The methodology of door-knocking: Saudi household surveys on socioeconomics and learning technologies

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Abstract: Some academics endorse analysing societies’ symbolic forms. This article, therefore, inspects the symbol of door-knocking. It addresses the research question of what impacts data collection through door-knocking. This question was addressed as part of a household survey conducted in low-income Saudi neighbourhoods to study socioeconomics and learning technologies. This study involved recruiting 18 male and female Saudis to knock on 1300 doors. It showed positive and negative influences on data collection. Concerning negative influences, knockers and “knockees” were gendered—constrained by gender separation, societal and parental restrictions upon women and lack of gender confidence. Knockers were intimidated by doors’ assertive features, such as elaborate carvings, decorative cutouts or colouring. They were frightened by doors’ defensive features, like thick doors with enormous frames, two front doors per house, high concrete walls and unnecessary stairs. They were uncomfortable—exhausted, emotionally distressed and concerned about hygiene and safety. Regarding positive influences, knockers and knockees were traditional, following Saudi negotiation, charity work, hospitality and generosity. Knockees were respectful, showing respect to knockers’ authority, rank and class. They were profit-oriented, appreciating financial and non-financial incentives. Saudi households were distinguishable through food smells, shoes, cars, stickers and plants. These influences constitute methodological grounds for future door-knocking.

Keywords: Saudi; household survey; door-to-door; interview; learning technology

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
A message for writers is that scholarly efforts should be put into “explicitising” the academic methodology of home-to-home data collection by theorising it and devoting manuscripts to its dynamics. A message for researchers is that, in Saudi Arabia, even though the perceived reality is that any academic attempt to conduct door-to-door household surveys will not succeed, the actual reality is that households are more likely to welcome researchers and willingly answer their interview questions.
1. Opening
Cassirer (1923), in his well-cited book The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, opened a new window into philosophy, calling for the detection of the principles behind societies’ symbolic forms. Corresponding to Cassirer's call, this article enquires into societal and cultural norms, values and concerns that underlie the symbolic configuration of door-knocking. Through this enquiry, the article contributes to the academic mission of philosophising, assisting with “the study or science of truths or principles underlying all knowledge and being” (Butler, 1996, p. 297). The article establishes a framework to help those whose methodology requires door-knocking.

1.1. Non-academic door-knocking
Buchli (2004) article on material culture investigated the socio-spatial ramifications of door-knocking. Door-knocking is a common practice that serves a variety of sectors. The business sector, for instance, uses door-based sales representatives, solicitors, peddlers, scammers and distributors of circulars (Jolson & Wotruba, 1992). Door-knocking is also implemented for educational and learning purposes, encouraging young people to sell sweets door-to-door, thereby helping them gain soft life skills such as active citizenship, courage, confidence, entrepreneurship and character (Inness, 1997). In the political sector, door-to-door canvassers generate party support (Green et al., 2003). In the healthcare division, door-knocking aims to create collective awareness of medically safe practices (Omer et al., 2008) and carry out screenings to detect diseases and disorders (Dogu et al., 2003; Romero et al., 2011). The government sector also conducts door-to-door household surveys, such as population censuses (Smith et al., 1997). As for the volunteer sector, home-to-home charitable giving is a common practice in certain countries (Benthall, 1998). In addition, there is the religious method of home-to-home preaching, including evangelistic campaigns such as “door-to-door proselytising” (Mir, 2014). During traditional celebrations (e.g., Halloween and Girgian), children dress in traditional attire (or in costumes), carol (or perform) door-to-door and collect small gifts (Nevins & O'Shea, 2018; Roger, 2003; Shaw et al., 1964).

1.2. Academic door-knocking
Academics collect data by using the method of door-knocking. However, very few have written about this experience in the methodology section, nor have they composed independent manuscripts dedicated to this experience (Brutto et al., 2005; Yu et al., 2012). The method of home-to-home outreach is customarily “embedded within the research process and rarely made explicit during the research itself or in subsequent publications” (Davies, 2011, p. 290). In consideration of this limitation, scholarly efforts should, as recommended by Hazel and Clark (2013), be put into “explicitising” the academic methodology of home-to-home data collection by theorising it and devoting manuscripts to its dynamics. Following this recommendation, this paper details an experience of door-knocking and deals with this experience as “data” (Davies, 2011, p. 290) that are to be analysed, interpreted, discussed and eventually published. A small number of academics have taken the initiative and reported on the experience of data collection through door visitation. For example, Von Wright (1988) viewed academic knocks from neurophysiological perspectives; in contrast, the current article views them from social and cultural standpoints. Hazel and Clark (2013) examined house-to-house research primarily from political viewpoints, whereas the current study perceives it from philosophical outlooks. Freeman (2000) and Davies (2011) applied first-person pronouns to share their personal, technical and diary-like reflections on academic door-knocking; however, the current work takes a step further in attempting to theorise this knocking. The article investigates door-knocking in more depth (beyond exploring the technicality and art of going door-to-door) to scrutinise its philosophy. Existing academic literature appears to be lacking with respect to the philosophising of door-knocking; hence, this article places knocking within a philosophical context.
2. Methodology
This publication studies the aspects of social reality grounded in the front door. It unearths the social dramas inherent in the front door, generating a narrative for what appears to be merely a passive, spatial piece of metal or wood. It addresses the question of what impacts data collection through door-knocking by examining an academic experience of door solicitation in the Saudi context. The solicitation involved around 1300 unannounced knocks on Saudi front doors to study socioeconomics and learning technologies. Four-months of knocking with an average of 11 knocks a day occurred in Dammam, the capital of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The household selection went through two stages. In stage one, low-income neighbourhoods were identified by consulting three charity organisations, who referred to nine neighbourhoods as inhabited by many low-income Saudi families. In stage two, houses in each neighbourhood were randomly selected at the same density rate, using satellite images. Satellite images were used due to the absence of address-list systems and published knowledge about neighbourhoods. The project’s leading team consisted of Arab and non-Arab speakers. Hence, the decision was made to employ bilingual locals from a private university. Bilinguals, who can afford to study in private universities, tend to come from high-income families. Out of 102 female and 31 male applicants, ten women and eight men were accepted as data-collectors, that is, “knockers”. The analysis of the collected data gave rise to four negative and four positive influences over data collection through door-knocking in the Saudi context. These influences are illustrated in Figure 1 and unpacked in the following sections.

3. Negative influences [findings]
This section addresses the first part of the research question, focusing on what negatively impacts the data collection by means of door-knocking.

3.1. Being gendered
Knockers and “knockees” (to borrow a term from Sims & Stephens, 2011) felt constrained by gender in three ways. The first way was gender separation; some were restricted by the cultural norm of gender segregation, whereby unrelated men and women cannot, traditionally, meet up. That is, households were more likely to participate in an interview if the interviewing was in line with the custom of gender separation. Yet, despite this custom, cross-gender interviewing occurred in special circumstances. First, one gender interviewed the other on the street outside the home. Second, men interviewed women inside the home in the presence of other family members,
whether male or female, adult or child. Third, men interviewed female-headed households through their child, who acted as a go-between to deliver messages between the mother and interviewer, who sat in different rooms. Fourth, women interviewed men in the presence of their wives or a male researcher. Sixth, men interviewed women through a closed house door, making it difficult for them to hear each other through the door. Some women accepted being interviewed through a closed door because they were conservative; they were worried about safety, especially without the presence of a male member of the house. Some of these women had been locked in by their husbands, who had taken the door keys with them. Some of those who chose to be interviewed from behind a door were ashamed of the bad condition of their households and consequently did not want others to see inside. That said, the norm of gender separation made some men more desperate to socialise with women. Hence, at times, if a household head was male, he appeared to prefer to be interviewed in the presence of women because of flirtation and the novelty of talking with women. Some female-headed households were desperate for aid, and as such, some agreed to be interviewed by men as long as they would be helped by receiving the 14 USD reward for taking part in the interview, even though they were against gender mixing. Even though conservatism is the norm, very low-income households could not afford to act conservatively. Notwithstanding the social norm of gender separation, at times, male households agreed to be interviewed if the interviewer was female or accompanied by a woman. Perhaps because of that reason, the records show that female interviewers experienced less rejection than men. Sometimes, although male research assistants knocked on household doors and were refused, female research assistants who knocked on the same doors saw inhabitants change their minds and agree to participate.

Second, societal and parental restrictions on women constrained some knockers. As for societal restrictions, neighbourhoods are alienated into two zones: one for families and the other for male singles. It is generally stated in rent advertisements whether accommodation is for male singles or families. Single apartments are structured differently from family apartments. For example, for male singles’ accommodation, each apartment has only one door, and the doors are close to one another. As for family accommodation, each apartment has two doors—one for family members and one for guests. Property owners build an entire apartment building and dedicate it to either male singles or families, and there is no mixing between the two types. In a male singles-only building, residents reported not liking it when a woman (here, a female interviewee) entered their building, as they observed that such behaviour brings negative attention. Female knockers never agreed to enter an apartment for single men or a house where there were only male family members. As for parental restrictions, many women were enthusiastic about working as research assistants for the project, but most of them knew that their parents would never allow them to knock on doors. Some women might have joined the project without telling their parents or might have told their parents at a later stage of the project. Some might even have told their parents that they were going to a shopping mall or campus while secretly conducting fieldwork.

The third way, a lack of gender confidence, made some knockers constrained by a lack of confidence with communicating with the other gender. Female students showed more confidence in door-knocking than their male counterparts, perhaps because women culturally spend more time in the house domain than men and are subsequently more familiar with the home’s political and social dynamics. Moreover, male research assistants found it difficult to knock on houses, viewing houses as women’s domains. That is, the Saudi front door splits the entire nation into two domains: women’s inside-the-house and men’s outside-the-house domains. This means that the front door originates from a deeply rooted social dyad and the power relationships between the inhabitants, namely, men and women. The association of women with the inside-the-house domain is well-established, to the extent that it is thought that, once a woman steps outside the home, the devil immediately starts escorting her until she returns home (Bin Jabrin, 2010). Certain cultural values are “inscribed” on the Saudi front door. In other words, the house door exists as a cultural representation and concept, which women carry with them and sustain outside the house. The first example of this is that restaurants tend
to be divided into small rooms with closed doors (with one room per family), creating a temporary front door. Some other restaurants have no such rooms; alternatively, they offer female customers movable, flexible, non-transparent, long partitions with which to border themselves and their dining table, thus replicating a front door. The second example is that the windows of some cars are covered with one-way film, through which passengers can see out, but passers-by cannot see in. This film is culturally applied to serve in the role of a front door, turning the car into a domestic private domain. The third example is that, on beaches and in deserts, some women build temporary fabric walls or use their cars as borders between themselves and the public domain, thus “self-enforcing” the concept of the front door (Al Munajid, 2015). These three examples show that the front door can be viewed as permanently attached to women, even when they are physically in motion (e.g., while going for a walk or being in a car). This deeply enriched and well-established value of the house door discouraged some male knockers from daring to knock on it.

3.2. Being intimidated

Knockers felt intimidated by the assertive features of the front doors. There were various forms of assertiveness. The first assertiveness, decorations, means that the front door was decoratively outstanding. A door tends to be elaborate, even when the rest of the house is in bad condition. This can show the front door to be the most important component of the building’s façade. The door is traditionally made of wood or metal and, at times, decorated with carvings, cut-outs or gold colours. Households “express their wealth and identity through the use of distinctive decorations and patterns on the main entrance door” (Alharkan, 2017, p. 47). The door is painted in dark colours to contrast the light-coloured walls, thus highlighting its presence.

The second assertiveness of actions and statements means that residents are supposed to undertake specific actions and articulate certain statements when crossing the front door, thereby stressing its presence. Concerning actions, before a woman opens the front door to leave the house, she may take certain actions, including gaining verbal permission from a male guardian or being escorted by a male relative (Bin Othaimin, 1993). Also, a woman is culturally supposed to take the action of veiling when crossing the door to leave the house. As for statements, while stepping over the threshold to leave home, one is expected to articulate: “In the name of God, I place my trust in God, and there is no might nor power except with God” (Al Qahtani, 1990). When crossing the door to leave the house, one is culturally encouraged to articulate: “O God, I take refuge with You lest I should stray or be led astray, commit or be made commit a sin unintentionally, oppress or be oppressed, behave foolishly or be treated foolishly” (Al Qahtani, 1990). Moreover, while entering through the house doorway, one is culturally expected to say to residents “peace be upon you”, a practice that highlights the front door as representing an essential shift from a non-peaceful territory to a peaceful zone (Bin Fozan, 2003). The wording of these sentences provides some insight into the existence of the house front door as a transitional borderline. Such actions are promoted because of the belief that what lies beyond the house door in the public domain represents vice, sin and wickedness. These features of the Saudi house doors frightened some knockers. Such actions and statements show the act of crossing the doorstep to constitute a fundamental transition in social roles, configurations and settings.

The third assertiveness, the virtual transformation of the front door, means that the house door becomes metaphysical, transcending its basic physical presence to take an immaterial form. Here are three instances to illustrate the point. First, when outside the domestic domain, women may wrap their entire body (including hair and face) with loose fabric, utilising this fabric as a form of a mobile front door (Al Shaikh, 1992). Second, going online is viewed as crossing the virtual form of a front door to the public domain. For this reason, some households impose certain restrictions on their female family members in online settings. Some women wear a veil when using a webcam to talk to others, even family members. When it is not in use, they cover the lens of the webcam with
tape, thus “closing” the digital front door. Third, for some residents, female contact information is private, confidential and not to be released to the public domain. In situations where female contact details (e.g., a mobile phone number) must be given, some women instead provide the contact details of their male relatives. In this case, the mobile phone is culturally configured to entail a front door that members of the male public domain cannot access or breach. In other words, the Saudi front door has been digitised. Fourth, a man may be notified if his neighbours have workers on the second floor or rooftop of the house, since these workers may be able to overlook the courtyard of the neighbour’s house, see his female family members and therefore undermine the purpose of house doors and walls. When a man receives such a notification, he asks his female family members to close the curtains and not go out into the courtyard. This implies that the front door exceeds its physical presence and ascends into the air limitlessly, constituting an immaterial concept and taking on an abstract form.

3.3. Being frightened
Some knockers were frightened by doors’ defensive features. First, doors are made thick. A “heavy entrance door is a common feature emphasising the sharp line between the external public and internal private” (Akbar, 1980, p. 24). The second feature, frame thickness, points out that door frames are made heavy. The front door has an elaborate concrete frame that is higher and thicker than the walls to stress its existence. The third feature, two front doors, means that there are two front doors located one after another, with a distance of around one metre. That is, a door or wall is sometimes added behind the front door to prevent a knocker from having a direct view into the house when the door is opened (Khair, 2016). At times, such a wall does not exist; hence, a knocker is culturally advised to stand to the right or left of the door to avoid having a direct view into the house when the door is opened (Zaidan, 2015). The fourth feature, defensive positioning, implies that front doors are located strategically, in a defensive manner. That is, the front door may be positioned at the corner of a house to avoid exposure of the house’s core middle space and yard to a knocker (Akbar, 1998). House doors tend not to face one another, to avoid exposing the inner spaces of homes to neighbours (Alsaleh, 2008; Bahmmam, 2002). In short, the house door is physically designed and culturally configured to have a strong defensive position and generate a defensible system (Saleh, 1996).

The fifth feature of high walls illustrates the concrete walls with a height of more than two metres. The front door encompasses not merely the entrance to a home, but also high concrete walls that surround the entire property (Glasze & Alkhayyal, 2002). These walls contain no holes, preventing passers-by from seeing through gaps (Saleh, 2002). Although walls are already high (more than two metres), some households use cladding sheets to expand the height of walls surrounding their house, effectively doubling the walls in height. In brief, the house exists as a “compound” with secure, high, wide doors and walls, effectively turning towns into “municipalities of closed spaces” and “cities of walls” (Sawaf, 2017, p. 12). The sixth feature of unnecessary stairs refers to the unnecessary stairs in front of the house door, existing as a cultural sign to underline the transition from one domain to another. That is, the act of having to go up the stairs to enter the inside-the-house domain reinforces an implicit sense of going up from a low-status (outside-the-house) domain to a higher-status (inside-the-house) domain. The seventh feature is that windows are positioned defensively. When building a house, owners ensure that windows are designed in a way that prevents neighbours from seeing into the house, implying that windows are part of the Saudi front door. All of these features of the Saudi front door and its surroundings underpin its defensively made nature.

3.4. Being uncomfortable
Some knockers were uncomfortable, showing exhaustion, emotional distress or concern about hygiene or safety. Regarding exhaustion, they complained that knocking required the physical effort of going door-to-door and taking stairs, making them exhausted by the end of the day. Many households lived in buildings with several floors, forcing knockers into walking up sets of stairs. Some protested that they had to remain standing while conducting interviews through closed
doors or on the street. As for hygiene, knocking on doors and shaking hands with households were sources of hygiene-related concern among knockers, especially considering that shaking hands with others is encouraged and promoted in Saudi culture as a way of politeness. Hence, when finishing a day of door-knocking, knockers made sure to wash their hands with soap carefully. Most female knockers were concerned about cockroaches, which could commonly be observed inside and outside houses. Some women did not want to go into a household that smelled of cigarettes or smelled bad in general, or where pets were present (i.e. cats and birds).

As for emotional distress, some knockees started crying during the interviews when knockers asked them to self-report shocks and struggles in their life. Regarding the difference in social class, some research assistants were wealthy, wearing gold, jewels and branded watches and driving upmarket cars. Nevertheless, some removed these items in the field and parked their cars on the outskirts of neighbourhoods for safety reasons and to imitate the status of low-income families. Since knockers came from well-off families, exposing them to some very low-income families through the project significantly impacted them, encouraging them to rethink their taken-for-granted wealth. Concerning safety, some parents of knockers were worried about the safety of their children. That said, households and neighbourhoods were found to be quite safe. The following examples underpin this claim. When knocking on doors, the youngest child (male or female) opened them and talked to knockers, meaning that households were not worried about safety. Also, children were playing in the streets, unattended by adults even after sunset, giving a positive indication of the safety level. Also, it was safe for a female knocker to walk the streets during daylight, as long as she was not alone. For men, it was safe even at night. It should be noted that, although men could knock on doors alone, female knockers were in pairs to achieve an even higher level of safety.

4. Positive influences [findings]
This section provides answers to the second part of the research question, concentrating on what positively affects data collection through door-knocking.

4.1. Being traditional
Some knockers and knockees acted in traditional manners. The first tradition relates to negotiation. Some knockers were, subconsciously, inspired by their Arab roots, whereby Arabs are known for being good at negotiation and have been in trade and sales for thousands of years. Hence, during data collection, some knockers, intuitively, applied and resorted to the “foot-in-the-door” business strategy (cf. Freedman & Fraser, 1966) without former training. They applied this strategy in three ways. The first way relates to temporal deception; once households opened their front door, some research assistants immediately enquired if they would be willing to take part in a 10-minute interview, although the interview would take 40 minutes. The research assistants lied about the time because they knew that once they were inside the house, they would not be asked to leave when the interviewee realised that the interview would take longer than promised. Once the research assistants passed the threshold and were inside the house, their position shifted from being a stranger into being a guest. As such, the household was more likely to agree when asked for more time. The second way relates to national pride; a knocker would, right from the start, ask households if they were Saudi. If they responded in agreement, this would then make them feel selected and experience a sense of privilege and status to be deemed eligible to participate in the survey. The third way relates to headship pride. That is, some research assistants would kick off the conversation with households by asking the person if they were the household head, making them feel a sense of authority and power. The third way relates to children; the very first question that knockers asked was whether it would be acceptable to give some snacks to the children in the household. If the household member replied positively, they would, in all likelihood, agree to take part in the survey to show appreciation, at least in return for pleasing their children. The research assistants were asked to stop using the “foot-in-the-door” business strategy in such ways, as it seemed to be ethically dubious.
The second tradition relates to charity. Giving charity is an integral part of Saudi culture. Households are used to charity organisations and “good people” (a phrase commonly used in Saudi culture) knocking on their doors, particularly during the holy month of Ramadan, asking them what they need and giving them food and clothes. Hence, knockers were perceived by households as charity workers, who are, culturally, to be welcomed and appreciated. That said, researchers were not misperceived as salespeople, as door-to-door sales do not occur in Saudi Arabia. The third tradition relates to hospitality. In the past, Arab households left their doors open almost 24/7 as a sign of hospitality. Refusal to receive visitors is harshly criticised in their society (Al Omari, 2009). Throughout history, Saudi culture has been deeply structured around the concept of hospitality (Al Lily, 2020). It was observed during fieldwork that some front doors were left open, particularly when households were expecting guests. The fourth tradition relates to friendliness, warmth and bigheartedness. Sacred teachings attach considerable value to what it is phrased as “honouring the guest” (Al Munajid, 2008). As an Islamic norm, a knocker has the right to be welcomed and taken care of for at least three days in a row (Bin Baz, 2010). During the research, households made jokes and insisted on knockers “visiting” again. Moreover, some regarded the visit not as an interview, but rather as an opportunity to “chit-chat”, kill time and share stories. Some households welcomed researchers because they were bored and wanted to be entertained. The fifth tradition relates to generosity. Door visitation appeared to cultivate some households’ Bedouin roots, whereby ancestors welcomed knockers to show generosity (Hateem, 2015). Traditions state that, regardless of how swift a visit is, guests are not allowed to leave before they have been offered drinks and food or snacks. Because of these traditions, two-thirds of households welcomed knockers and showed cooperation. Having foreign researchers in the field encouraged households to be particularly accommodating and welcoming, so as to impress foreigners with national values.

That being said, other traditions negatively influenced data collection through door-knocking. The first negative tradition relates to directedness. Saudis tend to avoid being direct, as directness is viewed as a form of rudeness. Hence, when knocking on doors for interviewing, some knockees would not say no to knockers face-to-face. Instead, they would come up with excuses and ask knockers to come back later. The second tradition relates to religiosity. Some knockees asked to pause the interview for 45 minutes as they wanted to attend mosque when prayer time was due. The third tradition relates to myths. One interviewee referred to being “possessed by a ghost” as a shock he experienced, which consequently caused his low income. A different shock reported by another knockee was having been hit by the “evil eye” (a look given by one who feels jealous of others for having a specific good feature in the hope that they lose this feature).

4.2. Being respectful

Some knockees showed respect to particular figures and matters. The first sign of respect relates to authorities. Households were more likely to agree to take a survey if authorities were involved. Some asked for permission (i.e. a signed letter) from an organisation (here, a university) conducting the research. That said, some households did not accept the organisation’s letter and asked for a government letter instead. The researchers were unsure if such a letter from the government even existed. Some households believed that only the government could solicit information, and if the government wanted information, it would collect it itself. This implies that some households did not believe academics should do research at all, indicating a limited understanding of academic roles. Two households stated that, if the authorities supported the project, it should be announced on TV. Four households called the police on knockers. Three of the callers were military employees who reportedly felt a sense of needing to protect the country against any possibly illegal and harmful action that knockers may plan to undertake through the collection of data. Police officers checked the letter from the university and confirmed that knockers’ actions were not illegal. Officers remarked that it would be entirely up to the household to accept or turn down knockers’ invitation to participate in the survey. Some households thought that the research assistants were census workers. Households are accustomed to being asked for personal information through census actions, particularly considering that the latest census rounds had just finished at the time the research started.
The second sign of respect relates to ranks. Households were more likely to agree to participate in a survey if it was conducted by a PhD holder. Culturally speaking, having a doctorate is held in high esteem, and professors receive a particularly warm welcome. The primary researchers wore their professional hats, introducing themselves to households as professors, which helped maximise the acceptance rate. The third respect relates to social class. Some knockers appeared to be from high-income families, which encouraged households to welcome them. Other knockers experienced relatively high rejections because households noticed from their accent that they hailed from a minority group. Lower-income residents were observed to show more collaboration if knockers hailed from higher-income families. In general, it seems that lower-income individuals allow higher-income people (here, wealthy research assistants) to intervene in their private life but not the other way around, which could imply that door-knocking entails implicit status negotiations.

4.3. Being profitable

Some knockees appreciated incentives. The first incentive was a mutual benefit. Some households hoped that their participation in such an economical and educational project would help them gain personal benefits (financial or non-financial aid) and would help improve the economic and educational status of their neighbourhood. The second incentive was a personal non-financial benefit. Each child in a household was given an elaborate pack of snacks (sweets, drink and chips). Parents reported appreciating this gift for their children, fostering the acceptance rate. The third incentive was a personal financial benefit. Some households agreed to partake in an interview if there was a financial reward in return. Households received 14 USD for taking part in the survey. Some households begged to be interviewed to receive money. It should be remarked that knockers were told to ensure the anonymity of participants, as this was an ethical requirement. However, participants were found to dislike being anonymous. They wanted to be identified so that others might come to know about their unfortunate financial circumstances and, therefore, give them donations and charity. Some households asked for researchers’ numbers to call them later to beg for money or jobs, meaning that what mattered was not the anonymity of participants but rather the anonymity of research assistants. It should be noted that some households were illiterate, meaning they could not read what was written on the receipt for the reward for participating in the survey. By way of contrast, a small number did not take the reward because they viewed the money as “so little” or against Saudi generosity (generosity that prevents them from receiving money from visitors). Although some households were in need, they refused to take such charity out of “Saudi pride”. Some did not accept the money because they were not in need or did not want to be somehow made to feel less than the interviewer.

4.4. Being distinct

It is difficult to use doors to differentiate Saudi homes from non-Saudi households. That said, certain features of Saudi house doors would ease this differentiation. First, with the market feature, any door in neighbourhoods that is close to the markets and shops is more likely to be occupied by foreign households. Second, the shoe feature notes that some Saudi households (particularly those living in an apartment) leave their shoes outside the front door, which helped knockers know (according to the type of shoes) if the family was Saudi. Saudis wear shoes that tend to be different from those worn by non-Saudis. With the third difference of smells, Saudi families could be identified according to the food smells coming through the house door and windows. That is, Saudis generally cook particular types of dishes that differentiate them from non-Saudi residents. The fourth difference relates to cars; Saudi families typically purchase certain types of cars that are different from those bought by non-Saudis. Hence, Saudi households could be identified via the type of car parked next to the door. The fifth difference is stickers; some foreigners have stickers on their front door, which is not a regular practice among Saudi households. The condition of a house is the sixth difference. If a house is in a particularly bad condition, it is likely inhabited by non-Saudi individuals. If the house is in bad condition, yet its house door is impressive, it is likely inhabited by Saudi families. Finally, the difference of plants points to the fact that if there are plants by the front door, this can potentially indicate that the household is Saudi.
5. Closing

Following the philosophical call for the analysis of societies' symbolic forms, this article has examined the symbolic form of door-knocking. It has relied on a household survey to profile possible positive and negative influences that can be exerted over the collection of data through door-knocking. That said, the positive influences have won against the negative influences, turning the practice of door-knocking in Saudi Arabia into a success, with approximately 70% of Saudi households welcoming knockers. This success undermines the warning from managers at the beginning of the project that Saudi households would very much dislike door-knocking. Colleagues, likewise, cautioned the researchers that the Saudi front door was held in high regard, which would make the practice of approaching it out of bounds. Yet, the outcome is counter to expectations. Although door-knocking at first seemed to the academic knockers as knocking on a door to “hell”, it turned to be more akin to knocking on a door to “heaven”. The take-home message of this research is that, in Saudi Arabia, even though the perceived reality is that any academic attempt to breach the front door will not succeed, the actual reality is that households are likely to welcome researchers. It should be remarked that the success of data collection done through door-knocking in Saudi Arabia would have been limited if the target audience had been high-income households. That is, apparently, the lower one’s income, the more likely one was to agree to participate in household surveys. This is partly because low-income households have nothing to worry about in terms of sharing information (unless they take drugs and are involved in other crimes), whereas higher-income individuals may have more secrets (e.g., the illegal act of having a job in the public sector and a job in the private sector simultaneously).

As a final note, it is apparent that, even though knockers managed to physically breach the Saudi front door, they were unable to culturally breach it. Even though male knockers were allowed inside a house, women remained fully veiled, thereby sustaining and holding up a layer of the front door. More notably, when knockers were allowed to enter the house and cross the Saudi front door entrance, they were located in a guest room, which sometimes had an independent door. Houses generally had two front doors (one for family and one for guests), ensuring “the sharp segregation between guest and family parts” (Al-Naim, 2006, p. 40). The guest room was the closest to the front door, ensuring that guests remained inside the house without being inside the house. In this case, although knockers crossed the physical front door entrance, they did not cross the cultural front door entrance and could not particularly observe the inside-the-house dynamics. A methodological implication of this is that knockers were allowed merely to complete questionnaires and not move beyond this practice (e.g., by witnessing social dynamics within the inside-the-house domain). What can be derived from this research is that, in Saudi Arabia, even though the strategy of academic door-to-door outreach has potential for self-reporting techniques (e.g., household surveying), it has no “ethnographic potential” (Davies, 2011, p. 289).

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