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## HIJAB STYLE AND MODESTY ON INSTAGRAM AMONG THREE HIJAB BRANDS IN MALAYSIA



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### Abstract

A pious Muslim can be represented with Hijab donning. All Muslim women may not wear Hijab; however, a significant number do don it. Hijab styles and designs transform with the movements of fashion. Most Hijab available on the market today not only serve the needs of religious commitment but also to ensure wearers can be fashionable at the same time. Therefore, this research tries to find out the extent of Hijab designs on Instagram in accordance with the modesty requirement of Islam in three prominent Malaysian Hijab brands. Content analysis was used to gather data on the three leading brands' corporate Instagram page. Each of the Instagram postings must have the model being visible. The postings were analysed centred on one of the Islamic clothing guidelines, which is a headscarf that must cover the wearer's chest. The central theme was further divided into sub-themes of headscarf must cover the wearer's hair; it also covers from the forehead to chin and lastly, the headscarf must also cover the wearer's bosoms. The findings indicate that only two sub-themes achieved the concept of modesty. This may imply that Hijab available is not as traditional as it is used to be, and at the same time, the persuasiveness of being hip is as vital as donning a Hijab.

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## 1. Introduction

There are approximately 1.8 billion Muslims across the globe, making it the Islam the 2nd biggest religion after Christianity (Oishimaya, 2019). Whereas in Malaysia, Islam is the largest religion, with more than 16 million followers ("Islam in Malaysia", 2019). Muslims, primarily women, are taught that the human body should be covered if not hidden from anyone besides their immediate family members (Khuri, 2001). Even though the idea of modest dressing is imparted on both sexes by the Qur'an; however, greater emphasis is usually given to female devotees (Siraj, 2011). It can be implied that when female devotees dress style heeds the teaching of the Qur'an, objectification towards female Muslims will be less known.

Fashion is being defined by Oxford Learner's Dictionaries (Oxford University Press, n.d.) as the most recent trends either in clothing, hair, decoration, or behavior. In the 1970s, when western fashion influence became widespread, many Muslim women choose not to don the veil preferring to dress up according to the western trend. However, the practice did not last too long as many choose to embrace a more modest fashion by embracing Hijab wearing (Reece, 1996). Patel (2012) supports the notion that Middle Eastern Muslim Women re-embraced veiling in the 70s and 80s after a period of western dressing. Woldesemait (2012) adds that Muslim women from different countries have different Hijab styles, and these styles not only being worn by Muslim women in their own countries but adopted by others from different continents as well.

The term modesty varies, some perceive the term means to conceal one's body, on the other hand, some might define it as clothing that helps in obscuring curves of one's body, or it is just a choice of women want to dress up (Johnston, 2019). According to Boulanouar (2006) "The concept of modesty is addressed in Islamic teachings from many angles" (p. 135).

Almassi states (2018), there are broad meanings behind the term modest fashion. However, to some Muslims, being religious does not mean they need to dress a certain way (Moors & Tarlo, 2007). On the other hand, Hijab is not as simple as a piece of cloth that is used as a fashion statement by its wearers; Hijab is more than that. Hijab also signifies the wearer's religious beliefs as well as the person's cultural practices (Slininger, 2014). According to Ghurmmman and Ryan (2013), the term Hijab "derives from the Arabic word hajaba, which means to cover" (p. 674).

As an example, Sloan (2011) states that Muslim women in Qatar practice veiling, signifying their commitment to their religion, which is Islam. According to El Guindi (1999), a general translation of the word Hijab means "to veil, to seclude, to screen, to conceal, to form a separation, to mask" (p. 157) While Zulkifli and Fatin (2013) define Hijab as "a headscarf worn by Muslim women; conceals the hair and neck and usually has a face veil that covers the face except for the eyes" (p. 50).

A Muslim woman can be easily identified when she dons a Hijab (Muljadji et al., 2017). Woldesemait (2012) states that particular views of the Qur'an, veiling is compulsory to Muslim women. At the same time, there are contradictory views of how a Hijab should be worn by Muslim women. Some would say that the wearer needs to follow the guideline that Hijab needs to cover the wearer's chest while some say that it must cover all parts except for the face and hands. There is also some that state veiling is to cover the devotees' hair, and it is not a mandatory act (Hochel, 2013; Zulkifli & Fatin, 2013). Moving

forward with time, Williams and Kamaludeen (2017) mention, the focus in today's ethnographic research is often related to how Hijab wearers blend the idea of modesty and the element of fashion into their Hijab styles. With that being said, the outlook for modest fashion is undeniably changing, moving from a traditional and conservative way of donning a Hijab to contemporary styles that are on par with the progression of fashion.

The availability of Hijab choices in today's fashion market is in abundance. A search on Google with the keywords 'modest fashion', within 0.65 seconds, a total of 164 million results is generated. It cannot be denied that women's fashion contributes a chunk of the overall industry revenues (Slininger, 2014). The demand for fashion is vast, and the demand for modest fashion is also getting massive. As mentioned in the State of the Global Islamic Economy Report by Thomson Reuters (2018), the current market value for Muslim fashion is at 270 billion USD and estimated to rise to 320 billion USD by the year 2023. In Malaysia, with the organization of the yearly Kuala Lumpur Fashion Week that serves as a platform for local designers to push the country to become the fashion capital of the region; It has also helped local modest fashion designers to gain recognition in the industry (Rabimov, 2018). Malaysian fashion designer, Alia Basramam for example, has not only created a name for herself in the local market; recently, she has showcased her spring and summer 2020 collection in Milan Fashion Week (Teo, 2019). Locally, there are multiple homegrown brands that specialize in modest fashion. An example, dUCk has sold over a million scarves across the globe (Iylia, 2018) and even won admiration from a Bruneian Princess, whereby they have teamed up to design a collection of scarves together (Springer, 2017). Even giant toy-maker Mattel had released its very first Hijab donning Barbie, in honor of Ibtihaj Muhammad, the first American Olympian that donned the Hijab while competing in the games (Samuelson, 2017).

In addition to that, a report by McKinsey and Company states that the landscape of the fashion is changing from the traditional physical store to utilizing digital commerce. This phenomenon is even more prominent in South East Asia, as consumers would spend a great deal of time utilizing different social media platforms (Anderson et al., 2017). Without a doubt, the use of social media has significantly impacted the steady growth of modest fashion. This is because social media platforms engage users not only with words but more so with an illustration of the products (Nadirah, 2018). As the modest industry expands, it has also allowed women to become entrepreneurs at the same time, forming a sisterhood of women who understand the needs and wants of Muslim fashionistas ("The modest revolution: How social media gave rise to Muslim fashion", 2018). With that said, the usage of social media by modest fashion houses has also pushed the phenomena of hijabsta and jibaster to expand in the social media verse.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Muljadji et al. (2017) argue that designs of Hijab on the market today are impacted by trends; some of the designs are western-inspired; therefore, the line between religious teaching and being stylish is smudged. Malaysia has several homegrown brands that specialize in modest fashion. To add to that, Rogers (2019) mentions in recent years, internationally established brands have ventured into the modest fashion. They, too, want a slice of the pie as the modest fashion market has proven to be a lucrative one, where it's worth ranks at the billion-dollar mark. Malaysian Muslim women not only don the Hijab to

reflect their choosing to be religious, but some may choose to wear the Hijab to look stunning and contemporary (Hassim, 2014). Muhammad Tahir and Kalthom (2015) add one of the aspects that shape women's choice in fashion would be beauty. Moors and Tarlo (2007, p. 134) state:

Whilst many consider modesty an important Islamic virtue, how this translates into particular styles of dress is highly variable. Some Muslims do not consider that their religiosity is linked to dress (p. 134)

With that being said, Hijab that is available on the market today may not match the description of how Hijab should look like and how it should be worn in the Q'uran. The designs and the sheerness of the fabrics can be regarded as obscene based on Islamic standards. On top of that, with the prevalent usage of social media platforms like Instagram as a tool to promote and market available products; It has helped business owners to be more engaging with their customers. Not only it allows two-way communication, for instance, leaving a comment and replying to it, but most importantly, each post is accompanied either with a photo or a video. Therefore, this research hopes to understand the selected brands' direction in conceptualizing the designs of Hijab, whether they are based on fashion or religious perspectives.

### **3. Research Questions**

- Do Hijab designs by three prominent Malaysian Hijab brands cover the models' chest?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

This research tries to investigate the extent of Hijab designs on Instagram with the modesty requirements of Islam in three prominent Malaysian Hijab brands.

### **5. Research Methods**

Content analysis was used in finding out the extent of Hijab designs on Instagram with the modesty requirement of Islam in three prominent Malaysian Hijab brands. The data was collected from April 2018 to August 2018. The three brands are chosen due to their top 10 positions (Atiqah, 2019) as well as having a strong social media presence. The companies' corporate Instagram page was used in data collection. Data collection was done at the mentioned time frame as the researchers felt during that specific period, the brands would have high posting rates and multiple posts per day to promote their Hari Raya Puasa and Hari Raya Haji collections of Hijab. Each of the postings that were analyzed must have image representations of Hijab wearing models and based on one of the definitions of modest clothing that is following the teaching of Islam, which is the headscarf is covering the wearer's chest. The central theme was further divided into sub-themes of headscarf must cover the wearer's hair; it also covers from the forehead to chin and lastly, the headscarf must also cover the wearer's bosoms.

## 6. Findings

Within the span of 5 months, 726 postings were analyzed. Even though the teaching of Islam contains 3 aspects of how female followers should dress up, this research is only looking at one of the aspects which is headscarf must cover the wearer's chest. The second, the clothing worn must be loose-fitting and also non-translucent that include covering the entire body except for the hand and face and thirdly, an accessory is worn should be not shown to others are not part of the research objective and question as to the focus of this research in on modesty requirement of Hijab designs. Based on the theme of the research, the theme further expands into 3 sub-themes; namely, the headscarf must cover the wearer's hair, must cover from the forehead to chin, and thirdly, the wearer's bosoms must also be covered by the headscarf.

The findings indicate that only two sub-themes achieved the concept of modesty. The 2 sub-themes that achieved the concept of modesty are headscarf covers the wearer's hair and the headscarf covers from the forehead to the wearer's chin. Firstly, findings show an impressive 100% of the postings cover the wearer's hair. Secondly, out of the 726 postings, 644 (88.7%) of postings cover from the forehead to the chin while 62 (8.54%) do not, and a small number of postings (20, 2.75%) cannot be seen as the photos were taken at an angle where the models face was not facing the camera. On the other hand, the sub-theme of wearer's bosoms must be covered did not achieve the modesty requirement. 504 (69.4%) of the postings analyzed indicate that the headscarf did not cover the models' bosoms. Only 148 (20.4%) do, while 74 (10.2%) of the postings, the photos were taken either with the models not facing forward towards the camera or they were taken till then neck level.

The discovery of this study reveals Hijab designs and styles by the 3 prominent brands in Malaysia showcase a mixture of traditional and contemporary designs. Hijabs that are made in Malaysia do not lean towards extreme ends of either too conservative or too voguish. The implication of such findings could be due to several reasons.

Firstly, as modest fashion can generate an enormous amount of revenue, it makes sense to produce Hijab that is on par with current fashion, and this is also supported by the argument made by Bazlin et al. (2019). With fashion, it changes every season and in every collection. That could be a reason why the concept of modesty cannot be wholeheartedly followed as designers would draw their inspirations from various sources. Designers would need to look at what it is in and out of fashion; before each collection is made. After all, Muhammad Tahir and Kalthom (2015, p. 445) state

"one of the distinctive inborn characteristics of a human being is striving to look unique and different from others, and this characteristic becomes more important when it comes to fashion."

Furthermore, modest sportswear may not be able to fully comply with the modesty requirements as the design of sportswear needs to conform to the provisions of specific sports (Ahmed, 2017). Johnston (2019) states, as some of South East Asia nations have a large number of Muslims, designers do not only need to look into the modest side in designing clothes, but they would need to take into consideration the climate of the region.

Secondly, even though the tragic incident of Sept 11th had happened almost 18 years ago, Islamophobia still exists. For example, several European nations had limited or ban the donning of Hijab (Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017). France does not allow its civil servants to wear Hijab while Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands have banned face-covering in public (Byng, 2010). Even across the southern border of Peninsular Malaysia, the Singaporean government does not allow uniform wearing civil servants to veil (Humairah & Wong, 2017). This could imply, in today's day and age, the designs and styles should not only comfort the wearers, but the perception of the observers are also sometimes vital. At times, for a wearer to feel comfortable to don the Hijab in public, she must also need to ensure the community accepts the design and style. One might want to stand out and be proud of one's religion, but she might not want to be the oddball. Previously, non-Muslims might perceive Hijab donning is a sign of oppression or even finding it bizarre; however, the designs of current Hijabs do not look at all out of place. The designs look posh and even come with a hefty price tag (Ahmad & Foong, 2017). Therefore, being fashion-forward with Hijab could be the right way to go.

Thirdly, Malaysian culture, in general, is more diverse compared to other Islamic states. As a multi-cultural nation, there are times when ways of life of different ethnic groups are infused together. So, making Malaysians more open-minded in accepting less traditional ideas. In an interview with Forbes (Rabimov, 2018), Nurita Harith mentioned her designs contain Malaysian elements because that is what her designs distinctive. Similarly, Alia Bastamam stated that she had incorporated Malaysian textiles like Batik into her Hari Raya collection. Another instance, dUck has a collection of scarves called The Oriental dUCK. Some of the names are Chinese inspired, for example, Lotus, Mooncake, Oolong Tea, Bird's Nest, Porcelain and Fortune Cookie ("The Oriental dUCK", 2017). However, this suggestion is slightly contrasted to Jackson and Monk-Tuner (2015) findings, Yemeni and Egyptian women tend to associate Hijab donning with their identity, modesty, and religion but not with fashion.

## **7. Conclusion**

In general, devotees of different religions may don their religious attire when they want to. Similarly, the act of veiling is not solely practiced by Muslims; it is also practiced by Christians, Jews, and even the Amish community in the United States of America. However, the spotlight of veiling is often shone on Muslims. With the continuous change and expansion of the fashion industry, it cannot be denied that Hijab fashion will also follow where the fashion trail leads. Therefore, the interpretation of the concept of modesty may change in time. This statement may sound controversial; however, fashion might one day trumps religious obligation or could both co-exist without losing the fundamental essence of Hijab donning. It is also hoped that with stylish Hijab designs that sometimes can be less traditional, the acceptance of Hijab by non-Muslims will grow wider. Like what Muljadji et al. (2017) have mentioned in their writing, research on Islam and Hijab might be able to change the western view about the religion to a more positive level.

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