine's Day in Kuwait has been adopted without a thorough understanding of its history nor its various references to the West. Muslims never had the intention of becoming accustomed to non-Muslim habits and conforming with the masses[197], but over the years, traditionalist ideas in Islamic communities began to merge unnoticed with the general culture of the West, pushing people to follow relative occupational and social aspects of western society (Sedgwick, 2009). This process had occurred because of globalisation; because of the reliance on western communication and information in terms of the economic system (Pappé, 2005). Western influence is profoundly involved in the social transformation and economic globalisation of Kuwait. This is identified within social movements that encourage evolved

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[197] Many Muslims take issue with western ideology and the outcomes of colonialism, and fight any mockery or disrespect about their religion, namely through social movements and product or company boycotts.

ideas like changing gender roles and traditional attitudes, promoting "images of well-being that cannot be satisfied by national standards of living and consumer capabilities", as claimed by Appadurai (2000: 5). Not only do other cultures influence Kuwait but also people who have arrived and resided from different countries and ethnicities. To imagine other social life and regions of the world is now a globalised phenomenon, embedded by internationalism and transnationalism (Appadurai, 2000). However, studies conclude that the exact method of how the Middle East has been reformed remains to this day an unsolved riddle (Abu Lughod, 1978). Therefore, this research must be taken beyond an exploratory stage to better address this transformation.

The common perception of Valentine's Day in Islamic societies widely involves religious connotations. The fieldwork showed that Valentine's Day obstructs traditional marriage and falsely portrays love. Arab culture and tradition classifies many "unusual" concepts as Islamically forbidden or frowned upon, especially self-expression or freedom of choice. Muslim conduct in Kuwait is always questioned to decide whether it is "Islamically approved". In fact, countless principles are excessively debated in Islam, like dating or the *hijab*, so definitive policies are still unclear. However, even when some concepts were proven appropriate in Islam, they are still culturally tabooed and infested with tradition, so not to disappoint elders and ridicule years of traditional heritage and identity. More research should be dedicated towards shame, or *'aib*, and how it interferes with modes of life in the Middle East. I believe that the concept of *'aib* hinders talent and progress in Arab nations, especially with regards to women capabilities (Almadanat, 2018).

As I reflect on my research, I reckon that religion is often understood as a system that prohibits, condemns and punishes. Perhaps the mistake lies in the manner of how Islam is projected, especially towards those who are new to it. The approach is commonly faulty and the blame rests with the Muslims, not with Islam. Instead of sensibly educating about the Islamic revelation, the five pillars of Islam, prophetic principles and morals, secondary rules and regulations often precede. Usually, it starts off with concepts like dating forbiddance, alcohol and pork abstinence, a modest dress code and obeying the male-dominating figure. Coercion of these rules causes inhibitions as one doubts that almost everything in religion is sinful. The obsession about following these rules creates the

fallacy that this is the essence of religion, and that is what determines a "good Muslim". This ignorance can make Islam seem scary or restrictive, producing an archaic society. Maybe the essence of Islam is realising that it is not set to obstruct freedom or life, but that in fact, "God is unconditionally forgiving" (*Surat Al-Zumar*, 39: 53), that "true faith is judged by the intention in the heart" (*Surat Al-Baqarah*, 2: 225), and that "God does not burden a soul greater than it can bear" (*Surat Al-Baqarah*, 2: 286). Once those ideas are absorbed, and after the moral foundations on which Islam was set are explained, more "secondary" matters could then fall into place. Evidently, the error is not in religious methodology, but in those who claim to apply it (Bowen & Early, 2002: 181).

To increase confidence, it is necessary to keep pace with society changes and decrease resistance towards "unusual" concepts in Muslim-majority countries, such as Valentine's Day or a woman being the primary breadwinner of the house. These subjective one-sided perceptions should be questioned by further religious exploration. Traditional reprehensive methods that were once dictated by Arabian Gulf culture could be changed using the *yusr* concept in Islam, in other words, using forgiveness, lenience and empathy (Al-Oueid, 2012). Additionally, in the Quran, it is mentioned in *Surat Al-Baqarah* (2: 185) that Allah desires ease for people and not hardship. Rather than stressing young couples to get married or forbidding them from dating, Valentine's Day can be a way to explore relationships and probably with the knowledge of one another, divorce rates could be significantly reduced. To date someone without the constant pressure, stressful scrutiny and uncomfortable questioning could help avoid many wrong decisions or regret regarding life partners. Maybe then, we would see many happy couples in happy relationships, rather than oppressed women in abusive, neglectful marriages. This cultural western occasion has provided the young generation with opportunities to socialise; to connect with others, to be noticed and heard. Valentine's Day might not morally corrupt the youth but is rather a feature of symptomatic individualism in a changing society. This promises progress in Muslim-majority countries and a better representation of Islam. We understand that Valentine's Day integration is blamed on the western capitalistic culture and globalisation but is also due to a universal changing youth culture (Patel, 2014).

It is true that embracing modern traditionalism envisions Kuwait as a diverse country, empowers social justice and reinforces rich cultural heritage and national identity. However, modern traditionalism has some recognised limits, such as unpleasant social conditions (Harkness, 2020). This shows how some countries are perceived differently internally and externally[198]. Kuwait should begin adopting new approaches with the public, for example integrating more awareness programs regarding cultural taboos that appear completely appropriate to openly discuss in terms of Islam, like mental health, reproduction, sexual relations, sexually transmitted diseases, male and female anatomies, gender roles, Muslim conduct, homosexuality, modesty, dating, conjugal relations, validations for divorce and many others. The fieldwork suggests that discussing these themes is shameful and portrays an "openminded" community, but after expanding my awareness, I reckon that Islam is quite an openminded religion structured around a set of divine rulings. Certainly, promoting such awareness programs determines the level of tolerance in Muslim communities, in other words, the higher the level of awareness, the more transformed an Islamic country becomes. Encouraging critical thinking and group discussions, even among families, will create an effective and engaging environment that fights backwardness and oppression, which Islam disfavours for its followers. In turn, learners must also act accordingly, and demonstrate responsibility for their knowledge, becoming more consciously active in a motivating, religiously open Arab environment.

Kuwait is witnessing a social transformation, albeit at a slow pace, and can be labelled as a fashionable society in narratives of history. Kuwait today shows pragmatism towards its external relations. That being said, tensions between modernisation and preservation in the region certainly exist (Verdeil & Nasr, 2017). Kuwait can be leading two radical paths in the future. It can be heading towards a more conservative society due to the presence of ultraconservative Muslims in its parliament, or towards an increased tolerance in lifestyle activities and adoption of multicultural practices. This depends on the law structure and parties who have the power to place rules, lead the country and guide the people.

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[198] For example, while Qatar externally brands itself with its megaprojects in numerous fields, internally those views are forged given a flawed labour system, strict immigration laws, financial regulations and government policies, notwithstanding with the Islamic faith (Harkness, 2020).

Finally, there were a few understudied areas that lacked supportive literature during my fieldwork in Kuwait and some recommendations are provided to develop the study of the gift and Valentine's Day. It is encouraged to increase variability in the research sample and investigate the larger population of Kuwait to incorporate a greater number of responses. This allows for a better analysis of gift-giving activities. A closer look regarding differences in social class, gender, age, culture, and subculture need to be further explored within the gift-giving context. Firstly, as I have only studied people coming from similar social or income classes (mostly middle class), it would be interesting to study a research sample that involves prestigious individuals, such as businessmen or entrepreneurs (high social class), or ethnic tribal groups that live in rural areas, like *Biduns* and Bedouins (low social class), and observe differences in responses. Secondly, interviewing more Kuwaitis. Since my study focused on the Kuwaiti culture, it did not target exclusively Kuwaiti nationals. This could be another opportunity to examine a change in results. Thirdly, interviewing people of other religions. Since my findings ascertained that few individuals from my informant sample celebrate Valentine's Day, I believe it is mainly due to their Islamic faith. It is problematic for Muslims to take part in Valentine's Day or Christmas in Kuwait because it acknowledges western dominance in an Islamic society and suggests "distancing" from religion. When informants realise they are being recorded for their answers, they would like to protect their Islamic identity and traditions and seem more attached to their customs to create an image of a "good Muslim". However, when answering questions about promotions and discounts during Valentine's Day, they seemed less edgy. It is therefore a good idea to interview people of other religions that reside in Kuwait to find out whether religion was a factor that made my informants claim they do not celebrate Valentine's Day. Similarly, if I had interviewed ultraconservative Muslims in Kuwait, the responses would have led to different conclusions. Finally, this thesis urges to consider studying other gifting occasions in Kuwait to realise cultural similarities and differences compared to Valentine's Day.

Further research should be made about how technology has influenced a change in diets, lifestyles, points of view, dreams or even individual ideology. Accessibility of information and increased awareness has allowed Muslim states to move forward. Because we are all

connected, thanks to the internet, people are detaching from traditions that were passed down by their parents, and realise they are free to search for explanations through religious exploration and interpersonal communication to broaden their views about the world. In a way, the coming generation would represent different ideas from their 21st century parents.

Additionally, it can be an opportunity to extend the research by pursuing bold underexplored areas related to the Arabian Gulf. For example, there is a dearth of research on the alliance between the Arabian Gulf and other non-Muslim, non-Arab countries. The multi-layered relationship between Kuwait and the United States or China for example deserves deeper investigation[199]. On a further note, considering the large percentage of Asian population and workforce that lives in Kuwait, future works could assess the relationship Kuwait has with countries including India, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Philippines. Considering this information, future efforts can define the impact of these countries on Kuwait's culture, in terms of technology transfer, political and security dialogues, international trading activities, human and social development, cultural practices and religious understandings.

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[199] A previous study stated that Japan's main export to the Arabian Gulf is technology, and its main import is energy. Japan has also contributed to the security and stability of the Arabian Gulf region. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Japan has been described as an "exchange of petroleum and technology". As for the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States, it is an "exchange of petroleum and security" (Nakamura, 2016: 6-7).

# VI.    GLOSSARY

All terms are presented in their singular form.

**Abaya, عباءة, ʿabāʾah** [pages 8 and 64]:

A long women's cloak. Essentially a simple, dark-coloured robe-like dress, worn in parts of the Muslim world and is widely spread in the Arabian Peninsula.

**Abu, أبو, ʾabū** [page 57]:

Father (of).

**'Aib, عيب, ʿayb** [pages 183, 226, 227, 230, 255]:

Socially inappropriate, disrespectful or shameful.

**Al-Masjid Al-Haram, المسجد الحرام, al-masjid al-ḥarām** [page 136]:

Islam's most important mosque located in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, which contains the *Kaaba* that pilgrims walk around. It is the most sacred site in Islam.

**Aqeeqa, عقيقة, ʿaqīqah** [page 97]:

Animal (usually sheep or lamb) sacrifices.

**Bakhoor, بخور, baḵūr** [page 96]:

A traditional, oriental (strong) fragrance.

**Baksheesh, بقشيش, baqšīš** [page 74]:

A tip. A sum of money given to someone as a reward for a service.

**Bidun, بدون, bidūn** [pages 38, 54, 55, 59, 166, 258]:

Literally signifies "without", referring to a stateless (without nationality) Arab minority in Kuwait.

**Chai el-thahha, شاي الضحى, šāy al-ḍuḥā** [page 57]:

Women's morning tea.

**Dishdasha, دشداشة, dišdāšah** [page 64]:

An ankle-length, loose traditional garment, commonly worn by men in the Arabian Peninsula. Different terms for this attire exist in every country.

**Diwaniya, ديوانية, dīwāniyyah** [page 57]:

Predominantly men's gathering lounge.

**Duaa', دعاء, duʿāʾ** [page 109]:

To make a prayer. To address God and request something in a humble manner with supplication.

**Eid, عيد, ʿīd** [pages 97, 101, 110, 111, 112, 117, 135, 136, 141, 145, 146, 171, 214, 221, 248]:

The multiplication of reward and returns by Allah to his worshippers, which can be both material and spiritual.

**Eid Al-Adha, عيد الأضحى, ʿīdu al-ʾaḍḥā** [pages 108, 110, 136, 157]:

The second Islamic festivity of the year that celebrates the end of pilgrimage or the duty of *Hajj*, commemorating the sacrifice of Prophet Abraham.

**Eid Al-Fitr, عيد الفطر, ʿīdu al-fiṭr** [pages 108, 110, 135, 157]:

The first Islamic festivity of the year that celebrates breaking the fast after the completion of the month of Ramadan.

**Eid Al-Hubb, عيد الحب, ʿīdu al-ḥubb** [page 156]:

The festivity of love.

**Eid Al-'ushaaq, عيد العشاق, ʿīdu al-ʿuššāq** [pages 156, 198, 213]:

The festivity of lovers.

**Eid El-Mawlid El-Nabawi, عيد المولد النبوي, ʿīdu al-mawlid al-nabawī** [page 111]:

The festivity that celebrates the birth of Prophet Mohammed.

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**Eidiyyah, عيدية, ʿīdīyah** [pages 110, 111, 136, 142]:

The hope that blessings, joy, kindness and generosity are to be repeated the next year.

**El-sobou', الأسبوع , al-ʾusbūʿ** [page 97]:

Party for new-borns that typically takes place on the first week of the baby's birth, but in some cultures, it can be set on the 40<sup>th</sup> day.

**Emir, أمير, ʾamīr** [pages 52, 53, 54]:

Ruling Prince.

**Fotour/Iftar, فطور/إفطار, fuṭūr/ʾifṭār** [pages 136 and 146]:

The meal that breaks the fast at sunset. The terms generally mean the first meal of the day or breakfast.

**Gergean, قرقيعان, qirqiʿān** [pages 136 and 171]:

A festivity practiced in Arabian Gulf countries that takes place during the month of Ramadan (usually between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> day of Ramadan), which typically involves knocking on neighbourhood doors for the exchange of sweets, celebrated by children with the help of their parents.

**Ghabga, غبقة, ḡabqah** [page 136]:

A shared meal served late at night during Ramadan, which takes place between *fotour* and *suhour*.

**Hadeeth, حديث, ḥadīṯ** [pages 107 and 109]:

Sayings (usually of the Prophet Mohammed).

**Hadiyya, هدية, hadiyya** [page 115]:

Arabic term for gift which stems from the word "guidance": هداية (Hidāya).

**Hajar Al-Aswad, الحجر الأسود, al-ḥajaru al-ʾaswad [page 136]:**
Arabic for The Black Stone. It is a stone set into the corner of the *Kaaba* encased with silver, revered by Muslims as a sacred Islamic relic. Part of *Al-Hajj* ritual is to stop and touch or kiss the stone.

**Hajj, الحج, al-ḥajj [pages 65, 110, 136, 157]:**
Pilgrimage.

**Hala Febrayer, هلا فبراير, hala fibrāyir [page 219]:**
"Hello February" is a period of increased sales and promotional offers in Kuwait which takes place during February.

**Halal, حلال, ḥalāl [pages 185, 191, 198, 248]:**
Permissible in Islam.

**Haram, حرام, ḥarām [pages 185, 226, 227, 230]:**
Forbidden in Islam.

**Hijab, حجاب, ḥijāb [pages 8, 9, 64, 65, 66, 68, 97, 161, 255]:**
The Islamic veil or headscarf.

**Hijri, هجري, hijrī [pages 111 and 221]:**
The *Hijri* New Year marks the beginning of a new Islamic lunar year. The *Hijra* was when Prophet Mohammed migrated from Mecca to Medina upon invitation to escape persecution from the Quraysh tribe who prevented him from preaching and spreading the word of Allah.

**Ijtihad, اجتهاد, ʾijtihād [pages 64, 189, 191]:**
Religious exploration.

**Imaan, إيمان, ʾīmān [page 57]:**
Piety.

**Kaaba, الكعبة, al-kaʿbah** [pages 95 and 136]:

A cuboid-shaped shrine made of stones. It is the direction of prayer for Muslims and the building that pilgrims walk around during *Hajj*.

**Kafala, كفالة, kafālah** [page 59]:

Work or guardian residence sponsorship.

**Kaleem Allah, كليم الله, kalīm allāh** [page 114]:

The converser of Allah.

**Oud, عود, ʿūd** [page 96]:

A traditional, oriental (strong) fragrance.

**Ramadan, رمضان, ramaḍān** [pages 97,110, 135, 136, 145, 146,157,171, 214, 215, 221]:

The ninth month of the Islamic calendar, observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting, prayer, reflection, and community.

**Sadaqa, صدقة, ṣadaqah** [pages 111, 142, 144]:

Giving charity.

**Salat, صلاة, ṣalāt** [pages 65 and 109]:

Prayer.

**Sawm, صوم, ṣawm** [page 65]:

Fasting.

**Shahada, شهادة, šahādah** [page 65]:

Testimony.

**Shaitan, شيطان, šayṭān** [page 145]:

Devil.

**Sharia, شريعة, šarīʿah** [pages 53, 64, 67, 184, 189]:

Islamic religious law.


**Shia, شيعة, šīʿah** [page 55]:

One of the two main branches of Islam.


**Suhour, سحور, suḥūr** [page 136]:

The meal before starting the fast at dawn.


**Sunnah, سُنَّة, sunnah** [pages 107, 108, 109, 242]:

One of the two main branches of Islam. The Prophet's *Sunnah* refers to the sayings, habits, practices and characteristics of the Prophet Mohammed. It is the second source of religious knowledge for Muslims after the Quran.


**Sunni, سُنّي, sunnī** [pages 55 and 61]:

Those who follow the Prophet's *Sunnah* and represent the *Sunnah* branch of Islam.


**Tahadou tahabbou, تهادوا تحابوا, tahādū taḥābū** [page 109]:

Give gifts and you will love one another.


**Um, أم, ʾumm** [page 57]:

Mother (of).


**Waseet, وسيط, wasīṭ** [page 74]:

Middleman, intermediary or medium.


**Wasta, واسطة, wāsiṭah** [pages 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 91, 118, 122, 126, 142, 143, 144, 145, 151, 231]:

Favour-doing through social networking with influential figures.


**Yawm Al-Hubb Al-'Alami, يوم الحب العالمي, yawm al-ḥubb al-ʿālamī** [page 198]:

The International Day of Love.

**Yusr, يسر, yusr** [pages 183, 193, 256]:

An Islamic concept that urges to use forgiveness, lenience and empathy.


**Zakat, زكاة, zakāt** [pages 65, 108, 109, 111, 142, 144]:

Almsgiving.


**Zakat Al-Fitr, زكاة الفطر, zakāt al-fiṭr** [page 108]:

Almsgiving that occurs before *Eid Al-Fitr*.


**Zina, زنا, zinā** [page 205]:

Sexual relations outside of marriage.

# VII. WORKS CITED

## 1. Primary Sources

### 1.1 Informant Biographies

1. Abrar is a 31-year-old Pakistani, married and has 2 children. She was born in Pakistan and brought to Kuwait as a baby where her family worked since the 80s. She holds a degree in business management. She has recently launched her own skin care/makeup online business on a social media platform. She is Issa's daughter. Interviewed in her house in Farwaniyah, Kuwait in April 2019.

2. Adam is Syrian, 31 years old, born and raised in Kuwait. Recently engaged and works as a customer service and sales team leader in one of the leading companies in perfumes and oriental fragrances companies in Kuwait. He was unable to attain his bachelor's degree in business administration for personal reasons. Interviewed in Hawalli, Kuwait, in April 2019.

3. Amal is 58 years old and was born in Syria. She moved to Kuwait after she got married in the 80s and has 3 children. Interviewed in her house in Mangaf, Kuwait in August 2019. She is Qassem's mother.

4. Amina is 72 years old. She is Kuwaiti of Iranian heritage. She is widowed and was interviewed in her son's house in AlZahraa, Kuwait in August 2019.

5. Anna is Swiss. She is 24 years old and single. She moved with her family to Kuwait in 2011 after her father got a job at the Swiss embassy. She has a master's degree in Migration studies. Currently in Costa Rica pursuing another master's degree. Interviewed in Barcelona in March 2019.

6. Aseel is an Egyptian Canadian. She is 29 years old, single, and was raised in Kuwait. She has a degree in medical sciences from Toronto and is currently studying medicine in Australia. Interviewed online in March 2019.

7. Bader is a 47-year-old Kuwaiti, married and has children. He has a PhD in Engineering and an MBA. He is a construction engineer. Interviewed online in April 2019.

8. Bashar is Syrian. He is 23 years old, single, born in Syria and raised in Kuwait. Works as a receptionist and customer service agent while simultaneously pursuing his business administration degree. Interviewed online in June 2018.

9. Danah is Kuwaiti, widowed, 67 years old. She has 7 children. She lives with her 4 youngest children in Hateen but was interviewed in her daughter's house in Rumaitheya, Kuwait, August 2019.

10. Eman is from Saudi Arabia, married to a Kuwaiti. She is 68 years old. She came to Kuwait after marriage in 1974. She used to help her husband with his business/trade of traditional dresses, oriental fragrances, dates and sweets. Now her children took over the business while she looks after her grandchildren. Interviewed in her house in Rawda, Kuwait, in June 2018.

11. Faisal is Kuwaiti. He is 34 years old, married and has children. Works in a bank as a financial analyst, has attained his MBA in 2016. Interviewed in Mishref, Kuwait, in June 2018.

12. Fares is 55 years old and is a civil engineer. He is Egyptian and got his bachelor's degree from Egypt. He came to Kuwait in 1993 with his wife and has three children. Interviewed online in February 2019.

13. Fatima is Kuwaiti of Palestinian origin, born in 1942. She has had a passion for tourism and art for the last 40 years. She creates wooden and ceramic handcrafts in her home studio to gift them. She survived war and had to take care of her younger siblings because her father fell ill and passed away, so she remained unmarried. Interviewed in her house in Jabriyah, Kuwait in February 2019.

14. Ghada is 36, single, Egyptian, born and raised in Kuwait. She has a degree in design technology from UAE. She is currently a fitness trainer and sport brand advertiser in one of the gyms. Interviewed in Salmiya, Kuwait in April 2019.

15. Hisham is 18 years old, single, Egyptian, was born and raised in Kuwait. He finalized his secondary school studies and is enrolled in a university in the United States to study Sports management. Interviewed in his home in Salmiya, Kuwait in June 2018.

16. Issa is 60 years old. He is Pakistani, he is Abrar's father. He came to Kuwait in the 80s, got married and has 5 children. He is an experienced travel agent and tour advisor. Interviewed in his house in Farwaniyah, Kuwait in April 2019.

17. Joanna is a 28-year-old Lebanese. She was born in Lebanon, raised in Kuwait. She studied medicine in Lebanon. Moved to the United States in 2017, got married, and is a physician (medical doctor). Joanna is Omar's daughter. Interviewed online in February 2019.

18. Karam is Jordanian of Palestinian origin. He is 56 years old. He came to Kuwait for work after the Persian Gulf War, got married and has 7 children. He is Seba's father. He works at a car sale outlet and repair company. Interviewed in his house in Salwa, Kuwait in July 2019.

19. Khaled is 20 years old. He is single, from Lebanon, born and raised in Kuwait. He is currently in Ukraine, studying to become a plastic surgeon. Interviewed online in August 2019.

20. Khodor is Belgian of Algerian origin. He is 36 years old, single, and has a PhD in physics from Italy. He moved to Kuwait in 2012 and currently works as an academic. Interviewed online in August 2019.

21. Kholoud was born and raised in Lebanon. She is 44 years old and holds a master's degree in social studies. She moved to Kuwait after marriage in 2002. She has 3 children and

currently works as a social coordinator in a school. Interviewed in her house in Salwa, Kuwait in July 2018.

22. Lamya is a single 33-year-old Sudanese female. She was born and raised in Kuwait, has a master's degree, worked as a research assistant, and is currently a freelance yoga instructor. Interviewed in Al-Bidaa', Kuwait, in February 2019.

23. Latifa is Kuwaiti, 62 years old and lives in Khaldiyah with her husband, children, and grandchildren. Interviewed in her house in May 2018.

24. Loulwa is Jordanian, born and raised in Kuwait. She attained a degree in design technology from Jordan and is currently a freelance artist in Kuwait. She sells her art on a social media platform. She is 37 years old, married and has 2 children. Interviewed online in May 2019.

25. Maha was born and raised in Lebanon. She is 61 years old. She got married in 1981 and moved to Kuwait with her husband where they can work and start a family. She is a very dedicated civil engineer. Interviewed in my house in Salwa, Kuwait in August 2019.

26. Mahmoud was born in Morocco in 1983 (37 years old). He graduated from Morocco and came to Kuwait for work in 2008. He is a lawyer in one of the banks. He is divorced and has 1 child. Interviewed in Kuwait City in April 2019.

27. Majida is 31 years old, single, Egyptian of Sudanese heritage who came to Kuwait when she was 5 years old. She has a bachelor's degree in Marketing and works as a PR executive. Interviewed in Salmiya in April 2019.

28. Manar is 51 years old, half Iraqi half Jordanian, born and raised in Kuwait. She is married and has 3 kids. She has a business management degree from Jordan. She used to teach finance in university and currently works in the quality management department and contracts. Interviewed in Mishref, Kuwait in June 2018.

29. Mariam is 66 years old and has had a long career in teaching. Due to segregation (Islamic) laws in Kuwait, Mariam mostly taught in all-girl schools since Kuwait's liberation. She is Syrian and lives with her children and husband. Interviewed in her house in Salmiya, Kuwait in June 2018.

30. Medhat is a 45-year-old Egyptian. He was born in Egypt and moved to Kuwait for work in 2004. His family (wife and children) still lives in Egypt. He has attained a secondary school education and works as a security guard in one of the residential buildings. Interviewed in my house in Salwa, Kuwait, in June 2018.

31. Mervat is Jordanian born in 1956 (64 years old). After finalizing her studies in nursing, she came to Kuwait with her husband in 1985. She is currently retired and has returned to Jordan in 2015. Interviewed online in October 2018.

32. Mostafa is a 68-year-old married Kuwaiti father. He had a long-time career in aviation and aircraft operations. Interviewed online in August 2019.

33. Nahla is the oldest informant. She is a widowed 87-year-old. She is Kuwaiti, from a Lebanese mother. She was born and raised in Lebanon. She experienced several wars, World War II, Lebanon's civil war and the Persian Gulf war. The family returned to Kuwait in the late 80s. Nahla made money as a young adult by knitting and making hand-stitched frocks and woollen sweaters. She lives with her sister, her children, and grandchildren. Interviewed in her house in Shamiya in May 2019.

34. Omar is 63 years old. He is Lebanese. He has a civil engineering degree from Lebanon and came to work in Kuwait in 1988. He has 3 children, one of them is Joanna. Interviewed in his house in Salwa, Kuwait in August 2019.

35. Qassem is a 26-year-old Syrian. He was born in Syria and raised in Kuwait. He is single and has a diploma in nursing and works as a nurse. He also holds a bachelor's degree in English Literature. Interviewed in Mangaf, Kuwait in August 2019. He is Amal's son.

36. Rana is a 31-year-old female. She is half Syrian and half Jordanian of Palestinian origin. She is single and has studied business administration. She works as a Human Resources representative. Interviewed online in March 2019.

37. Rashed is a 30-year-old Jordanian of Palestinian origin. He was born and raised in Kuwait. He is single and had worked as a technical computer engineer. He has obtained a bachelor's in Electric (computer) engineering and a master's degree in Drone Engineering. Interviewed during different intervals between May 2018 and March 2019 in Ardiyah Industrial area, Kuwait, Madrid and Barcelona.

38. Sahar is Syrian and is 37 years old. She was born and raised in Kuwait. She is married, has children, and holds a bachelor's degree in English Literature, currently a housewife. Interviewed in her house in Salmiya, Kuwait in April 2019.

39. Sana is 38 years old. She is half Lebanese, half Serbian (formerly Yugoslavia), born and raised in Kuwait. She has a degree in Business management, got married and now lives in Jordan with her 4 children. Interviewed online in October 2018.

40. Sarah was born in Egypt in 1955 (65 years old). She came to Kuwait with her family (parents and siblings) when she was 8 years old. During the Persian Gulf War, they went back to Egypt, and she came back in 1995 for work. She is married and has 4 children. She used to work at a law firm in Kuwait City. Interviewed in her home in Surrah, Kuwait in August 2019.

41. Seba is 23 years old and single. She is Jordanian of Palestinian origin, born and raised in Kuwait, has a degree in business administration and works in administration and contract management. She is Karam's daughter. Interviewed in her house in Salwa, Kuwait in July 2019.

42. Serene is a single 25-year-old Egyptian female architect. She was born in Egypt and raised in Kuwait. She attained her architecture degree from UAE. Interviewed online in February 2019.

43. Suzan is 30 years old. She is Kuwaiti and her mother is Lebanese. She is married and has a baby boy. She attained her master's degree in Petroleum Engineering. Currently enrolled in a PhD program and works for an oil company in Kuwait. Interviewed online in October 2018.

44. Tahani is 24 years old, born in Palestine, got married and moved to Kuwait in 2016. She is a university student, currently in her first year in International Business. Interviewed in her house in Hawalli, Kuwait in July 2018.

45. Tarek is 17 years old, single, Jordanian of Palestinian origin, born and raised in Kuwait. He is finishing his last year of high school. Interviewed in his home (with the approval of his parents) in Salwa, Kuwait in June 2018.

46. Yousef is a 32-year-old male. He is single and of Syrian nationality. His family came to Kuwait for work after the Persian Gulf War. Currently works as a coordinator, helping in client complaints and team stimulation. He has a bachelor's degree in Design management from a university in Syria. Interviewed in Salmiya, Kuwait in July 2018.

## 1.2    Consultation of Digital Written Archives

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# VIII. ANNEXES

## 1. Consent Form Sample

**Approval to be interviewed for the PhD thesis research titled: The Cultural Gifting Dynamics of Kuwait During Valentine's Day: The Adoption of Western Practices in Muslim-Majority Countries.**

**PhD Candidate: Rawan Dbaibou**  **Email address: r.dbaibow@gmail.com**

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this academic research study being conducted for a PhD degree in History from Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona. This research will address Kuwait's gifting habits during a western-originated occasion, specifically Valentine's Day.

**Information about the research**

This research aims to delve into the phenomenon of an ever-changing Islamic culture in Kuwait. To identify this, I will explore social, cultural and other dynamics that contribute to the adoption of western gift-giving practices in Kuwait, specifically Valentine's Day. I also wish to identify various viewpoints that denote and equally promote this adoption.

This research will attempt to reason contemporary gifting practices with the Islamic religion and, on the other hand, shed light on the impact of social media, migration, ethnic diversity, women empowerment, and education which were evident factors in the social transformation of Arab societies in the 21$^{st}$ century.

**Information about the interview**

Through personal interviews, I seek to gather first-hand information about gifting experiences and significances. This would help establish gift and relationship expectations, as well as the different situations to offer gifts in Kuwait, ultimately defining "Kuwait's gift theory". Regarding Valentine's Day, I aim to understand the manifestations of a mass,

popular culture and would like to know whether purposes to celebrate the occasion differs from the overall perception of it: to show love. Finally, several questions are asked about the Kuwaiti identity and what makes it stand out from other Arab nations, finally reflecting on the direction Kuwait is likely to take in the future, especially with the emerging globalisation phenomenon that helped bring Arab Muslim societies closer to other parts of the world. Some questions can be sensitive or personal, for example about your religious beliefs or intimate relationships, to which you are free to choose not to answer. The interview can take between 30 minutes and 2 hours.

**Approved Consent**

By signing this consent sheet, I confirm that:

• I understood the purpose and nature of this study and I had the opportunity to ask questions about it.

• I acknowledge that my participation is voluntary, and I can withdraw my consent at any time for any reason.

• I know that my identity will remain confidential and that a pseudonym will be used instead to issue the findings' results formally.

• I understand that I might be quoted directly in the doctoral thesis.

• I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used primarily for the PhD thesis, and may be used in conference presentations, journal publications, published papers and so on.

• I agree to audio-record my interview, only to be used to analyse the answers and draw useful research conclusions.

• I understand that the signed consent form, original audio recording and interview transcript will be retained in limited possession and access of the researcher and would only be shared with collaborators, supervisors or university professors that decide upon the achievement of this doctoral degree.

• I have the right to review, correct, change or eradicate my answers from the produced transcript.

• I understand that I am free to contact the researcher to seek further clarification and information.

• I understand that I can refuse to answer any question during the interview, or stop the interview at any time, without any consequences.

• I agree to my participation, to which I do not expect to receive any benefit or payment.

• I acknowledge that there are no identified risks or burdens associated with my participation in this study.

• I have been given a copy of the interview questionnaire and this consent form.


I, _____, certify that I have been informed about the research topic and purpose of Rawan Dbaibou's thesis, who has invited me to participate, in which I freely and voluntarily contribute with my input and trust that the information provided by me, as well as my personal data, will be used confidentially and in good faith.

## 2. Interview Pre-set Questions

**Name:**

**Gender:**        **Age:**        **Marital status (children):**

### A. The Gift

1. Express the difficulty you experience when buying gifts. Why?
2. How long does it take you to search and buy and until the occasion arrives?
3. Describe situations for giving gifts in Kuwait.
4. What are some characteristics of the gift in Kuwait? Are these characteristics important for you?
5. What did gifts mean before? How does the gift differ from that of your parents or the younger generation? (How did gifts change from one generation to another?)
6. What do you think about packaging styles or techniques?
7. Aspects of gift presentation, wrapping, tag or card: how important are these items that complement the gift?
8. How much do social media and influencers affect your decision? Are you interested in what is being advertised?

### B. Valentine's Day

9. What is your opinion of Valentine's Day?
10. What is the purpose of this occasion?
11. Do you celebrate? Why/Why not?
12. What do your parents think about Valentine's Day?
13. What is the ambience of Valentine's Day like in Kuwait?
14. How does this ambience differ from other Arab countries?
15. Describe your ideas on romance and romantic couples during this occasion.
16. How popular is Valentine's Day in Kuwait? By whom is it widely celebrated?

## C. Kuwait

17. How is Kuwait distinct from other Arab countries? What differentiates its identity?
18. Is there enough awareness about Kuwait and the Arabian Gulf region?
19. Is Kuwait properly portrayed in the media by other countries?
20. Do you believe Kuwait is an oppressed society? In what way?
21. Is Kuwait a collective or an individualistic society? Did this change from before/Will this change in the future?
22. Explain why the Kuwaiti film industry still portrays a religiously, conservative culture, although that might not be accurate.
23. How can different societies with the same Islamic and Arab background accept different concepts and reject others? (For example, Egypt and Valentine's Day compared to Kuwait and Valentine's Day).
24. Why don't all Arab Muslims behave equally?
25. What factors change a society overtime?
26. Do you believe the increase in expats have influenced this country's traditions?
27. How did Valentine's Day spread here?
28. What is the purpose behind accepting external norms?
29. Does this impact the original culture? (Would incorporating new practices make the original culture vague and mixed?)
30. How important is it to practice and maintain original customs?
31. Saudi Arabia has allowed Valentine's Day to be celebrated as of 2018, arguing that it can be considered a similar occasion expressing love like Mother's Day. Do you agree? Why?
32. What direction is the country likely to take in the future? (Will it take on more foreign customs or have more local control to maintain original identity?)

## 3. Informants' Information Tables

| Pseudonym | Age | Group | Sex | Nationality | Origin | Civil Status | Kids | Latest attained degree | Relation to Kuwait | Interviewed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Abrar | 31 | Young adults | F | Pakistani | | Married | Yes | Bachelor's | Family came for work | Apr-19 |
| Adam | 31 | Young adults | M | Syrian | | Single (Engaged) | No | Secondary School | Born and raised | Apr-19 |
| Amal | 58 | Older adults | F | Syrian | | Married | Yes | Secondary School | Moved after marriage | Aug-19 |
| Amina | 72 | Seniors | F | Kuwaiti | Iran | Widowed | Yes | Secondary School | Home country | Aug-19 |
| Anna | 24 | Youth | F | Swiss | | Single | No | Master's | Family came for work | Mar-19 |
| Aseel | 29 | Young adults | F | Canadian | Egypt | Single | No | Bachelor's | Family came for work | Mar-19 |
| Bader | 47 | Middle-aged adults | M | Kuwaiti | | Married | Yes | PhD | Home country | Apr-19 |
| Bashar | 23 | Youth | M | Syrian | | Single | No | Secondary School | Family came for work | Jun-18 |
| Danah | 67 | Seniors | F | Kuwaiti | | Widowed | Yes | Secondary School | Home country | Aug-19 |
| Eman | 68 | Seniors | F | Saudi Arabia | | Married | Yes | Secondary School | Moved after marriage | Jun-18 |
| Faisal | 34 | Young adults | M | Kuwaiti | | Married | Yes | Master's | Home country | Jun-18 |
| Fares | 55 | Older adults | M | Egyptian | | Married | Yes | Bachelor's | Came for work | Feb-19 |
| Fatima | 78 | Seniors | F | Kuwaiti | Palestine | Single | No | Secondary School | Home country | Feb-19 |
| Ghada | 36 | Middle-aged adults | F | Egyptian | | Single | No | Bachelor's | Born and raised | Apr-19 |
| Hisham | 18 | Youth | M | Egyptian | | Single | No | Secondary School | Born and raised | Jun-18 |
| Issa | 60 | Older adults | M | Pakistani | | Married | Yes | Diploma | Came for work | Apr-19 |

| Pseudonym | Age | Group | Sex | Nationality | Origin | Civil Status | Kids | Latest attained degree | Relation to Kuwait | Interviewed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Joanna** | 28 | Young adults | F | Lebanese | | Married | No | Medical | Family came for work | Feb-19 |
| **Karam** | 56 | Older adults | M | Jordanian | Palestine | Married | Yes | Secondary School | Came for work | Jul-19 |
| **Khaled** | 20 | Youth | M | Lebanese | | Single | No | Secondary School | Born and raised | Aug-19 |
| **Khodor** | 36 | Middle-aged adults | M | Belgian | Algeria | Single | No | PhD | Came for work | Aug-19 |
| **Kholoud** | 44 | Middle-aged adults | F | Lebanese | | Married | Yes | Master's | Moved after marriage | Jul-18 |
| **Lamya** | 33 | Young adults | F | Sudanese | | Single | No | Master's | Born and raised | Feb-19 |
| **Latifa** | 62 | Seniors | F | Kuwaiti | | Married | Yes | Secondary School | Home country | May-18 |
| **Loulwa** | 37 | Middle-aged adults | F | Jordanian | | Married | Yes | Bachelor's | Born and raised | May-19 |
| **Maha** | 61 | Seniors | F | Lebanese | | Married | Yes | Bachelor's | Moved after marriage | Aug-19 |
| **Mahmoud** | 37 | Middle-aged adults | M | Moroccan | | Divorced | Yes | Bachelor's | Came for work | Apr-19 |
| **Majida** | 31 | Young adults | F | Egyptian | Sudan | Single | No | Bachelor's | Family came for work | Apr-19 |
| **Manar** | 51 | Older adults | F | Jordanian (Iraqi mother) | | Married | Yes | Bachelor's | Born and raised | Jun-18 |
| **Mariam** | 66 | Seniors | F | Syrian | | Married | Yes | Diploma | Came for work | Jun-18 |
| **Medhat** | 45 | Middle-aged adults | M | Egyptian | | Married | Yes | Secondary School | Came for work | Jun-18 |
| **Mervat** | 64 | Seniors | F | Jordanian | | Married | No | Bachelor's | Came for work | Oct-18 |

| Pseudonym | Age | Group | Sex | Nationality | Origin | Civil Status | Kids | Latest attained degree | Relation to Kuwait | Interviewed |
|-----------|-----|-------|-----|-------------|--------|--------------|------|------------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Mostafa | 68 | Seniors | M | Kuwaiti | | Married | Yes | Bachelor's | Home country | Aug-19 |
| Nahla | 87 | Seniors | F | Kuwaiti (Lebanese mother) | | Widowed | Yes | Secondary School | Home country | May-19 |
| Omar | 63 | Seniors | M | Lebanese | | Married | Yes | Bachelor's | Came for work | Aug-19 |
| Qassem | 26 | Young adults | M | Syrian | | Single | No | Bachelor's | Family came for work | Aug-19 |
| Rana | 31 | Young adults | F | Jordanian (Syrian mother) | Palestine | Single | No | Bachelor's | Family came for work | Mar-19 |
| Rashed | 30 | Young adults | M | Jordanian | Palestine | Single | No | Master's | Born and raised | May-18 |
| Sahar | 37 | Middle-aged adults | F | Syrian | | Married | Yes | Bachelor's | Born and raised | Apr-19 |
| Sana | 38 | Middle-aged adults | F | Lebanese (Serbian mother) | | Married | Yes | Bachelor's | Born and raised | Oct-18 |
| Sarah | 65 | Seniors | F | Egyptian | | Married | Yes | Diploma | Family came for work | Aug-19 |
| Seba | 23 | Youth | F | Jordanian | Palestine | Single | No | Bachelor's | Born and raised | Jul-19 |
| Serene | 25 | Young adults | F | Egyptian | | Single | No | Bachelor's | Family came for work | Feb-19 |
| Suzan | 30 | Young adults | F | Kuwaiti (Lebanese mother) | | Married | Yes | Master's | Home country | Oct-18 |
| Tahani | 24 | Youth | F | Palestinian | | Married | No | Secondary School | Moved after marriage | Jul-18 |
| Tarek | 17 | Youth | M | Jordanian | Palestine | Single | No | Secondary School | Born and raised | Jun-18 |
| Yousef | 32 | Young adults | M | Syrian | | Single | No | Bachelor's | Family came for work | Jul-18 |