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How Kuwait Media Preserves National Heritage

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Abstract

In a world where people can be connected 24/7, is "heritage" still relevant? Given that Kuwait has changed so drastically in the last fifty years, does it matter that many aspects of tradition, language, and architecture have disappeared? This paper examines a variety of research articles related to heritage in Kuwait and the media's involvement in preservation of national heritage. The literature review also discusses the "natural selection" of heritage: although certain aspects of history have been "lost," this "loss" was not due to "lack of preservation," but due to a more natural process of learning what benefits the economy and what detracts from the economy. The paper also looks at media patterns in Kuwait and the significant role of social media in the nation. If one begins to embrace a broader definition of heritage—that of a "journey" related to identity—rather than something related to aspects of antiquity that may or may not be supportive of a nation's development, the process of preservation takes on an entirely different form. In order to preserve heritage in a way that benefits Kuwaiti society, it is important that media creators identify what, exactly, needs to be saved and what role media should play in heritage preservation.

Keywords: Media; Journalism; National Heritage; Kuwait

Introduction

The state of Kuwait is located in Southwestern Asia, situated between Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the Arabian Gulf. It consists of 6880 square miles and is populated by roughly 2.8 million people, among whom about thirty percent are Kuwaiti citizens [1]. In the face of globalization and rapid development, the Kuwait of today looks nothing like the pre-oil Kuwait of the early 1930s. In fact, traditional folk music revolves around the nation's history as a seafaring society, a close-knit group of tribes whose subsistence came from pearl diving and fishing [2]. In 1938, oil was discovered in the desert of southeastern Kuwait. From that point on, the nation began to amass significant wealth and undergo rapid development in an unprecedented way. After the country's independence in 1961, this growth accelerated with the nationalization of the oil wells and extensive retail development [3].

Although these changes have been undoubtedly beneficial to the national economy, there is an undeniable sense of heritage loss. By "heritage," one means "features belonging to the culture of a particular society, such as traditions, languages, or buildings" [4]. How does one know that Kuwaiti heritage is in danger? With the influx of foreign retail and globalized services—or perhaps in response to the influx—the younger generation of Kuwaitis have begun to speak a different dialect from that of their parents and grandparents. English words have crept into the language, as well as social norms like women working outside the home and children using social media on personal technological devices [5]. The older generations of Kuwaitis remember a lifestyle drastically different from that of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Western TV shows air on local channels, and American brands and fast food chains are ubiquitous in Kuwait [6].

Keeping this in mind, does losing a national "heritage" have significant repercussions? Is it a "big deal"? For this research project, why a nation's heritage matters will be discussed. Specifically, the literature review will draw on the long-term effects of preserving heritage by looking at the United States of America as an example, and comparing it to Kuwait. With 58 national parks and thousands of historical landmarks, the United States seems to be the gold standard for heritage preservation. Nevertheless, in a world of social media where more people meet to play Pokémon Go than to go hiking in a national park, one must re-examine heritage in light of technology.

In today's world, people can be connected 24/7 from nearly anywhere on the planet (and even from space); keeping that in mind, how can heritage be preserved?

To help find answers to the above questions, one must examine the current state of heritage preservation in Kuwait. The following sections discuss heritage in Kuwait, including language, traditions, and architecture, as well as Kuwait media channels and the extent to which these media channels address heritage. If the government or national media is doing anything to preserve heritage, why does it not seem to be working? The literature review goes on to discuss heritage preservation around the world and why some elements of heritage are purposefully not preserved. Finally, the paper concludes with a series of research questions that will help one gain a further understanding of the situation, and how heritage may be selectively preserved to contribute to the growth and success of a nation.

Literature Review

To address how Kuwait media preserves national heritage, it is necessary to first expand upon the variables: heritage and Kuwait media. In order to understand how Kuwait media preserves heritage, one must first examine all aspects of heritage in Kuwait. Specifically, unique elements of language, traditions, and architecture relevant to the nation will be discussed. This will allow the reader to answer the question "what, exactly, counts as 'Kuwaiti heritage?" The review will follow with an expansion upon the topic of Kuwait media. The literature review includes research articles about leadership of Kuwait media channels, as well as social media patterns in Kuwait. In the sections that follow, the paper discusses media's role in preserving heritage around the world, as well as the idea of "natural selection of heritage."

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Following the literature review, a number of research questions will be introduced that reflect the need for further study on the scope and necessity for heritage preservation in Kuwait.

Kuwaiti heritage (dependent variable)

Heritage definition: Formally, "heritage" refers to "features belonging to the culture of a particular society, such as traditions, languages, or buildings, which were created in the past and still have historical importance" [7]. In much of Middle Eastern society, according to Dr. Hani Faris' research, there exists three major ideological groups that carry their own interpretations of heritage — "the Traditionalists, the Liberals, and the Leftists". In Traditionalist view, Islam is such an integral part of Arab heritage that it transcends physical expressions of heritage: "the traditional belief that Sharia is a complete and unchanging system…that provides society with all it needs" is, according to Faris, "an obstacle to the development of Arab civilization." In contrast to the Traditionalist view, Liberals believe that "heritage functions in a manner similar to natural law" in that it "controls and directs the actions of a contemporary society." According to Liberals, consciousness of heritage is necessary and that it should be directed "in the service of nationalist goals." As opposed to Liberals, the "Leftists" opt for one of two positions on the issue of heritage: they either completely ignore it or completely reject it. In both cases, their position is based on the belief that "heritage is a reactionary force that hampers social development and obstructs the spread of revolutionary ideologies." Given this research about different views of heritage, one can understand that the issue of preserving heritage may be difficult to prove as a relevant issue in the Arab world.

Western societies like that of the United States of America, a multi-denominational and multi-cultural nation, have a greater degree of separation of church and state than Middle Eastern societies. Kuwait is a nation built on Islam's ability to unite people of different tribes. For this reason, religion reigns over heritage as the predominant and unchallenged "final say." According to Faris, whether someone is Traditionalist, Liberal, or Leftist is the main determinant of whether heritage should be acknowledged, ignored, or preserved. That said, even considering these different ideologies, in order to further define heritage in Kuwait one can look at a number of distinctly "Kuwaiti" elements: the Kuwaiti dialect, Kuwaiti social norms, and architecture.

Language: In terms of language, the Kuwaiti dialect is a distinct part of Kuwaiti heritage. Hanan Taqi's research on phonological variation and change in Kuwait over the last 50 years provides an apt description of the dialect: "a combination of Najdi and Ajami Arabic which reflects Persian predecessors and tribal differences." She describes the "convergence of Najdi and Ajami features of spoken Arabic" and how "rural speakers (of Ajami) arriving in the city often find that their accents are ridiculed (by Najdi speakers)." Najdi is the main dialect of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, and for reasons of prestige, many Kuwaitis tend to shift themselves toward aspects of the Najdi dialect. According to Taqi's study on Kuwaiti language and perceptions, "some young Ajamis believe that their parents' accent is 'an embarrassment'" because it makes them seem un-cultured and un-educated. Interestingly, T.M. Johnstone's research on the Dosiri dialect in Kuwait (a part of the Ajami group of dialects), describes the "local form of Ajami" as "a dialect of high social prestige." Johnstone's paper was published in 1961. In just half a century, the perceptions about language and accents in Kuwait have changed one hundred and eighty degrees. If language is, as defined earlier, an integral part of heritage, perhaps heritage—at least in Kuwait—is not as stable as its definition suggests.

Traditions/social norms: Heritage is also made up of certain traditions and social norms. In order to provide background information about distinct elements of Kuwait society, including marriage and holiday traditions, Altef Al-Sabah's 2001 book on Kuwaiti traditions goes into detail about distinctly Kuwaiti traditions like "Gargee'an" and "Geraish." For example, "Geraish" refers to the day before Ramadan in which Kuwaitis have potluck dinners with extended family. "Gargee'an" (often compared to Halloween) is where children wear traditional costumes and go around the neighborhood knocking on doors for candy and small gifts. In terms of gender relations, Kuwaiti social norms dictate that a woman's primary role is as a nurturer and homemaker for her family [8]. Dashti and Mesbah's research on the role of women in Kuwaiti society revealed that the majority of female media professionals, although feeling somewhat empowered by education and the rich lifestyle of Kuwait, feel that "their cultural upbringing, self-image, and societal outlook hamper their level of growth and independence" [9]. Given that half of a country's population may not be entirely pleased with their status because of the gender norms, this reality reflects a notion that "preserving heritage" may not be the most suitable way to move forward, if it does indeed detract from a part of the population's sense of identity.

Architecture (tangible heritage): In terms of tangible heritage, much of Kuwait's "landmarks" (museums, archaeology, and historic buildings) have been demolished during the wave of infrastructure development that started in the 1950s [10]. In addition, "museum attendance is low, and Kuwait's considerable archaeology is not well understood by the majority of local residents." According to a 2002 research article by Yasser Mahgoub, "while some architects employ a global architectural vocabulary to integrate local architecture into global cultural trends, others use revivalist styles as a means to enforce local identity and heritage." This dichotomy has resulted in a "built environment that lacks shared identity and a sense of place." The research concludes with suggestions that architecture in Kuwait "preserves and respects diversity as well as house seemingly disparate philosophies of space, people, and their interactions with and within the built form." In summary, one can conclude that much of Kuwait's tangible heritage has been lost, though it is possible to revive aspects of traditional architectural styles through new projects that include an emphasis on local identity and heritage.

Is it important to preserve heritage? Why?: Kuwait, as discussed, has a heritage that appears to be changing with globalization. Aspects such as language and gender roles have transformed rapidly in the last fifty years, and the population appears to have no desire to "move backward." If the purpose of preserving heritage is to retain elements of the past, one must question the value of these elements in comparison with their new and modern counterparts. If the purpose of preserving heritage is to enrich the lives of citizens through enhancing their sense of identity, one must examine the most appropriate ways of accomplishing such a goal. In Deborah Wheeler's study about new media, globalization, and Kuwaiti national identity [11]. She affirms that "communication is the cement of identity." Although Kuwait has changed significantly in the last half-century, and in doing so lost many elements of the dictionary definition of "heritage," one cannot assume that identity has been lost simply because the Kuwait of today is not the Kuwait of 1950. If communication really is the cement of identity, it is necessary to examine one of the most prominent means of communication today: media. To further explore this independent variable, the following sections will review research on who controls the media in Kuwait, what the media provides, and who uses it. Does

Kuwaiti media talk about heritage? Does this affect whether a people's sense of identity is enhanced?

Kuwaiti media (independent variable)

What is "Kuwaiti media"? TV channels, radio, newspapers?: To define the current state of Kuwaiti media, one must understand what channels, print media, and stations are available. In terms of television, Kuwait TV, Al-Rai, and Al-Sabah are the most prominent channels in the nation [12]. In terms of radio, the two strongest stations are Marina FM and Radio Kuwait. For newspapers, Al-Qabas, Al-Rai, and Al-Jareeda. Even more prominent than the newspapers is a magazine called "Al-Arabe" that is published in Kuwait and read throughout the Middle East [12].

Who controls Kuwaiti media?: The Kuwaiti government officially publishes "Kuwait Today" once a week and funds the monthly publication "Al-Arabe," as well as Kuwait TV and Radio Kuwait [6]. The government provides support for Al-Qabas and Al-Rai in terms of free office space, paid utilities, and training expenses. That said, Alqudsi-Ghabra's 1995 research on information control in Kuwait provides additional insight as to the government's role in directing content and censorship. Given that it directly or indirectly funds media outlets, there is a certain level of oversight as to what is "appropriate" content (i.e., limits on free speech). For a closer look, Khaled Al-Anezi's study on factors influencing chief editors' news selections explains the sensitivity toward topics involving religion and political leadership: "anything which might be viewed as lending support to Iraq is banned, as well as anything insulting toward the Emir" (2000). The government indirectly controls media outlets, and Kuwaiti citizens make up the majority of the leadership bodies within individual companies [13].

Who watches what kind of media?: According to statistics from Istizada Group, the majority of Kuwaiti youth under 25 use social media more than any other kind of media (TV, radio, newspaper/magazine). This is especially significant because the youth segment in Kuwait makes up roughly 54% of the population. In fact, Instagram has gained international attention for the plethora of homegrown "Instagram businesses" in the nation [6] 95% of families own a television set, and more than 97% are active internet users. Approximately 64% of the population actively reads newspapers (higher than the United States statistic of 38%). According to Jamal and Melkote's [14] research on news channel viewership, satellite television networks like Al-Jazeera are actually more popular among younger Kuwaitis because they "create a free marketplace of ideas and information that engender citizens to speak for themselves rather than allow authorities to speak for them." Youth (18-35) feel that "these (non-government) networks have become open forums for average Arabs to express their ideas and exchange views." One can infer from the data that a majority of Kuwaitis are more active on social media and viewers of non-Kuwaiti channels because these types of media give them a sense of freedom that government-sanctioned media does not provide.

Using Media to Preserve Heritage

What do we know about Kuwait media preserving heritage?

In the research process for this review, no formal studies were found on the topic of media preserving heritage in Kuwait. In fact, a 2015 Arab Times article relayed the Kuwaiti Information Minister Sheikh Salman's call for media to "preserve Kuwaiti heritage for future generations"[15] upon his visit to the "Beit Al-Othman" museum, Sheikh Salman discussed the importance of preserving historical artifacts in museums, but also voiced the need for "sound media coverage" regarding Kuwaiti heritage. The dearth of evidence to support the argument that Kuwaiti media channels work to preserve heritage is a clear and alarming sign that little is being achieved.

What can media do to help preserve heritage?

It is clear that technology plays a massive role in facilitating recording and collecting data, and that media helps to spread information. According to Muqeem Khan's 2012 TED talk "Playful Technology to Keep Cultural Heritage Alive," media "needs to have meaningful cultural content-creation so that people can feel attachment." In a world dominated by social media—and even more so in the Gulf nations—it is important to consider the role of the user, even more so than the government or private company's presence as "provider of content." People are sharing, commenting, and creating on a daily basis through social media channels. If media seeks to preserve heritage, it must do so in a way that encourages preservation of aspects that will appeal to users. Media's role is still significant, but the challenge lies in creating platforms sensitive to user's needs while balancing these needs with goals like progress, unity, and identity-formation. If these goals are clear, media can work with user patterns to present content that is relevant and appealing.

A research paper by Kononova et al. [15] provides data on media multitasking amongst youth in the United States as well as in Kuwait. Because of Kuwait family patterns, one learns that youth are less likely to media multitask (i.e., listen to music and use a smartphone) during mealtimes and family gatherings. This difference "could be explained by the perception of eating as a social activity in family-oriented, more collectivistic Middle East, making music listening not appropriate" [15]. Therefore, while media penetration in Kuwait is on a comparable level with the United States, cultural patterns like family meal gatherings still take precedence over extensive media usage.

When it comes to preserving heritage around the world, what works?

In terms of tangible heritage preservation, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [7] play a role in protecting physical heritage landmarks around the world. UNESCO Heritage Sites receive international assistance in the preservation and maintenance of historic sites. According to Unesco.org [7], Kuwait has no properties inscribed on the "World Heritage List," but three properties on the "Tentative List." In contrast, the United States has 23 properties on the World Heritage List and 11 properties on the Tentative List. Given that UNESCO protects physical heritage landmarks, who is protecting intangible heritage? That is a difficult question, given that some aspects of heritage (as discussed previously) are not compatible with every nation's goals for progress and globalization. In an increasingly connected and globalized world, people share and pass on the things that they feel are important, positive, and/or meaningful. If a nation has a history of marginalizing part of the population (such as women or people of a certain race), preserving this history may not be beneficial for the future of that society. If people are to identify with heritage, they must feel a strong positive connection to that tradition, language, or architectural creation. Media, by spreading information, allows users to inform, entertain, comment, and influence decisions.

According to Deborah Wheeler's study on international identity, respondents were asked to tell the researcher about one experience that had an impact on their national identity. Citizens of the United States answered with things like "military service, education, and birth within a particular state." Kuwaitis, when asked the same question, responded

with "the discovery of oil, the Iraqi occupation, being Muslim, and being born in Kuwait." Interestingly, when asked to name "one experience which had an impact on their national identity," Americans and Kuwaitis both responded with such things as "military service, education, and birth within a particular country." Notably, they did not refer to TV series, movies, or celebrities as a defining part of their identity [11]. Although we should not take this to mean that media does not matter in identity or heritage preservation, it is important to note that globalization of media has not detracted from an individual's sense of identification with their own nation and history.

Given the research on media and heritage preservation in Kuwait and United States, one can make assumptions about the utility of media in preserving identity for future generations. Wheeler's research on new media discusses how Kuwaiti citizens view media as a "double-edged sword" that "could lead to the interruption of Kuwaiti traditions" because women and men can communicate freely (something restricted in the physical sphere) but also "positive for international trade" because of the adaptation of non-face-to-face communication [11].

Should some elements of heritage disappear?

For example, women have been working outside the home for over a century in the United States. This pattern, though unconventional at first, proved beneficial to the national economy and spread throughout the world. Now it is a widely accepted norm that women can have careers and simultaneously raise a family. Similarly, elements of Kuwaiti heritage will continue to evolve in response to changes in environment, technology, and globalization. If media seeks to preserve heritage in Kuwait, further research is required as to which elements of heritage should be saved, and media's role in the process.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

As discussed in this literature review, heritage is constantly evolving through. Kuwaiti language, architecture, and gender roles are all a part of heritage, yet each has changed drastically in the last fifty years. In order to preserve heritage in a way that benefits Kuwaiti society, it is important that we ask the following research questions:

What, exactly, needs to be "saved" in terms of Kuwaiti heritage?

To find an answer to this question, one must research how elements of heritage affect the nation. This can be analyzed in terms of identity formation, economic success indicators, and qualitative research conducted with Kuwaiti citizens.

What should Kuwait media's role be, exactly, in preserving heritage?

To address this question, researchers must examine role of national media channels in affecting change. Because this question is rather subjective, finding an answer would require a diverse set of opinions in order to form a plausible consensus about what should be the extent of media's role in the process of preserving heritage.

How can social media be used to impact heritage preservation?

This question is significant because we know from the literature review that social media plays an important role in Kuwaiti society, especially for the younger generation. A study on social media's ability to affect perceptions would be useful to help one find an answer.

How can media's "heritage preservation" last for future generations?

In order to provide further insight into heritage preservation, the long-term effects of media efforts to preserve heritage should be examined. If every newspaper in the world featured a section on national heritage once a week, one cannot assume that the effect in each nation would be the same. In a world where literacy rates differ among population segments and certain age groups prefer social media over reading the news, the futility of using certain media channels is a useful topic for further research.

If one is to make a hypotheses based on the literature examined in this review, it is logical to assume that non-tangible elements of heritage like language and social norms will continue to change in response to globalization and international political trends. To preserve heritage, in a broader sense, means to preserve an individual's sense of identity, whether that is part of a nation, family, or neither of the two. This does not mean that the past is irrelevant or "backwards"; rather, it means that we live in a globalized, connected world where progress includes creating value for others and employing rational decision-making processes in a world of instant feedback. If elements of a nation's heritage are positive and healthy for their economic growth, these elements will perpetuate and spread worldwide in a type of universal natural selection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a common theme in all the books, research papers, and conference talks consulted in this literature review is the role of communication in influencing identity. Recent research by Sedlacik [16] on social media and heritage describes heritage as "a journey"—one that is lived in different ways, depending upon the media platform. That said, one must "acknowledge the complexity of heritage and show how heritage extends beyond a tangible 'state.'" An extended understanding of heritage, according to Sedlacik, "can help one begin to frame potential solutions to the problem of heritage loss." Once a consensus is reached on the answers to the above questions, media can take steps to provide people with the right tools and incentives to preserve those elements of heritage for future generations, and to help guide communication's role in influencing national identity. If heritage is, as Sedlacik states, "a journey," then Kuwaiti media has a responsibility to equip its audience for that journey.

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