



Constructing and Presenting the Self through Private Sphere Dress:  
An Interpretive Analysis of the Experiences of Saudi Arabian Women

Wijdan Tawfiq and Jennifer Paff Ogle, Colorado State University, USA

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In Saudi Arabia, women's presentation of the self through dress is shaped to a large extent by setting and audience considerations. In the public sphere – anywhere outside of the home where women are in the presence of males who are not considered to be next of kin – Saudi women are required by law to veil. In contrast, in the private sphere – which encompasses women's interactions in their homes, with other women, or with their next of kin – dress worn by Saudi women is open to individual choice and may include traditional Saudi styles (modest, long dresses with long sleeves), or, in recent years, Western styles. To date, the bulk of the research examining Saudi women's dress has focused upon public sphere dress. In contrast, little is known about Saudi women's private sphere dress. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to explore how Saudi women construct and present the self through their choice of dress for the private sphere, and in particular, how they negotiate the many traditional and modern influences present in their everyday lives. Of interest were the women's views on traditional versus Westernized dress for the private sphere as well as the role of others in shaping Saudi women's presentation of self through private sphere dress. The work was situated within the interactionist and dramaturgical traditions, taking as its theoretical starting point the premise that the self can be conceptualized in terms of "impression management," with dress acting as a symbol of the self invoked in the service of constructing positive impressions and avoiding negative ones.

Data were collected via in-depth interviews with 15 Saudi Arabian women (mean age = 30 years). All participants were married and most had pursued some form of post-secondary education. A majority were homemakers and shared a middle-class or upper middle-class lifestyle. Data were analyzed using constant comparison processes. Analyses revealed three key themes related to Saudi women's use of private sphere dress to construct and present the self.

*Conceptualizing the Desired Self.* Participants accounts' of private sphere dress reflected a desire to manage the impressions "given off" in such a way so as to construct a desirable self-presentation (Goffman, 1959, p. 2) for the self and others, conceptualized here as The Woman I Want to Be (Guy & Banim, 2000). Participants identified several aspects of the Woman They Wanted to Be, including a desire to appear authentic, unique, fashionable, and age appropriate. Participants also spoke to the role of social class in shaping the desired self, characterizing the Woman they Wanted to Be as one whose socioeconomic status was inscribed upon her private sphere dress. Finally, desired selves were often predicated upon the concept of modesty. Although some participants espoused a very conservative/modest appearance guided by the principles of the Islamic faith, others were somewhat more liberal in their interpretations. Some participants acknowledged shifting norms of modesty for private sphere dress in contemporary Saudi society, disapprovingly suggesting that for some Muslim people "the signal for how they decide what is fancy or not is how revealing of your body it is" (Participant 2, 22 years).

As they characterized the selves they wished to present to others, participants also considered what they did *not* wish to convey about the self, or the Women They Did Not Want to Be (Guy & Banim, 2000). For instance, participants spoke at length about their use of private sphere dress to camouflage disliked aspects of the body and to construct the impression that their bodies mirrored cultural body norms, which, like Western ideals, were said to emphasize thinness. In other cases, participants expressed concern about presentations of self through private sphere dress that would somehow bring dishonor to the self or to Saudi society as a result of disregard for norms of cultural propriety (e.g., being underdressed for an important occasion, trying to balance being fashionable without pushing the boundaries of modesty too far).

*The Role of Traditional and Western Dress in Mobilizing Desired Selves.* Participants characterized traditional dress as both supporting and undermining desired self-presentations, or the Women They Wanted to Be. Most notably, participants regarded traditional dress as buttressing their desire to present the self as modest and as having a rightful position within Saudi Arabian culture for the purpose of honoring customs and feeling “in the spirit” of their ancestors. Not all participants, however, viewed traditional dress as a mechanism through which to realize The Woman I Want to Be. Younger participants, in particular, often expressed the view that traditional dress was outdated and inconsistent with the role demands of their everyday lives. For these women, Westernized dress offered a viable sartorial alternative for mobilizing desired selves and one that was highly regarded for its fashionability, ready availability, comfort, practicality, versatility, and low cost. A common thread running through participants’ discussions of Western dress concerned the issue of modesty and the opinion that some Western fashions could not easily accommodate Saudi standards of modesty.

*Looking Glasses: The Role of Others in Mobilizing Desired Selves.* Participants saw themselves through the eyes and impressions of others, invoking these reflections of the self to mobilize desired self presentations. The reviews of husbands and in-laws often were important, reflecting the significance of pleasing one’s husband as a tenet of Islamic teachings. Western fashion media, as well, were consulted and were interpreted as a reflection of that which was “trendy.” As they planned their appearances for specific occasions, however, participants adjusted and redefined their self-presentations to suit the desires of their various audiences, such that they presented differing selves for differing audiences, sometimes preferring trendier looks, and sometimes privileging a more modest presentation. For some women, the perceived need to present somewhat incompatible versions of the self was a source of tension that represented the diverse influences confronting them in the quickly changing Saudi society.

Findings revealed that as they presented the self through dress within the private sphere, Saudi women engaged in a complex process of navigating Islamic teachings and Saudi cultural conventions, shifting cultural mores, and the diverse expectations of others and reveal interesting implications for the study of self-presentation within a changing cultural milieu.

## References

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