

Retaining Ethnic Identity in the Apparel Design of Modern Saudi Dress

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Female Medium (size 6-8) Bust 34", Waist 26", Hip 35"

Introduction and Contextual Review: The purpose of this research is to explore ways to develop new apparel designs for Saudi Arabian women that bridge the gap between outdated historic styles and modern, fashion-forward approaches to dressing. The following discussion establishes the importance of traditional dress and is specifically intended to provide a glimpse of some of the unique characteristics of traditional Saudi Arabian dress for women. And while many of these characteristics are presently incorporated into current clothing designs, the outcomes are often outdated and do not fulfill the need for what the new generations desire. While the cultural aspects of clothing design continue to be important, Saudi Arabian women also want clothing options that are stylish, unique, and feminine (Iskandarani, 2006; Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013; Tawfiq & Marchetti, 2017).

Clothing, according to Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992), is a non-verbal communication cue. The traditional dress represents a national culture and historical heritage and includes all garments and body modifications that embody the past for particular members of a certain group (Eicher & Sumberg, 1995; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). In Saudi Arabia, the embellished ethnic garment holds significance and another, represents a woman's reproductive capabilities, shows a woman's skills in making those garments, and connects the new generation to their ethnic identity as well as their cultural heritage. The traditional identity of women in Saudi Arabia was distinguished through the cultural statements they used to define their dress codes. For each social event, tradition required women across different cultures to wear embellished garments that were differentiated by the types or colors of the threads, as well as the fabric used (Foster & Johnson, 2003). Besides, the extent of embroidery was a major contribution to the identity of women in Saudi Arabia, as it is argued that embroidery was reflective of social values, personal style, and gender identity. The western area of Saudi Arabia is recognized for the unique tradition



Figure 1: Traditional Ethnic Thawb of the Bani Saad tribe

embedded in its cultural and social identity (Long, 2005). Furthermore, the influence of the cultural identity of the western region of Saudi Arabia is denoted in the increasing bridal garment adoptions by the rest of the country. However, a limited amount of research has been directed toward the tradition of these bridal costumes largely because many of these costumes are made by people who have acquired the talents from earlier generations, a trend that is used by the few families with the talent to ensure the tradition continues. This type of traditional Hijazi dress is embellished with heavy embroidery in particular locations: around the neck, side panels, the top of sleeves as well as the cuffs, and at the hemline (see *Figure 1*). The color that is used most for embellishing that traditional dress is red, followed by yellow and hints of blue and green. The addition of traditional ethnic embroidery into new modern garment designs was a key part of the apparel design completed for this study.

Process, Technique, and Execution: The FEA model provided an appropriate framework for analyzing the culture of the Saudi female as the intended consumer. It was used to contextualize the characteristics of Saudi ethnic dress for women, and to describe the characteristic aesthetic appearance of ethnic embroidery in the Hijaz region of western Saudi Arabia. The target consumer (intended user) is the core of the FEA model. For this study, the target consumer is Otaibi woman aged 25-35 years old, making her a contemporary woman who appreciates and respects historical and cultural values and expects these elements to be a part of her current clothing choices. This ensemble combines a traditional embroidery technique that was inspired by the ethnic wedding dress of Hijazi women within a contemporary silhouette. It contains a blouse made of silk organza, a circle skirt, a vest, and a belt with a long side panel. Attention was given to flat pattern methods that allowed for a full range of motion. The skirt was made of silk and wool and widely flared to create movement. Most importantly, the primary design element was traditional ethnic embroidery. It was strategically placed to the back of the vest, as well as the side pleated panel of the skirt that is fully embroidered and lined with silk organza. A two-inch wide belt was also embroidered and wrapped over the vest and around the waistline to aid in overall cohesion. It is important to note that the design incorporated authentic traditional embroidery that was sourced from and created by women from the Hijaz region. Including authentic traditional embroidery is important to this group of consumers and adds meaning to modern designs.

Aesthetics Properties and Visual Impact: The overall design integrates the color palette of traditional embroidery within a distinctly more modern silhouette. The use of silk organza in the blouse was chosen to reflect the crisp yet feminine side of the Hijazi dress. The circle skirt adds interesting movement in contrast to the tailored vest. The back of the vest contains a central embellishment; embroidery was mainly focused between the princess style lines and follows the contours of the body. The side pleated panel hanging off the skirt also consists of rich traditional embroidery and is lined with silk organza. The overall look is innovative while still incorporating traditional elements. The overall design is cohesive and professional. These were qualities found to be important to the Saudi women consumers.

Design Contribution and Innovation: Historical clothing is the manifestation of identity in the Hijaz region of Western Saudi Arabia (Alotaibi & Starkey, 2018). This ensemble translates the heritage of Hijaz culture in a contemporary style that combines both traditional and modern design elements. It specifically translates the historical Saudi identity in a new way and reinforces the value of the ancient, traditional clothing of western Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, this design was developed to demonstrate creative and innovative ways to incorporate ancient techniques in a contemporary design and to change how we view the current existing fashion paradigm. Specifically, from outdated, rigid designs to support consumers' demand for a more unique, fashion trend products that inculcate craft culture. The FEA framework provided a comprehensive set of tools to aid the designer in the apparel design process. Exploratory research in apparel design is critical to help designers meet the needs of emerging markets, and in this case, the changing needs of Saudi Arabian women. This study is ongoing and will include interviews with Saudi women in order to better understand their clothing preferences for future design of modern apparel.

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Figure 1: Topham, P., Landreau, A., & Mulligan, W. E. (1982). Traditional crafts of Saudi Arabia. Sugar Land, TX: Stacey Intl.

