

Using NFTs for nation branding in the UAE

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Abstract:

Digital artists have been utilizing public ledgers to create digital tokens of their artwork and sell them by means of cryptocurrencies or what is known as non-fungible tokens or NFTs. Despite this growing trend, the use of NFTs in the Arab region is under-studied. To address this gap, a study has been conducted with a focus on utilizing NFTs as a cultural commodity in branding the UAE and promoting the NFT market. The study involves a semiotic analysis of selected NFTs aimed at projecting a unique image of the UAE. These NFTs are deployed to reflect an image of the UAE that balances its desert landscape past with modern astronomy, creating a fusion of past and future. This challenges the arbitrary distinction between the two temporalities and creates a new form of techno-cultural artifact that defies an Orientalist view of Arab culture by mediating the past through futuristic artifacts.

Keywords: NFT; nation branding; Gulf futurism; hybridity; semiotic; UAE.

Introduction

Non-fungible tokens, or NFTs, are digital representations of real-world art stored on a Blockchain. They come with unique metadata attributes that certify their uniqueness and ownership. As a result, NFTs can be traded as commodities using cryptocurrencies, representing the certificate of a real-world object rather than the object itself. Several studies have explored the use of NFTs to promote tourism (Russel, 2022), branding consumer products (Sundararajan, 2022), or designing digital collections such as in the fashion industry (Joy et al., 2022) or music industry, allowing artists to create their own music NFTs (Lloyd, 2022). Many digital artists have discovered the potential of minting their art as digital tokens on a public ledger, where they can be sold to the highest bidder using cryptocurrencies. However, there seems to be a heavy emphasis on Western countries when it comes to NFTs and a scarcity of studies that address the use of NFTs in the Global South.

This study fills this gap with a focus on the use of NFTs to brand one Arab state, namely the UAE. This article focuses on using NFTs as a cultural commodity, which is integral to social processes as social actors determine its value and can fluctuate over time (Appadurai, 1986). The selected NFTs are analyzed using Semiotic analysis. The selected NFTs were offered in the UAE as part of a series of NFTs as a limited edition created by top artists to

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celebrate the country's 50th anniversary. This state initiative aims to introduce more people to the NFT market and encourage a proactive NFT community movement in the UAE (Khaleej Times, 2021). This study zooms in on the use of NFTs as a digital cultural commodity minted to reflect a unique hybrid identity of the UAE while examining the components of this hybrid identity. Theoretically, the study is anchored in nation branding as a concept and practice; methodologically, the study draws on an in-depth analysis of selected NFTs to show how they reflect the unique brand and image of the UAE.

The article is structured as follows: Firstly, we discuss the importance of the concept of Gulf hybrid identity in light of the accelerating digital technology that is being adopted by the majority of populations in the Gulf region. Secondly, we introduce the theoretical framework drawing on Appadurai's concept of hybridity, because the selected NFTs demonstrate conflicting connotations of hybridity, such as diversity and openness versus isolation and attachment to tradition, which are specific to their cultural context and heritage. Thirdly, we discuss the methodology of semiotics which forms the basis of this study. Fourthly, we present our findings. Finally, we return to the concept of Gulf identity in the concluding discussion.

1- Gulf hybrid identity

The origin of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has its roots in the late 18th and early 19th century, with a tribal alliance between various rulers. However, this alliance threatened the British trade routes with India. The British used a combination of force and diplomacy to deal with the threat of those tribes on their trade routes with India (Kluijver, 2013: 99). Pearl fishing and trade were the main sources of prosperity for the region until the 1930s. Still, the discovery of oil in the 1960s helped to revitalize the economy and bring about a renewed sense of prosperity. During the 1950s and 60s, prior to independence, significant advancements were made to modernize the UAE, such as building hospitals, schools, roads, and infrastructural facilities such as electricity and postal services. The discovery of oil led to a boost in development, as the revenue generated from the oil industry allowed each emirate to attract foreign investment and trade. In 1971, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Umm Al Quwain, Ajman, and Fujairah formed the UAE, and Ras Al Khaimah joined in 1972. Abu Dhabi is the leader, and the ruler of Dubai is the deputy head of state (Kluijver, 2013:100). The UAE has since developed to become a modern country with a highly diversified economy, with Dubai, in particular, developing into a global city and a hub for tourism, retail, and finance, and home to the largest man-made seaport. The UAE's GDP for 2020 was \$359 billion, and its economy is highly integrated into the global economy (Hanieh, 2011).

The rapid growth of Gulf cities has led to clashes between economic and social changes and the need for the local population to adapt. The fast-paced changes have resulted in the quick westernization of the urban environments, even if the changes were at the expense of indigenous fabric. Adding to this, the growing population of expatriates in the UAE and across the GCC region has blurred the lines of what is considered indigenous, authentic, or locally appropriate. Despite this, incorporating hi-tech architectural shapes referencing traditional symbols is necessary to embody the Gulf's desire for locality and reclaim a sense of place. Nonetheless, advanced technologies have been embraced as the new symbol of Gulf futurism, whether in architecture, building grand museums, or in digital art (Fabbri, 2022, p. 22).

In the Gulf, there is a global trend of shaping a city's brand using digital media, or brandscape, to highlight the connection between urban development and place marketing (Fabbri, 2022, p. 21). The coexistence of global and local cultural production in the Gulf region contributes to shaping the contemporary identities of the region (Exell, 2016) as hybrid identities and whether hybridity is understood as a practice and not just a result of globalization (Kraidy, 2002). Dubai, for instance, has been analyzed as a worldwide brand, a diverse city, and a center for various services, ethnicities, and media outlets (Govers & Go, 2016). The city has successfully positioned itself as a global hub while highlighting its unique local heritage through traditional attire, dance, calligraphy, and other cultural elements. However, with the free flow of capital and services, there has been a growing demand to prioritize local job opportunities and preserve the city's cultural heritage. In this way, Dubai has marked itself as a global hub with a unique local heritage manifested in national dress, local dance, and calligraphy, among other cultural markers (Govers & Go, 2016).

This study draws on the notion of nation branding, utilizing symbols to represent or brand a nation, particularly the UAE. This branding process is closely related to the national identity and the content creators' perceptions of the UAE and their experience in boosting the promotion of the UAE.

2- The nation as a cultural commodity

Globalization was celebrated as a means to get the world together, a view challenged by Arjun Appadurai (1996). He defines globalization as a process integrating different layers or landscapes: ethnoscapescapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes, and finanscapes. Here, mediascape constitutes one major process in that the flow of ideas, people, capital, and technology is shaped by media messages that flow cross-nationally, triggering different interpretations and meanings. However, this process can also threaten the local culture and collective identities out of fear of *mimicking* Western ideas and norms. For "commodities, like persons, have social lives" (Appadurai, 1996, p 3), and politics underpins the relationship between exchange and value. Appadurai's model of 'scapes' suggests a new postmodern form of understanding cultural artifacts, replacing traditional binary models that delineate past and present, old and new, center and periphery, or tradition and modernity.

Debates surrounding globalized culture have often focused on the "break between tradition and modernity and typologized as the difference between ostensibly traditional and modern societies" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 3). However, globalization, thanks to fast-paced technological advancement, has also created a new configuration that is coined "technoscape," characterized by "increasingly complex relationships" (ibid. p. 34). In the new global mediascapes, images travel to meet deterritorialized viewers such as Arab diasporic communities. Such images lean on the concept of situated difference to create a form of group identity. Such an identity, unlike ethnic identity, does not lean on kinship and family relations but on shared experiences and ethnoscape, or the new "landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 33).

In this globalized cultural landscape, pasts "are as important as futures, and the more we unravel these pasts, the closer we approach worlds that are less and less cosmopolitan, more and more local" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 63). In this sense, Appadurai's concepts of *trans-local* and hybridity (1995) are equally relevant here. The trans-local incorporates the local with the

global, thereby reconciling local communities with the “capacity to transgress their local boundaries” (Carpentier, 2007, p. 1). Thus, translocality allows us to go beyond seeing a community as a close group with delineated (ethnic and geographic) boundaries to seeing the community as an interpretive community or a community that shares a set of meanings, interests, and practices while transgressing geographical boundaries. In a way, the trans-local is synonymous with the glocal, implying a sense of fluidity in space (Carpentier, 2007).

Moreover, Appadurai’s concept of hybridity points to several tensions, such as the mixing of old and new symbols (e.g., the desert and spaceship), because it draws on a specific cultural context and heritage as manifested in the selected NFTs. Thus, it can also challenge the notion of authenticity (e.g., which symbols truly represent the UAE) since local audiences may not accept the hybrid signs or prefer art that solely reflects the traditional heritage of the UAE. As such, hybridity has conflicting connotations, such as diversity and openness versus isolation and clinging to the past.

3- The visual grammar of NFTs

This study asks whether there is an ideological meaning attached to the NFTs representing the UAE and whether there is a visual grammar attached to this digital representation. This form of visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) is the system underpinning visual representations and, thus, a sign in a visual text (e.g., NFT). It carries a specific meaning and ideology anchored in the cultural specificity of the UAE (and Arabian culture generally). While visuals can be mistakenly seen as a mere (and transparent) reflection of reality, this study argues that the interpretation of the visual sign is often anchored in cultural differences.

Visuals that combine traditional signs with modern/Western ones are arguably anchored in an Orientalist interpretation. It may refer to the classic sign in a given (mostly Oriental) culture while reserving the modern sign to Western culture (e.g., Moeran, 1996). This study, however, sheds light on the use of traditional along with modern signs, not to invoke orientalist meanings such as Western technological superiority, but to evoke the meaning of national pride in successfully blending past and future in a complex present.

In so doing, the study shares the concern of Social Semiotics in that it highlights the fluidity of signs according to their social and cultural system rather than analyzing signs as static (Hodge & Kress, 1988). Here, clues about the motivation for using certain signs, the perception of the imagined audience, and the value attributed to each sign/NFT take center stage.

Semiotics theory was referred to as a system of semiology aiming to unravel the system of references and signs within specific social contexts. According to de Saussure, the semiotic process involves a signifier (the word or image) and a signified (or the concept attributed to the sign), the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary (Chandler, 2004). There are three kinds of signs: icons (literal representation), indices (clues to the real-world concept), and symbols. Thus, icons refer to abstract objects, such as a photograph of the founding fathers of the UAE, which resemble their authentic selves. Indices refer to the connection with the sign, such as the desert, as an index of Arabian culture since it has an existential link with this region. Finally, symbols carry arbitrary relationships to the object, such as falconry as a symbol of Arabian tradition or the colors of the UAE flag as a symbol of the state (Chandler, 2004).

NFTs represent a technological sign system with a unique set of multimodal meanings. These meanings need to be studied as a “semiotic technology,” referring to “the relationship between the multimodal

meaning potentials of the semiotic surfaces of social media, the technology below these surfaces, and the social practices in which social media are embedded and contribute to shaping” (Poulsen & Kvale, 2018). Such a system includes several dimensions, such as the multimodal, the practice, the social, the media, the material, the historical, and the critical dimension (ibid.). Such a multimodality system encompasses unique computer-mediated signs such as emoji and social media images and digital art such as NFTs. This form of digital art has two audiences: insiders and outsiders. This digital art connects insiders emotionally with their past and heritage; for outsiders, it may connote exotic traditions (Almuhrzi, Hughes & Ballantyne, 2020, 194).

Following Chandler’s (2004) suggested model of semiotic analysis, this study adopts the following process: first signs in the given multimodal text are identified along with their specific codes, e.g., social codes. Then, the relationships between the different (syntagmatic and paradigmatic) signs and the relationships connecting these different combinations are identified. Finally, the ideological function of the signs is explored to identify the ideas constructed in the text and their underlying assumptions. Intertextuality was also examined, as inferred within this specific social context (Matheson 2005). This means that NFTs, as multimodal texts, can draw upon a multitude of codes and genres (Chandler, 2004).

To examine the meaning of NFTs as digital signifiers, we looked at key visual carriers of meanings, such as modality and actors (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Modality can refer to the articulation of the image in terms of the background (clear or blurred), setting (whereabouts), objects (three-dimensional, two-dimensional, or one-dimensional), and lighting (bright or low light). The analysis of actors includes an analysis of the actors’ gaze (engaging with viewers), angle (vertical or horizontal vis-à-vis the viewer), and distance (close, medium, or long shot).

Visual analysis can look into four different sites that render meanings to an image: the site of production, the site of the image itself, the site of circulation, and the site of the audience (Rose, 2016, p. 24). This study focuses on the sites of the image and its circulation. Each of the analyzed images projects a specific technological modality, or a reflection of how the image is made and circulated, as well as a compositional strategy that combines certain content, color and setting, and social modality or the socio-economic and political relations surrounding how the images are made and used (Rose, 2016, p. 25).

This study focuses on two main groups of NFTs: The first group represents the celebrations of the UAE’s fiftieth year, which reviews the UAE’s past, while the second group focuses on space and the mission to Mars. Both collections celebrate the UAE’s advancement by highlighting the UAE’s national journey from a tribal society to the first Arab country to send a mission to Mars in 2021. It is known that the UAE Space Agency launched the Hope probe in 2020, which went into orbit in 2021. In total, we included six NFTs (table 1).

Most NFTs included in this study have a title and brief description with the artist’s name and relevant details. This helps viewers engage with the artwork and understand the artist’s intentions and message. These NFTs draw inspiration from real-life experiences to enhance the digital viewing experience, making them inter-discursive. It’s worth exploring if the NFT

offers a distinct perspective from the subject's position. In this sense, NFTs represent a group of signs with underlying codes that form a system of visual grammar, generating meanings and situated interpretations among local versus foreign audiences. The NFT art represents a constructed past and tradition that exists alongside futurist images, creating a new form of virtual communities (Kazan, 2020, p. 186).

Within each image, the type of shot used in visual media conveys the distance between the viewer and the subject, e.g., an angle is linked to power relationships: If the camera angle looks up or down at the subject, it can be associated with superiority or inferiority. Typically, the camera lens is positioned at the same height as the subject's eyes, portraying a neutral relationship between the audience and the character. However, a power dynamic is created within the shot when the viewing position is above or below the actor. Poses are also significant as they can convey an actor's level of confidence, intimacy, distance, and engagement (Hansen and Machin, 2013), and so is the gaze, whether it is a demand gaze (looking directly at the viewer) or offer gaze (looking away) (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). The demand gaze helps acknowledge the viewer as the main addressee, creating an imaginary relationship with the viewer, while a person looking away positions the viewer as an invisible onlooker.

For the following analysis, a coding scheme was devised to explore the underlying meanings of each NFT on three different levels:

First level: Identifying the **denotative** elements of the image, including the icon, symbol, or index, and the setting.

Second level: Identifying the **connotative** elements, including visual cues that may have deeper meanings, such as the angle, gaze, and actors.

Third level: Identifying the specific **cultural codes** and conventions, such as the relationship between the connotative elements and the specific cultural context of the UAE.

Table 1 provides an overview of all NFTs included in this study.

Figure 1 – Falcon soldier

Part of the Falcon Society's NFT collectibles, founded by a team of UAE-born residents and nationals, declaring its aim as to foster an "ecosystem of the future." It features a falcon dressed as a human soldier. The falcon represents the country's past.



Figure 2 – Falcon family

Part of the Falcon Society’s NFT collectibles. It features a falcon family placed in a traditional tent. The image is a celebration of the country’s heritage represented in the tent, falcons, and the design of the seating area.



Figure 3 - “Desert to Mars”

Minted by Jasim Albulushi, this NFT features a spaceman staring at the modern city from a desert on Earth. The desert symbolizes the country’s past, and the spaceman and spaceship symbolize the journey to space.



Figure 4 - “Still”

Minted by Mattar Bin Lahej, a native Emirati artist. It represents the evolution of the UAE as reflected in the movement of a rolling ball formed by small pixels. The figure represents the traditional wind tower – barjeel, in a futuristic design.



Figure 5 - “Wing of Glory”

Minted by Kristel Bechara, and was said to be inspired by the majestic wings of a falcon. The artwork is also said to be a tribute to the daring spirit of the UAE, with the shimmering dunes symbolizing the past while the stars of the cosmos represent the future.



Figure 6 - “The Highest “

Minted by Kaiwan Shaban featuring a man walking in the desert surrounded by palm trees (representing the past/tradition) and heading toward the iconic city landscape, representing modernity and the future.



The themes emerging from the analysis were as follows: constructing the past by focusing on traditional elements of Emirati culture and highlighting technological progress and modernity by focusing on the UAE's mission to Mars. We argue that this blend or hybridity of past and present can be interpreted as part of "Gulf futurism," which integrates past and future through techno-cultural creation, rejecting an Orientalist perspective of preserving Arab culture. Thus, it embraces the future without harming the traditions and customs of the past.

4- Constructing the past

Unlike other states in the Global South, where tradition may be depicted as an emblem of backwardness and modernity as a symbol of "Western" progress, traditional values and heritage in the UAE (and indeed many GCC states) are represented as emblems of situated progress, that is rooted in one's locale. This is reflected in the use of traditional symbols in constituting the myth of a nation. Myth refers to the ideologies underpinning symbols that appear natural in any cultural setting and can be relayed through images, texts, and other cultural heritage. Heritage, in this context, connotes both tradition and cultural heritage and defines "not only the passing down of a visual object, an artifact or element of ancestry from one generation to the next and that it should also define the manner in which it is transmitted" (Kazan, 2020, p. 8).

As the country is relatively young, it draws on a mélange of heritage and traditions that together form "an invented tradition" (Cooke, 2014) of Arabian values and norms. Such an invented tradition is instrumental in (re)enforcing a sense of national unity and identity among inhabitants. This includes, for instance, the image of the Bedouin lifestyle as an integral element in the UAE cultural heritage. The founding father of the federation, Sheikh Zayed, was known for his use of desert animals like falcons and camels not just as symbols of the Emirati natural landscape but also as signs of Emirati heritage and past, such as the use of falconry as heritage sport (Kazan, 2020, p. 37). Likewise, the national dress, standardized in the UAE in the 1980s, symbolizes invented tradition and a sign of authenticity in a country where expatriates form nearly 90% of the population. The national dress is important in everyday interaction but also, more so, on the national day, which is an occasion to affirm the Emirati national unity and identity (Koch, 2018a). In such a cosmopolitan state, heritage signs such as the national dress become a means to stress one's national identity while distinguishing oneself from the crowds of migrants across the UAE (Cooke, 2014, p. 125). The national dress becomes an emblem of the "real" Emirati vis-à-vis other ethnic groups who reside in the UAE, and the dress forms part of the daily performance of this national identity and "common culture" (Akinci, 2020). For instance, during National Day, pictures of Sheikh Zayed are shared as a memory of the past, and such images include other traditional symbols such as falcons or camels.

This is perhaps why the first group of NFTs includes artists who are members of the Falcon Society, which has three objectives: enhancing the UAE's standing as a progressive nation, promoting its diversity, and presenting its heritage (Digital Journal, 2022). Falconry here is more than a heritage symbol, as it has turned into a national sport, and the UAE has led the initiative to get falconry recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage

(Koch, 2018b); the country also hosts International Falconry Festival and Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital and Sheik Zayed Falcon Release Program (ibid.).

The NFT in Figure 1 shows a falcon as a soldier (Ravi, 2021), which includes clues of a typical soldier (army or police) in the UAE (particularly Dubai) with a khaki cap and a khaki outfit. The dress symbolizes the nation's guards, protecting it against external threats (e.g., influences of globalization on local cultural practices). The falcon soldier gazes away from the viewer as if looking far ahead toward the future, ready for speedy action if required.

The use of a falcon has several layers of symbolism and connotation. Firstly, it has a unique cultural significance in the UAE (and across the Gulf region). Indeed, the falcon is considered a symbol of power, speed, and agility and is also associated with royalty and nobility, as falconry was once a sport exclusive to the elite. The NFT is part of the Falcon Society's NFT collectibles and is not attributed to one artist (Ravi, 2021). It features a falcon dressed as a human soldier, representing the country's past. By using the falcon in the branding of this NFT, the image taps into the cultural significance of the falconry in the UAE to convey a sense of cultural exclusivity. Secondly, the image could be interpreted as a way to anthropomorphize the falcon and create a connection between humans and animals. The falcon is seen as a powerful and intelligent animal, and by creating humanoid versions of them, it is suggested that they are worthy of human-like reverence and admiration. Thirdly, the image implies the UAE's commitment to conserving falcons and their natural habitats. Using the falcon as a symbol, they may highlight the importance of preserving these animals and their environment. This is significant given the UAE's hosting the Cop28 in December 2023.

Moreover, using the falcon as a symbol helps create a distinct and recognizable brand of the UAE that stands out in a crowded marketplace. With its bold and distinctive features, the falcon creates a strong visual identity that is easy to remember. It also creates a sense of grandeur and mystery while contributing to the cultural symbolism of the falcon, which is often associated with power and dominance among other creators since falcons are known for their hunting prowess and ability to dominate their prey. Although a traditional symbol, the falcon is arguably used futuristic, perhaps as a subtle indication of the use of digital art (NFT) as a metaphor for the role of technology in the UAE's future.

Figure 2 is another NFT image that projects the nation's image (UAE) as a family (Musolff, 2016) with its high cultural salience. The image reflects the hierarchal structure of the Arabian family, with the father as the highest authority, as illustrated in the father's closer proximity to the viewer's perspective than the rest of the family. The father's gaze at the viewer indicates the father's role as the parental authority, ready to engage with strangers in conversations instead of letting the mother or children speak. The rest of the family (mother and children) seem preoccupied with their affairs, especially the children, whose gaze turns away from the viewer. The mother sits in the background, in distant proximity to the father, almost protected in her own house surrounded by the family.

Indeed, the family unit forms one integral component of the cultural identity in Gulf societies, including the UAE. This is enshrined in the country's constitution, which exalts the nuclear family as the basis of society (Al-Nakib, 2020, p. 84). Within the traditional UAE family, the father is the legal head of the family, although women have also been granted

more rights in tandem with their increasing participation in the labor market and governmental offices (p. 88).

The family is seated in a bright tent decorated with light (happy, content, modest, bright), identical to the father's clothing. The falcon family is represented by a falcon mother, father, and two falcon children. The setting conveys a local Bedouin living area with a seating area covered by pillows and a large sheet printed in traditional patterns. The mother wears a traditional dress, and so does the father, who wears the traditional headdress and holds what resembles a coffee pot as a symbol of the traditional beverage served daily in the UAE. The children wear Westernized clothes and seem to be playing chess, a game developed in the West. Their game symbolizes their knowledge and mastery of Western and modern technology, not to mention that chess is usually marketed based on strategic thinking and tactics. The children, then, are carriers of the ideological mission of the nation to prepare the younger generations for a modern and progressive future characterized by the adoption of high technology. The parents, however, symbolize a past that nurtures the future and provides wisdom and guidance. With a generous gesture, the father's gaze contrasts the previous image of the soldier looking away from the viewer.

Al-Sadu is a traditional form of embroidery still practiced in dispersed rural communities and is used to adorn furnishing accessories such as blankets and cushions. It uses sheep wool, which Bedouin women clean and spins the yarn and dyes it in different colors, typically in brown and red shades, using geometric shapes. Weavers use this practice to gather and sing or perform poetry. Abu Dhabi Culture and Tourism (2011) formally requested that UNESCO inscribe Al-Sadu on the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.

As for the color palette, there is the brown Falcon and the traditional Al-Sadu in brown and red. Colors here are crucial for navigating our environment, allowing us to differentiate objects through tonal differences. They are often associated with certain things based on similarities. For example, reds and yellows are associated with fire, sun, and heat and are considered warm colors, while blues and green-blues are considered cold colors. Thus, colors here serve as iconic signs, associated with meanings, like green for safety, yellow for warning, and red for danger (Caivano, 1998, 397). The color brown, here, is often associated with reliability, stability, and friendship. It's the color of the earth and natural things while red is a powerful color that draws attention, and it is usually associated with energy and excitement. Red is also the color of physical courage, strength, and basic survival, although it can be perceived as demanding and aggressive (Tavaragi & Sushma, 2016, 117-120). The color white, of the outfit of the father of the family represents purity, cleanliness, and neutrality. Visually, it enhances the perception of space but can make warm colors appear garish (Tavaragi & Sushma, 2016, 116).

In sum, art is a crucial aspect of cultural identity and contributes to the unique language of design that defines a society. In the Arab region, Islamic culture and beliefs deeply connect with art, making it an essential element of its cultural identity. In particular, unique art forms like Calligraphy and Islamic Geometries have become integral to the Arabian cultural identity.

Such an invented tradition refers to invented national cultural symbols across the GCC states where heritage revival has taken center stage, as demonstrated in the continuous

investments in constructing heritage museums, camel racing festivals, and pearl-driving festivals, among other events (Khalaf, 2002). In such a milieu, elders in the UAE have become the carriers of memory who experienced the shared images of the past (Papagianni, 2018, p. 323). The elders then represent the past oral tradition, stories, and memories, while the young generation of Emiratis may seem fearful of losing these past stories, prompting them to support heritage museums and festivals. The country's capital, Abu Dhabi, has also recently launched the Emirates Film Competition, promoting films and documentaries about the UAE heritage (ibid. p. 324).

5- From desert to Mars

In the "From Desert to Mars" NFT collection, the underlying myth is that of material progress as the natural bedrock of innovation in the future. Image 3 was created by the UAE artist Jasim Jasim Albulushi, and it features a spaceman standing in a desert landscape, surrounded by a glowing aura.

The artwork depicts a futuristic scene of a space shuttle launching from the desert. The space shuttle is in the center of the image as a powerful symbol of technological progress and human achievement, representing the UAE's ongoing quest for exploration and discovery. The shuttle's futuristic design and sleek appearance emphasize the idea of progress and innovation. On the other hand, the desert landscape in the background highlights the UAE's unique geography and environment. The desert landscape could also be interpreted as a symbol of the challenges and obstacles humanity must overcome to achieve its goals.

The image uses a contrasting color scheme, with the warm colors of the desert landscape in the background juxtaposed against the cool blues and purples of the futuristic architecture and space shuttle. This contrast creates a sense of tension and excitement, emphasizing the idea of progress and innovation. The space shuttle represents the journey to the future and reinforces the idea of progress and forward motion. The image also uses strong contrasts of light and shadow to create a sense of depth and three-dimensionality.

The image's use of futuristic design elements, such as the space shuttle and the sleek, minimalist architecture in the background, creates a sense of optimism and progress. The design elements suggest that the UAE is a forward-thinking, technologically advanced society actively pursuing a vision of the future. In terms of iconography, the space shuttle in the center of the image is an iconic symbol of human progress and innovation, while the futuristic architecture and minimalistic design elements suggest a forward-thinking, technologically advanced society, reinforcing the message of progress and optimism.

The image features several cultural references that could be interpreted differently. For example, the desert landscape could be seen as a reference to the UAE's history and cultural identity, emphasizing the country's roots in the Arabian Peninsula's harsh and arid environment.

The spaceman is standing in a desert landscape, which could be seen as a symbol of vastness. The desert can also be associated with survival, endurance, and adaptability, as it is a harsh environment that requires resilience and resourcefulness. The combination of the humanoid figure and the desert landscape could be interpreted as a way to explore themes of human resilience and adaptability in the face of challenging environments. The figure is

surrounded by a glowing aura, which could be seen as a symbol of spiritual energy, transcendence, or mysticism. The glow could also represent the figure's inner light or energy, suggesting they possess a powerful and radiant presence.

Overall, the image appears to be a complex and multilayered artwork combining science fiction, mysticism, and spiritual elements.

Bin Lahej's image (figure 4) features a mostly monochromatic color scheme, with shades of white, gray, and black dominating the composition. This could be interpreted as creating a sense of otherworldliness or abstraction, emphasizing the image's distance from reality. The bright glow of the circular object and the figure's aura also contrast with the landscape's muted colors, making them stand out more prominently. The image represents a hybrid figure that draws on the architecture of a traditional wind tower (or barjeel) and a futuristic circular object. The circular object and the glowing aura could also be associated with Islamic art and calligraphy, which often feature circular motifs and glowing lights.

Image 5, the "Wings of Glory," is created by the Lebanese Kristel Bechara and features a stylized falcon in flight, surrounded by golden rays of light. As mentioned, the falcon, which is the center of the image, is a powerful symbol in Arabian culture, representing strength, courage, and freedom. The image represents a mixture of the traditional symbol (the falcon) painted in abstract, modern lines. The falcon is surrounded by golden rays of light, which could be interpreted as a symbol of glory, radiance, or divine intervention. The rays of light create a sense of drama and awe, highlighting the importance of the falcon as a cultural icon. The falcon's wings are spread wide, creating a sense of movement and dynamism, suggesting that the bird is in flight and free, as if implying the dynamic and fast-paced development of the UAE state. The color palette (blue and gold) is part of the UAE flag. The selection of blue may also refer to the sky and the bird's freedom in nature, while gold can signify wealth and power, highlighting the UAE's status as a rich country.

Image 6 (The Highest) was created by the Kurdish artist Kaiwan Shaban. It features a man walking in the desert surrounded by palm trees and heading toward the iconic city landscape, representing modernity and the future. The image provides an example of the hybridity of the past/tradition (palm trees and the desert) and the present/future (modern city). Again, the image uses the warm colors of the desert landscape juxtaposed against the dark shades of the city lying ahead. This contrast creates a sense of progress and stable movement toward the future.

Notably, the images are three-dimensional compared to the falcon's images discussed above, as if juxtaposing the past with the future. Also, the shot of the soldier falcon is close, indicating a sense of intimacy, while the long shot of the man on Mars indicates the given distance to the future.

In summary, the image tells a powerful visual story, depicting a scene of human exploration and discovery. The narrative of the image reinforces the message of progress and optimism, emphasizing humanity's ongoing quest for knowledge and understanding. Seen through this lens, the UAE's Mars Mission was highlighted as a projection of a dynamic future for the UAE and the whole Arab region, with the UAE being the first Arab nation to send a mission to another planet. In addition to its Mars Mission, the UAE was the first to

appoint a Minister of Artificial Intelligence in 2017 (Aima, 2018, 13). In so doing, the nation reinvigorates the capacity of Arabs to contribute to humanity and give hope for the future, hence naming the mission Amal or Hope (Aima, 2018, 13).

6- Discussion: Gulf futurism

With the past existing side by side with the future, the UAE art aims to harness the power of globalization, seen not as a threat to local cultures but as a process controlled by the UAE's long-term vision (Erskine-Loftus, Penziner-Hightower & Ibrahim Al-Mullah, 2016). This amalgamation of past and future has come to characterize the UAE's soft power efforts as illustrated in mega events such as Dubai Expo or Burj Khalifa Tower, which act as signifiers of the UAE's fast-paced economic development while serving as markers of a unique culture based on the fusion of past and future. This fusion creates a sense of boundarylessness that embraces change and tradition (Kazan, 2020, p. 180).

The images represent a juxtaposition of past and future in the form of a heterotopia, which, as Foucault ([1967] 1984, 3) defines it, is not "a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light [but...] a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another." Thus, they do not project a utopian image of the UAE but a place that juxtaposes several spaces that "are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault, ([1967] 1984, 6) and a site that is linked to different temporalities. Heterotopia can be a real yet imagined space loaded with topic meanings. Nonetheless, the UAE highlights a delicate balance between the past (desert landscape) and modern setting (astronomy).

The Emirati futurism here challenges the arbitrary distinction between past and future and instead combines the two temporalities in a new form of techno-cultural artifact. It is a form of futurism that defies an Orientalist view of the Arab culture as needing saving in excavating its past; instead, it is based on a past mediated via futuristic artifacts. Such futurism does not project fear of the future, which in reality is dominated by Western technology, but it embraces the future as a spatial and temporal image that is not destructive to past heritage and everyday practice. On the contrary, it is a future that can coexist with a cherished past and a dynamic present. Such a futuristic view is reinforced in other narratives, not only NFTs, such as the recent Emirati film *Aerials*, by the Emirati filmmaker S.A. Zaidi which tells the story of an alien invasion centering in Dubai where an alien spaceship hovers around Burj Khalifa, the tallest building of the world's tallest building. In contrast to Hollywood science fiction films that typically narrate such an invasion as a prelude to the destruction of the present, the past and re-shaping the future, Zaidi's film presents a new narrative of Dubai as embracing the changes created by the alien invasion but without being destructive as if calling to reassess the future (Donica, 2020).

In so doing, the NFTs project a new form of Emirati identity that weaves cultural heritage, such as falconry, Al-Sadu, pearl diving, and nomadism, into a future that jettisons a fixed image of the UAE and Arabian culture as either anchored in the past or mimics a Western model to shape its present and future. Instead, the NFTs project an identity that forms a triangulation of narratives representing different, albeit competing, spaces and times.

Conclusion

The above images provide a captivating blend of traditional cultural symbols and modern design elements, resulting in powerful and evocative images. The combination of the falcon, a traditional symbol, with an astronaut, a modern icon, and the use of both warm and cold colors, creates a dramatic and awe-inspiring effect, emphasizing the significance of the falcon in UAE's history and identity. The abstract design of the artwork suggests a modern and innovative approach to updating traditional cultural symbols for a contemporary audience.

The decision to feature the falcon in this collection of NFTs is significant due to its cultural importance, strength, and versatility as a symbol while helping establish a memorable identity that combines tradition with technology and innovation. This hybridity aims to emphasize authenticity as a social construct since Dubai is claimed to be disorienting with its mixture of global and local places such as the city's glitzy spaces, blended with more traditional, and hence authentic, spaces such as traditional *souq* (AlMutawa, 2019). Finally, the vast expatriate communities in the UAE are reflected here in the integration of NFTs created by non-Emirati along with those created by Emirati artists. Such communities represent a continuation of the constant migratory flow in the UAE, which has become a trait of the country (Thomas, 2021). This is also reflected in using English as an official language in the country, alongside Arabic, educational institutions, government offices, some media sources, and daily interactions such as communicating with taxi drivers or everyday shopping. The blend of past and present, Emirati and non-Emirati, helps create a new hybrid image of the UAE as a futuristic Gulf nation.

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