

**A STUDY OF SAUDI ARABIA'S SOCIAL
COMMENTARY BASED ON PHOTOGRAPHY
ARTWORKS**

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COMMENTARY BASED ON PHOTOGRAPHY
ARTWORKS**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAODAS	Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IP	Interpretative Phenomenological
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
MENAM	Middle East, North Africa, and Mediterranean
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

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KAJIAN KOMENTAR SOSIAL KARYA SENI FOTOGRAFI ARAB SAUDI

ABSTRAK

Jurugambar mempunyai kreativiti artistik mereka untuk menggambarkan komen sosial yang relevan tentang trend sosial global. Dalam hal ini, jurugambar warga Saudi juga tidak terkecuali. Berbanding dengan negara maju lain, fotografi di Arab Saudi telah menarik sedikit perhatian saintifik dan antarabangsa. Oleh itu, kajian ini berusaha untuk menyatukan komunikasi dengan meneroka gambaran ulasan sosial oleh jurugambar Saudi ketika mereka bergerak untuk mengubah masyarakat. Kajian ini akan menentukan persepsi umum terhadap gambar yang dihasilkan oleh jurugambar Saudi. Karya seni artis Saudi dari pelbagai galeri seni di Arab Saudi akan dikumpul dan dianalisis dengan menemu bual dan mengedarkan soal selidik kepada orang ramai. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah kualitatif dan kuantitatif untuk meneroka, mentafsir dan menganalisis imej. Maklum balas daripada penonton akan dianalisis oleh NVivo dan SPSS untuk mengenal pasti topik berulang dan muncul yang penonton fahami melalui imej ulasan sosial. Tambahan pula, kajian ini akan menyediakan konteks komunikatif untuk menggambarkan komen sosial oleh jurugambar Saudi sebagai gambaran tentang idea, amalan dan sikap artis Saudi.

A STUDY OF SAUDI ARABIA'S SOCIAL COMMENTARY BASED ON PHOTOGRAPHY ARTWORKS

ABSTRACT

Photographers have their artistic creativity to express relevant social comments about the global social trend. In this respect, the current Saudi photographers have no exception. Compared to other developed countries, photography in Saudi Arabia has attracted little scientific and international attention. Therefore, this study seeks to unify communication by exploring the depiction of social commentary by Saudi photographers as they move to change the society. This study would determine the general perception of photographs produced by Saudi photographers. The artworks of Saudi artists from various art galleries in Saudi Arabia would be collected and analyzed by interviewing and distributing questionnaires to the public. This study utilized qualitative and quantitative methods to explore, interpret and analyze images. Feedback from the audience would be analyzed by NVivo and SPSS in order to identify recurring and emerging topics that the audience understands through social commentary images. Furthermore, this study would provide the communicative context for portraying social comments by Saudi photographers as an insight into the ideas, practices and attitudes of Saudi artists.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This introductory chapter presents an overview of the rationale that triggered the researcher to conduct the study. Beginning from the historical evolution of photography as an art form, background of the study has been underscored with a specific focus on the use of photographic art as a tool to produce socially relevant and evocative commentary. Background of the study presents an elaborative perspective on the strength and viability of photographic images to express social commentary which not only captures and depicts what actually exists in the society, but also is suggestive of the needed change from the people in the society. Furthermore, purview of the background also explains the superior ground that, in comparison to other artistic expressions, photographic representations have in relation to modelling and eliciting actuality of the world as it exists. Additionally, photographers use images to convey broader and socially relevant plus evocative comments on the prevalent or desired state of affairs. In this backdrop, current study has been constructed with an object to explore the extent and nature of social commentary that Saudi Arabian photographers make through the products of their camera lenses. Last part of the first chapter of the study elucidates research objective, statement of the research problem, research questions, significance and scope of the study, limitations, and overview of the thesis.

1.1 Current Study

In today's world, photographic images abound all over the media and Internet to the extent that photography has surfaced as a new, robust, and authentic form of artistic expression. Photographers, thought to be the people who have more equipment and artistic sense than those who have knowledge to operate a camera, have refined

attention as well as acumen to capture whatever that intrigues their aesthetic and intellectual faculties, and use their images to convey larger and broader meanings (Cotton, 2009). Photographic art entails a concrete example of how artistic expressions and social trends have been such a continuation to influence each other. Camera has become one of the most powerful tool and the image has surpassed the 'word' in as much as its' power to disseminate real life, evocative, and stirring messages are concerned (Bogre, 2011). Where writers and other literary artists have to write down long narratives, punctuate the to assert their idea, photographers simply picturize the scenario of their interest and disseminate it. The resultant impact that images harness among public outweigh the narratives; a point that is evident from the ever-increasing usage of photographic images along the written manuscripts in popular media.

Conventional forms of art have long been a crisp tool to comment on prevalent conditions, thoughts, ideations, and cultural context; however, photographic art signify comparatively new, yet most effective form of art through which observant photographers capture real-life images utilizing camera lenses and their keen sense of selection (Christman, 2008).

Despite the criticism on photographic images as lower degree of artistic representation, contemporary photographers rely on this particular field as the most effective and robust means of highlighting social issues and engaging wider public in meaningful discourse. Photographic art, according to Freund (1980), is the concrete example of interaction between artistic expression and social norms. Beyond the advertising purposes in newspapers, images carry and convey deeper meanings to trigger thinking processes amongst the audience. Since open verbal criticism is not encouraged in Saudi Arabia and is even suppressed methodically and systematically,

sane and sensitive individuals use other alternatives to express their views and engage other individuals in social discourse (Chung, 2012). This study seeks to understand how contemporary photographic artists of Saudi Arabia are using photographic images to comment on socio cultural circumstances of the country in relation to social norms, mores, cultural manifestations, and polity overall.

1.2 Research Background

Saudi Arabia is well known Arabian state all around the world as the largest oil producer globally, a country that houses' Muslim World's most revered religious monuments, a leader in regional trade and cross-regional diplomacy, the most important player of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Nonetheless, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has been prone to a broad range of stereotypes. Camel rides and races, clichés' attached to the abundance of oil and wealth, and the country's alleged support for extremists have been facades that international actors attribute to the name of KSA (Hemming, 2010). Notably, in today's world of media and information communication technology, scarce attention has been paid to the soft image of the country, its rich cultural traditions, its attentive, yet strict governance patterns, and most of all, its visibly elaborate and self-evident norms of the society.

What majority of the world has often ignored of Saudi Arabia is the mushrooming cultural wave that new and younger generations of Saudis have shouldered across national landscape since the turn of the twentieth century (Mohammad, 2013). Turning towards dynamism, the Saudi society is consistently evolving, with a particular focus on modernization, openness, and innovative modes of living (Murphy, 2013). Vision 2030 of the KSA envisages a modern Saudi Arabia with open trade and comparatively liberalized society, and incumbent Saudi Leader,

King Salman, has introduced far-reaching reforms in both trade and social fabric of the Saudi Society (Stapleton, 2010). With broadening space and eased regulatory restrictions, more and more Saudi artists are expressing their ideas and conceptions of the Saudi society, culture and are highlighting positive and liberating aspects of the country that has embarked the course of globalized existence.

Art created by Saudi artists serves as a paean to the Saudi culture which has its strong tribal roots with its indigenous norms and mores. Artistic expression in the Kingdom has adapted many forms, including music, painting, poetry, and photography among others. Photographic and picturesque art has gained enormous attention in Saudi Arabian artistic arena due to the exponential interest that Saudi youth as well as artists take in the field (Murphy, 2013). Despite that conservative norms of the Saudi society have been critical of picturizing others and concerns related to individual privacy are of paramount importance in the country, it has become a common observation that people, both males and females, roam around the Kingdom's street holding camera and searching for perfect shots (Murphy, 2013). Popularity of people with the use of smartphone cameras and the increasing use of social media applications, such as Instagram, have further strengthened this trend (Stapleton, 2010). Such interactive platforms allow lay people to become the artist as well as the audience simultaneously and contribute to the ongoing interactive gallery of art.

Painting, poetic verses, Art, and more recently, photography constitute the most commonly used forms of artistic expression owing much to the explosion of figurative representations, being used all around the specter of marketing, publicity, and even presence (Sontag, 2008). Photographers in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia are also following this course and are contributing their creations to assert a powerful,

meaningful and personalized perspective of the 21st century Saudi Arabia. The idea of Saudi identity and the image of Kingdom's culture that Saudi photographers portray are sometimes whole, at times under construction, and at others, the one that is being lost (Yaacob et al., 2013). Cumulatively, artists tend to question the idea, nature, and the manifestations of Saudi Arabian social and cultural identity and seek to correlate, or otherwise, compare it within a broader global context (Amirsadeghi, 2010).

With the burgeoning artistic landscape of Saudi Arabia, particularly in the field of photographic art, it is of primal importance to explore how Saudi Arabia is seen from the eyes and perceptions of Saudi photographers, rather than following the artistic commentary made by European artists and their middle eastern apprentices (Amirsadeghi, 2010). Traditionally, Western artists and their accompanying Middle Eastern fellows have been portraying the typical and even false *Aladdin*, or *A Thousand and One Nights* image of the Arabian landscape; however, contrary to this romanticized notion, it is more important to explore what actually exists and how local artists perceive the area, its policy, and society.

Where contemporary photographers in KSA are keen and sensitive enough to express their criticism of the norms and practices that they consider as unnecessary, obtuse, or effervescent, many of them have captured images to express hospitality, religious norms, traditions of the country, the element of kindness, blend of tradition, morality, and modernity (Murphy, 2013). Such contemporary pictures which are brimming with realistic commentary presented an image of the Kingdom that is far removed from the stereotypes of Arab Sultans.

This study focus on the contemporary, rather than classical photographic art, created by Saudi Arabian photographers, which particularly focus on Saudi society, cultural norms, ways and patterns of living, contemporary social trends, and streams of thoughts that dominates minds of Saudi artists as well as general public. Focus on these aspects will help the researcher to study the selected images from an interpretative paradigm and observe what commentary artists make through their artistic creation and what could be their perspective towards modern Saudi Arabia. The notion of art in contemporary photography in general, will be explained at the outset of the study before proceeding to the specific photographic art the Middle East as well as Saudi Arabia. This explanation of the art background will provide substantive foreground to comprehend how, via medium and the content, selected Saudi photographers express their views including thoughts to comment on the country's society and the way of living including the thoughts of the Saudi people. Keeping in view the human and resource limitations, this interpretative analysis focuses on the works of the representative artists of the Saudi Arabian photographic art.

1.3 Definitions and Concepts

1.3.1 Photography

The art of photography entails the notion of a camera being used to capture or record images of the actual scenes with the object to store, remember, redisplay, analyze, and understand and appreciate life and its circumstances in a better way. Photographic representation of the actual scene allows the viewers to gain a better comprehension of the profound events and happenings of life as it enables the viewers to view it repetitively and apply their critical thinking conveniently. As a medium of

art, photography has enormous scope for capturing human emotions and social conditions which future generations and contemporaries can view and understand in accordance with their respective bent of mind. Thus, photographic reserves and the art serves as a historical record. In any span of time, people can analyze the images and understand how the life has been in the past. Apart from obscura of the camera, photography owes much to the photosensitive layer; while specific techniques and methodologies are employed to determine how the photosensitive layer interacts with the light to produce representative images of the real-life scenes.

Scholarly explanations of the photography vary across the scholars and range from simplistic elucidations, such as “drawing from light” (Ingledeu, 1994, p11), to highly meaningful definitions, such as “the only language understood in all regions of the world” (Helmut, 1962, p. 199). Some of the definitions of photography are stated as below:

- Ingledeu (1994) relies on technical aspects to elucidate meanings of the photography, regarding it as a “painting with light” drawing heavily from the Greek name for the brightest star Phosphorus, wherein the prefix ‘phos’ means ‘created by light’ (p.11).
- Abbot (1951) distinguished the art of photography from painting, symphony, dance, or a mere pretty picture, and focused more on its artistic aspects, regarding it “a significant document, a penetrating statement, which can be described in a very simple term – selective” (p. 21).
- Helmut (1962) explains photography “the only *language* understood in all parts of the world, and bridging all nations and cultures, it links the

family of man. Independent of political influence - where people are free - it reflects truthfully life and events, allows us to share in the hopes and despair of others, and illuminates political and social conditions. We become the eye-witnesses of the humanity and inhumanity of mankind..." (Helmut, 1962, p.199).

Badsha (1989) further explains that "The camera... has been there to record inhumanity, injustice and exploitation" (p. 55).

1.3.2 Documentary Photography

English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham originally used the term 'documentary' to explain a kind of photography that documents real life situation and provides substantive information and knowledge for the awareness of general public as well as the target population. Bentham further explained that documentary photography sheds light on the socially important issues and events and capitalizes upon visual understanding of the target population.

- La Grange (2007) explains documentary photography as a field of photographic art that "covers a wide range of activities" including capturing potentially controversial activities happening across the lives of peoples (p. 239).
- John Grierson (1926) employed the term documentary photography to delineate Hollywood fiction and realistic documentaries on the basis of truthfulness of the content.
- Stott (1973) highlights the importance of the content of photograph rather than its form, style, or medium; and regards it as a "defying

comment” that seeks to impose its meanings through the presentation of evidence and facts.

- Newburry (1999) regards documentary photography as inseparable from photo-journalism as both of the media serve same purpose by playing the role of “informant by artist” and portraying cultural and community information” (p.21).
- Focusing on its functional aspects, Hatting (2012) explains documentary photography as a form of photography that serves dual purpose --- of elucidating photographers’ intention and playing a strong role in society.
- The Life Library’s Documentary Photography (1972) defines it as a depiction of the actual world with the intention to convey something that the photographers finds of critical importance, having the purpose of making the viewers understand that.

1.3.3 Social Documentary Photography

As a critical genre of photographic art, social documentary photography has its focus on social groups and classes, and shows the prevailing social circumstances in their true form for the information and enlightenment of the population. It portrays the target social group in the light of socio-economic and cultural aspects. Furthermore, social documentary photography highlights the plight of underprivileged and disadvantaged factions of the society, focusing on the living and working conditions, and reveals the discrimination and unjust treatment that those factions persevere (Keeley, n.d.).

1.3.4 Social Commentary Photography

As is evident from the term itself, social commentary photography portrays the contemporary social and cultural influences on a society from the artist's perspective. Furthermore, subjects of the social commentary photography may range from local to global level, and it presents socially relevant communiques in a way which the artist chooses according to one's own intentions and objectives (Green & Lowry, 2009; Moss, 2008). Essentially, social commentary itself is an art as it requires the commenter to analyze social undercurrents in accordance with one's mind and knowledge and come up with socially meaningful comments on the prevailing situation. Most often, it may assume a form of propaganda, meant to introduce, promote, justify, or confront a social change by informing general public about the nature and implications of the change through photographic representations. Pendergrast (2002) asserts that photography that elicits social commentary presents a blend of documentary photography, concepts of social change, and new technologies.

1.3.5 Social Action

In sociology, social action connotes the act or attempt that focus on the actions and reactions of individuals or social groups and is meant to introduce, promote, or oppose any socially relevant trend (Fadul & Estoque, 2010). Explaining the nature of social action, Max Weber propounds that the action that takes into account behavior of the individuals and is oriented on the basis of that behavior becomes a social action. Kotler (1971) adds the purposive dimension to the Weberian explanation of the social action and explains it as a collective action meant to mitigate or resolve some social problem.

1.3.6 Social Awareness

Each society has a collective set of knowledge and experiences, which serve as the guideline for social actors. Holistically, social awareness refers to the collective consciousness and awareness of a group of people or community about some social situation (Kotler, 1971). This social knowledge leads to the actual understanding of the prevalent social currents and serves as the reservoir to derive surround and socially relevant recommendations and advice to meet prevailing and future needs of the society.

1.3.7 Message

In general, a message connotes the content of a communication between the communicating parties. Furthermore, the channel and the content collectively constitute the extent and nature of the message, thus, is dependent upon the particular context in which it is relayed or received. Verbal and visual symbols are used to formulate messages in such a way that those can be effectively understood and digested by the target receiver(s). Lester (2012) asserts that messages that are formulated in form of visual images are highly compelling. Thus, photography and imagery add to the strength and efficacy of the messages.

1.3.8 Artist

Akin to other art forms, photography offers an enormous diversity. Practitioners of this art form ascribe a range of titles, for instance, art photographer, photographic artists amongst others. A learned person having mastery or skill and follower of a pursuit in which the required skill is acquired through. Study or practice is known as the artist. Such individuals create their art-pieces with the object to

showcase their skill set and creativity and cultivates the field of fine arts. Photographic artists create their works to display those in public sphere and are capable of articulating meaningful messages with the object to promote their work while at the same time implant important messages in the minds and perceptions of their audience and the public.

1.4 Problem Statement

Johnson (2004) expressed that art speaks louder than words. In modern era, photographic images have a powerful medium of communication across the world and photographers have used this medium as a tool to trigger social changes, for instance, in Arab Spring. During the Arab Spring, photographs captured by photojournalists, such as Remi Ochlik, were disseminated socially relevant and instigating messages across the Internet through modern means of communication which then provided a strong impetus to the movements (Werman, 2013). Photographers create socially relevant photographs with images containing full of meaning as an alternative to trigger changes in people's attitude towards critical issues relating to ethics, political culture, moral norms, and even religious thoughts (Bright, 2011). Given the multifaceted and lasting commentary that photographs can convey, understanding of the message by the audience helps them not only to understand and appreciate the photography, but also enables them to further expand their intellectual and sensory horizons (Werman, 2013).

Despite that photographic art has been widely accepted and favored as a tool for social commentary, this particular medium has been scarcely used, let alone encouraged, in the Islamic polity of Saudi Arabia (Murphy, 2013). Art entails a creative phenomenon, whereas suppression or regulation of artistic expression tends

to demean artistic genius, leading eventually towards gradual destruction of creative faculties (Werman, 2013).

Saudi governments have been consistently following oppressive and strictly regulated policies to keep dissenting voices quiet. Furthermore, religious norms discourage picturizing of personals; a phenomenon that has been manifested itself in the form of general dislike and even disapproval of the photography in the Kingdom. Sign boards such as *Photography Prohibited* (Figure 1.1) are a common observation in the streets and many parks of the country.



Figure 1.1: *Photography Prohibited*; Courtesy by Moe Kahtan (2013)

As one of the natural outcomes of restricted social space for artists, photographers have to undergo a form of self-censorship while capturing socially vocal photographs (Cravero, 2017). To date, there have been insufficient of information on social commentary photography in Saudi Arabia although there are photographic artists in Saudi Arabia who produced social commentary photography for the public or audience in this country. A few is known among the audience or not being known at all, it is a query whether the audience recognize the being of social commentary photography and whether they understand the message through social

commentary photography by these artists. As a consequence, communication gap between the artist and the audience exist that become in the form of acceptance and understanding.

Therefore, this study proceed to discover whether social commentary photography images in Saudi Arabia was being understood or accepted by the Saudi public and whether it could enhance change in the society on social issues, likewise to the western countries. This study would find out the photographic artists, their artworks and determine public understanding on the social commentary photographic images by the local photographic artists.

1.5 Research Aim

This study aims to provide a photographic development model that can increase the use of social commentary images among local communities to create social change in Saudi Arabia.

1.6 Research Objective

Through the problem statement and broader context of social commentary in fine arts photography, this study has secured the objectives as follows:

- i. To identify Saudi Arabia's truly social commentary photography artists.
- ii. To investigate the practices and the themes undertaken by social commentary photography artists to make their photography as a tool of communication.

- iii. To determine the extent of understanding and acceptance by the public on social commentary photographs produced by the Saudi Arabia's photographic artists.

1.7 Research Questions

- i. Who are the Saudi truly social commentary photography artists?
- ii. What are the practices and themes undertaken by social commentary photography artists to make their photography as the tool of communication?
- iii. What are the extent of understanding and acceptance by the public on social commentary photograph produced by the Saudi artists?

1.8 Significance of the Study

- i. To classify the photography artists in different field of expertise according to their various themes.
- ii. This study lined up the Saudi Social Commentary Photographic Artists for future reference by other researchers in the same field.
- iii. To promote photography as a tool of change; to change the way the society think or act to certain issues. The image in photography is a speechless communication presented in a way of visual communication
- iv. This research could raise and nurture production of quality photographic images in Saudi Arabia to make meaningful images in social commentary.
- v. The findings of this research could be used as an academic reference on the similar topic.

- vi. This study will contribute as a scholarly evidence on the contemporary social commentary photography artwork of Saudi Arabia.

1.9 Scope of Study and Area of Focus

- i. This study focuses only on Saudi respondents who live in Saudi Arabia.
- ii. This study focuses on photographic artworks from Saudi Social Commentary Photographic Artists.
- iii. This study focuses only on Saudi Social Commentary Photographic Artists with time frame of the selected artists.

1.10 Limitations of study

- i. Costumes, traditions and the nature of conservative Saudi society is a reasons for the lake of art photographers interested in the social commentary aspect.
- ii. Photographic art is a comparatively newer field of scholarly enquirers and, therefore, limited research work is available on this specific aspect of Saudi art landscape.
- iii. The researcher has chosen photographic artworks of the artists who are living, have public recognition, and their works have been exhibited in museums of the KSA.

1.11 Delimitations of Study

- i. Social commentary photography is not always available everywhere in public.

- ii. Lack of support to travel distant regions of KSA and collect sample artworks created by artists who may have different perspectives towards photographic art and social commentary.
- iii. Lack of existing literature on Saudi social commentary photography is another major limitation of the present study.

1.11.1 Research Conceptual Framework as Applicable to the Current Study

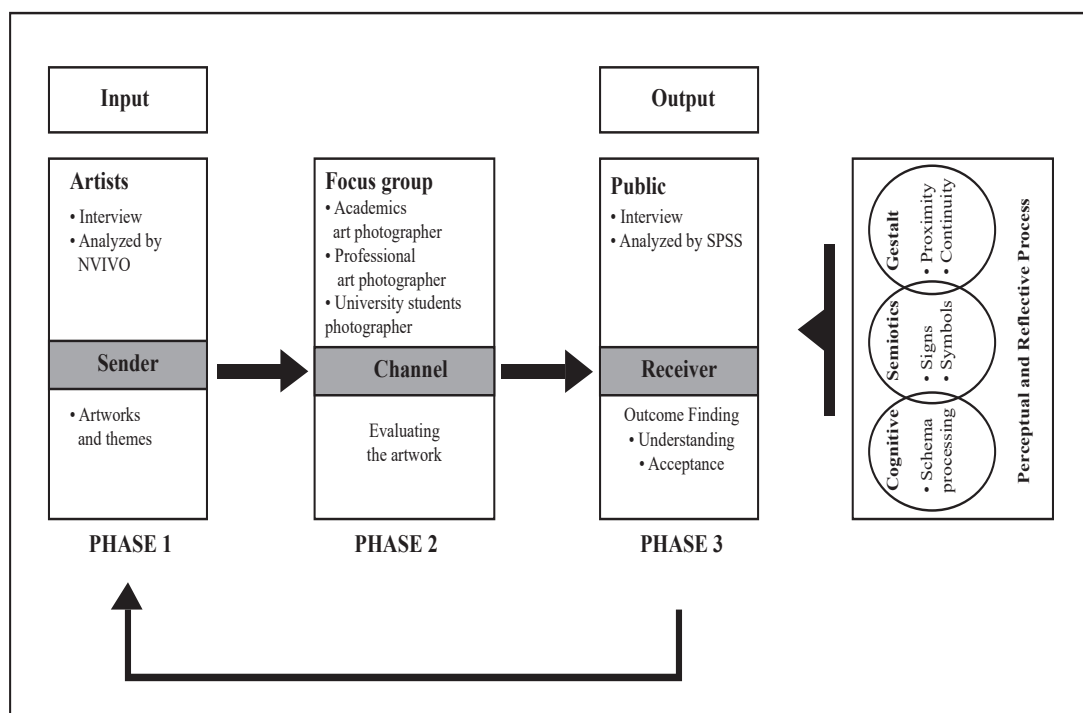


Figure 1.2: A Conceptual Research Framework of the current study

Essentially, current study seeks to identify Saudi truly social commentary photographic artists and explore how their socially relevant photographic art is perceived and interpreted by the recipients --- the Saudi public. To attain these core objectives, this study takes recourse to the theories of communication, perception and sensation that explains the process of communicating messages to the receiver and how the receiver understands and responds to the received messages, respectively.

Given that the Schramm's model as mentioned in chapter 2 of Communication highlights the importance of three core elements that are critical to the process of communication, namely, the sender, channel, and the receiver; this theoretical framework for the current study utilizes these elements in following manner and context.

1.11.1(a) Elements of Communication Theory

Sender: In the current scenario, the dispatchers are Saudi photographic artists who make artistic images that are socially meaningful and socially meaningful (Phase 1).

Channel: Refers to the medium that the sender uses to formulate an individual's message and transmit it through the channel with the object to deliver it to the target audience. The channel in this study is a number of people under the name of the focus group, and its function is to nominate a number of artworks and then present them to the public (Phase 2).

Receiver: For the purpose of this study, recipient refers to any person who sees, understands, or at least attempts to understand, interprets, attempts to explain, responds to, or attempts to respond to images created by selected Saudi photographers. The recipient in this study are the public (Phase 3).

1.11.1(b) Sensual and Perceptual Theories

Notably, sensual and perceptual theories of communication, such as Gestalt principles, Semiotics, and Cognitive perspectives of communication have been

integrated in the study to explain the perceptual and reflective processes as those are carried out on the part of receiver of the message --- audience and public in this case.

As explained in following chapter, Gestalt theory of communication rely majorly on the certain principles whereby the audience or the receiver of the message perceive visual object in its wholistic and partial perspectives in order to make a better sense and create or deduce meanings. After gaining a sense of the object and background of the visual images, receivers/viewers employ diverse ranging cognitive processes to process the information using informational schema they already have acquired through their past social and cognitive experiences. Here Schemas refers to the collectivities of the information and experience to which the viewers have been exposed in a meaningful way and they have processed those experiences using their cognitions and that has been a part of their conscious and unconscious memory reserve. On being exposed to new visual stimuli, the viewers tend to compare or align new input with the stored schema and seek to make a sense of the stimuli. This is where their cognitive processing takes the charge of the process and they come out with an initiation of the perception toward the visual stimuli.

Another perspective, namely Semiotics, also governs how the receivers and the public process visual input in form of artistic images. Using a variety of clues, including iconic, indexical, and symbolic clues, semiotic perspective emphasizes the relevance and importance of symbolism and symbolic clues which the viewers process with the object to make a better and relatable sense of the visual stimuli.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The second chapter of this study presents a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the use of photographic art as a tool to express social commentary. The chapter begins with a general introduction to photography as a historical and contemporary expression of art and its effectiveness as the most elaborate, systemic, and representative art form. Transitioning towards the need, effectiveness, and expanse of the relevant, meaningful commentary, the chapter will provide a concise yet elaborative purview of how and what photographers capture and why they capture in a particular yet generalisable perspective. Generalizability of the content and the message preserve the real sense of the art piece, the making of which has had its toll on the expertise, equipment, persistence, and resilience of the photographer, who acts as the sole observer, interpreter, as well as the creator of the socially or culturally relevant meaning. Later, the review will shed light on the prevalence and nature of social commentary in Saudi Arabia, focusing on artists and photographic images that convey visible and meaningful social commentary.

2.2 Photographic Art, Photography, and Art

Since the capture of first photograph in 1826 captured by Nicephore Niepce, numerous intermediary developments, such as Daguerre Process, negative development, and development of solution to carry out wet collodion process, refined the procedure as well as tools that complement photography (Pendergrast, 2002). During its earlier developments, painters and sketchers regarded the ability to capture

any moment of one's choosing in camera and paper as a threat to the sway of their hand-made paintings and recreations. Initially appalled by the idea and offerings of the photography, artistic community feared that cameras would soon replace realistic painting art (Bright, 2011), while general public regarded it a spectacular feat to capture snapshots of their real lives. With increasing usage and modern innovations in the art of customizing and operating camera, photographers found systemic as well as operational support to capture real life images, which not only elicit scenic detail of the event but also satiate aesthetic aspirations of the critics as well as general audience (Werman, 2013).

At the onset of photography, it has long been considered as perfect documentary medium which projects unadulterated and authentic replicas of the subject of interest. Given the mechanical nature of the medium and operations involved in capturing images, photographers had little manipulative role except selection of the scene of interest and operating cameras (Barret, 2000). Before 1900s, photography as art has rarely been acknowledged; however, beginning of the twentieth century witnessed revolutionary technological advancements, including digital photography, fastest means of sharing images, and means of interactive communication with others who have similar interests (Bright, 2011; Barret, 2000). The traditional conception of the photography, one which meant to simply record life and present it as objectively as possible, gradually gave way to the modern use of camera lens to create meaningful and thought-provoking art pieces (Johnson, 2012).

During early 1900s, Alfred Stieglitz captured meaningful and speaking images when he inspired and introduced the new trend of using medium of photography for political and social commentary (Johnson, 2004). Importantly, use of photography as a tool and medium of socio cultural and political expression or commentary has

become more common given the availability of advanced cameras, operational expertise, and the directed or inspirational theme to be conveyed through the depiction as well as communiqué of a photographed image of real-life objects and events (Rothman, 2012).

As the evocative representation of the real-life situations, photographic images stimulate the audience and envision a broader spectrum of thoughts, coming out of minds after a thorough processing of the details of the captured image. A surface view of the details that an image imparts to the audience and, as much as one ponders over the ingredients, techniques, as well as the persona of the photographer, everything contributes to the construction of a meaningful expression. Almost everybody has access to the different technologies, available to the commoners of the society, which can be used to capture, fix, keep, and, if so desired, share the photographic images.

2.2.1 Photography: An Art?

Though denied the status of an art for a considerably longer time, photography has proven its artistic worth in a very short time, owing much to the technological advancements that allowed the photographers manipulate light and tone of the captured image. This every element of mechanical equipment has long kept artists not to acknowledge the photographic representations as artistic creations (Hartell, Boyd & Ferraro, 2011). Nonetheless, despite criticisms, photography held sway as the only medium that represents and preserve, rather recreates, the real-life event in its best possible vivid details. The notion that if something is visibly identifiable from an image, it should be and, possible, must be true.

“Anything that we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it. [...] A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture” (Sontag, 2008, p. 5).

Lack or minimality of human influence during the process of capturing images and its evidentiary worth has endowed this medium – photography – more than for its capacity to be reckoned as an art (Ballenger, 2014). Furthermore, the critics of photography as an art also deny photography to the noble plank of art due to its open, or at least, mass access to the masses. In today’s digital era, capturing and sharing photographic images has become a mundane activity in which almost everyone equipped with a cell phone camera engages, rendering photography as a popular means or at least the most potent accessory of communication (Ballenger, 2014; Wells, 2004). Such categorization works towards the exclusion of human creativity, a prime tenet of the traditional notion of art.

Most of the available literature deals with the idea of photography as an artistic practice, mainly focusing on other types of photography rather than documentary. Specifically, clearly manipulated photography appears to be accepted in the realms of art, because of its clear effort of creating something which does not represent the truth (Bohme, 2003). However, in this context, documentary photography, usually associated with longer projects who are considered to be of public importance, rather than private, is often commonly neglected in the artistic environment, because its only aim is to record historically important events or to show the real walks of life (Yaacob, 2014).

2.2.2 Mechanical Nature of Photography

Until the introduction of commercial Daguerreotype photography in 1839, the medium was hailed as a marvellous scientific feat and technological advancement (Villi, 2011). Since the beginning, photography and photographers immediately ventured into the commercial and industrial sectors, rather than leaning towards the realm of art. Photographs were regarded as vertically opposed to Realist works of art, as manifest from the paintings. A large body of art enthusiasts were vehemently opposed the idea of photographic practices as artistic practices, anchoring bulk of their criticism in the mechanical and technical operational pattern of camera (Trachtenberg, 1980). Among the admirers, Baudelaire strongly upheld the photography on the recognition of art, and wrote:

“If photography is permitted to supplement some of art’s functions, they will forthwith be usurped and corrupted by it, thanks to photography’s natural alliance with the mob. It must therefore revert to its proper duty, which is to serve as the handmaiden of science and the arts” (qtd. in Benjamin, 2008, p. 527).

Photography, according to the critics, places the photographer far away – at a distance – from the subject, whereas it is the camera that stands between photographer and the object, and it is the camera that appears to be performing work. Thus, the entire process of creating and capturing photograph lack the creative acumen endowed thorough the divine inspiration, and that anyone equipped with camera and capable of capturing images neither require any particular skill nor need any divine inspiration.

Emphasizing the role of the camera, rather than the one of the photographer, is strictly related to the truth-value associated with photographs. Indeed, according to Heinrich Böll, ‘The great deceit of photography lies in the prior deceit of ‘objective reality’ (Villi, 2011). It is not the lens which makes the decision, but the