The Changes of Meaning Over Life Stages: Caftans As Expression of Moroccan Women’s Identities

Delphine Godefroit-Winkel, Lille School of Management Research Center
Marie-Hélène Fosse-Gomez, Univ Lille Nord de France-Skema Business School

We conducted a qualitative study on caftan consumption in Casablanca, Morocco. We show that Moroccan women use their caftan to express different identities through distinct life stages. Our findings suggest an additional level of meanings, distinctive meanings, and extend prior research on the role of meanings in intra-gender relationships.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017384/volumes/v42/NA-42

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
The Changes of Meanings over Life Stages: Caftans as Expression of Moroccan Women’s Identities
Delphine Godefroit-Winkel, Lille School of Management Research Center, France
Marie-Hélène Fosse-Gomez, Univ Lille Nord de France-Skema Business School, France

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Authors in consumer research have shown that meanings are malleable and may change over time (McCracken 1986). However, little is known on how product meanings are likely to evolve in the course of consumer’s lifetimes. We try to fill such gap while exploring the different meanings that Moroccan women ascribe to their traditional dress at different life stages.

Product meanings are visible at three levels: public, private and relational meanings (Nugyen and Belk 2013). Public meanings are those assigned to objects by non-owners of the objects. They have various significances (Richins 1994). Some are stable over time, while others are dynamic (Eckhardt and Houston 2008; Richins 1994). Private meanings are those assigned to objects by the owner of the objects. Relational meanings are those cocreated by consumers who aim to strengthen their interpersonal or intergroup relationships.

We conducted a qualitative investigation in order to understand how meanings are likely to change over distinct life stages. We located our research in the Moroccan context because Moroccan women’s verbal expression and behaviors are strictly constrained. Moroccan women are not expected to talk in public (Sadiqi 2003). Therefore, we thought that product meanings would help women in communicating with others.

We chose to study the consumption of Moroccan traditional dresses, the caftans, because of the fame, the time and the cost associated with caftans. Nowhere is the limitation of female verbal exchanges more obvious than in Moroccan weddings. In such contexts, most of female guests privilege observation to speech and one of their common activities consists in a critical observation of caftans.

The consumption of caftan is embedded in a male biased society (Mernissi 1975, 2010), which is based on the family (Sadiqi 2003). In the Moroccan context, most women have a weak, indirect, invisible power but their socially attributed responsibility is remarkable. In the collective imagination, the image and reputation of a family resides in its female members’ behaviors.

We interviewed 20 female informants in Casablanca, Morocco. Interviews were complemented with recordings of human experience in natural settings. One of the authors participated to three Moroccan weddings over a period of six months. The two authors analyzed the data first separately and then together. Iteration was made to form, revise, and develop understandings of the entire data set (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Our analysis of caftan consumption reveals that product meanings are used to express distinct identities over a lifetime and to communicate within and between subgroups. Our findings suggest three types of meanings attached to three distinct life stages. We found that (1) meanings related to individual identity are prevalent in the discourse of single young women, (2) meanings related to family identity are prevalent among married women who don’t have single daughters and (3) meanings related to the collective identity of Moroccan women are prevalent in the discourse of old women.

First, our findings suggest that single young women to be married use caftan to express their individual identity. They use caftans as one of the scarce means for female individual expression that are not prohibited by Moroccan social conventions. Moreover, caftans contribute to the delicate task of finding a husband. However, young women don’t aim to communicate with men. They intend to attract the attention of mothers of young men. They use their caftans to communicate with potential mothers-in-law rather than with potential mates.

Second, our findings suggest that married women use caftans to express their family in-law identity. In the Moroccan collective imagination, married women are expected to reflect favorably the identity of their family in-law and old women have the duty to supervise the behaviors of younger female family members. Therefore, Moroccan women invest in time and efforts to choose a caftan, and try to conform to the expectations of their mothers-in-law. Married women, thus, ascribe relational meanings to their caftan in order to strengthen their relationships with their mothers-in-law. Besides, they ascribe other types of meanings to express positively the identity of their family in-law. We define such meanings as distinctive meanings.

Third, our findings suggest that old women use caftans to express the Moroccan women collective identity. While wearing caftan in wedding ceremonies, they play their socially attributed role of guardians of the traditions (Sadiqi 2003).

Our work suggests three contributions. First, our findings extend the body of knowledge on product meanings while showing that meanings are likely to vary along different stages of consumers’ lives. Second, our findings suggest an additional level of product meaning. Distinctive meanings are likely to be created at the group level in order to foster one’s group image and/or compete with other groups. Third, our findings extend prior research on the meanings of consumption and intra-gender relationships. We demonstrate that women may use product meanings to attract the attention of potential mates’ mothers.

REFERENCES


Mernissi, Fatema (1975), Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society, Cambridge, MA: Schenkman.


