My Voice, My Money: Authenticity, Capitalism, and Literary (Self-) Publishing from Kuwait

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Abstract Self-publishing continues to carry a negative reputation compared to traditional publishing, often stereotyping self-published authors as incompetent or as by-passers of institutional gatekeepers for not upholding creative integrity. This study examines the emerging phenomenon of self-publishing within Kuwait's literary production, revealing how young authors challenge traditional publishing norms through autonomous publication choices. Through qualitative interviews conducted with authors, we explored the motivations and experiences of Kuwaitis who decided to self-publish their literary efforts in digital or print form, along with the outcomes of their attempts to self-make culture in Arabia. The qualitative analysis indicates that Kuwaiti authors deliberately choose self-publishing to retain creative control and preserve an authentic voice, a trend particularly evident among non-native English-language literary writers. Secondly, while traditional publishers in Kuwait prioritise best-sellers, self-published writers effectively leverage social media platforms and personal networks to cultivate reader communities. Thirdly, self-published authors are expanding the niche of "Anglowaiti" literature. These findings suggest that, rather than signifying inferior quality, self-publishing in Kuwait represents an evolving form of cultural production.

Keywords: *Authorial voice, Culture, Language, Literary production, Publishing*

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1. Introduction

The technologically enabled democratisation of book publishing has changed how creative works are brought to audiences, altering distribution networks, impacting market penetration, disrupting traditional gatekeeping mechanisms, and introducing additional outlets for cultural intermediation. This has implications for authenticity, creative autonomy, and artistic integrity, particularly in markets in which familial capitalism, self-publishing, and author satisfaction intersect (Matulionyte et al., 2017; Robertson et al., 2017).

Comprehensive surveys of modern Arab literature have given the occasional honourable mention to the Kuwaiti short story (Hafez, 1992; Starkey, 2006),

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poetry (Allen, 2000), and drama (Al-Ra'i, 1992). The novel is a late but forceful arrival to the scene of international recognition, with a Kuwaiti win of the Man Booker Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2013, drawing attention to a younger generation of Kuwaiti authors (Arablit, 2013).

Within the country, reading, writing, and publishing poetry and prose is a popular and growing phenomenon, with a tidal wave of self-publishing hitting Kuwait recently. Literary authenticity in this scene is commonly understood as creative control, language choice, and market positioning, mediated by institutional factors (e.g., business structures), technological enablers (e.g., digital publishing), and sociocultural stratification (e.g., linguistic hybridisation). Translation processes determine how literary works circulate among cultures, with publishers making profit-based decisions about cultural and intellectual value. Audience segmentation encodes how publishers classify the target readership, with reader segments defined by educational background, age, intellectual interests, cultural affiliations, and psychographic characteristics—allowing publishers to target specific groups like educated urban professionals or young adults interested in particular genres. Cross-border distribution involves the practical challenges of international shipping, digital platforms, and bookstore networks, while regulatory frameworks add further complexity through licensing requirements and intellectual property laws that control legal permissions, prevent unauthorized reproduction, and protect authors' rights. (Lucius, 2008; Lutton, 2019; Mead, 2012).

The interplay of these elements has remained underexplored in Kuwaiti studies of literary history that often sidestep critical engagement for the sake of focusing on the leading role the country played in the cultural development of the region, recording each milestone with nationalistic pride. In order to fill this gap, in this study, we examine how self-publishing influences authentic literary expression within Kuwait's capitalist publishing environment by analysing the relationship between publishing models and author voices, evaluating how commercial demands shape literary production, and assessing the role of self-publishing in cultural expression. Authenticity remains a valid issue for contemporary writing from Kuwait, where authors – both of the traditional and the self-published kind – need to reconcile potentially conflicting powers of identity, language, (literary) heritage, conditions of high-tech modernity, and a commercially oriented industrial environment in which their works are made available to readers.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Authenticity in Modern Literature

The rise of the ideal of authenticity in Western culture occurred in the context of the rise of modernity and modern technology to encompass a certain individualistic ethos in response to social disenchantment originating from the "irreversible plunge into modernity" (Lindholm, 2013, p. 365) that undermined the hitherto taken-for-granted social order. The transformations called for refashioning individual self-understanding as one of uniqueness and distinctiveness, with the possibility that who a person truly is may be distinct from her public self (Varga & Guignon, 2020). Varga's (2012) work identifies three distinct models of authenticity: the autonomy model, the inner/introspective sense model, and the performative model. The autonomy model identifies authenticity as individual sovereignty over decision-making processes, free from external cultural pressures and social conventions; the inner sense model emphasises introspective self-understanding as the primary mechanism for authentic expression; and in the performative model, authenticity is transformed from an intrinsic characteristic into a market imperative, making authentic self-expression a goal that can be achieved through strategic self-marketing and personal brand cultivation. Authentic personal brands no longer assume adjustment of personality to outside requirements of the market; rather, they are an element of becoming oneself. Echoing the tenets of Varga's performative model, Charles Lindholm asserts that authenticity is realised by altering the relationship between individual identity formation and commercial and social marketplaces (Lindholm, 2013).

2.2 Gulf Capitalism and Authenticity

As Varga (2012) points out, the relationship between capitalism and the ideal of authenticity is one of reciprocal shaping. A well-established tradition of discussing capitalism in the Gulf takes as its starting

position the theoretical framework of the rentier state or rentier economy that describes economic growth based on the exploitation of natural resources, emphasizing the government-controlled distribution of externally obtained wealth through different channels of patronage (Farah, 1989). Capitalism in Kuwait needs to be understood in relation to and as an integral part of, capitalism in the Gulf. The economies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have become "a major node of world capitalism" (Hanieh, 2011, p. 2), a process that occurred through integration into global markets in just a few decades. The rapid emergence of Gulf capitalists saw state-supported and family-based 1960s and 1970s merchant groups evolve and grow into a handful of large conglomerates engaged in the internationalisation of Gulf capitalism (Hanieh, 2011).

The 'spirit' of Kuwaiti/Gulf capitalism resembles the familial description associated with 19th-century Europe (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018). Arab family businesses have certain defining characteristics that govern their operations in ways reflective of the socio-cultural context which they grew from and in which they operate. Arab and Gulf societies are built on dense personal networks where the individual is identified by the web of connections one establishes with others (Fahed-Sreih, 2017). The relationships are established and maintained through mutual obligations, and the negotiated ties of a person to others constitute the essence of the person's identity both in the eyes of the community and to the person himself (Rosen, 2004). Capitalism in the Arabian Gulf reflects the same pattern: business is "the nexus of kin-based relations and entrepreneurial images or networks" (Palaiologos & Al Khunaizi, 2017, p. 34). It exists to create value for the family in its social context, maintain family loyalty, extend belongingness to all, and boost the family image in society. Following hierarchical traditions, senior members hold power to enact decisions, but knowledge is shared laterally across the network and passed down to the next generations, with family members all contributing to the family's and the business' unique identity. Nepotism, *Wasta*, continues to shape many decisions, retaining its traditional role despite social modernisation and the internationalisation of Gulf businesses (Al Mulla, 2023). Nonetheless, demands for authenticity emerge in these socio-cultural configurations, too.

2.3. Self-Publishing: a DIY Ethic for Seekers of the Authentic

In a world of heavily consolidated Western book publishing industries, self-publishing carries an aura of authenticity: "tiny, but authentic" competitors eat away at the market share of giant publishing houses that are then prompted into launching new imprints with the look and feel of self-publishing (Fürst, 2019). While the publishing industry in Kuwait continues to reflect patterns of familial capitalism, self-publishing grows. As noted, "[a]uthors in the Arab Gulf often publish their own books", which is seen as a problem in making the books accessible to wider audiences internationally (Königstetter, 2019, p. 387). Self-publishing in this context lends itself to an interpretation that sees the phenomenon less as a matter of a conscious choice to seek authenticity in the shadow of major publishing corporations (Al-Rubaie, 2023) and more as a move prompted by issues with the standards of the Gulf publishing industries that, until relatively recently, were considered as lacking in professionalism. But above all, the growing trend of self-publishing in recent years has been fueled by the new-found interest of Khaleeji youth in reading and writing fiction. As a mode of self-expression, DIY publishing can be significant for the value it creates outside of capitalism by expanding the use-value, or the book's worth to authors, to a primary status over its exchange-value (Holtzman et al., 2007). Choosing to self-publish can be an act of demonstrating a DIY ethos in declaring the claim to full participant status in the participatory cultures (Jenkins et al., 2015) of Gulf youth, with profound implications for the authenticity of publications brought to the public this way.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Data collection centred on two distinct groups of participants: published authors and local publishing house proprietors. The research sample comprised 13 published Kuwaiti authors selected to represent various publishing routes. Three of these authors had experience spanning both traditional and self-publishing channels, offering valuable comparative insights into these distinct publishing approaches. Six participants had exclusively pursued self-publishing routes, whilst four had published solely through traditional publishing houses, either within Kuwait or internationally. The diversified sample

enabled a thorough examination of different publishing experiences and their impact on authentic literary expression.

The participating authors were aged between 23 and 38. They all demonstrated high levels of educational attainment, holding postgraduate qualifications including Masters and PhD degrees across various disciplines. This educational background often informed their approach to writing and their perspectives on the authenticity of their published work. Notably, all participants maintained professional careers alongside their literary pursuits, either as full-time employees in various sectors or as freelance professionals, balancing creative expression with practical constraints.

The participant recruitment process employed convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Initial participants were identified through the researchers' professional and academic networks. These participants then facilitated connections with additional authors through their publishing networks. The study also included in-depth background interviews with three owners of Kuwaiti publishing houses. The publishers were selected based on their industry experience, all of them representing a 'new wave' of publishing. This wave comprises nine entrants into book publishing in Kuwait between 2008 and 2018, their move triggered by the growing popularity of writing poetry and fiction among young Kuwaitis as a form of self-expression. The interviews with the publishers explored their views on the state of publishing in Kuwait, their experiences with managing a local publishing house, and their take on self-publishing.

The formal interviews were supplemented by searches of Arabic and English government archive sources for official figures on book publishing and literary production in Kuwait. These searches yielded only partial results, but the data helped the triangulation of perspective to reflect a context of the broader industry patterns.

3.2. Instrument

The research instrument consisted of semi-structured interviews (see Appendix) designed to make use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogue while maintaining consistency and allowing for organic exploration of emerging themes (Brinkmann, 2020). The interview guide for authors focused on their perceptions and experiences regarding authentic literary expression, publishing challenges, and creative freedom. The publisher interviews explored industry dynamics, market trends, and the balance between commercial viability and cultural contribution. Each interview typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The participants were keen on sharing their experiences and voicing their opinions on the literary scene in Kuwait.

3.3. Procedure

The interviews were conducted between October and December 2020. Eleven out of 16 participants opted for meeting via ZOOM, reflecting preferences for online interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic. The remaining two interviews were conducted in person in cafés, as suggested by the participants. The flexibility in the interview format ensured maximum participant comfort whilst maintaining data collection consistency.

Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the research process. All participants received detailed information about the study's objectives and their rights as research participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms in all research outputs. This commitment to anonymity was particularly important given Kuwait's relatively small literary community and the potentially sensitive nature of discussions about publishing practices and creative freedom. The interviews were recorded with participant permission and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The transcription process included careful notation of non-verbal cues and contextual elements that might influence interpretation. The data analysis process employed a systematic approach for coding and theme identification (Boyatzis, 1998). This was followed by a detailed thematic analysis with a focus on what was said to identify patterns, relationships, and contradictions within the data to facilitate a rich understanding of the complex relationships between literary expression, authenticity, commercial publishing considerations, and cultural factors in Kuwait's literary production.

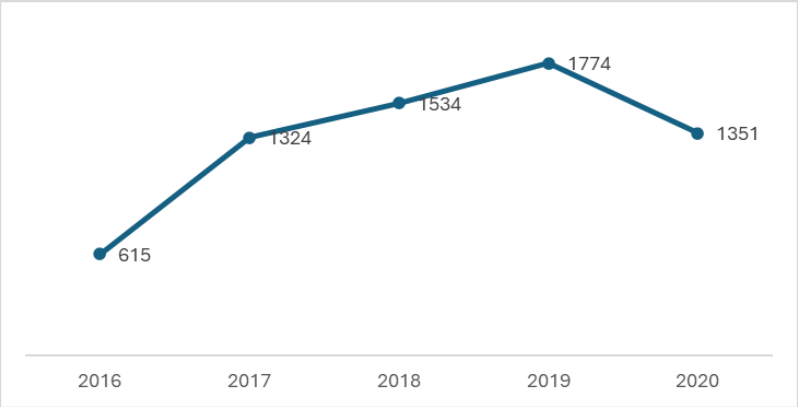
4. Results

4.1. Literature, Self-Expression, and Publishing Models

Archival research provided a measure of the growing popularity of reading in Kuwait. Government statistics about the annually held International Book Fair of Kuwait show that the event attracted 206,000 visitors in 2014, and the numbers went up to 350,000 in 2020 when the fair had to move online during the pandemic (http://bookfair.nccal.gov.kw/en/).

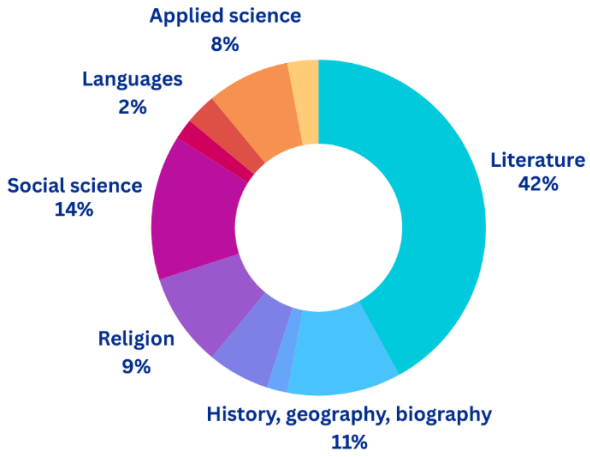
Apart from book fair statistics, we also managed to uncover some facts to support industry insider perceptions about the dynamics of the segment, all agreeing that the trend has been towards growth, mainly driven by young readers. As a publisher we interviewed said, "*There is an interest [in reading] and I don't like the cliché that says Arabs don't read*". Similarly, another publisher asserted that *"[t]he number of readers, the number of writers (which are reflecting the numbers of readers), and the number of publishers are much more than what it was 15 years ago*". A measure of the volume of local publications is provided by figures shared with us by the ISBN Department of the National Library of Kuwait. These figures show steady year-on-year growth in the number of books registered at the National Library prior to 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Books Registered for ISBN at Kuwait National Library



Based on data available for 2014/15 (NCCAL, 2015), among the books published in the country, works classified as "literature" feature prominently, constituting the single largest category with 42 percent (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Books Published in Kuwait by Genre, 2014/2015



The catalogue of books deposited at the Kuwait National Library in 2015/16 supports another recurring observation made by our interviewees about the self-publishing trend. Of the 244 titles that were categorised as "literature" in the library's database for that period, 44 items, or 18% of the total, were self-published (National Library of Kuwait, 2016). Similarly, the website of the 2020 online international book fair listed 74 participating publishers, with 20 of them, or 27%, listed as 'independent', a label denoting self-publishing. In addition, the business potential of the sector is reflected in Kuwaiti entrepreneur Lulu Al-Sabah's decision to set up a self-publishing company in London in 2020 under the slogan "Every Story Matters/Let your creativity soar!".

Talking about the state of literary book publishing in Kuwait, we found a contradiction in how publishers and authors understand the scene. Like reluctant capitalists, the publishers we interviewed all stressed the non-financial considerations that got them into the business, with the co-founder of a mainstream publishing house detailing his professional credo this way: "*As a commercial business, [book publishing] is not the best field to work in. If you don't have passion for books, and if you don't have this idea about changing the society to a better position, if you don't have that ambition to develop your society and to help your people to be better in the future, you will not work in that field."*

On the other hand, the authors we interviewed repeatedly articulated critiques of the commercialism of Kuwait's publishing industry. A traditionally published author no longer under contract with a mainstream publisher summed up her experience with the house as, *"I always thought of them as just this big marketing, just this money guzzling machine. They just wanted money"* (Shaimaa). Authors repeatedly cited the profit motive as something detrimental to the literary quality of what gets published. As they see it, "*Most publishers in Kuwait are purely commercial. They look only for sales, and I don't think that's a good goal for publishers because sales are not everything*" (Mansoor), sentiments echoed by another author who expressed his dislike for current trends by saying, "*I don't like very much what I see because the publishing companies are focusing on how to sell more books rather than how to sell a good book. It's becoming more about the money, not about the quality of the work*" (Hamad). The demographics of readership are also seen to push mainstream publishers towards accessible and homogeneous offerings: "*The audience of the teenagers here in Kuwait is very big, especially the girls. So [publishers] focus on how to get their attention, mostly through love stories and love novels. And it's not really that good a love story, it's what we see on TV. This is the true genre that the publishing companies want*" (Hamad).

The commercial imperative invites publisher preferences for popular genres, including self-help, romance, and horror. It also makes publishers pursue popular, if untried, authors who have already built up a large online following, such as established bloggers or social media influencers: "*It's actually a trend that celebrities or social media influencers write books now, so the whole scene of publishing a book or writing a book in Kuwait is not as healthy as I hope it to be*" (Mansoor).

Interviewees believe that self-publishing places authors in a position of full control over the publishing process, challenging established norms that govern creative industries and book publishing. Several traditionally published authors we interviewed subscribe to the view that self-publishing allows liberation from the restrictions that arise from conventional procedures of publication. As Hamad, whose books of poetry were published by a small mainstream Kuwaiti house, explained the attraction: "*I'm thinking about self-publishing myself because it gives you more freedom about your work and how you really want to do it*".

Self-published authors were particularly emphatic on the creative control self-publishing affords writers. As a self-published young writer said, "*When you self-publish, you control everything. No one would interfere, no one would suggest any modifications for you. You take control of 100 percent of the process*". His views are shared by self-published poetess Farida: *If you go to a publisher, there's a specific direction or narrative that you must follow. They have more control over the content, down to the design and word choice even, all of that. And I wanted at least my first book to be a creation that is free of any limitations. Because I spent so much time creating it, I believed it should come out to the world the way... Just free, not controlled or directed.*

Echoed by other interviewees, this take on literary creation directly challenges the role publishing houses are supposed to play in content development and enhancing the manuscript through the editorial process. The standard industry position is clear: if literary giants like Hemingway and Fitzgerald relied on the skill of editors, then so should most self-publishers, for "the worst editor in the world is the author" (Greco et al., 2014, p. 5). In fact, several of our interviewees who published their work through traditional houses complained about the lack of editorial oversight over their manuscripts, which suggests that Kuwaiti publishers may not actually control or direct the creative process as much as self-publishers assume. But coupled with the widely held views about the mainstream industry's commercial considerations cited above, the authors' rejection of editorial direction may read like a challenge to authoritarian guardians of language and taste placed higher in the hierarchies of traditional publishing. Democratizing the field then may become a prerequisite for allowing authentic new voices to engage with and give artistic expression to issues that concern Khaleeji youth, which is what initially drew young author Nourah to self-publishing: *For me, the intention was how can I reach my audience, using tools that are basically democratic. There's no publisher who's telling me I like this piece, but not that piece because this piece will sell (…), but this piece won't. So that's what interested me in [self-publishing]*.

4.2. Writing in English

Many of the authors interviewed opted for writing and self-publishing in English rather than Arabic. These Arab writers face the danger of being labelled as 'not Arab enough' (or not Kuwaiti enough) for undermining their mother tongue. In addition, Kuwaiti publishers prefer books that are more marketable to Gulf audiences – i.e., books written in Arabic. One of the publishers interviewed expressed awareness of the limitations of an English publication in terms of sales, claiming that publishing fiction written by Kuwaiti authors in English would not be profitable.

On the other hand, the authors we interviewed were keen on showcasing their work even if writing in English erects a barrier to entering the dominant literary circles in Kuwait. For instance, to belong to the Kuwaiti Writers' Association, one needs to fulfil the requirements of Kuwaiti citizenship and writing in Arabic. In a similar vein, as quoted above, Kuwaiti publishing houses choose to publish Arabic literature because of its mass-market appeal and potential sales. As an author whose English-language novel came out from a traditional publishing house said, "*As someone who has published with a publishing company, I did feel a little bit alienated in [that] they were favouring the Arabic writers*" (Shaimaa).

Kuwaiti author Nada Faris coined the term 'Anglowaiti', referring to Kuwaiti authors writing in English in order to create space for these writers who must carve out a literary path without the support of the publishing industry or presses in Kuwait. The authors agreed that what matters is choosing English because they feel "*more comfortable*" with expressing themselves in this language rather than attempting to write in Arabic in order to sell more or to conform to societal expectations. It was essential for the writers to have their voices heard: "*I want to have people read my book*", says Farida.

One of the traditionally published authors we interviewed felt the need to express his voice in English because he had studied English as an undergraduate. He was keen to express emotions in English rather than in his mother tongue. Upon a close reading of the book, it was clear that there was no editorial committee that read the book for grammar or literary quality, suggesting that publishers do not have committees in place to deal with English books. As one of the authors explained: "*I approached most of the publishing companies that are well-known. I sent the email, and all of them told me that they don't publish English work*" (Hamad).

Two themes kept emerging in the interviews with authors writing in English. First, there is a clear lack of support received from publishing houses to publish in English. If they do publish in English, they may need to bear some of the related costs, and it will be a struggle to have their book promoted as vigorously as Arabic books. The authors were aware that publishing in English left them at a disadvantage in this way. The second conclusion arrived at is that although the authors were aware of the disadvantages of writing in English, they did not wish to compromise their work or the text's authenticity in English. One of the authors was asked to translate her work to Arabic, being a native

Arabic speaker herself, and she utterly refused: "*The only thing that was bothering me the whole time was that they needed a translation. And I was like, No, well, I didn't write it in English in order to translate it into Arabic because I know that not many would understand what I am writing about, but changing the meaning will definitely just ruin my whole idea of what I wrote about"* (Rawan).

The choice of language for publication then remains a concern for authors and publishers alike, albeit for different reasons. Authors choose to write in English to remain true to their 'literary' voice over national belonging. On the other hand, publishers choose to remain loyal to the market, where the largest sales potential is in Arabic works.

4.3. Authenticity

The themes that emerged from the interviews reflect elements of all three models in the authors' understanding of authenticity (Table 1).

Table 1
Themes Identified in the Interview Data

Model of authenticity	Theme	Definition
Autonomy	Creative control	Absence of outside interference with one's literary creation
	Artistic freedom	The ability to make all choices regarding the work
	Democratisation	Seizing power over one's creation from the industry
	Anti-commercialism	Opposing the commercial dictate of publishing houses to tweak content and language for higher sales
	Resistance to commodification	Refusal to understand the work as a product produced to sell
Inner sense	Anglowaiti writing	Not conforming to conventions by writing in English as a more comfortable way of expressing inner selves
Performative	Pro-marketing	Understanding expressions of authorial voices as inextricably linked to the promotion of the work

The emancipatory potential of self-publishing, as applied to the act of getting a book out without assistance from established institutions, is clearly recognized by the research participants. Self-publishers, both in their own eyes and the eyes of traditionally published authors, are seen as capable of making decisions for themselves, liberated from interference from commercially-minded mainstream publishers, and free of the need to obey industry-standard external cultural pressures and conventions. Authenticity demands that writing expresses who the author truly is. More precisely, expressive authenticity, as applied to art, demands that the work express both the cultural beliefs and values of a people and the personal character and feeling specific to the individual creator (Dutton, 2005). With only self-imposed guidelines to shape the writing and publishing process, self-publishing may emerge as a new form of cultural expression with works that can serve as "potential sources of insight into the struggle for identity and authenticity" (Hardt, 1993, p. 67).

5. Discussion

As established previously, our research grew out of the need to find explanations for why self-publishing has become a popular trend in Kuwait, particularly among youth. We wished to find out what drew young authors to it and what experiences they gained from engaging in this cultural practice. In making sense of the self-publishing phenomenon, another major question that prompted the research focused on whether self-publishing could enable an authentic expression of new voices in literature in Kuwait, particularly among young authors who defy cultural conventions and societal expectations to write in English. Taking as our starting point the assertion that the relationship between capitalism and the ideal of authenticity is one of reciprocal shaping (Varga, 2012), we also asked what understandings

of authenticity can emerge under conditions of a publishing industry run on the commercial logic of Kuwaiti capitalism.

We found that Kuwait's culture shapes forcefully local understandings of authenticity. In a context where the self is relational, premodern social relations continue to inform social organisation into networks, and capitalism is familial, the autonomy model makes perfect sense for young authors struggling for identity and authenticity. In the autonomy model of authenticity (Varga, 2012), individuals are posited as able to govern themselves, capable of deciding for themselves, free from manipulation, and uncritical obedience to the powers of external cultural pressures and social conventions. Autonomy and authenticity both assume that an individual should endeavour to lead her life according to self-imposed guidelines emerging from her own non-constrained reasons and motives, but authenticity also demands that these reasons and motives ought to express the individual's self-identity.

The recurring critiques authors expressed about the commercialism reigning in Kuwaiti book publishing and the commodification of literature that limits artistic creativity can also be read as expressions of objections to inauthenticity, in line with the inner sense model of authenticity (Varga, 2012). As this model posits, inner states, motivations, and feelings are the guiding authority to follow, eschewing the public competitive relations that dominate social life and force role-playing where public identities are determined by the normative expectations of other people. Authenticity needs to be defended against conformity through the realisation of a person's own way of being human, a notion articulated in romantic and bohemian artistic critiques that claim the commodification of art under capitalism restricts human creativity. In such critiques, resistance to standardization and the commodification of mass-produced (artistic) goods becomes a struggle against inauthenticity. However, aspects of the inner sense model with an emphasis on eschewing relations that dominate social life are harder to reconcile with either the social organisation or the understanding of the self in Kuwait.

Linking previously incompatible logics underlying earlier models, the performative is the most helpful way to model authenticity as understood by young authors in contemporary Kuwait. Through the prism of the performative model, authentic persons are distinct, and their difference can be put to work by communicating it strategically in a consistent pattern of interaction with others. Thus, difference is no longer a derivate of an autonomous life but rather the main source of both authenticity and market value that needs to be invested and performed in situations with others. If it is the performance of an individual's uniqueness that leads to authenticity, authenticity comes to be understood as "a process of self-creation as a creation of difference" (Varga, 2012, p. 134). The performative model of authenticity merges central elements from the other models: both introspection that helps a person find her inner core she is to stay true to and the possibility of choosing identities from a range of possibilities are part of it. But authentic traits are "only conceived as authentic if they help produce difference from others in such a way that it also brings a strategic gain" (Varga, 2012, p. 135). Ultimately, the performative model matches up the ideal of authenticity and the requirements of capitalism. Capitalism adeptly endogenizes critiques like the artistic critique of inauthenticity that posited the authentic as incommensurable with money and standardized commodities. Today, authenticity has been successfully economized (Murtola & Fleming, 2011).

Our research interviews all confirmed the importance attached to self-marketing and personal branding, reflecting an implicit understanding of the creation and maintenance of authentic personal brands as an element of becoming oneself. Authors perceive themselves as distinct persons who communicate their difference strategically through their writing and in the patterns of interaction with their audience, making this distinctiveness the source of both authenticity and market value invested and performed in situations that bring creative labourers a strategic gain.

Self-published authors exploit readily available venues for the strategic communication of their distinct personal brand: social media. Social media are pervasive in Kuwait where approximately 99.7 percent of households use smartphones, and the usage of WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter is over 70 percent among Kuwaitis (Al-Sumait et al., 2021). Digital marketing is inexpensive and perfectly suited for exploiting the networked nature of Kuwaiti society where word-of-mouth remains a powerful method for building and economizing brands. Social media platforms are handy marketing tools for

self-published authors, many of whom are adept at exploiting communication technology in addition to mobilising their existing networks of friends and family. A self-published novelist described his promotion strategy as a combination of personal networks and inexpensive social media methods: "*As for the marketing, first it started with the family. I would speak to my family and friends, and everyone would tell their families and friends. [Then] I posted about it (…) on Facebook and on Twitter"* (Firas). A self-published poet also confirmed the paramount importance of word-of-mouth in generating publicity for his work: "*I create my own teasers, my own promotions. I like direct marketing, and I love when people recommend my books to one another. The word of mouth actually saved my writing career*" (Mansoor). Similarly, another self-published poet saw personal recommendations as a crucial ingredient in promoting her work: "*I did use social media, Instagram, Twitter, but I guess word of mouth went a very long way*" (Farida).

Literary publishing in Kuwait is, thus, to a great extent a matter of the ability to mobilise social ties and participate in networks to strategic advantage. Networks are central to conferring a public existence on authors and texts (Bourdieu, 2008), and the ability to forge ties with and tap into existing networks is essential for gaining fame and recognition as a published author. This realisation was implicitly communicated by our traditionally published research participants, who saw self-published authors at a disadvantage for not being associated with a publishing house that others, including distributors, could "*make deals with*". Describing reactions that she encountered, self-published poet Farida also talked about people in the 'literary scene' telling her, "*Oh, you're an outcast, so you had to do it on your own*".

Networks and connections tend to organise relations around every aspect of the industry. Several authors we interviewed talked about publishing contracts materialising from personal connections to the owners of a house; an author who has a friend or knows someone in the industry could land a contract mainly on the strength of that connection. Such centrality of relationships, contacts, and networks in book publishing is characteristic of the USA as well, where the industry "relies exclusively on people, relationships, and contacts" (Greco et al., 2014, p.147). In the world of Arab book publishing, however, this 'people business' operates on a "weak" editing culture (Qualey, 2021). As a result, authors with exacting standards need to pay out of their own pocket to get their manuscript copyedited properly even if they publish with a publishing house, and it is not unheard of that they also end up commissioning and covering the costs of their book's cover design. Such practices suggest that (successful) authors may enjoy a high degree of autonomy within the confines of the industry, and they also point towards blurring the lines of demarcation between traditional and self-publishing – a blurring that becomes explicit in the widespread practice of using hybrid publishing models.

In Kuwait's publishing industry, the hybrid publishing model entails a contract formula that sees an author pay in whole or part for the publishing of her work, but the book is released under the name of a publishing house. In exchange for her financial contribution to the publishing process, the author then gets a larger cut of the sales revenues. As Warda summed up the practice, it is "*kind of like self-publishing, but with a brand name on it*". The known sales percentage splits shared with us by interviewees from their experience varied between configurations of 90–10, 80–20, and 50–50. Granting a higher percentage to an author conflicts with the publishers' profit motive and leaves the author at a disadvantage, whereby the publishing house will not promote the book as energetically as they market titles that earn them more. "*If I'm not taking the higher percentage, it means they will market my book in a better way. If I'm taking the higher percentage, they're not going to take care of it; they're going to leave it on shelves, or they're not even going to put it on shelves because they are not taking the higher percentage*", said Fadia, a bestselling traditionally published author. The percentage split can also serve as an indirect indicator of what the publishers think about the manuscript and how well they expect the book to do. As Warda, whose self-published experimental book was picked up by a traditional publisher, said about her contract with the publishing house, "*I paid for most of the printing. They didn't really believe in it, so I got a higher percentage*". In addition, authors like Warda are also regularly tasked with taking care of distribution and delivering copies of the book to bookstores around Kuwait, a practice better known for self-publishing.

'Hybrid' is arguably also a good way to describe a phenomenon rarely discussed in the matrix of traditional versus self-publishing: author-owned publishing houses. Such houses are not unique to

Kuwait or the present day. Dar Suad Al-Sabah for Publishing and Distribution, for example, was set up in the 1980s by the poetess the publishing house is was named after. Today, high-culture-focused Takween's co-founders include novelist Bothayna Al-Essa and poet Mohammad Attabi, who are both published by their house, while youth-centric Platinum Book publish co-founder Dr. Ahmad Al-Haidar's works. For their owners, such houses represent the ultimate in achieving creative autonomy. At the same time, the author-owned publishing houses are also businesses, seamlessly blending competition for honour and esteem in Kuwait's cultural field and the imperative to circulate books as commodities, thereby contributing to the economisation of authenticity.

To conclude, self-publishing may not be so far removed from the traditions of Kuwaiti culture after all. Yet, it adds an element of open defiance to the cozy hybrid relations that have shaped the literary field. The recent wave of self-publishing in Kuwait created new configurations for experiencing the potentially conflicting powers of identity, language, (literary) heritage, conditions of high-tech modernity, and a commercially oriented industrial environment in which literary works are made available to readers. Self-publishing brought young Kuwaiti authors new opportunities to enter the flow of literary publications. Following self-publishing blueprints found online, new writers of fiction and poetry have offered up their voices for public appreciation, bypassing the editorial guardian mechanisms of traditional publishers. Coupled with our research participants' repeatedly articulated critiques of the commercialism of Kuwait's publishing industry, the DIY ethic underpinning self-publishing points toward the possibility of reading the works by these emerging voices as authentic expressions of a new Khaleeji generation. The young authors we interviewed expertly speak the new language of authenticity, in sync with a global understanding of authenticity as a performative need for the accomplished communication of authentic singularity.

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Appendix

Questions for the Semi-Structured Interviews with Authors

1. What is your view of self-publishing?
2. What was your experience with publishing like?
   [Prompts as necessary on:]

How did you find the publisher?
Why did you choose to go with them?
What were the terms of the contract you signed with them? [Who pays for what; who gets what; who owns the copyright and moral rights?]
What did they help you with? (e.g., editing services, cover design?)
How did you decide on the format (print/e-book)?
How many copies were printed? Why?
How long did it take for the book to come out?
What was the overall experience of the publication process like?

3. When the book was published, how did you and/or the publisher go about marketing it? Who did what to let readers know the book was now out? [Prompts as needed: book launch, book signings, social media marketing, book reviews, etc.]
4. How was the distribution of the book organized?
5. How did the book do? (sales, reader feedback)
6. For your next book, why did you stay with/decide to change the publishing method? How was the publication process different this time?
7. Why do you think some authors have a problem with self-publishing? Or have you seen a change in perceptions?
8. In your experience, what hierarchies are there between the publishers/authors/self-published authors?
9. What would you say makes a good publisher?