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Mediating Modernity: The Cultural And Religious Reordering Of Saudi Arabia In The Vision 2030 Era

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Abstract: Saudi Arabia is going through a major cultural shift which we can see it clearly in the way media is being used. For a long time the system was tightly controlled and leaned heavily on religious authority, but that is no longer the full picture. This continuous dichotomy is being recreated by thriving cultural organizations like the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra) and dynamic events like the Diriyah Biennale, Riyadh season and Jeddah season. These efforts represent a radical rebranding in which Islam is not pitted against modernity, but rather used as a tremendous force for cultural diplomacy and economic innovation under Vision 2030.

From a cultural studies perspective, this isn't a turn toward secularism. What's happening is more deliberate: the state is reframing religious language and encouraging a tone of moderation that still carries symbolic weight. Media plays the middle role here. It gives room for tradition to be expressed, even as institutional authority shifts. One of the clearest signs of the transition is how many women are now visible as journalists, creators, and filmmakers. Their presence doesn't erase tradition; it complicates it in productive ways, showing how religion, gender, and national identity are being rebuilt in conversation with each other rather than in opposition.

Keywords - Cultural Studies, media, Islam, gender, nation-building.

I. INTRODUCTION

Vision 2030 is often talked about as a major turning point for Saudi Arabia, and that sense of scale isn't exaggerated. The plan is meant to push the economy beyond oil, but there is also a noticeable cultural and media shift happening at the same time. This part of the transformation doesn't always get the same attention, yet it shapes how the country presents itself and how people inside the Kingdom make sense of the changes around them. Announced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman with the endorsement of King Salman bin Abdulaziz on 25 April 2016, the initiative articulates a vision of progress grounded in the language of "openness," "innovation," and "youth empowerment." Beyond financial diversification, the project functions as a cultural blueprint for redefining Saudi identity in the twenty-first century.

Taking a look at Vision 2030 through the lens of modernization theory, and through thinkers like Daniel Lerner and Alex Inkeles, it's easy to see the usual pattern: economic change leading to shifts in culture. But in the Saudi case, the process doesn't feel automatic or gradual. It has emerged as a planned intervention in social engineering. It appears as if a new version of Saudi Arabia is to emerge as a socio-cultural entity. The reopening of cinemas in 2018 after more than three decades, the arrival of large international concerts such as MDL Beast, and the growing presence of Saudi influencers on Instagram and YouTube all operate as signals of a planned,

carefully managed liberalisation. These moments don't stand alone; they're supported by state-led media campaigns designed to present a picture of energy, openness, and gender inclusion. Even the material put out by the General Entertainment Authority shows this shift. Their visual documents or videos that promote this new vision, with their quick cuts, depiction of joyful youth and upbeat visuals, present the short films with a positive entertainment, promoting people's participation, giving fillip to modernisation and tourism.

This coordinated push lines up with Antonio Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony, where the state wins consent by slowly reshaping everyday norms rather than depending on force. In this light, the cultural changes tied to Vision 2030 can be read as a broader hegemonic project: an attempt to sketch out what "Saudi modernity" should look like while still keeping a firm hand on its boundaries. When everyday activities like going to the cinema, showing up at concerts, sharing moments online are framed as acts of national commitment, a new moral logic starts to emerge. It blends modernisation with loyalty to the state instead of setting them against each other. Media sits at the center of this process. It doesn't simply broadcast images of change. It also signals to audiences inside and outside the country that these shifts fit within the broader national story.

1.1 Saudi Arabia Today: The Semantic Shift

Saudi Arabia today occupies a unique intersection of religion, media, and modernisation. As the birthplace of Islam and home to its two holiest cities, the Kingdom has long claimed religious authority within the Muslim world, rooted in its alliance with Wahhabi orthodoxy. At the same time, it is a wealthy petrostate, deeply involved in global markets, international entertainment, and cross-border politics. That mix creates a constant tension between maintaining religious legitimacy and pushing toward modern global relevance. Vision 2030 doesn't erase this tension; it reframes it. Slowly, the language of modernisation is taking the place of the earlier rhetoric of moderation, and that shift changes how people understand and experience reforms. Under King Abdullah (2005–2015), "moderation" served as a sort of middle ground between extremism and liberal reform, allowing changes to happen while staying within the bounds of faith. Under the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, however, "modernisation" is presented differently it is treated as necessary, a moral and developmental expectation, and a way to measure Saudi progress against international standards.

This shift could be seen, in Michael Foucault terms, as a kind of "discursive transformation of power", a reworking of what can be said, seen, and accepted in the public sphere. With Vision 2030, the state does more than allow cultural modernization; it actively sets the terms for it. Modernization becomes a central metaphor for national identity, responding to global pressures while also guiding social behaviour at home. A key part of this process is the media. State-affiliated outlets like Al-Arabiya and the Saudi Broadcasting Authority push stories of innovation and youthful energy, while international streaming platforms such as Netflix showcase Saudi films and series (e.g., Wadjda, AlKhallat+) among them that quietly explore issues of gender, tradition, and reform. These portrayals do more than mirror change; they help shape it, influencing what comes to be seen as the "new normal" in Saudi life.

At the same time, top-down modernization comes with some contradictions. Scholars such as Madawi Al-Rasheed and Pascal Menoret have pointed out that even when Vision 2030 looks progressive, it can actually strengthen the state control by concentrating cultural influence. Things like entertainment, cinema, and social media influencers are meant to bring people together, but they are still closely watched. The same platforms that let new voices appear also push stories the state wants people to see, about optimism and progress. In some ways, it feels like the Kingdom is shaping a picture of modern Saudis who are young, connected to the world, and entrepreneurial. Their sense of belonging comes more from shared cultural experiences than from taking part in politics

1.2 Modernization and Vision 2030

Vision 2030's cultural reforms reveal a new synthesis of religion, media, and modernisation. The Kingdom's transformation narrative depends not on abandoning its religious heritage but on translating it into the language of development and cultural productivity. In this way, modernisation becomes both a cultural performance and a political strategy, one in which media serve as the primary stage. Saudi Arabia's future, then, will not only be determined by its economic diversification but by how successfully it manages this ongoing negotiation between sacred authority and the global spectacle of modernity. All these shifts are semantic, reshaping Saudi identity; the metaphor of modernisation becomes central. It is presented more as a cultural imperative, an antidote to global influences, and even more so to local relevance. Media forms the core of this transformation, whether through state-controlled outlets or cultural conflicts played out in digital content. Modernisation is embedded within and driven by the media..

In the middle of the twentieth century, when the emergence of radio, later television were serving as crucial mediums for transmitting Islamic authority and administrative legitimacy, the early broadcasting focused on religious programming, sermons and Quranic recitation (Boyd, 1982). thereby firmly embedding media as a tool to promote religious nationalism. During the 1960s and 1970s, television emerged as a controversial topic. Initially, religious officials deemed it un-Islamic, but later down the road, they used it to spread ideas related to religion, and on the other hand, the society was divided into sections. A section that was very eager to experience those new mediums which is the majority and they were looking forward to watching national television, tales and anecdotes were woven about that era including what is said about some women covering themselves in front of the television announcers in some villages and a section that got used to watching television through travelling abroad or from Aramco represented a large percentage of people who were familiar with the nature of television and there was a very small conservative group that rejected television and exaggerated in their reluctance (Al-Shubayli, 2014). The commencement of television in Saudi Arabia (1965-1967) required a reliance on local production to fulfil program requirements, because the available imported content was insufficient and often restricted by stringent censorship, particularly concerning depictions of women. In the initial months following the establishment of television, representations of women were absent in both locally produced and foreign programs.

1.3 Cultural Environment as a Social Ecosystem

Saudi Arabia's modernisation isn't just about money or politics. It's also about culture and social life. And somehow, maybe even the environment is part of it too. Vision 2030 has things like the Saudi Green Initiative and NEOM's city plans. They show that environmental ideas are mixed into the bigger story, though not always clearly. Media, festivals, cultural centres, they all try to bring sustainability, creativity, and inclusion together, but it's messy. People can see it in new parks, green buildings, and programs about the environment. It kind of feels like caring for nature is becoming part of being Saudi. Three emphases define the opening up these spaces: A kind of modernity that tags along the rich tradition, making the new entity environment friendly, and therefore, sustainable, and establishing the lost connection to the world at large.

Indeed, the concealment of women's image was anticipated for societal purposes. The woman's voice was broadcast for the first time on the radio in 1963, merely three years prior to the advent of television. The women reluctantly venturing into broadcasting suggests that their representation on television would also be delayed. However, once women began to appear on television, their involvement started moderately, mainly restricted to commentary and hosting programs and news, mainly through programs focusing on women and children. Despite societal opposition to the inception of television, within few months the medium expanded in all directions, featuring female participation while adhering to stringent standards of modesty and decorum in appearance. Initially, women only displayed their hands in family programs. In the early beginnings, women were absent, but subsequently, television began to permit their involvement in audio through segments that exclusively displayed hands (Al-Shubayli, 2014).

1.4 The Transformations

The internet came to Saudi Arabia in the late 1990s and transformed how people got their news by focussing on filtered information. The Internet became available in 1999 (Al-Tawil, 2001), but it was filtered to keep out pornographic material and political content. By the 2000s, social media was an important platform for young Saudis to connect with individuals from all over the world and exhibit their creative side. Saudi Arabia is using social media platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and Snapchat to push for social media transformation while simultaneously preserving its cultural values. The General Authority for Media Regulation (GAMR) introduced new laws in 2025 that declared social media posts couldn't use offensive language or certain types of clothing.

This discussion pertains to a state that prohibited women from driving until 2018, despite neighbouring countries such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Kuwait having already normalised female driving. A state with a religious authority known as the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) had authority to track down, interrogate, detain, and prosecute individuals suspected of violating religious and moral codes. Strict gender segregation in public was enforced, business closures during prayer times were mandated, and women were pressured to adopt traditional dress. According to the International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 by the United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, they were also instructing and advising individuals to fulfil the religious obligations mandated by Islamic Sharia, while discouraging actions deemed impermissible by Sharia, as well as the adoption of detrimental customs, traditions, or heretical taboos. The jurisdiction of the CPVPV encompasses public gender interaction and illicit private contact between men and women; the practice or

exhibition of non-Muslim religions or the denigration of Islam; the display or sale of media that contravenes Islamic principles, including pornography; the production, distribution, or consumption of alcohol; the veneration of locations or celebration of events that are not aligned with sanctioned Islamic practices; the practice of sorcery for financial gain. In April 2016, Saudi Arabia's cabinet made a decision that limited the CPVPV's authority. This was a big step towards modernising. The move addressed the country's social openness, which could keep visitors coming. At that time, Saudi Arabia did not issue tourist visas, as the country was not open to tourists except for religious visits to the holy cities of Mecca and Madinah.

If we examine the geographic location of the Kingdom, it is surrounded by socially open countries and is known as a hub of tourism activities, such as the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Qatar. According to the World Tourism rankings, the United Arab Emirates was the sixth most popular destination for international tourists in terms of expenditure in 2024, where tourists are not required to wear traditional attire or cover their hair. Western-style clothing is allowed in public places like hotels, shopping centres, and on beaches. While people are expected to dress modestly in government offices and mosques and the consequences for not following these guidelines are usually much lighter comparable to what is applied in Saudi Arabia. In cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi, licensed hotels, bars, and clubs serve alcohol openly. Additionally, there are no restrictions on what tourists wear, except at mosques and religious sites, where modest dressing may be required. Qatar, which is competing with Saudi Arabia through its Vision 2030 initiative, gained international recognition after hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The country demonstrates openness in areas such as tourism, culture, heritage, and global events. Qatar actively seeks to position itself as a welcoming tourist and financial hub, investing in museums, festivals, public programming, and luxury tourism. Saudi Arabia is surrounded by tourism hotspots in the Middle East, necessitating rapid adaptations to achieve the goals of Vision 2030.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past decade, Saudi Arabia has shifted from characterising a strictly regulated and clerically sanctioned public sphere to examining the implications of top-down modernisation initiatives, state media strategies, and digital platforms are reshaping religion, culture and social dynamics. The political leadership of the kingdom is intentionally employing a range of economic, cultural and media to alter the legitimacy structures that have for centuries relied on the close relationship between the ruling family and the religious authorities. In parallel, digital communities and cultural creators are generating social conflicts that in practice can broaden social space despite the persistent political restrictions. Understanding this reconfiguration requires an analysis of three interrelated dynamics commonly discussed in the literature: state-directed modernisation underpinned by Vision 2030 and its investment framework; the adjustment of religious authority and moral governance; and the rapid commercialisation and industrialisation of culture, especially via films, festivals, and digital media platforms. The dynamics of these processes vary significantly among different social groups and geographical locations. Together, they both influence the digital media, and are also influenced by various AI driven platforms promoting collaboration and monitoring activities. The combination of these findings illustrates the concept of "moderation" within policy discourse and the practical consequences of "modernisation".

Vision 2030 serves as a significant reference point in the literature while also establishing a framework for the analysis. It functions not merely as an approach but as a broader policy framework that ties economic diversification to national image-making and an expanded vision of cultural openness (Sheline, A., & Ulrichsen, K. C., 2025). The instruments of the plan, including the Public Investment Fund (PIF), Giga-projects, and various national programs focused on tourism, entertainment, and enhancing quality of life, serve as clear indicators of modernisation. As a result, there have been new cinema halls, international music bonanzas, world-class sports events, and establishment of many cultural institutions. The net effect of these transitions signified a transformed public sphere that emphasizes consumption and spectacle (Public Investment Fund, 2023).

There have been many descriptions and coverages of what has been happening from different angles. Analysis of industrial and governmental policies indicates that state incentives and regulatory adjustments such as the establishment and enhancement of organizations like the General Commission for Audiovisual Media (GCAM), which introduced the ingress of private and foreign enterprises into the market, concurrently reshaped the production landscape (Alamri M., 2023). Simultaneously, the analysis of cultural production shows that media industries have become a testing ground for the reform agenda. (Derendinger & Frank, 2023) assert that Vision 2030's emphasis on economic diversification intrinsically favored creative industries like as cinema, television, music, and digital content. The analysis shows a contradiction: the state supports these

industries to cultivate national identity and augment soft power, while simultaneously enforcing control through regulatory measures. Modernization is permitted only to the degree that it can still be controlled, underscoring the constant role of statecraft through censorship organizations such as the (GCAM). This corresponds with previous research by Almakaty (2025), which highlighted that journalism in Saudi Arabia has historically functioned under governmental authority. While Vision 2030 introduces new opportunities for innovation, it does not fundamentally ease the existing control mechanisms. The existing literature on cultural industries demonstrates how alterations in policy have crystallized into new markets. A good example is the legal and administrative changes that made it possible for movie theaters to open again in 2018 after being banned since the 1970s. Film exhibition has emerged and the government supports it, creating new opportunities for domestic filmmakers, distributors, and exhibitors (Reuters, 2018).

The perspectives of Saudi youth on modernisation offer valuable insights into how society responds to state-led reforms. Saudi youth acknowledge the ongoing modernisation efforts; however, they generally view these changes as being imposed from outside rather than stemming from internal motivations. The way this perception is formed could impact the effectiveness of modernisation policies and their acceptance by the younger population (Alhumood, 2023). Equally, the consumption of foreign media has significantly influenced the formation of cultural identities in Saudi Arabia. (Khushaim, 2021) investigates the impact of the American media on Saudi youth, explaining that their exposure to foreign content has influenced their cultural perceptions and values. What we have observed shows the significant correlation between media consumption and cultural identity in the Saudi society which has witnessed rapid modernisation.

III. Research Questions

• How has the turn of events influenced the change of discourse in Saudi Arabia – taking the country from 'moderation' to 'modernisation'?

• Does this transition serve specific cultural functions which makes it possible to achieve the objectives of Vision 2030?

• What has been the media's role in bridging the gap between overtly focusing on religion and to now on modernisation?

• How are cultural identities being reconfigured through media consumption and production?

• In what ways does Saudi Arabia exemplify or challenge broader theories of modernisation, mediated religion, and cultural hybridity?

IV. Research Gaps

4.1 Existing Focus and Neglected Dimensions

Although Vision 2030 has been extensively discussed in policy analysis and economic literature, much of this work privileges material transformation—diversification, privatisation, and economic sustainability—over the symbolic and cultural dimensions of reform. Studies by policy institutions and international media tend to portray Vision 2030 as a technocratic blueprint rather than a cultural narrative. Scholarly attention has largely examined the political economy of Saudi reform (e.g., Hertog 2017; Ramady 2018) or its geopolitical implications (e.g., Gause 2019), yet there remains a significant gap in analysing how culture and media operate as tools of ideological negotiation within this framework.

4.2 Underexplored Role of Media and Identity Formation

Many of the existing studies only touch the surface when it comes to how the Saudi state talks about modernity or turns it into something people are expected to value. What's still missing is a closer look at the actual discursive work happening through media especially the digital sphere, the new entertainment scene, and the cultural events that the state now supports so heavily. Scholars such as Al-Rasheed (2021) and Menoret (2020) have unpacked the political centralisation behind Vision 2030, but they give less space to the way these reforms are packaged and circulated symbolically. That part shows up in films, in influencer trends, in the visual language of "progress," and it hasn't been studied with the same depth.

4.3 Theoretical Blind Spots

There's also a gap in the literature when it comes to applying ideas from cultural studies, media theory, and postcolonial modernisation to Saudi Arabia. Most studies rely on Western models of secular modernity and don't really explore how the Saudi state shapes modernisation through religious authority and cultural nationalism. We have definitely benefitted from the ideas of 'Cultural hegemony' (a la Gramsci) which ruled the Saudi Arabia once. The idea of Michel Foucault on the issues of discourse and power have also helped us in understanding the transition. What Benedict Anderson once called the 'Imagined communities' has come to

be almost real thanks to the Vision 2030. The approach has mediated modernity—where state narratives circulate widely but are also negotiated and sometimes challenged through cultural production.

The Present Study's Contribution

This research, therefore, addresses the gap between policy rhetoric and media representation. The idea is that Vision 2030 isn't just about economics, it's also a kind of cultural story about building the nation. Modernisation doesn't just happen through reforms; it's imagined, acted out, and shared through media stories that mix religion with global ideas of modern life. To really see how people experience this opening up, we need audience studies over time with lots of people with different ages, regions, genders, social classes. It could also help to compare what's happening in Saudi Arabia with other Gulf states, like the UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain, to figure out if these patterns are unique or part of a bigger regional trend in how states manage religious reform.

What is the Central Thesis?

The research examines significant reforms in areas such as media, women's driving, religion, and tourism. There has been a nuanced cultural change in this country but the discussions have not focused on that aspect. Clearly, what have changed are many, including family dynamics, private religious practices, and rural transformations. One needs to conduct further studies to understand the long-term effects. In what ways do generational identities evolve in response to prolonged cultural transformations? What new expressions of religiosity, blended identities, or forms of resistance arise in this context?

V. METHDOLOGY

This study implements a qualitative research design, focusing on secondary sources to examine the evolving media landscape and cultural changes in Saudi Arabia in relation to Vision 2030. The data set is constructed from a wide range of materials, including:

- Journal articles that comment on or analyse research on Saudi media or Changes;
- Textbooks, research journal articles, web pages, blogs, etc.
- Books that interpret and analyse the contemporary image of the Kingdom;
- Political commentaries (as projected by the mass media);
- Dissertations and Reports;
- Newspaper editorials/opinion pieces;
- Government publications;
- Public records;
- Historical and statistical documents;
- Business documents;

VI. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

One of the most evident results is how visible modernisation has emerged in Saudi Arabia. The Vision 2030 Annual Report in 2023 and The Public Investment Fund (PIF) disclosures show lots of real changes, such as reopening movie theatres after being banned for decades, starting cultural and film festivals like the Red Sea Film Festival and Riyadh Comedy Festival besides building entertainment centres such as Riyadh Boulevard City, Riyadh Boulevard World, Jeddah Superdome and Jeddah Promenade as well as starting huge projects for leisure and tourism like NEOM and Diriyah Project (Vision 2030 Annual Report, 2023; Public Investment Fund, 2023). Saudi Arabia was formally confirmed as the host nation by FIFA for the FIFA World Cup in 2034. Media coverage validates not only government statements but also public events, such as film in cinemas, concerts in Riyadh, Jeddah and Al-Ula, and advertising campaigns aimed at changing people's behaviour being an expat or a local resident (Reuters, 2018; Time, 2018). This visibility is crucial because it does not only influence laws and regulations, it also impacts what people think, speak and believe. As culture becomes a part of everyday life through venues, public art and performances, the symbolic weight of modernisation grows. People don't think about it anymore, they just deal with it every day.

Also, modernisation is quite controversial and always limited, NGO reports like (Freedom House, 2023 and Amnesty International, 2023) show that people can express themselves in the media to an extended limit. Criticism of religion, open political opposition, or assertions that threaten the legitimacy of the state are nevertheless risky. And in areas that can be commodified, like entertainment, tourism and advertising, media reforms are allowed. However, political discourse is still very tightly controlled. The women's right to drive movement was praised in the media, but it also put activists at risk of being tracked online and even punished by the law (Khalil & Storie, 2020). So, modernisation is not a free pass, and it has limits, even if those limits

are not clear. It seems that the Kingdom is in a state of negotiation and trying to find a balance between public display and private silence.

Another dispute line exists between tradition and modernity. Religious authorities are restricted and centralised rather than removed. The country is progressively framing modernisation as compatible with a moderate form of Islam, and it is giving more attention to religious voices that endorse the modernisation narrative.

The concern here is about how individuals deal with these immense changes in their daily lives and how modernisation and religion come together through the media. Youth and women are navigating modernisation through creative means. Digital platforms and social media enable individuals to explore new norms, for example, women are posting photographs of themselves driving, engaging in artistic expression and social life as long as sharing opinions while also being highly cognisant and aware of the hazards associated with boundary violations (Khalil & Storie, 2020). Hence, the social media usage results in both empowerment through self-presentation and access to global discourses as well as stress, which is a result of fear of verdicts, surveillance and conservative backlash (Hammad & Alqarni 2021). Young Saudis often embrace reforms as opportunities for personal growth, but elderly conservatives are still not sure about them and are sceptical. And still, among the young people, excitement is somehow muted by knowing where the red lines are.

Religious identity continues to be essential in these negotiations. People in Saudi Arabia don't see modernisation as a replacement of religious practice; they see it as a way of integration. Religious commentary and media content frequently depict modernisation as the "Islamic modernisation," claiming that reforms are consistent with religious teachings. A significant portion of the state's legitimacy continues to rely on religious symbolism. At the same time media creates new venues for cultural expression, religion is not replaced; rather, it is reinterpreted with respect to those spaces.

As Saudi Arabia puts its local reforms on display for the world, culture starts to work as both a commodity and a kind of diplomatic tool. Concerts, sports events, and other entertainment are licensed in ways that are supposed to bring in tourist money and make the reforms seem more legitimate. But some people see these events differently as they argue it's just a way to distract from limits on freedom of speech or ongoing human rights issues. It becomes clear that modernisation here isn't only about culture. It's tied up with politics and the economy, too.

Modernisation in Saudi Arabia is also about rebranding the country and changing how it is seen around the world. The reforms in Vision 2030 are important for "improving the Kingdom's global reputation" (Vision 2030 Annual Report, 2023). Hosting of Formula One races, or International art biennales, and large scale Music festivals all contribute to this curated effort. The idea is not merely to show one's economic clout, but also about establishing the Kingdom as an alternative cultural space.

There are both similarities and differences between Saudi Arabia's path to modernisation and that of the United Arab Emirates. The UAE, like Saudi Arabia, saw cultural liberalisation as a way to diversify its economy. Dubai's new image as a worldwide cultural hub shows how infrastructure and spectacle can make changes that seem normal. But Saudi Arabia has a more complicated theological and societal structure. Saudi Arabia's societal change is much more sudden than the UAE's. It has been known as an international hub for decades. And that is why Saudi modernisation is so controversial. The UAE serves as both a model and a competitor for Saudi Arabia. At the same time, because Mecca and Medina are sacred sites, the Kingdom has to maintain its role as the guardian of Islamic identity while pursuing modernisation. This dual responsibility creates unique challenges, as reforms must show that modernisation can coexist with Islam rather than conflict with it.

These findings add some new angles to how we think about media, religion, and culture. For one, they show that the usual idea—economic growth leading straight to political liberalisation—isn't so simple. In Saudi Arabia, modernisation is managed carefully: people see more cultural openness, but political control stays in place. The media plays two roles at once. Social media gives people space to explore identity and express themselves, but at the same time, rules and monitoring clearly limit what can happen. Another point is that religion doesn't disappear even as culture shifts. Instead of moving toward secularisation, Saudi media uses state platforms to show that religion can go hand in hand with entertainment and cultural life. It's a kind of cultural mix—global and local influences together—but in a way the state controls.

VII. Conclusion

The study shows that Saudi Arabia is somewhere between its past and the future it wants to build. Vision 2030 has brought modernisation into daily life, and people now see the Kingdom differently. It isn't just about oil or pilgrimage anymore; it's trying to be a place for entertainment, tourism, and culture. But all of this is tightly managed. Political speech and criticism of religion still have clear boundaries. The changes are real, but the obstacles are real as well.

Modernisation isn't a straight line toward liberalisation; it's more like something that develops over time and in fits and starts. The government mixes cultural openness with political control, and people work out what it means to live in this changing world by experimenting with new identities online, joining cultural events, and adjusting some traditions—but they still know the boundaries. Religion hasn't disappeared. If anything, it's been reshaped to fit ideas of "moderation" and "modern Islam." This means that we cannot solely look at Saudi Arabia's modernisation through the lens of economics or policy. It also has to do with symbols, daily life experiences and the continual process of figuring out what things signify. These developments can make the youth in Saudi Arabia feel both empowered and limited at the same time. They can be an opportunity to be part of a more open cultural environment, but they can also remind them of the limits that still exist. These developments are quite exciting for some people, and they are frightening and threatening for some others and for a lot of people, they are a mix of all at the same time. Saudi Arabia is still an odd combination of freedom and control, empowerment and restriction, tradition and reconfiguration.

The story of the Kingdom is still being told. Not only will the government's plans decide whether these changes lead to lasting cultural diversity or remain a carefully managed spectacle, but also how regular Saudis keep negotiating, resisting and accepting the change will play a role. The evidence currently indicates that Saudi Arabia is modernising.

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