

Saudi bride-to-be consumption: Negotiation between traditional and idiosyncratic meanings

Wijdan Tawfiq, King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia, Mary Lynn Damhorst, and Eulanda Sanders, Iowa State University, USA

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, consumption, idiosyncratic, weddings

The wedding, often viewed as “every girl’s dream,” is tied to rituals bringing families and friends together to mark and celebrate a rite of passage. Prior research conducted in Western cultures showed that cultural meanings are emphasized in wedding planning, with family expectations as a crucial influence (Carter & Duncan, 2017; McEnally, 2002). However, little is known about the impact of Saudi culture wedding rituals on bride-to-be consumption. Saudi brides are traditionally required to shop for the wedding day, several social events prior to the wedding, and the new life after the wedding (Tawfiq et al., 2018; Tawfiq & Marcketti, 2017). The bride-to-be represents her fitness as a wife and her commitment to the marriage through thoughtful purchasing of clothing and adornment items for the celebrations and life as a married couple. To increase understanding of this process, the purpose of this study was to explore how Saudi brides-to-be negotiate cultural influences as they make their purchase decisions. Of interest were the roles of others and the bride in the wedding preparation experience. Symbolic interaction theory (Stone, 1962) and Goffman’s (1959) concept of impression management were useful in theoretical analysis for this study.

Method. Qualitative data were collected via two to three semi-structured interviews with 14 Saudi brides-to-be (mean age = 23 years) who were engaged to be married (first marriage). The interviews were scheduled within a time frame of seven days to three months before the wedding day to ensure that the women were actively involved in their pre-wedding shopping. Institutional Review Board approval was granted. All participants received a monetary dowry from the groom valued between \$6,666 to \$13,333 USD to prepare for married life.

Results. Data were analyzed using grounded theory thematic analysis processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Analysis revealed three key themes related to factors influencing the Saudi bride-to-be’s purchase choices. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect their identities.

New Purchases Portray Aspects of Bride-to-be’s Individuality. This theme highlights the ways in which participants’ new purchases reflected idiosyncratic meaning that corresponded with their favorite style to create an authentic self-presentation (Sørensen & Thomsen, 2005; McCracken, 1988). Balques expressed her desire to look unique: “I like that my dress is a reflection of who I am, I want it to be different and unique.” The unique appearance was thought by some brides to foster a “positive impression in the eyes of others” (Saud) and fostered a positive feeling about the self. In other cases, participants explained the importance of the authentic self by showing their “raw beauty” (Batool). Wearing heavy makeup during their marriage celebrations was considered as “fake beauty” (Yassmeen) which limited their capacity to express the authentic self. From the impression management perspective, value in authenticity created a feeling of being “unreal” when one violated a commitment to a particular self-image (Goffman, 1967).

Others’ Influence on Brides-to-be’s Purchase Decisions. Participants mentioned specific and generalized others (Mead, 1934) as looking glasses (Cooley, 1902) to guide them through the

wedding transition process. They took on the role of the other to evaluate themselves and their purchases through the eyes of their family, and future husband. The brides-to-be considered older married family members' feedback a valuable source to gain knowledge about the new role: "My mother and aunt are experienced in how the bride should look. Their support is what makes me feel confident and prepared for my new life" (Baylassan). However, a few participants disagreed with their family regarding dress appropriateness, such as wearing a dress that was "too immodest" (Abrar) or "not fancy enough for the occasion" (Raseel). The participants recognized that the violation of dress norms may "hurt [their] family's reputation" (Nalah). Disagreement incited a sense of tension for them while trying to balance between their individuality and their family's guidance.

The second most influential source participants mentioned was their future husband. Change in identity may occur through the process of taking on the role of the other, particularly the role of the partner (Burke & Cast, 1997). Participants persistently pursued validation from their fiancé when making dress choices (Stone, 1962): "It means the world to me when my fiancé compliments me" (Reetal). Part of the Saudi bride-to-be's new identity construction consisted of incorporating aspects of their fiancés' identities into their own identity, which facilitated the transition into new life as wife (see Burke & Cast, 1997).

Perception of Tradition. Saudi brides-to-be thoughts about Saudi marriage traditions reflected either affiliation or autonomy (see Kleine et al., 1995). Fayha sought affiliation and approved of the marriage traditions: "I think it is a very nice tradition that allows both families to share the happiness of the new couple." On the other hand, the majority of participants disapproved of some of the traditions, but adhered to them to avoid judgments. Balques felt she was "the victim" of her tribal traditions, which she fully complied with to safeguard her family's reputation in front of their tribe: "my close family would also be harmed if I broke the rule, I don't want to hurt them." Only a few Saudi brides-to-be sought autonomy and challenged norms by refusing to follow some marriage traditions; they consequently were willing to face social judgment. Norah, for example, favored the Western bachelorette party over the traditional *Ghomrah* party because of the individualistic emphasis of the bachelorette party in which a bride "can be herself with close friends... without having to worry about breaking the rules of tradition."

Conclusions. Findings provided ample support for what Gergen (2011) referred to as "multiphrenia." Participants experienced a "dense population of the self" in which they had to consider numerous influencers from significant and generalized others while negotiating details of the wedding celebration events. The "voices" of these influencers were at times incompatible, which lead Saudi brides-to-be to become uncertain of how to present various aspects of the self: their old self, new self in role of bride, and individuality within consideration of opinions and expectations of significant others and the traditions that still have a strong hold on Saudi society. Their uncertainty and pull between tradition and individual expression was reflected in the shopping process and purchase decisions. The variations in attitudes of the brides-to-be toward the Saudi marriage traditions possibly indicate the evolving Saudi cultural context and societal changes. The present research is well-timed to understand how women's changing role in Saudi Arabian culture may lead to changes in consumption patterns.

References:

- Burke, P. J., & Cast, A. D. (1997). Stability and change in the gender identities of newly married couples. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 277-290.
- Carter, J., & Duncan, S. (2017). Wedding paradoxes: Individualized conformity and the “perfect day.” *The Sociological Review*, 65(1), 3-20.
- Cooley, C. H. (1902). *Human nature and the social order*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Gergen, K. J. (2011). The dissolution of the self. In S. E. Cahill & K. L. Sandstrom (Eds.), *Inside social life: Readings in sociological psychology and microsociology* (pp.182-188). (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual*. Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Kleine, S. S., Kleine III, R. E., & Allen, C. T. (1995). How is a possession “me” or “not me”? Characterizing types and an antecedent of material possession attachment. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22(3), 327-343.
- McCracken, G. (1988). Culture and consumption: A theoretical account of the structure and movement of the cultural meaning of consumer goods. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 13(1), 71–84.
- McEnally, M. (2002). Princess for a day. In *Cases in Consumer Behavior, 1*, 57-65. Prentice Hall.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society*. The University of Chicago Press.
Psychological Review, 96, 506.
- Sørensen, E. B., & Thomsen, T. U. (2005). The lived meaning of symbolic consumption and identity construction in stable and transitional phases: Towards an analytical framework. *European Advances in Consumer Research*, 7, 571-576.
- Stone, G. P. (1962). Appearance and the self. In A. M. Rose (Ed.), *Human behavior and the social processes: An interactionist approach* (pp. 86-116). Houghton Mifflin.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park.
- Tawfiq, W., & Marcketti, S. (2017). Meaning and symbolism in bridal costumes in western Saudi Arabia. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 35(3), 215-230.
- Tawfiq, W., Damhorst M., & Sanders E. (2018) Getting Ready for a New Life: Saudi Bride-To-Be Shopping Experiences. International Textile and Apparel Association Annual Conference Proceedings 75(1).