

Doing Religion” and constructing identity against a backdrop of cultural change:

Experiences of freedom in public dress among Saudi Arabian women

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In Saudi Arabia, women have been required by law to wear the veil in public for decades, which includes the wearing of traditional forms of loose black dress (e.g., the *abbaya* with a headscarf and *niqab*) that cover the entire body except for the hands and eyes (Le Renard, 2008; Long, 2005; Winter & Chevrier, 2008). However, since Prince Mohammed bin Salman was appointed crown prince in June 2017, there have been many changes in the country, and the Saudi government loosened several laws that have restricted rights for women (BBC, 2017). For example, in 2018, Saudi women gained the right to drive and to choose their own public dress (O'Donnell, 2018; Smith-Spark, 2018). These new laws have led many Saudi women to abandon their traditional black *abbaya* and to adopt alternatives such as jumpsuits and long cardigans (Abdulaziz, 2019).

With this work, we contribute to the limited research on Saudi women's dress (Quamar, 2016) by exploring how these women have experienced and negotiated the newly sanctioned freedoms in public dress recently extended to them legally, contributing understanding about contemporary Saudi women's relationship with their public dress against a backdrop of cultural change. To provide context for understanding these changes, it is important to acknowledge that, even before Saudi women were legally granted freedom in public dress in 2018, the improving status of women in Saudi Arabia and debates on women's empowerment had given rise to conditions whereby women in varied social locations associated differing meanings with the veil/veiling, including the veil as accepted social custom, imposed cultural practice, and/or even matter of personal choice (Quamar, 2016). To frame our work, we drew upon theoretical perspectives (a) that acknowledge that women's relationship with their clothing may be experienced both in relation to feelings of constraint/restriction and agency/creativity (Guy & Banim, 2000) and (b) that explore the concept of “doing religion,” a performative and agentic mode of being undertaken by religious women in the pursuit of identity construction (Avishai, 2008). Thus, we built on prior work to tell the story of how recent, codified shifts in symbolic boundaries and cultural regulations have afforded women new ways to do religion and to construct identity through dress, exploring the diverse ways in which women experience and relate to these shifts.

To gain an understanding of Saudi women's experiences of the newly sanctioned freedoms in public dress, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 15 Saudi women whose ages ranged from 22 to 53 (mean age = 33). As a group, participants were educated and affluent. Most lived in urban areas, and seven were married/engaged. Data were

analyzed using the constant comparison process. Analyses revealed three themes, which are discussed below. Before turning the themes, it is important to acknowledge key patterns of dress among Saudi women since the passage of the 2018 law, including foregoing wearing of the *niqab* (face covering leaving only the eyes bare); wearing of colored, open, or shortened abayas; and continuing to wear the black abaya/veil.

Freedom in Dress and Empowering Women. The 2018 law provided participants with new opportunities to explore how they wanted to look or appear before others when presenting the self in public as a form of female empowerment. They recounted pleasure and feelings of agency in using dress to mobilize various identities in a process of self-realization (cf. Guy & Banim, 2000). They took joy in constructing “authentic” and satisfying public appearances that allowed them to express their own unique style rather than to “lose the self” by wearing a conforming black abaya. Selected participants discussed how the 2018 law buffered them from experiences of shame. These participants suggested that the law prompted shifts in gender roles that encouraged men to show more respect to women (e.g., no longer staring at women’s uncovered faces) and buffered women from dress-related harassment.

Constraints in Freedom of Public Dress. Participants acknowledged that there were limits/boundaries to freedom and choice: “freedom in dress is not chaos; there is a line you cannot cross.” Thus, as they constructed their appearances in this new cultural context, they balanced multiple concerns, including modesty, fashionability, and decency/respect.

Concerns/Ambivalence Prompted by New Freedoms in Public Dress. Some participants also expressed concerns and feelings of ambivalence in relation to the new freedoms in dress extended to them, including worries that (a) they might be “abandoning [their] Saudi identity” by wearing nontraditional forms of the abaya, (b) the traditional abaya will become extinct as a cultural form/the changes in dress will result in losses to the Saudi culture, (c) the value of modesty might be undermined for future generations, and (d) the new freedoms will be abused or underappreciated by younger generations.

Thus, findings revealed that for Saudi women, constructing identity through public dress against a backdrop of cultural change is a process marked by complexity. Although the new freedoms in public dress supported participants’ feelings of agency associated with the mobilization of authentic identities and the subversion of religion as a form of oppression, participants also shared that their newfound freedom in dress was not boundless and prompted feelings of ambivalence and concern. In this way, new ways of doing and performing religion – here, a female, Muslim identity – included varied experiences and represented what Kaiser has referred to as the “ever-changing inter-play between freedoms and constraints...[reflecting] an on-going structure-agency debate in the social sciences” (2012, p. 1; Avishai, 2008; Guy & Banim, 2000).

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