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

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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’ bodies 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.

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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. 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, 1999b), Turkey (Sandikci and Ger, 2007; Secor, 2002; Gole, 2002), Mali (Shultz, 2007), Cote D’Ivoire (leBlanc, 2000), Indonesia (Jones 2003), South India (Oseall and Oseall, 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 United Arab Emirates (UAE) 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 Islam and 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 only around 17% of Qatar residents are Qataris and 16% of Emirates residents are 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 disavowal 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 Western values that emphasize display of women’s beauty and sexuality in the public sphere and traditional values requiring modesty 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.  

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 idiosyncratic meanings of prevalent religious, cultural and fashion discourses informed by the two conflicting ideologies. They negotiate dominant values in the Western ideology, adopting and adapting some while resisting and rejecting others. They appropriate global fashion trends to create 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 the traditional and modern and the modest and vain 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 good 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 by locals as a camouflage garment that makes them look taller and thinner, hence enhancing their beauty and hiding 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.

In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty four middle class university students in business from Qatar University (12) and American University of Sharjah (12). 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 vain to modest.
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