

The Transformation of Practices Surrounding the Celebration of Major Islamic Holidays in Urban Muslim Families: Between Religious Traditions, Modern Consumption, and Social Representation

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Abstract

This study examines the shifting socio-religious and cultural landscape within the contemporary Saudi Arabian domestic sphere by analyzing the transformation of Islamic holiday celebration practices among urban Muslim families under the influence of Saudi Vision 2030. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive-analytical case study design, this research purposively focuses on upper-middle-class households in major metropolitan centers, specifically Riyadh and Jeddah. Data were systematically collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, digital observations of family lifestyle representations on social media, and visual documentation, which were subsequently evaluated using thematic analysis alongside the theoretical frameworks of Jean Baudrillard's consumer culture theory and social representation theory. The findings indicate that the acceleration of state-led urbanization and economic modernization has fundamentally restructured traditional celebration dynamics, shifting the center of gravity for Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha from sacred-conservative tribal rituals to a highly commercialized cultural hybridity. While core normative religious obligations are carefully preserved, the domestic preparation and celebratory periods are increasingly dominated by luxury retail consumption, high-end hospitality markets, and state-sponsored entertainment events. Furthermore, the ubiquity of global digital platforms,

particularly Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok, has redefined traditional family privacy boundaries by turning the private household into an expressive digital stage for performing contemporary class status. This rapid commercialization introduces a distinct value ambivalence among Saudi youth, who increasingly recontextualize sacred times as secular vacations and opportunities for personal entertainment rather than pure spiritual devotion. These insights highlight the urgent necessity for family and educational institutions in Saudi Arabia to actively maintain the essential spiritual virtues of Islam within modern parenting structures.

Keywords

Consumer Culture, Family Transformation, Saudi Arabia,
Social Representation

Introduction

Studies on the sociocultural landscape of contemporary Saudi Arabia have increasingly focused on the sweeping structural transformations initiated by the state. Since the inception of Saudi Vision 2030, the kingdom has undergone a radical realignment of its public and private spheres, effectively dismantling decades of strict socio-religious conservatism in favor of a more open, moderated social environment. This massive societal shift has profoundly altered the daily lived experiences of the population, trickling down from high-level state policies into the deep recesses of the domestic arena. Within urban Saudi Muslim families, this transformation is vividly reflected in how religious celebrations are conducted. Traditional Islamic holidays, most notably Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, are no longer observed in a rigid, monolithic, or culturally insulated manner. Instead, the celebration of these sacred milestones has begun to intersect intimately with modern global lifestyle trends, shifting the domestic atmosphere of urban households from a purely spiritual focus to a highly dynamic social phenomenon (Al-Rasheed, 2021).

The intersection of modernity and religious tradition within the Saudi household has given rise to a complex contestation between

historical preservation and contemporary lifestyle choices. For generations, Islamic celebrations in the kingdom were deeply anchored in ancestral desert traditions and tribal customs (*bedouin traditions*), which emphasized patriarchal family gatherings, strict gender segregation, and modest communal rituals. However, urban families now face an intense penetration of modern consumerism, fueled by rapid commercialization and the aggressive expansion of the domestic leisure industry under the auspices of the General Entertainment Authority. Furthermore, the ubiquity of digital media has introduced a powerful culture of lifestyle display on social media platforms. Urban Saudi families increasingly find themselves caught between maintaining the quiet, sacred traditions of their forebears and participating in a highly visible, hyper-commercially driven celebration culture that demands aesthetic perfection and public validation (Al-Saggaf, 2023).

These unresolved ideological tensions between older and younger generations within the urban household directly influence how religious values are transmitted and expressed. The domestic space, once considered a highly private sanctuary for conservative socialization, has been transformed into an intellectual arena where the meaning of religious festivities is constantly redefined. When parents try to reinforce traditional values of kinship and spiritual reflection, they often clash with the desires of their digitally savvy children, who view these holidays as premium opportunities for consumption, leisure, and digital self-representation. If not navigated carefully through sophisticated intra-family diplomacy, this cultural divide can cause significant friction, potentially diluting the core spiritual meaning of Islamic holidays and replacing them with a highly secularized version of celebration focused entirely on social prestige and material display (Mellahi & Wood, 2021).

Although the socio-religious evolution of Saudi society is currently a highly prominent topic in global academic discourse, the specific micro-dynamics of the domestic sphere remain significantly understudied, leaving a major academic gap. A rigorous review of recent literature shows that existing scholarship on contemporary Saudi Arabia is overwhelmingly dominated by macro-level analyses,

specifically focusing on the political economy of oil transitions, state-driven liberalization policies, or the expansion of women's rights in public employment. Very few qualitative studies have turned their analytical lenses inward to investigate how the urban Saudi Muslim family navigates and negotiates the changing meaning of religious holidays amidst an aggressive wave of consumerism. The subtle ways in which husbands, wives, and children manage their private spaces to accommodate both state-sponsored entertainment and traditional religious obligations have largely escaped comprehensive theoretical scrutiny (Hertog, 2020).

This notable research gap demonstrates a conceptual limitation in understanding the complex realities of modern Saudi society, as current studies often oversimplify the population's adaptation to state-led modernization. Scholars frequently assume that public liberalization automatically translates into a seamless, conflict-free adoption of modern lifestyles within the home. As a result, the psychological adjustments, domestic tensions, and unique behavioral strategies used by urban families to survive this rapid commercialization of sacred time are overlooked. This study is crucial because it fills this academic void, providing nuanced empirical insights into the internal cultural defense mechanisms and identity negotiations occurring within the contemporary Saudi household (Diwan, 2021).

Consequently, this article offers significant scientific novelty by deploying the dual lenses of the sociology of consumption and social representation theory to decode the cultural hybridity of modern urban Saudi families. Rather than viewing consumerism and religious tradition as mutually exclusive forces, this research explores how they are creatively synthesized behind closed doors. The novelty lies in its focus on the shift of Islamic holiday practices from a state of closed cultural sacredness to an expressive, highly commercialized form of modern celebration. This approach contributes a fresh theoretical framework to the fields of contemporary Islamic sociology and Middle Eastern family studies, illustrating how globalized lifestyle expectations redefine family rituals in a transitioning state (Matthiesen, 2023).

The primary objective of this study is to analyze in depth the

transformation of Islamic holiday celebration practices within urban Saudi Muslim families, explicitly evaluating the interplay between ancestral traditions, modern consumerism, and social representation. Specifically, the research aims to uncover how urban families reconstruct their celebration rituals, how the rise of the domestic entertainment industry alters family holiday agendas, and how social media usage redefines the traditional boundaries of family privacy. Through this comprehensive examination, the study seeks to clarify how the younger generation of Saudis conceptualizes their religious and cultural identities when the home itself becomes a site of modern lifestyle performance. Ultimately, these findings will enhance our understanding of how religious moderation and social change are internalised within the foundational institution of the Muslim family.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical case study design to investigate the contemporary sociological phenomena of religious holiday transformations within the shifting cultural landscape of urban Saudi Arabia. The subject of this research specifically focuses on upper-middle-class Muslim families residing in major urban centers, predominantly Riyadh and Jeddah, which are selected using a rigorous purposive sampling technique. The selection criteria for these families include their active engagement with modern consumer markets, ownership of multi-generational households, and a high degree of digital literacy among family members. Data collection is systematically conducted through a combination of semi-structured in-depth interviews, carried out either online or through direct field interactions, along with digital observations of family celebration representations across major social media platforms, and comprehensive visual documentation of contemporary holiday decorations, gifts, and attire.

The gathered qualitative and digital data are processed and examined using thematic analysis to categorize the narrative data regarding cultural transitions and generational shifts within the Saudi domestic sphere. These identified codes and themes are subsequently analyzed using the theoretical frameworks of modern consumer

culture theory by Jean Baudrillard and social representation theory, allowing for a profound examination of how symbolic consumption and digital display redefine traditional sacred times. To maintain the scientific validity and trustworthiness of the research, data triangulation is rigorously performed by cross-verifying the structural interview transcripts from parents and youth against the visual evidence obtained from digital social media observations. This comprehensive methodology ensures an objective, detailed, and highly accountable qualitative exploration of the modern transformations occurring within the foundational institution of the Saudi family.

Result and Discussion

Genealogy and Forms of Islamic Holiday Traditions in Urban Saudi Arabian Society

The historical foundation of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha celebrations within Saudi Arabian families is deeply intertwined with tribal structures and ancestral customs that defined the pre-modern Arabian Peninsula. Historically, these sacred occasions functioned as vital mechanisms for reinforcing kinship solidarity and tribal allegiance, operating through highly formalized and rigid communal gatherings where extended families from the same clan would assemble in centralized ancestral spaces. These traditional celebrations were characterized by strict codes of hospitality, gender-segregated interactions, and the presentation of specific heritage dishes alongside the mandatory wearing of traditional attire like the thobe and abaya. The genealogy of these festivities shows that holiday rituals were not merely individual spiritual duties, but were collective expressions of tribal honor, social hierarchy, and a shared desert heritage that demanded absolute conformity to ancestral norms (Samin, 2022).

However, the rapid acceleration of state-driven urbanisation and demographic shifts in major metropolitan areas like Riyadh and Jeddah has systematically restructured these traditional kinship patterns and altered the spatial dynamics of religious celebrations. As young Saudi professionals increasingly migrate to economic hubs for employment, the physical center of gravity for holiday observances has shifted from rural tribal villages to modern urban apartments and

gated communities. This spatial transition drastically reduces the scale of traditional extended family gatherings, replacing large communal assemblies with smaller, more privatized nuclear family celebrations. The architectural layout of modern urban housing in Saudi Arabia further reinforces this domestic privatization, limiting the capacity for sprawling, spontaneous hospitality and transforming the holiday experience into a more intimate, inward-looking family event that prioritizes convenience and immediate familial bonding over expansive tribal obligations (Al-Saggaf, 2023)

Despite these significant spatial transformations, normative religious values transmitted across generations continue to play a foundational role in shaping the standards of domestic piety during Islamic holidays. Urban Saudi parents diligently maintain core spiritual requirements, ensuring that the younger generation understands the theological significance of religious rituals, festive prayers, and the obligatory distribution of charity. These internalized religious norms act as a cultural stabilizer, preventing the complete secularization of sacred time even as the surrounding physical and economic environment modernizes rapidly. Consequently, the contemporary urban Saudi home operates as a complex hybrid space where deeply embedded religious obligations are preserved and practiced, even as the traditional tribal packaging of those rituals is discarded to accommodate the practical realities of modern city life (Tlaiss & McAdam, 2021).

Modern Consumer Penetration and Commercialization of Holiday Celebrations in Contemporary Saudi Arabia

The contemporary landscape of urban Saudi Arabia is characterized by a massive proliferation of luxury retail industries, high-end hospitality sectors, and specialized domestic tourism packages that have fundamentally altered the traditional essence of holiday preparations. In the weeks leading up to Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, metropolitan centers witness an unprecedented surge in consumer spending, driven by aggressive corporate marketing campaigns that reframe religious celebrations as premium shopping events. This economic shift transforms the domestic preparation period from a time of quiet spiritual reflection and modest familial

cooperation into a highly demanding, hyper-consumptive rush for material acquisition. Wealthy urban families increasingly dedicate significant time and financial resources to securing exclusive designer clothing, luxury hospitality reservations for family banquets, and domestic holiday getaways. Consequently, the historical meaning of holiday readiness has been systematically commercialized, embedding luxury consumption as a mandatory prerequisite for experiencing religious festivities in the modern kingdom (Grand, 2020).

This domestic transition is further accelerated by the state-driven implementation of the Saudi Entertainment Seasons under the General Entertainment Authority, which actively integrates large-scale public concerts, cultural festivals, and elaborate fireworks displays into the mainstream holiday agendas of urban families. By deliberately scheduling high-profile entertainment events during sacred Islamic holidays, the state has created a new civic calendar that successfully competes with traditional, purely religious family routines. Urban Saudi households now routinely organize their holiday itineraries around national festival schedules, shifting the family's focus away from traditional mosque-centered activities or extended kinship visits. While spiritual obligations like the Eid prayer are still maintained, the overarching atmosphere of the holiday has shifted toward secular entertainment and public leisure. This structural realignment demonstrates how state-sponsored commercial entertainment has successfully decentralized the dominance of pure worship, redefining the holidays as a time for national celebration, sensory pleasure, and modern lifestyle experiences (Diwan, 2021).

Furthermore, this cultural hybridity is vividly manifested in the widespread commodification of religious symbols, which are increasingly adopted by urban Saudi families as markers of modern socioeconomic status. Traditional tokens of holiday affection and home adornments have been replaced by highly sophisticated commercial products, such as designer Eid decorations, bespoke corporate hampers, and luxury confectionaries wrapped in minimalist Islamic geometry. Urban families eagerly adopt these commodified symbols not merely for their religious utility, but as essential tools for social representation and lifestyle projection within their peer networks. Packaging faith into high-end consumer goods allows the

emerging Saudi middle class to display both their religious adherence and their alignment with global aesthetic standards simultaneously. This ongoing synthesis indicates that the modern Saudi household does not reject religious symbolism, but rather repurposes it through the lens of modern consumerism, transforming sacred emblems into fashionable indicators of contemporary taste and bourgeois identity (Al-Malik, 2024).

Social Media and Social Representation of Saudi Muslim Family Lifestyles in the Digital Space

The rapid expansion of global digital platforms in the Arabian Peninsula has facilitated an unprecedented cultural phenomenon where urban Saudi family members actively utilize applications such as Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok to broadcast their holiday celebrations. During major Islamic festivities, the domestic boundaries of the Saudi household become digitally porous as users document and share intimate aspects of their celebrations, including curated displays of festive attire, elaborate multi-course family banquets, and highly stylized home decorations. Snapchat, in particular, has emerged as the dominant medium for real-time micro-narratives within Saudi society, allowing family members to capture the sensory richness of their celebrations as they unfold. This pervasive digital documentation transforms what was once an exclusively private familial experience into a highly visible, shared public spectacle. The act of recording and broadcasting these domestic moments indicates that the physical home is no longer just a private living space, but has been repurposed into a meticulously designed digital stage for presenting a modernized, culturally fluent lifestyle (Al-Saggaf, 2023).

This shift in communication practices is deeply tied to the construction of socio-economic identity and the social representation of the emerging Saudi new middle class. Within the digital landscape, the visual aesthetics of holiday celebrations ranging from the coordination of premium family outfits to the presentation of high-end consumer brands serve as vital semiotic tools for displaying elevated social status. Urban Saudi families intentionally curate their social media feeds to project an image that successfully synthesizes deep-rooted Islamic piety with global consumer sophistication. By adhering

to specific digital aesthetic standards, such as minimalist interior visual styling and the inclusion of luxury corporate lifestyle markers, individuals negotiate their positions within contemporary Saudi Arabia's rapidly changing class hierarchy. Consequently, the social representation of Islamic holidays on digital networks is no longer merely about spiritual devotion, but functions as a critical mechanism for class distinction and the accumulation of digital cultural capital among urban bourgeois networks (Diwan, 2021).

Underlying this digital lifestyle performance is a profound historical transformation of the traditional Saudi domestic sphere, marking a clear shift from a hyper-private family culture toward an expressive, open digital orientation driven by the desire for social recognition. For generations, Saudi family dynamics were characterized by strict concepts of honor and domestic insulation, where the inner workings of the household and the daily lives of female family members were carefully shielded from public view. However, the intersection of state-sponsored modernization, rapid urbanization, and smartphone ubiquity has successfully eroded these traditional privacy barriers. Contemporary urban families increasingly accept the public exposure of their domestic lives, choosing to trade traditional invisibility for modern social validation, digital connectivity, and peer group approval in the virtual public square. This cultural evolution demonstrates how the foundational concept of family privacy has been redefined in the internet era, transforming the contemporary Saudi household into a highly expressive, digitally transparent institution (Al-Otaibi, 2025).

Implications of Celebration Culture Transformations on the Construction of Religious Values among Saudi Youth

The rapid transformation of festive practices within the contemporary Saudi domestic sphere has given rise to a profound psychological and cultural ambivalence among the younger generation. Growing up during a period of intense transition, urban Saudi youth find themselves caught in a complex socio-religious squeeze between the conservative religious doctrines of their parents and the secular lifestyle options offered by state modernization policies. Parents often continue to reinforce traditional ideas of religious devotion, quiet family bonding, and behavioral modesty

during sacred holidays. Conversely, the public sphere, heavily influenced by state-sponsored entertainment campaigns, presents these occasions as times for expressive freedom, modern consumption, and secular entertainment. This divide creates a state of value ambivalence for youth, as they try to satisfy both the traditional expectations of their families and the modern demands of their peer networks, making the construction of a cohesive personal identity increasingly difficult (Thompson, 2019).

This ongoing generational tension has accelerated a significant reconceptualization of the meaning of Islamic holidays among urban Saudi children. For decades, Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha were understood by young minds as times dedicated almost exclusively to spiritual devotion, communal prayers, and family obligations. However, the commercialization of festive spaces has shifted the younger generation's focus, reframing these sacred milestones primarily as times for personal leisure, luxury shopping, and domestic tourism. The spiritual depth traditionally associated with these holidays is increasingly overshadowed by their utility as a long vacation from academic and societal pressures. While youth still perform foundational religious rituals like the Eid prayer, their internal motivation has shifted from finding spiritual meaning to seeking entertainment, transforming a sacred celebration into a secular holiday focused on personal indulgence and social display (Meijer, 2022).

To counter this ideological shift, urban Saudi parents are forced to develop sophisticated domestic strategies to balance teaching original Islamic values with allowing their children to adapt globally. Rather than using outdated, authoritarian parenting styles that might alienate their digitally savvy children, contemporary parents rely on flexible guidance and conditional compromise. They intentionally create a domestic space where children are encouraged to participate in ancestral tribal customs and local charity work, while also allowing them to enjoy state-approved concerts and modern entertainment events. By acting as cultural filters, parents try to separate the beneficial aspects of global modernity from lifestyle choices that directly contradict core Islamic values. This strategic balance

demonstrates that the modern Saudi household serves as a critical site of negotiation, where families work to ensure that global integration does not result in the total loss of the nation's unique religious identity (Mellahi & Wood, 2021).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the celebration of Islamic holidays within urban Saudi Arabian families has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from its historical roots in sacred-conservative tribal rituals toward a highly complex cultural hybridity that blends religious identity with modern consumer lifestyles. The rapid acceleration of state-led urbanization and economic diversification has systematically altered traditional kinship obligations and spatial dynamics, moving the center of gravity for festive occasions from rural ancestral villages to modern urban domestic spaces. While core normative religious practices and spiritual duties are still carefully maintained by parents, the overall atmosphere and preparation for these sacred milestones have been heavily commercialized through the penetration of luxury retail markets and high-end hospitality sectors. This ongoing cultural synthesis demonstrates that the contemporary Saudi household does not reject its Islamic heritage, but rather repurposes it through the lens of modern global consumption.

Underlying this domestic shift is a radical redefinition of traditional family privacy boundaries, driven by state-sponsored modernization policies like the Saudi Entertainment Seasons and the ubiquity of global digital media. Social media platforms, most notably Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok, have successfully transformed the closed, hyper-private Saudi domestic sphere into an expressive digital stage where holiday celebrations function as premium spaces for representing the socio-economic status of the emerging urban middle class. This rapid commercialization and digital display have introduced a distinct state of value ambivalence among Saudi youth, who increasingly reconceptualize sacred times as opportunities for secular leisure and personal entertainment rather than pure spiritual devotion. Consequently, there is an urgent academic and practical recommendation for Saudi educational institutions and family guidance centers to continuously contextualize the essential spiritual

values of Islam within the family structure, ensuring that future generations maintain a substantive religious orientation amidst the powerful current of secularized holiday celebrations.

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