Meaning and Symbolism in Bridal Costumes in Western Saudi Arabia

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Abstract
The western region of Saudi Arabia has its own unique traditional bridal garments. Little is known about these bridal costumes because they are handmade by a few families in the region. The purpose of this study was to investigate the history, significance, and meaning of the Hijazi bridal costumes. Symbolic interactionism was the theoretical starting point of this study. Qualitative data were collected via in-depth interviews from 22 married Saudi women. A purposive, snowball sampling strategy was used. The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman process. Four key themes emerged including (a) physical appearance and process of wearing the costumes, (b) meanings and beliefs related to the costumes’ components, (c) appropriate occasions during which the costumes could be worn, and (d) motivation negotiated within families. The Hijazi bridal costumes have deep historical roots in Saudi culture, which continues to play a significant role in today’s marriage rituals.

Keywords
bridal, costume, historic clothing, culture change

Disciplines
Asian History | Family, Life Course, and Society | Fashion Design | Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts | Women's History

Comments
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Dress is an important cultural tool that can be used as an expression of social and cultural identity (Barnes & Eicher, 1992). Traditional dress represents national culture and historical heritage and includes all items, garments, and body modifications (e.g., makeup and perfumes) that embody the past for particular members of a group (Eicher & Sumberg, 1995; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). Characteristics of traditional dress evolve accommodating changes in contemporary society (Disele, Tyler, & Power, 2011; Foster & Johnson, 2003). In Saudi Arabia, traditional dress has a rich history and plays a significant role in Saudi women’s lives, particularly for special occasions such as weddings (Iskandarani, 2006; Long, 2005). However, extant research regarding its meaning and symbolism is limited.

In Saudi Arabia, a wedding is a major event that represents a sacred bond governed by culture and Islamic law. Weddings and subsequent marriages are viewed as paramount to healthy family relationships and the continuation of a strong and stable Saudi society (Doumato, 2010; Long, 2005). As such, weddings become public celebrations which are often marked by lavish spending (Al-Jeraisy, 2008; Al-Munajjed, 1997). The wedding costume is one of the most important aspects of the Saudi wedding celebration. To many people it reflects the cultural values of the wedding and the status of the bride and groom’s families (Foster & Johnson, 2003).

Several researchers have explored the prominence and the symbolic value of a bride’s traditional dress in different societies (Baldizzone & Baldizzone, 2001; Barber, 1994; Becker, 2003; Foster & Johnson, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Kochuyt, 2012). These researchers have shown that traditional bridal costume holds significant and diverse cultural meanings that can represent women’s reproductive capabilities, connect generations of families, and ease this rite of passage into adulthood. It has been suggested that traditional wedding costumes in diverse cultures are
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more than objects because of their powerful symbolic value and fundamental role within the
wedding ceremony (Baldizzone & Baldizzone, 2001). In addition, traditional bridal costumes
may give brides a sense of national identity, especially when they live outside of their native
country (Kochuyt, 2012). Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) proposed the term costume for use
in discussions of dress for ceremonies and rituals, thus, we will use the phrase traditional
wedding costumes.

The western region of Saudi Arabia, the Hijaz, has its own unique styles and forms of
traditional bridal costumes (Iskandarani, 2006; Yamani, 2004), which are still popular and
widely used today (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013). However, researchers have yet to explore the
symbolic meaning of traditional Hijazi bridal costumes. Within Arabic scholarly literature,
Iskandarani (2006) analyzed the physical appearance of the design lines, fabric, color, textiles,
and patterns used for decorations for traditional bridal costumes in Medina, but did not analyze
the bridal costumes for meaning. Little is published about the meaning of these traditional Hijazi
bridal costumes and their place in today’s marriage rituals. Perhaps this is because they are
handmade by a few families who live in the region who own and rent them, and are not mass
produced or available for purchase in stores. Rentals are usually very expensive, ranging from
$300 to $800 per night depending on the condition and the materials used for the decoration.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the history, significance, and meaning of Hijazi
bridal costumes from the perspective of women who have experienced wearing them. Further,
we explored their continued use in rites of passage from both historical and contemporary
perspectives. The other primary objective was to explore the motivations that influence Saudi
women’s decisions to wear traditional dress during the wedding ceremony. The researchers
propose that exploring the meaning of Hijazi bridal costumes from the perspective of women
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who have experienced wearing them will contribute to the literature about women’s rites of passage from a global perspective, in particular, the intergenerational meaning of traditional bridal costumes.

Literature Review

Saudi Arabian Wedding Rituals

The Saudi Arabian region has been under Islamic rule since the birth of Islam in the seventh century (Long, 2005). After the establishment of Saudi Arabia as a country in 1932, Saudi law has continued following the rule of Islam in every aspect of life; this includes marriage, weddings, and dress (Long, 2005). Islam requires men to pay a dowry (a set amount of money as a gift for his bride). Moreover, Saudi culture requires approval from both the bride’s and groom’s families before marriage (Al-Munajjed, 1997; Bin Manie, 1985). Family is a very important structural unit in Saudi society and familial relationships are strong (Long, 2005). This closeness makes family events such as weddings major occasions, for which Saudi women pay a great deal of attention to dress (Al-Munajjed, 1997). The bridal dress in the wedding celebration represents the bride and her entire family (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013).

Traditional Saudi weddings include multiple culturally significant rituals celebrated over several discontinuous days (Qusay, 2010). These begin with the introduction of the bride and groom in arranged marriages. After an agreement between the two joining families, the engagement party is held, during which the groom presents the dowry, engagement ring, and bridal jewelry on an ornately decorated silver cart (Iskandarani, 2006; Qusay, 2010). As the wedding day approaches, other celebrations and events take place. In Hijazi culture, the Ghomrah party, a bridal shower, is held a few days before the wedding, during which the bride wears a traditional bridal costume and henna designs are drawn on her hands and feet.
(Iskandarani, 2006). For the wedding ceremony itself, the bride, if not garbed in traditional Saudi costume, dons a white, Western-style wedding gown (Iskandarani, 2006). The wedding ceremony, however, is not the conclusion of the wedding-related celebration. Many Hijazi families hold additional post-wedding parties to congratulate the new couple (Iskandarani, 2006).

There have been many 20th and 21st century changes in Saudi Arabia that have influenced modern Saudi weddings. Since the discovery of oil in 1938, foreign workers and their families, customs, and traditions have led to economic growth, modernization and increased Western influence in the country (Al-Munajjed, 1997; Long, 2005). Western influence in particular could be seen to be connected to the increase in female educational opportunities and representation in the workforce (Al-Munajjed, 1997; Pharaon, 2004). Perhaps this explains the change from the average age of first marriages for Saudi Arabian women at 15 years old in 1935 (Bin Manie, 1985) to an average age of 24 years old in 2007 (Qaundl, 2007). These changes might also explain the adoption of Western dress for work and casual wear and the use of Western style wedding dresses for the official wedding ceremony (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013). However, traditional dress is still preferred by many Saudi women for special occasions (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013).

**Historical Context of Traditional Hijazi Wedding Dress in Saudi Arabia**

Even though Saudi Arabia is a relatively young country in terms of its current national borders, it has a rich history of clothing and textiles (Long, 2005; Yamani, 2004). For example, each region in the country used to have its own style of clothing and textiles that were hand made through weaving, dyeing, embroidery, and sewing. These different styles expressed individual group belonging and geographical and historical location (Long, 2005; Yamani, 2004). The area known as Hijaz contains the two holiest Islamic cities, Mecca and Medina, and has attracted many pilgrims and visitors since the birth of Islam in 610 AD (Long, 2005). As such, the roots of
historical dress in the Hijaz have been influenced by the many cultural backgrounds of pilgrims
and visitors over hundreds of years. Furthermore, the Turkish Ottoman Empire, which ruled the
Hijaz region for over four centuries has exerted an ongoing influence on the styles and customs
of the Hijazi (Iskandarani, 2006; Yamani, 2004).
Whereas traditional dress in other geographic areas of Saudi Arabia has undergone rapid changes
or become nearly obsolete since the introduction of Western influence in the 1930s (Long, 2005;
Pompea, 2002; Yamani, 2004), traditional Hijazi bridal costumes have survived the increasing
dominance of Western styles (Iskandarani, 2006). This traditional dress helps forge a visual
connection to the region’s rich cultural heritage within an increasingly modernized Saudi Arabia.
In one study, Tawfiq and Ogle (2013) found that Hijazi bridal costumes held a special value and
meaning for participants, and were viewed as a central aspect of the Ghomrah or bridal shower
celebration in which the bride often wears a costume including undergarments, outer garments,
and a tiara on her head, all of which are embroidered with gold.
In her study of the different stages of the traditional Saudi wedding celebration which
spans several days, Iskandarani (2006) described five distinct bridal costumes. Historically, the
five costumes worn, al-mentur, al-medini, al-mahaf, al-zabun, and al-muskak, differed in terms
of the number of pieces per dress, color, design, motif, and the detail of the embroidery.
Typically, the main pieces included: under-vest, pants, tiara or head cover, face cover, and an
ankle-length robe with very long, wide sleeves. In addition to these pieces, al-medini includes
pearls, hair accessories, and a pillow-like bib wrapped around the neck stuffed with cotton and
heavily decorated with diamonds, gold, pearls, and flowers which are sewn onto it the day it is
worn (see Figure 1). Iskandarani (2006) also described a custom in which, for the first wedding
she attends among relatives after her own, a newly married woman would wear one of the
traditional bridal costumes. It is to be noted that wedding celebrations are gender segregated and conducted within the private sphere which includes women’s interactions with women and their male next of kin, thus, the hijab is not religiously required (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013).

“Place Figure 1 about here.”

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic interactionism was the theoretical starting point of this study because traditional wedding attire often has great symbolism, which is negotiated through social interactions (Eicher & Ling, 2005). Symbolic interaction is defined as the interpretation of the meanings people apply to the world around them and share through social interaction (Blumer, 1969). Dress is one medium to which people assign meaning; therefore, it is an instrument for an individual’s expression of identity, and to position and develop the self he or she desires to present to the world (Goffman, 1959; Stone, 1962). According to these shared meanings, individuals manipulate their appearance to convey their desired identities in social contexts (Goffman, 1959). In turn, others act towards people based on these meanings, sometimes giving feedback about appearance that may influence the wearer’s future decisions about his or her appearance (Stone, 1962). To do this, individuals take on the role of “other” in order to construct themselves by imagining how others see and evaluate them using the “looking-glass self” (Cooley, 1902). Based on the “looking-glass self,” individuals make decisions about how they should dress for different social contexts (Cooley, 1902; Stone, 1962).

Within the theory of symbolic interaction, Solomon (1983) and Belk (1988) explained that behavior can be guided by the symbolic role of products, thus creating social context. Solomon (1983) claimed that an object’s symbolic meanings help individuals transition into new roles by accelerating the transition and reducing their uncertainty. Eicher and Ling (2005)
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suggested that during wedding rites, dress is used as a symbol for a bride’s transfer from one social identity (unmarried woman) to a new one (wife). Belk’s (1988) concept of “extended self” can provide insight into the ways in which objects and possessions can become sources of personal identity. According to Belk (1988), the past can be felt through the nostalgia and the memories attached to possessions; items such as family heirlooms and the traditions they represent become a part of people’s presentation of their identities. Traditional costumes passed down from generation to generation can enter into a bride’s concept of her extended self. These costumes become part of the ritual of marriage and help brides transition through this important life passage (Eicher & Ling, 2005).

The authors’ purpose was to explore the history, significance, and meaning of traditional Hijazi bridal costumes and answer the following questions: What factors contributed to the decision to wear bridal costumes for marriage celebrations? What were participants’ construction of the cultural meaning of the traditional costume? Do individuals of different generations hold distinct perceptions of the Hijazi bridal costumes? How do interactions between the generations help shape the continuation of these bridal costumes in Hijazi culture?

Method

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval (ID 15-079), a qualitative approach was used and data were collected via in-depth interviews (Esterberg, 2002) from 22 married Saudi women. A purposive, snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit research participants and ensure collection of relevant data (Esterberg, 2002). An initial list of potential participants was obtained from a key Saudi informant. After each interview, the primary researcher asked each participant to suggest other participants among their family and acquaintances. Each of the participants had worn at least one of the traditional bridal costumes (Table 1).
The participants were invited to bring photos of themselves wearing their bridal costumes to guide the interview discussion and in order for the researchers to corroborate the interview data. After gaining permission for reproduction from the owners of the pictures, some were scanned by the primary researcher with faces obscured to protect the participants’ anonymity. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Saudi Arabia in the homes of the interviewees. Interview questions focused on (a) the physical appearance of the costumes and the process of donning them, (b) the occasion(s) for which the costumes were worn, (c) how participants made decisions about which bridal costumes to wear, and (d) how participants viewed wearing traditional bridal costumes within weddings today. Interviews lasted between 34 and 115 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, translated into English, and reviewed by three readers fluent in Arabic and English. Extra attention was given to the cultural nuances of these personal conversations in order to make the translations as precise as possible.

**Analysis**

The interview transcripts were coded by breaking down into meaningful fragments words, phrases, and ideas considered relevant to the study. Each fragment was assigned to a code or category (Esterberg, 2002). Next, to display the data, a coding guide was developed to summarize these categories and the interviews were reread, searching for statements that might fit into any of the categories (Esterberg, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). During the final stage of analysis, the researchers looked for patterns, explanations, contradictions, and confirmations to develop conclusions for the study (Esterberg, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). To establish trustworthiness and dependability of the data collection and analysis, the primary researcher used reflexivity, writing memos throughout the data collection and analysis processes to acknowledge
self-criticism and help foster reflection and interpretation of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, the researchers negotiated meanings during coding until agreement was reached.

Findings

Emergent Themes

Our findings revealed that interviewees’ weddings were deeply rooted in traditional customs and shown through the bridal costumes. Specifically, four key themes emerged relating to the significance and meaning of these costumes: (a) Physical appearance and process of wearing them, (b) Meanings and beliefs assigned to the costumes’ components, (c) Appropriate occasions for which the costumes could be worn, and (d) Motivations negotiated within families.

Physical appearance and process of wearing the traditional costumes. Participants recognized the uniqueness of Saudi traditional costumes’ designs and their rich historical context. Participant 11 explained, “the traditional bridal costumes reminds me of the old days.” While not knowing the exact meaning of the costume, Participant 1 stated, “My belief is that its’ connected to our roots and history, which bring back happy memories.” Participant 2B indicated, Since my mother was from Hadramawt and we lived in Saudi Arabia I wanted to strike a balance between these two backgrounds. Thus, I started off with wearing the hathiri costume and ended the party with wearing the Hijazi, Saudi Arabian costume; I saved the best for last.

She went on to explain a bit of the costume’s history, stating, “We just saw our grandparents and parents wear it and did the same. Many of the medini costumes are influenced by the Ottoman Empire when these costumes were associated with the high status and the elite.”

Participants described their costumes’ components, such as design, color, material, and decorations, as well as the complicated and time-consuming process of correctly donning the
bridal costumes. Participant 4 explained, “It needs someone who had the knowledge and training
with the process of dressing in traditional bridal costumes. From my experience, I found it to be
a difficult process and couldn’t have done it alone.” Another participant, 3c, described *al-
medini*, which she wore at her *Ghomrah*:

> It was a challenge to put it on with so many pieces. A dress on top with lots of
> embroidery, pants underneath, vest, and a head cover that included a tiara with flowers
> that supported it. Above all these pieces, there was a long fabric which covered me from
> head to toe and that I held with my hands.

Participants were cognizant of not just the costumes’ physical elements, but also the
social rules that dictated how to wear them. Within the framework of symbolic interactionism,
women are encouraged to use the shared meanings of the dress to present their desired identities
and prepare themselves in culturally prescribed ways (Goffman, 1959; Stone, 1962). As noted,
symbolic interaction theory explains how meanings develop through interactions and become a
common or shared perspective over a period of time within a given cultural context (Charon,
1998; Stone, 1962). As described to the primary researcher, the process of donning the
traditional Saudi Arabian bridal costumes allowed for interaction between the women who
helped prepare the bride for the event. These interactions may be symbolic of the brides’
transitioning identities, which required the help of others to fully execute. These shared
meanings were passed down from generation to generation through photos, stories, and
experiences seeing older relatives in the family wear these costumes. One of the women who
makes and rents bridal costumes explained the lengthy dressing process:

> Typically, the process takes 30 minutes from beginning to end. When I dress the bride I
try to create a pleasant environment. I ask my assistant to help entertain the bride to make
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her comfortable. We start with the undergarment, then the inner dress, the vest, then we
let her sit on a chair while we prepare the head cover. Originally, the head cover piece
was sewn on but I use bobby pins with pearls to attach it. Lastly, we apply the face
cover…I specifically explain and teach the brides about the names and customs of each
piece when dressing them. (Participant 14)

From the interviews and photos, it was found that the appearance of the costumes through
generations has changed only slightly, with differences in color, fabric, and embroidery materials (see Figures 2). Silk was at one time exclusively used, but the use of polyester has made the
garments more affordable, lighter, and easier to wear. While some participants, such as
Participant 4, indicated these changes “were subtle and do not affect [the costume’s] original
form in significant ways. The overall look is the same,” others were quite concerned regarding
any changes. According to Participant 3b:

The stupid change is decreasing their value. They use cheaper materials and you can see
the difference…people would use real gold and diamonds but now they use gold plating
and fake gemstones…They say they are changing, modifying, and renewing it. No, this is
not a change; this is irreverence.

Participant 11 concurred that changes would violate “the rules” of traditional bridal costumes:
“to preserve them as they are and not try to change them or modify them, because their beauty is
in their originality and inveterate tradition.” The strong beliefs regarding the impropriety of
change may be due to the valued symbolism of these costumes, possibly creating resistance to
change. Belk’s (1988) concepts of extended self and connection to the past can be used to
explain the special connection some participants had with traditional bridal costumes, which they
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valued more than the modified costumes. People may relate possessions to their sense of the past
to help them remember their pasts and enjoy the present (Belk, 1988).

“Place Figure 2 about here.”

Meanings and beliefs assigned to the costumes’ components. Participants not only
identified the physical descriptions of bridal costumes’ different components, but also the
meanings and beliefs behind them. Meanings ranged from cultural significance, such as
demonstrations of Islamic modesty and “the bride’s shyness” (Participant 7), to emotions,
beliefs, and social significance of what these costumes conveyed to others.

Within symbolic interaction theory, Goffman (1959) explained how people present
themselves through their appearance in ways that are socially accepted and expected. As
previously discussed, Islam influences all of Saudi life (Long, 2005) and is part of the rich
meanings associated with traditional bridal costumes. This explains why some pieces and aspects
of the costumes (e.g., face cover and costume length) represented modesty or “shyness and
purity” (Participant P6a), in accordance with religious beliefs: “I don’t even like to look at the
brides who wear the Western style that is revealing. Traditional bridal costumes are modest.
They even cover the head, the face, and everything else” (Participant 13). Due to the private
nature and gender segregated ceremony, the face veiling is not religiously prescribed, but rather a
function of cultural modesty and shyness, which some participants expressed a desire for:

The traditional bridal costumes are modest, long sleeved, loose fitting, and have a head
cover. The purpose of it is to instill shyness from a young age and conserve the women.

Modesty has been called a part of the faith. Modest clothing is not only a symbol of
shyness but is known to be associated with the high class worldwide. On the other hand,
revealing clothing is for trashy people. The more you reveal the lower down the class chain you get. (Participant 6c).

An additional symbolism of the face cover that participants spoke of is “protection from the evil eye,” (Participant 1), indicated by its embroidered phrase Mashallah (God has willed it). The costumes’ various colors were also said to hold meaning; for example, pink represented “good luck” (Participant 3b) and “innocence and femininity” (Participant 12). The garland made of tiny green apples worn around the neck was thought to be “good luck” and to promote “fertility” (Participant 8b). Two other pieces with symbolic meanings were the tiara and stool procession, whose “splendor” (Participant 7) made the bride “feel like a queen” (Participant 1).

Participant 12 explained the stool procession as a part of the actual bridal costume: “When the bride does the wedding procession in the traditional gown, there are two stools that she stands on with a bridesmaid on each side [one from her family and one from the groom’s family] and for every step they bring the stool from behind for her to step forwards onto until she reaches her bridal throne.” As discussed by Solomon (1983), individuals employ material symbols, such as dress, to assist them in determining their transitions into a new stage of life. This stool procession symbolizes the transition from her family’s house to her new home: “the first [stool] should begin at her parent’s house (the existing stool) and last one should end up at her husband’s house (entering stool),” (Participant 5). With every step of the stool procession, the bride is reminded of her changing role from a single woman to a wife. According to Participant 7:

The Ghomrah is not only a marriage celebration, it goes beyond this because it is a passage of ritual where a girl is transformed from a daughter living in her parent’s home to a women becoming a wife and moving into her husband’s home. Given this atmosphere, traditions are necessary because this is how traditions are carried on. A girl
learns the tradition by seeing what her mom wears and she later wears it. This way she learns how to be a bride.

Another piece that held significant value was the padded pillow, or bib, which was made of layered satin and cotton fabric with gold jewelry attached to it (see Figure 3). This was considered unique to Hijaz by several participants and used to represent the bride’s “social class” (Participant 15) and emphasize her “feminine physique” (Participant 12). Typically, the more jewelry and gold on the padded bib, the higher a bride’s social class.

Moreover, participants recognized the ephemeral aspects of the bridal costume as essential. For example, the ghomrah celebration “used to be called henna party” (Participant 13) “to beautify the bride and to show happiness” (Participant 17b). Before applying henna on the bride’s hand and legs there were special bathing rituals that included a mixture of “exotic flowers such as medini flower pedals and purple rehan (basil) that were dried, ground, and mixed with rose water then applied on the bride’s body like a body wash. Afterwards, the bride smells beautiful and body feels smooth” (Participant 14). The medini and rehan flowers were used in the Al-medini costume “to make a flower garland sewn on the bib and in the back of the tiara to support it, which give off a pleasant smell to the bride” (Participant 15).

In characterizing the meaning and symbolism behind the pieces of the bridal costume, participants also spoke of the benefits when wearing them, such as concealing the bride’s beauty via the face covering until the face is exposed on the wedding day, and the emotions felt while wearing the costumes. Participant 17c shared her positive feelings when she wore the costumes: “I feel so proud and unique and like I’m floating on air.” Participant explained:

I had a wonderful indescribable feeling like I lived in the old time. Even though I was not that shy, when I dress al-medini, I felt I was shy and acted like as if I was a bride living in
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my mother’s time. I think these are not just traditional bridal costumes. They are connected feelings. It is weird but they do influence how a bride feels and acts like as if they were alive. (Participant 11)

All participants emphasized the meaning of concealing the bride’s beauty at the Ghomrah party until the wedding day: “precious things are always covered, just like the bride” (Participant 17c). This enabled a bride to appear “surprisingly beautiful” (Participant 13) on her wedding day: “Al-medini covers the bride completely like a gift-wrapped surprise until the wedding day and highlights her beauty” (Participant 16).

Regardless of the meanings, some participants stated that while not knowing specific significance, they held strong convictions about who could wear the bridal costumes and to which occasions they could be worn. This may be explained through their past experiences with the costumes, viewing older relatives and friends marrying and how these memories of the bridal traditional have become part of their identities (see Belk, 1988).

“Place Figure 3 about here.”

Appropriate alternative occasions for wearing bridal costumes. As participants described the different occasions, they discussed the shared meanings and when and where bridal costumes could be worn in the past and today. As noted in the literature review, traditional Hijazi wedding celebrations last several days, and each day had its own specific traditional bridal costume (Iskandarani, 2006). In the past, there were rules and specially assigned costumes for each day of the “seven-day marriage celebrations” (Participant 2b). Today, however, these rules are more flexible. Thus, the costumes could be worn for major celebrations outside of weddings by the guest of honor, whose role is in transition. Solomon (1983) explained how dress can be used to support role changes and accelerate this transition. For example, a celebration called
Saabe (arrival of a new baby), a graduation party, and post-wedding events are all occasions when some of these costumes may be worn in the present day. At all of these events, participants experienced a degree of identity construction and used one of their traditional bridal costumes to help them perform their new role (Goffman 1959; Solomon, 1983). Despite some flexibility in their use, Participant 4 explained that the shared meanings and significance of wearing these costumes for specific events must still be respected: “The traditional costume holds certain rules and expectations with it. It can’t be worn by just anyone and to any event.” Further, Participant 8b said the traditional costumes would “lose [their] meaning” if they are not worn at times to which people are “accustomed.”

Because all participants valued the importance of wearing these traditional costumes, some participants felt that modern flexibility allows those who did not wear traditional costumes for their wedding celebrations to have another opportunity to experience wearing them.

Originally al-zabun (see Figure 4) should be worn on Sabha (the day after the wedding). Today, it has been worn on different occasions because not everyone celebrates Sabha, the bride and groom go straight to the honeymoon… People still wear different bridal costumes but not for the same things (participant 12).

However, some participants believed that traditional costumes should only be worn for wedding celebrations: “Other than the wedding celebrations, I think it would be too much to wear it because it is meant to be only for the bride” (Participant 17b). Perhaps these feelings stem from beliefs that because bridal costumes symbolize the transition to the new role of wife, they should be restricted to wedding celebrations. For example, the traditional costumes “which are known to be for brides can only be worn at the Ghomrah,” according to Participant 6c.
Lastly, some participants viewed the traditional costumes as “fancy enough” to be an alternative to the white Western wedding gown (Participant 7b) that has grown in popularity in Saudi Arabia, as both a symbol of marriage and to convey “feelings of happiness” (Participant 5). According to Eicher and Ling (2005), different cultures assign different meaning to their wedding dresses and costumes which help rites of passage. For some participants, these meanings are strong enough to overcome Western influences.

Motivation negotiated within families. Participants revealed that shared meanings regarding bridal costumes were passed down through intergenerational rituals. Daughters learned from their mothers that these costumes represented transitioning from girls to women. Eicher and Ling (2005) explained how community and family socialization helps form culturally shared traditions. The repetition of wedding celebrations from generation to generation and the social interactions between generations construct the shared meanings that are assigned to costumes (see Blumer, 1969). Participant 1 shared the first time she saw the traditional bridal costume, Was when I was five years old I saw a photo of my mother and grandmother. My mother responded, “when you get married you will wear a dress like this”…when I wore it I felt my mom and grandmother’s joy; living in the olden days.

Participants expressed excitement to wear the costumes after seeing and hearing about other family members wearing them, emphasizing the specialness of the costumes and traditions, which increased the value of the marriage celebrations for participants. Participant 8c stated, My grandmother has a treasure box that you need to see. When we were kids we dreamed of “reaching the treasure box.” The treasure box has traditional silver and gold jewelry and multiple bridal costumes that we were not allowed to try on until we got engaged…
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From the day I got engaged, I decided that I wanted a Ghomrah. I even went to my grandmother and told her that the time has come that I wear something from your treasure box like my relatives.

As mentioned in the literature review, weddings in Saudi Arabia are representative of the entire family, not just the bride-to-be (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013). Thus, participants spoke of the expensive cost of the costumes demonstrating “high class” or families’ wealth, “prestige,” and “class.” Participant 3b stated, “Al-medini was a must. It’s something everyone wore and those who didn’t were considered lower class.” Another participant expressed that “its distinctive shape… made me feel like royalty and walk with [my] head held up high” (Participant 4).

Many of the participants viewed the bridal costumes as part of a larger heritage, so that wearing them fulfilled a tradition in which women became a part of a regional “dynasty” (Participant 8c). Participant 8b described the traditional bridal costume in this context:

[It] represents genuineness, brings about nostalgia, and [is] redolent of history… if we do not preserve our traditional costumes we will lose our identity. In my opinion these costumes show that the person is an authentic, sincere, and noble person; it shows how much the person is proud and attached to their tradition. It is like a tree without roots that will soon die. We have to be proud of our tradition. Some Saudi people are proud of their roots while others are denying their roots and are embarrassed about [them]. People who do not wear their traditional costumes are detached from their roots.

Several participants regarded the Western-style dresses for the bride as “lost and brainwashed by the Western fashion and are missing out on a lot. The genuine people never forget their tradition and they preserve and appreciate its value” (Participant 16).
The family’s encouragement became an integral part of how these women shaped their views in deciding to wear traditional costumes. For families who owned the bridal costumes, following their wearing of Hijazi costumes, many of the participants shared the traditional wedding customs with multiple generations of family and friends. All participants asserted the importance of “keeping [these traditional costumes] from vanishing” (Participant 16) by passing them down through the generations. Participant 11 stated, “Each mother plays a major role in communicating the information about these traditional bridal costumes to their daughters and making them look beautiful in their eyes as our mothers did with us.” Participant 17b added “the mother has to convince her daughter to wear it and the daughter has to pass it along to her daughter, so it is passed down from generation to generation.”

Not all participants, however, viewed these costumes positively. The middle-aged women interviewed, in particular, expressed negative feelings associated with the traditional costumes, for example, Participant 12 stated:

On the day of Ghomrah, my mother advised me to wear the traditional bridal dress but I refused because I was young and looking for something modern. Also, the traditional dress had a funny camel’s hump [referring to the fabric train piece that attached to the tiara and covers the bride from head to toes]. My mother in law objected to the idea and was upset about me not wearing the traditional al-medini as it represents the entire clan.

A millennial woman shared this perspective, viewing the traditional costumes as outdated:

As a young girl from the new generation, I do not see anything special about it. However, parents and grandparents see it as special and unique and they feel so happy and proud when they see their daughters wear it. Therefore, I wore it for my mom’s sake. I’m not really interested in it. It’s so heavy. I spent an hour or two to put it on, and then another
hour or two to take it off. It feels as though you have 100 pounds on your head and it’s very itchy, yet it was a once in a lifetime experience. It looks beautiful but it doesn’t feel comfortable. (Participant 3c)

Some participants had to negotiate between multiple influences (what they wanted, what their family wanted, and cultural norms) that may have been contradictory, sometimes making them feel torn between opposing influences. Many of the participants discussed the way in which throughout their life, from childhood to present day, family members shared memories and their “treasure boxes” (Participant 8c) of bridal memorabilia, and felt influenced to wear the traditional costumes. Through the use of the “looking-glass self” or social interactions with older family members, participants dressed in traditional costume, in part, to fulfill familial obligations and expectations (see Cooley, 1902; Al-Munajjed, 1997). The use of the costumes helped reinforce the transmission of the bridal costume tradition through and between generations. Interestingly, the older and the younger women interviewed, were most favourable of the traditional costumes. Our findings revealed that the beliefs and symbolism about these traditional Hijazi bridal costumes were communicated between and within generations. Preservation of traditional bridal costumes allowed brides to connect to their heritage, adding valuable memories to the costumes that became a part of themselves and their memories of their wedding (see Belk, 1988). The Hijazi bridal costumes have deep historical roots in Saudi Arabian culture, which continues to play a significant role in today’s marriage rituals.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our findings are consistent with and extend prior work suggesting that traditional bridal dress has different cultural meanings representative of familial ties and womanhood, which are rooted within the context of place and time (Baldizzone & Baldizzone, 2001; Barber, 1994;
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Becker, 2003; Foster & Johnson, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Kochuyt, 2012). Our study added to the understanding of how traditional costumes are used to construct new identities through the meanings associated with these costumes, which help accelerate transitions between roles (see Solomon, 1983). These shared meanings are learned by younger generations from their elders. The use of these traditional costumes for wedding celebrations, as described by older family members, influenced and confirmed the younger generation decisions and helped them learn the roles of bride and newlywed. Our findings provided insight to understand existing theory within the context of role transitions as a symbolic interactionism perspective. Solomon (1983) explained how dress can be used to aid in role transitions, particularly, in significant rites of passage like marriage (Belk, 1988). Symbolism inherent in the traditional wedding costumes affirmed the participants’ separation from their parents and transition into a new life.

Participants compared the past and present of traditional bridal costumes with regards to appropriate occasions for wearing them, the physical look of them, and the traditions related to them. All of the participants sought to maintain the physical look of these costumes and allowed only minor modifications, such as fabric type and embroidery permissible. Many participants considered larger changes and modifications of these costumes as violation of the traditional rule. However, most participants were flexible as to other occasions for which the costumes could be worn. Maintaining the physical look of the costumes was similar to the findings of Hughes, Torntore, and Ogle (2015). In their work, Black Forest, Germany participants maintained Trachten traditional dress to help keep their culture alive and express their cultural identity, but allowed for some changes related to contemporary life. Originally, in Saudi Arabian culture, the meanings assigned to the costumes were only wedding-related. The participants expressed the importance of experiencing these traditional costumes. Today, different meanings
have been added however, such as extravagance and happiness, allowing participants to create a new, shared meanings that enable women to wear these costumes at occasions other than their traditional marriage celebrations. Translating the culturally shared meanings of the costumes supplements women’s performances in significant, transitioning roles at other occasions (Goffman, 1959; Solomon, 1983). Not all participants revered traditional costumes because they were thought of as uncomfortable and outdated, but they still underwent some level of negotiation with feedback when deciding whether or not to wear them. The feedback participants received from older family members influenced their choices to wear traditional costumes regardless of the brides’ positive or negative feelings about the costumes (see Stone, 1962).

Limitations for this study include the translation process from Arabic to English. Despite having multiple, fluent readers who reviewed the translations, some of the richness of the data may have been lost. While the multiple generations interviewed allowed for an understanding of diverse perspectives, interviewing younger women may have provided opinions of those exposed to more options and influences through globalization. Therefore, future research focused on the millennial generation views of traditional bridal costumes should be conducted.

In addition, future researchers could explore cultural wedding dress of other regions within Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the scope could be broadened to include other cultures, such as Morocco, which has rules associated with their traditional wedding dress and practices that are comparable to Saudi Arabia. A cross-cultural comparison of the meanings and practices associated with traditional wedding dress through generations would help researchers to better understand their significance. More research on traditional bridal costumes for immigrants who live outside of their native-born country, similar to Kochuyt (2012), to see if and how traditional costumes’ values and meanings change, would also be beneficial.
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