



Getting Ready for a New Life: Saudi Bride-To-Be Shopping Experiences

Wijdan Tawfiq, Mary Lynn Damhorst, and Eulanda A. Sanders, Iowa State University, USA

Keywords: Weddings, Saudi Arabia, Shopping, Transition

In Saudi Arabia, a wedding is a major occasion requiring extensive preparation; the bride-to-be shops to prepare for her wedding day, several pre-wedding events, and her new life after the wedding (Iskandarani, 2006; Tawfiq & Marcketti, 2017). Prior literature illustrates that planning a wedding in Western societies is a personal, deeply emotional experience, in which tradition and cultural values are strongly emphasized (Carter & Duncan, 2017; Nelson & Despande, 2004; Thomas & Peters, 2011). Researchers have not yet explored how bride-to-be consumption patterns might be shaped in a tradition-oriented culture like Saudi Arabia. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the Saudi woman's bridal shopping experience during her transition into marriage and the meanings reflected in the purchases made. Particularly, this study attempted to answer: (a) What do Saudi brides-to-be shop for during the engagement period? and (b) What is the importance or significance of different products in relation to the wedding celebrations and life after the wedding? Belk's (1988) concept of the "extended self" provided theoretical foundation for this study, in that an individual may use products to support and create a new identity during and after rites of passage.

Method. Qualitative data were collected via in-depth interviews with 14 Saudi women (mean age = 23 years) who were engaged to be married (first marriage) and had their weddings scheduled within seven days to three months after the first interview. Three interviews were conducted with 11 of the women, and three participants had time to schedule only one interview before their wedding date. The interviews were arranged to ensure that the women were actively involved in their pre-wedding shopping. A majority of participants shared a middle or upper middle-class lifestyle, and all had some form of post-secondary education. All participants had received a monetary dowry from the groom valued between \$6,666 and \$13,333 USD.

Results. Data were analyzed using constant comparison processes. Analysis revealed three key themes related to the Saudi bride-to-be's new purchase meanings and reflecting her readiness for the new life after marriage. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants when quoted to protect their identities.

Facilitating the liminal transition to new life. This theme captured the notion that consumption of new products may help coping and adjustment during the transition to a new life role (Solomon, 1983). The majority of the participants expressed that their new purchases were chosen to enable them to adopt the new identity of wife. Participants described the many products they shopped for to manage their appearance as part of their wedding preparation. Some participants indicated feelings of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982) as they imagined how well they would perform during the transition into marriage using the items they purchased. Abrar stated: "[it] helps me feel more confident ... prepared and ready." Participants described transformational feelings when wearing the gowns for the multiple marriage celebrations: "It was my first time feeling like a real bride" (Baylassan).

Participants attributed symbolic meanings to their new purchases. The clearest example of this subtheme was the connection of the new bride's image with dressing fancy: "that means I'm happy in my new life" (Eithar). New purchases also frequently were viewed as a "starting point of a new life" (Suad) and a sign of transition to a new status: "I changed my regular style" (Norah). Participants also spoke of how they proactively selected products to successfully plan "unforgettable moments" (Atlal) such as the wedding night and honeymoon.

All participants emphasized the purposeful management of their appearances to confirm their impending role as wife and build a marital relationship through two ways. First, dressing up represents "care and love [for the husband]" (Raseel). Participants acknowledged that their new purchases are not "the main sources to build the marriage relationship" (Atlal), but "the wife's appearance is the physical part that symbolizes the emotional part" (Raseel). Second, because all participants had never had an intimate relationship, they thought symbolic products such as lingerie would "take some stress out" (Eithar) of the forthcoming experience of sexual intimacy.

In other cases, participants described how packing their new purchases helped them through the separation stage to accept their new identity. The purchases helped them accept the fact that "I'm moving and leaving my parents' house" (Rania). The purchases convinced the bride that her life would change and would help navigate the transition.

Resisting complete change. Some participants wished to maintain a sense of continuity with their single woman self (cf., Ogle, Tyner, & Schofield-Tomschin, 2013). Their coping role transition strategy was to resist purchasing everything new, as is traditionally common in Saudi culture. Eithar felt that "having something old in your new environment makes you feel comfortable." Moreover, some participants tried to balance between maintaining part of their old self as a single woman and their desire to purchase new products as a married woman to please her husband: "I know my fiancé will love these pieces, but they are not me" (Raseel). Abandoning the old self was not yet completely acceptable to some participants.

Complication and ambiguity of the bride-to-be transition experience. Participants repeatedly expressed the complicated, complex, and confusing process of what to wear and purchase for all marriage events and post marriage life. For example, the first meeting is a public experience, fraught with dread on the part of the bride about whether she will be acceptable and attractive to her fiancé. The engagement could end after this introduction.

While purchasing symbolic products may facilitate role transitions for some participants, it may also complicate the transition for others. For instance, participants had never shopped for lingerie before, which caused some participants to have a degree of rejection toward it: "Some lingerie is scary... it shouldn't be at that level of lewdness."

Conclusions. Findings revealed that the Saudi bride-to-be shopping experience to prepare for multiple marriage celebrations and life after marriage is a complex and demanding process. Although the consumption of many new products facilitates transition into marriage, it may lead to conflicts about symbolic meanings of products. Saudi brides-to-be engaged in a complex identity construction processes to construct an appropriate new identity and make enough change in their appearance to feel and project the symbolic difference between single and married life.

References

- Bandura, A. (1982). Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency. *American Psychologist*, 37(2), 122.
- Belk, R. W. (1988). Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15, 139-168.
- Carter, J., & Duncan, S. (2017). Wedding paradoxes: Individualized conformity and the “perfect day.” *The Sociological Review*, 65(1), 3-20.
- Iskandarani, B. (2006). *Traditional clothes for women and bridal dresses in Medina*. Saudi Arabia, Jeddah: Khwarezm.
- Nelson, M. R., & Despande, S. (2004). Love without borders: An examination of cross-cultural wedding rituals. In C. Otnes & T. Lowrey (Eds.), *Contemporary consumption rituals: A research anthology* (pp. 125-148). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Ogle, J. P., Tyner, K. E., & Schofield-Tomschin, S. (2013). The role of maternity dress consumption in shaping the self and identity during the liminal transition of pregnancy. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 13(2), 119-139.
- Solomon, M. R., & Rabolt, N. J. (2009). *Consumer behavior in fashion*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Tawfiq, W., & Marcketti, S. (2017). Meaning and symbolism in bridal costumes in western Saudi Arabia. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 35(3), 215-230.
- Thomas, J. B., & Peters, K. O. (2011). Which dress do you like? Exploring brides’ online communities. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing* 2(3), 148-160.