

Chapter 2

The Advent of Western– Style Shopping Centres and Changes in Saudi Women’s Purchasing Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

This chapter sets out to investigate: (a) the extent to which Western-style shopping centres affected women’s culture and (b) the reasons for family members to imitate relatives and subsequently purchase unaffordable apparel in Riyadh. In order to address these research questions, in-depth interviews were conducted with Saudi women shoppers at Western-style shopping centres. Results show that the main reasons for visiting Western-style shopping centres were the expensive brand images, improving social position within the society, liberalisation of women’s culture, and to portray themselves as open-minded individuals. Moreover, the study also

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shows that Saudi women are highly influenced by the new Western-style shopping environment as evidenced by their desire to imitate relatives who shop at Western-style shopping centres and their desire to improve their perceived social position. Notably, they also depict a “must have” attitude toward current fashion and keeping on top of the latest fashion trends.

INTRODUCTION

In Saudi Arabia, a country with one of the world's most authoritarian societies and where traditional demands observance of strict social mores (Rice, 2004), the new Western-style shopping environment in the capital city Riyadh seems something of a contradiction to the casual observer. Since the proliferation of Western-style shopping centres and the relatively easy availability of Western goods, the traditional expectations of Saudi customers have changed to a great extent. Consequently, modern women also started demanding the dynamic and entertaining shopping experience that is provided by an attractive, contemporary and Western retail environment (Bhuiyan, 1997). With no shortage of choice Saudi women congregate in the shopping centres to embrace consumerism and spend whatever it costs to satisfy their desire for prestige and luxury products (Assad, 2007). Assad (2007) also indicated that consumer lifestyle and the consumerist attitude are spreading rapidly in Saudi Arabia. The spread of consumerism in the country is a consequence of a combination of global and local factors such as commercial advertisements, phenomenal uptake of the Internet, attractive marketing strategies and urbanisation processes. This mixture of global and local factors has changed Saudi Arabian culture at a phenomenal pace and characterises modern-day Riyadh.

Hofstede's work on culture in the 1980s categorised Saudi society at a high level of conservatism culture. However, Hofstede's work has been cited and criticized by many (Jones, 2007). It has been discredited in part or whole as many researchers find culture to be a dynamic, continually changing concept, coupled with forces such as globalisation and westernisation, which change the way we trade, communicate and act. As such, it is expected that the advent of the Western-style shopping centres in Saudi Arabia has resulted in Saudi women spending more via extended credit limits that was not a characteristic of shopping in traditional shopping centres. It was also evident that family or even extended family significantly influences Saudi women's consumption behaviour thereby creating a 'must have'

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