The Scented Winds of Change: Conflicting Notions of Modesty and Vanity Among Young Qatari and Emirati Women

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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 notions of modesty and vanity embodied in Qatari and Emirati clothing and cosmetic choices in the public sphere. Using insights from in-depth interviews with twenty-four 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 the constructions of female identity and conceptions of the self.

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The second major finding is that IQ is weakly, but significantly correlated with the IAT (r = .14, p < .05). The correlation between direct PhC and IAT is comparable (r = .16, p < .05). This indicates that IQ measures at least something in the person. However, analysing the relation between PhC and DC, reveals that IQ measures also something of the third-person. Indirect PhC correlated only significantly with indirect DC (r_{PhC indirect-DC} = .07, p < .05; r_{PhC indirect-DC} = .2, p < .01), regardless whether IQ measures were controlled for ERT and MRT. The opposite was true for the direct measures (r_{PhC direct-DC} = .33, p < .001; r_{PhC direct-DC} = .10, p < .05). The IAT measure of PhC was only correlated with direct DC (r = .228, p < .001) and not with indirect DC (r = .06; p > .05).

Discussion and follow-up research

This study clearly demonstrated the added value of the two-dimensional BIDR. The BIDR revealed that IQ only avoids ERT, but not MRT. Results further confirmed that the IAT is immune to SDB.

Correlation between IQ and IAT indicated that IQ is sensitive to individual differences. However, the lack of correlation between IQ and behavioural variables demonstrated that IQ also measures something of the third-person. Clearly, more research is needed to clarify this duality. Currently, a follow-up study is set up in which possible moderators are included. One of these is the perceived similarity between the participant and the third-person used in IQ (Fisher, 1993). If perceived similarity is low (high), participants could be motivated to differentiate (assimilate) themselves from (with) the third person, resulting in high ERT (MRT). Furthermore, this study did only assess behavioural intentions. Follow-up research will also comprise measures of actual behaviour.

References


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Individual clothing choices reflect a person’s conception of social, gender, and religious identities and are means by which wearers situate themselves socially vis-à-vis established codes of behavior (Gibson 2000; LeBlanc, 2007). Muslim women’s clothing is a visible form of public consumption, and has been the subject of much debate within social science literatures (for example, Abu-Odeh, 1994; El-Guindi, 1999a, 1999b; Tarlo, 2005; Ruby, 2006, Gole, 1996, 2002). Modesty in clothing for both men and women is central to Islam. Based on Islamic teachings a woman for instance should be covered in a way that does not reveal her sexuality in public. She should wear clothes that cover the body (except face and hands) and which are loose and opaque, neither revealing what is underneath nor delineating sexually attractive parts of the body (al-Qaradawi 1995:79-87). Other public consumption proscriptions include: perfume, explicit make-up, tattoos, plastic surgery, and wigs or hairpieces (Al-Albani 1994).

The requirement for modesty in women clothing has been translated into different forms and styles of body and hair coverings in different countries and also varies from person to person. A large body of work has looked at the diverse meanings and connotations of the Muslim veil and the practice of hijab in Muslim countries where women decide whether to observe modest dress, including Egypt (e.g., El-Guindi, 1999a, 1999b), Turkey (Sandicki and Ger, 2001, 2005, 2007; Secor, 2002; Gole, 2002), Mali (Shultz, 2007), Cote D’Ivoire (leBlanc, 2000), Indonesia (Jones 2003), South India (Oseall and Osealla, 2007), and London (Tarlo, 2007a, 2007b). Other work has looked at women’s dress in Muslim countries where women are expected to conform to a black loose outer gown like the abaya or similar garments worn in Gulf countries, Iran (Balasescu, 2003, 2007), and Yemen (Moors, 2007). 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). As a result, it has different meanings and connotations from wearing the chador in Iran, the abaya in Yemen, and purdah in South India. In
some Gulf countries like Qatar and Emirates, wearing the black abaya and shayla and in some cases the burqa or face cover is not necessarily religiously motivated. It is in some cases a social requirement that women are expected to conform to in order to remain loyal to local customs and traditional culture; it is not a legal requirement like it is in Saudi Arabia. Such loyalty is equated with national pride and dignity. Men also are required to conform to a uniform traditional white dress, the thoub, and head covering, the ghutra, in public.

Studying women clothing practices in Qatar and Emirates (UAE) is particularly interesting because of the social and economic upheaval that these countries have been undergoing and the concomitant shifts in discourses of beauty, religion and modernity in the media, advertising and other forms of local commercial imagery. The gulf region has been known to be the most conservative part of the Arab/ Muslim world where traditional Arab and Muslim values are strictly adhered to and where wearing traditional clothing by both men and women is seen as an essential requirement for cultural integrity and an affirmation of citizenship. However, petrodollar-fueled economic wealth and integration into the global economy have increasingly attracted foreign investment and Westerners to the region, leading to major social changes. In many of the GCC countries, like Qatar and Emirates, the leaderships’ desires for modernity and openness to the West has resulted in embracing more western values. This has caused some tensions and concerns that local values and national identities will be diluted and has lead to hot debates between those advocating modernity and those emphasizing the importance of preserving local culture. New clothing styles and adornment practices are increasingly adopted by young women in the region and reflect the conflicting forces of 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. This contrast is strikingly evident in shopping malls that house both abaya shops and Western style multinational clothing stores with gigantic posters of provocatively dressed Western women. 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. This has created a thriving abaya fashion industry featuring local and European designers attempting to reinvent the traditional plain costume into a sophisticated and fashionable garment that denotes status and prestige and makes statements about women’s affinity for fashion and modernity, all supposedly without undermining the local look.

We seek to explore how women negotiate the conflicting tensions between their desire for fashion, elegance, display of beauty, and expression of individuality in the public sphere on one hand, and their desire to be loyal to local culture and observe proper Muslim dress on the other hand. We look at dress not only as clothing but as including all bodily adornment and beauty enhancement practices (e.g., shoes, purses, watches, jewelry, sunglasses, perfumes, make-up, henna, and cosmetic surgery) that form women’s looks in the public sphere. We use insights from in-depth interviews with twenty four Emirati and Qatari female students to ascertain the dynamics underlying these conflicting imperatives of modesty and vanity and to capture some of the ambivalence inherent in these performative constructions of female identity and conceptions of the self. Preliminary findings reveal that young women resolve conflicting tensions between vanity and modesty on one hand and traditional and modern on the other, through syncretic rather than forced choice. Thus, many choose a traditional black abaya covered with expensive Swarovski jewels. The abaya that many young women choose is also more colorful, form-revealing and gives more hints of the outfits they wear beneath. The shayla is also worn sophisticatedly high and exposes some of the hair. The traditional garment is increasingly assuming a modern fashionable appearance accessorized with jewelry, designer handbags and high heel shoes, huge and catchy sunglasses. The look is complemented with flawless make up, nails and strenuous perfumes. The abaya that used to be a unifying garment that expresses women collective religious and cultural identity has evolved into a singularly self-identifying look that is expressive of status, distinctiveness and personal identities. It is used by girls to make statements about their personal tastes and affinities to fashion. Findings also reveal that girls choose different garments, scents, and makeup in different settings. And they find ways to rationalize their own appearance choices while distinguishing it from other practices that they condemn (Bier, 1986; Greenwalt, 1986; Scott and Lyman; 1986). Rather than the dichotomous choices posed by Western authors (Lexus vs. Olive Tree; McWorld vs. Jihad), they have chosen to combine both.

References

9The black abaya is a long black loose outer garment worn by women in most gulf countries. It is intended to hide the curves of their bodies, while the shayla is a black head cloth used to cover their hair. The abaya is made of two layers of thin material to make sure it is not transparent. Some women also cover their faces with a black veil–niqab- although there is wide agreement amongst Muslim scholars that this is not a religious requirement for physical modesty in Islam but more of a norm for women in some social circles.
Consumer Pride: Emotion as a Social Phenomenon
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Consumer emotions are rarely examined from a phenomenological perspective, with few exceptions. One consumer practice that generates emotion and involves consumption is ritual (Ruth, Ottes, and Brunel 1999). According to Collins’ Interaction Ritual Chain (2004), elements of sustained rituals elicit emotion in observable ways. This working paper investigates how the elements of consumption-based family rituals elicit pride. It takes an ethno- graphic approach, using long interviews and participant observation. The focus is on working class, middle class, and upper middle class Sunday family dinners in contemporary Zagreb, Croatia. The findings point to time, aesthetic goods, and family as elements that elicit pride. The paper presents a construct of consumer pride.

Conceptualization
Few articles in the field of consumer behavior research look specifically at pride. Using experimental research, scholars examine pride as a variable to manipulate in persuasive communications (Aaker and Williams 1998) or as a variable in consumer decision-making (Louro, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2005; Mukhopadhyay and Johar 2007). In a related field, social psychologists note that pride emerges in social contexts and plays a central role in facilitating relationships and in maintaining social hierarchies (Leary 2007). Pride is also distinct from hubris (Tracy and Robins 2007). In spite of the growth of research in the sociology of emotions, there is little research on pride in that field (Turner and Stets 2006). Although emotions arise in ritual, interpretive consumer research on rituals tends to focus on individual practices or on social relationships (Rook 1985; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Scholarship on specific group rituals, for example, family meals, tends to examine the role of ritual in creating meanings at the group and social levels (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Research on consumption-based rituals such as gift-giving argues that individual emotions are an important outcome of these interactions (Ruth, Ottes, and Brunel 1999; Wooten 2000).

I apply Interaction Ritual Chain (IRC), a theory for understanding the relationships between emotions, rituals, and goods, on a micro (small group) as well as a macro-social level (Collins 2004). According to Collins’ Interaction Ritual Chain (2004), elements of sustained rituals such as Sunday family dinner reinforce expression of emotion and the status of symbolic goods. My question in this research is: how do consumption-based family rituals elicit pride through the use of aesthetic goods? Overall, this research project will contribute to interpretive consumer research by examining relationships between consumer rituals, aesthetic goods, and family consumption, focusing on three points that, so far, have received little attention in the literature. First, this work aims to provide a means for understanding emotions from a phenomenological perspective. Second, it develops a construct of pride, a specific emotion elicited in rituals. Third, it will consider the ways emotions elicited in ritual influence the consumption of aesthetic and luxury goods (Charters 2006).

This work examines the role of pride and aesthetic goods (i.e. tableware) in consumption-based family rituals in contemporary Zagreb, Croatia, a society that experienced the transition from state socialism as well as war in the 1990s. The mid-day Sunday meal ritual has been practiced among members of working, middle, and upper middle classes in Zagreb through pre-socialist, socialist, and post-