Conflicting Imperatives of Modesty and Vanity Among Young Women in the Arabian Gulf

Rana Sobh, Qatar University, Qatar
Russell Belk, York University, Canada
Justin Gressel, University of Texas, PanAmerican, USA

Wearing modest Muslim dress in public is intended to conceal women’s sexuality and promote a virtuous public domain. Nevertheless, emerging bodily adornment practices in some Gulf region countries serve the contradictory purposes of revealing female wearers and celebrating fashion. We explore the conflicting imperatives of modesty and vanity embodied in young Qatari and Emirati women’s adornment choices in the public sphere. Using observation and insights from in-depth interviews with twenty-three Emirati and Qatari female students we explore the dynamics underlying these conflicting imperatives of virtue and beauty and capture some of the ambivalence inherent in these performative constructions of female identity.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1006758/eacr/vol9/E-09

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Rana Sobh, Qatar University, Qatar
Russell Belk, York University, Canada
Justin Gressel, University of Texas, Pan American, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Muslim women’s clothing is a visible form of public consumption, and has been the subject of much debate within social science literatures. Modesty in clothing for women is central to Islam. A large body of work has looked at the diverse meanings and connotations of the Muslim veil and the practice of hijab (observing Muslim women’s dress code) in many Muslim countries including Egypt (e.g., El-Guindi 1999), Turkey (Sandikci and Ger 2007, forthcoming; Secor 2002; Gole 2002), Mali (Shultz 2007), Cote D’Ivoire (leBlanc 2000), Indonesia (Jones 2003), South India (Oseall and Osealla 2007), and London (Tarlo 2007b). However, the black abaya within oil-rich Gulf countries is embedded in a different contemporary local context and is increasingly associated with status and wealth (Abaza 2007). Young Muslim women’s dress in the Gulf States of Qatar and UAE (United Arab Emirates) is both emotionally and politically charged.

The Gulf States are unique for several reasons: 1) There is a distinct and strong ethos of traditional dress for both men and women; 2) There is an omnipresent awareness of religious values in shaping identities and informing behavior; 3) There has been a rapid increase in wealth due to petrodollars, and 4) There is a dramatic presence of foreigners from both Western and Non-Western cultures, such that only 1 in 10 Qatar residents is Qatari and only 1 in 10 Emirates residents is Emirati. The latter conditions create a situation unique in the immigration literature in which there is pressure for the locals to acculturate to the immigrant rather than the more normal reverse situation. Locals increasingly fear the dissolution of their ethnic identity and therefore strive to emphasize their authenticity and ethnic affiliation distinction through wearing ethnic dress but also through other consumption styles such as extravagant conspicuous and luxurious consumption that foreigners in general cannot afford. Furthermore, the main acculturative agent in our context is not the dominant host culture as opposed to the minority or immigrant culture, but rather the forces of globalization and more specifically transnational Western consumer culture and its underpinning ideology that fundamentally conflicts with the local religious and patriarchal principles. Hence, new clothing styles and adornment practices are increasingly adopted by young women in the region and reflect the conflicting forces of individualistic Western values that emphasize display of women’s beauty and sexuality in the public sphere and traditional values requiring modesty and promoting a virtuous public domain. The abaya itself has been gradually reinvented and has evolved from being a concealing garment that hides women’s sexuality and beauty in public to an embellished fashionable, trendy haute couture garment that enhances beauty and reveals sexuality, all supposedly without undermining the local look. We propose to understand the dynamics underlying conflicting imperatives of modesty and vanity and to probe the ambivalence inherent in such performative constructions of identity and conceptions of the self as well as explore how young women negotiate and reconcile resulting tensions.

In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty three middle class university students in business from Qatar University (12) and American University of Sharjah (11). The informants ranged in age from 17 to 22. In addition to interviews, all researchers used observations of clothing and adornment practices in public places by young women (e.g., university, malls, restaurants) and the female researcher observed clothing and adornment practices in private spaces as well (homes, social gatherings, fashion shows, weddings and other women’s parties). Projective techniques were used and consisted of showing participants a set of stimulus pictures of girls wearing different types of abayas and using adornment practices across the spectrum from what might be perceived as vain to modest.

Our findings reveal that young women resolve conflicting tensions between the conflicting imperatives of the transnational consumer ideology and traditional local values through a number of appropriation and adaptation processes. Informants construct idiographic meanings of prevalent religious, cultural and fashion discourses informed by the two conflicting ideologies and shaped by changing cultural intermediaries and other social, political and economic structures. They negotiate dominant values in the Western ideology, adopt and adapt some but resist and reject others. They appropriate global fashion trends to create a local glamorous fashion trends and symbolically charged clothing practices that give them a sense of uniqueness and superiority over expatriates and foreigners. In effect they out-global the global consumer culture representatives, at least in some respects. Young women also enact Western style identities in uncontrolled spaces and settings such as in women-only gatherings and gender segregated spaces where tensions between traditional and modern, modesty and vanity are alleviated.

While accepting and acknowledging the local value systems, they manipulate and reinterpret some of the meanings to justify their clothing practices and condemn those of others. Regardless of their degree of religiosity, Islam was used by all informants to justify their clothing practices whether vain, modest or somewhere between the two extremes. Informants negotiate their need for beauty display in public within the Islamic discourses of beauty and the legitimacy of nice self-presentation and enjoyment of life. Besides, young women seem to reconcile opposing pressures by injecting western symbols such as designer names and fashion trends and patterns into traditional garments in order to rejuvenate and bestow modernity on them. This reinvention of tradition gives them a feeling of connection with the youth consumer culture and engagement in the world of fashion while still maintaining connections to local traditions that they are proud of. The purpose of wearing the abaya is also manipulated to be more aligned with Western ideologies and beauty discourses. Ironically, the abaya is interpreted as a camouflage garment that makes them look taller and thinner hence enhances their beauty and hides their body imperfections, tendencies which are in accordance with Western fashion discourses. Playing with meanings and altering the original uses and meanings of the abaya can be interpreted as unintentional resistance (Ger and Belk 1996) of the local hegemony emphasizing social conformity and as an affirmation of young women’s power in managing their appearances and enacting their identities in public. Following Blumer (1969), the abaya fashion seems to help young women mediate cultural contradictions they are subject to in some Arab Gulf countries and to adjust in a disciplined and orderly way to their fast moving society to help cope with the major social changes their countries have been undergoing as a result of globalization.
A Theorization of Symbolic-substitution: Exploring Taboo and the Muslim Female Consumer

Fajer Saleh Al-Mutawa, University of Bath, UK
Richard Rosenbaum-Elliott, University of Bath, UK
Peter Nuttall, University of Bath, UK

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, consumer researchers have taken more interest in the study of symbolic brand meaning (Belk 1988; Chon and Olsen 1991; Cushman 1990; Elliott and Wattanassawan 1998; Levy 1959; Mick et al. 2004; Mittal 2006). Much of this research however, has been conducted in western consumer cultures, which leaves a gap in understanding of symbolic meanings, consumption practices and applications of (western) theory in non-western contexts. Therefore, attempting to address the gap, this research focuses on an emerging paradoxical subculture of consumption in Kuwait; young modest Muslim female consumers of western luxury fashion brands. To our knowledge, no research has addressed this group, and our preliminary study shows promising findings.

Research on the symbolic meanings of western luxury fashion brands of clothing and accessories e.g. Gucci, Prada, LV, confirm that in addition to communicating class distinctions, such brands are perceived to carry symbolic meanings of (female) sexuality often termed “porno-chic” (Maneau and Tissier-Desbordes 2006). Research also confirms that expressions of female sexuality e.g. revealing clothing etc in socio-Islamic cultures (such as Kuwait) are regarded as taboo while customs of female modesty are preferred and practiced especially among young Muslim females (Antoun 1968; Rashid and Michaud 2000). Hence it is paradoxical that young modest Muslim women in Kuwait are engaging in consumption of western luxury fashion brands symbolically associated with female sexuality.

A preliminary research comprised of semi-structured depth interviews and participant observations with four participants took place in Kuwait over a period of two months to address the two main research questions: 1) To what extent do Muslim women recognize symbolic meanings of luxury fashion brands to be related to taboo? And 2) how is taboo involved in their consumption practices? The participants selected through convenience sampling were single, ages 13-19, from the upper/middle-upper classes in Kuwait. The women of higher classes of society not only afford and consume luxury fashion brands but they are also motivated to protect and reveal certain oppressive structures in society and their subsequent negotiation by consumers. The luxury fashion brand in this context becomes an “implicit resistance strategy” (Cudd 2006) and a manner to reassert free choice (Burger 1992) against the taboos of female sexuality imposed on young Muslim women.

Nonetheless, this study has limitations as findings are based on four participants and focused on a particular product category (luxury fashion brands) and particular consumer (young Kuwaiti Muslim female). This is non imperative however in that this preliminary study merely aims to encourage further research away from the Islamic idealist bias, as the context seems worthy of considerate investigation.

REFERENCES


