

## New Look, New Identity: Re-Inventing Muslim Women through Fashion

Sharifah Khatreena Nuraniah Syed Faizuddin Putra Jamalullail

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, KIRKHS, IIUM, Malaysia

Email of corresponding author: [sharifahkhatreena@gmail.com](mailto:sharifahkhatreena@gmail.com)

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country that admires traditions and its traditional costumes. Muslims living in Malaysia are encouraged to incorporate the Malay traditional wear in schools and also offices especially those under the government sectors. However, globalization has brought upon many contesting ideas about what is right to wear and what garments are unacceptable. The rapid development of the Islamic fashion industry, from its designers to the modelling agencies; the fashion revolution has empowered women in ways of projecting their personal identities through the choice of fashion available. While being influenced highly by the global consumer culture, understandings of Islam and its beliefs on “covering” become transformed into new interpretations that reject traditional perceptions of women subjugation and submissiveness. The objective of this paper is to identify how Muslim women re-negotiate their power relations through fashion. Secondary materials that emphasized on fashion issues and its effects on identity amongst Muslim women were studied. This paper reveals that clothing becomes specifically regulated and scrutinized within spaces. The understandings of covering are becoming more individualistic, personalized and accustomed to one’s own identity formation. Nevertheless, tensions between the rising consumer desires in participating within the global fashion movements of the West becomes activated as one’s obedience to stay loyal to the local culture and its perseverance of national identity becomes effected with the decision processes of consumption. In short, Muslim women use fashion in order to re-negotiate their roles and ascribe their personal identities as a way of power play in the modern society thus, making them more visible.

**Keywords:** Bodies, Fashion, Identity, Muslim, Women

### 1. Introduction

The development of the international fashion industry has emerged since the Renaissance period of where the development of trade and commerce found their demand for their supplies of their means of production. With the expansion of cities and industries, the class shifts in the power structure brought upon a Humanist thought that was very much interested in individuality and a desirable visual display (Arnold, 2009). Following the Industrial Revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the growth of a diversified fashion became visible as the birth of fashion designers of *houte couture* (an elite form of fashion) has evolved in France and made custom hand-made garments especially for individuals bodies and became one of the determinants of what was fashionable at that particular time. According to Arnold (2009: 7) fashion is “a vibrant form of visual and material culture that plays an important role in our cultural and social life... it shapes our bodies and the way we look at others [and also] ... enables creative freedom to express alternative identities” that becomes personally dictated with what is deemed beautiful and acceptable. Barnard (2002 cited in (Chen *et al.*, 2014) maintains that clothing serves a material and cultural function. The first functioned as a way of protection, modesty and attraction and the later, contains the functions of communicating personal expression, status symbol religious condition and also socio-economic roles and rituals.

In bringing the focus towards women and society in Malaysia, a new phenomenon of *Muslimah* fashion now dominates the fashion trends amongst the Malays and Muslim communities. The term *Muslimah* is referred to the “female Muslims” who represent themselves through Islamic culture and faith (Contractor 12 cited in Hassim 2014). To date, globalization, consumer culture and the advancement of technology have played a fundamental role in providing women with numerous array of clothing articles to choose from. This “freedom to choose” acts as a very powerful tool for women empowerment in their identity constructs, as women are able to share amongst with each other through cross-borders, the different

ways in which they use clothing articles in transforming their socially gendered character into a more empowered outlook towards society by showing their visibility through different mediums of space (Hassim, 2014). Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine how fashion helps Muslim women reinvent their identity within their private and public spaces.

## 2. Literature Review

Besides dressing to appear Islamic, Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country that admires traditions and its traditional costumes. Malaysian women also incorporate their “New Look” through the re-fashioning of their traditional attires as a way of negotiating their power prescribed by men, which becomes a common practice amongst women to date as it is considered as a “soft-power” play against patriarchal discourses. As *Muslimah*'s reinvent themselves in terms of fashion and consumption, vanity, competition and social-consciousness becomes probable. In parallels with the static unchanging nature of *Abaya* that imposed modesty of Gulf women, traditional Malay dress have also been transformed into fashionable and stylish apparels that ostensibly exudes vanity (Sobh, Belk and Gressel, 2012). The re-invention which occurs through various strategies of clothing allows women to unite amongst themselves in order to negotiate conflicting demands that embrace both local and global trends and also seek to find compromises between the new and the old. Therefore, out-globaling the global becomes tangible while still embracing their cultural heritage.

What is more, Warner (1992) and Cinar (2005 cited in Ismail 2008) argued that “the public sphere is not just an arena of deliberation, but also a space of identity formation through performances and subjectivities of visual displays as well as through the validation and authorization” (p. 420) which administers a sense of belonging within a society. In achieving a sense of belonging nowadays becomes a very challenging practice as globalization has brought upon significant social and economic upheavals that have shifted discourses of beauty, religion and modernity through mediated channels of advertising and commercial imagery. Modernization integrated with secularization of the public sphere has proliferated consumer culture and consumerism through immigration, global media dispersion and the access to multinational products and services (Sobh, Belk and Gressel, 2012). Accordingly, many nations urge to embrace a modernized fashions sense of style that embraces the changes of modernity and its openness to the West. Nonetheless, as the increasing adoption of Western values conflicts with local religious and patriarchal principles, conservatives fear over its moral decadence of this impure lifestyle that is regarded as a disguise of Western imperialism (Sobh, Belk and Gressel, 2012). Modes of clothing amongst Malaysian Muslim women have also transformed by incorporating and adapting international fashion trends and designs that are supplemented by popular Western brands and fashion items.

With the new technological advancement, “the Marketing of Muslim Women” through the internet and social media platforms display new fashion avenues that have been developed in broadcasting the latest fashion styling of a wider selection of garments (Waninger, 2015). What becomes materialized is their aim to look “cool” in order to assimilate within the expressions of modernity through appearances. To that account, this cultural phenomenon has progressively emerged amongst the urban middle-class women who are using space especially in today's context, through special arenas in projecting their identities through the re-fashioning of their bodies publicly (Noormohamed, Nadia, 2008). This as an effect has resulted the *Muslimah* fashion industry in creating and developing their own identities through modest wear by portraying Muslim women as more independent, strong, educated, bold and confident.

## 3. Research design

This research is a secondary analysis study that is descriptive in nature as the data collected is based on the local Malaysian magazines. This particular study focuses on six different magazines: *Hijabista*, *Hijab Fesyen*, *Era Muslimah*, *Wanita*, *Mingguan Wanita* and *Keluarga*. The focus in studying these magazines was to explore how Muslim women today define their personal identity through visually

expressing their sense of fashion in different spaces. Hence, all the magazines chosen for this study were chosen as its content catered highly towards Muslim women whom are their main target market of its readership. The data collected examined the types of attire worn by Muslim women in specific locations that were highlighted in the magazines. The study categorized the data into fashion and space; where space became sub-divided into smaller categories of the private and public realms in order to visually comprehend a clearer data collection of what types of clothing are chosen in re-inventing their new looks as a Muslim women. The researcher has separated the findings of the fashion worn by women located in studio settings. This was due to the reason that the studio could regarded as a space that is both private and public. Private, in the sense that it is within confined spaces and often an area pre-dominated by women and also public in the sense that the studio is a place of socialization and work.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1 Fashion in the private realm

Based on the analysis, this study discovered that Muslim women become commonly depicted in wearing traditional wear within the private spheres. The private sphere found in the magazines is mainly staged at home where women choose to wear the traditional *baju kurung* (trapped dress) at home. Although other forms of casual clothing are also visible (see Table 1), women still choose to be seen in *baju kurung*. Nevertheless, these women re-fashion their looks by wearing a more “fashionable” and “fashion savvy” look that coincides with the new trends of what portrays a “modern women”. Women choose to enhance their visibility and attractiveness in private spheres of the home while also playing their roles as mothers or daughters by adding to their look embellishments to their clothing. The embellishments that are found to have won favor by the women are those in three-dimensional flowers, appliques, feathers, lace, sequins, *Songket* material, ruffles or prints. Hence, it shows that although women prefer traditional wear to be worn in homes in compared to the other locations depicted within the private and public realms studied in this research. Muslim women, despite their need in playing important roles at home, they still chose to wear the traditional wear as a symbolic way of communication over the ideological identity of respecting the traditional Malay ways of life but yet, still plays around with detailing in their attempt to beautify and make themselves more visible (Fakhruroji and Rojati, 2017).

Table 1: Fashion in space

Space	Fashion
<b>Private</b>	
House	<i>Baju Kurung</i> , Long Dress, <i>Plain Modern Kurung</i> with 3D Flowers, Long Sequined Dress with Ruffles, <i>Mermaid Kurung</i> with Border Lace, Blouse with Jeans, <i>Songket Kurung</i> , Flared Sleeved Blouse with Pants, <i>Printed Kurung</i> , <i>Modern Kurung</i> , Blouse with Pants, Sequined Abaya, Plain Abaya, Jacket with Pants, <i>Lace Kurung</i> , Sequined Long-sleeve-dress, Long Blouse with Brocade Pants, Long Cardigan, Jubah
<b>Public</b>	
Hotel	Blouse and Jeans, <i>Kebaya</i> with Pants, Blouse and Pants, Princess Dress, Jubah, Jacket with Pants, <i>Modern Baju Kurung</i> , Ball-gown Dress, Long Cardigan, Long Dress, <i>Baju Kurung</i> , Abaya, Denim, Leather Jackets with Jeans, <i>Songket</i> Dress, Long Jacket, Ball-gown Skirt, <i>Modern Kurung</i> , <i>Peplum Kurung</i> , <i>Lace Kurung</i>
Garden	
Parks	
Mosque	
Street	

Nevertheless, the mediums of these magazines highlight an enormous emphasis on a few particular casual clothing, such as those, palazzos, cullots, oversized jackets, cardigans and blouses, flowy long skirts, *Abaya*, princess cut dresses, black and white pairing and flared sleeved blouses. What is more, in terms of traditional wear, *baju kurung* are re-styles into a more modern look where features of peplum, fishtail and *kurung Kedah* cuttings are in fashion and further embellished with ruffles, beadings, three dimensional flowers, lace, prints and *Songket* are incorporated to make women more visible.

#### 4.2 Fashion in the public realm

Correspondingly, this research has also focused on the fashion attributed within the public realms depicted in magazines. Large amounts of imagery were captured in hotels, garden or parks, the streets and mosques. With reference to Appleford (2016) research, the aspects of “dressing up” in fashion mostly occurs in the context of special occasions and places of high socialization. It is in these locations that women feel it necessarily important to “put more effort” in the way they look. (Appleford, 2016).

Hotel spaces carried out the most significant data collection as many corporate or charity events and product launchings were held at this space. What became obvious was the fact that it was in this space that women were seen to be wearing trousers the most. Although other variations of clothing such as traditional wear and *Abaya* were also depicted, women in this space re-fashioned their look by incorporating a more modern twist to their look. For instance, women paired their *kebaya* tops, blouses and jackets with pants that were slim fitted, culottes or palazzos.

Following, garden or parks are the second largest focus captured in magazines. Here, women become visible in a large array of clothing that mixes both traditional and casual clothing. Though there is a higher visibility of women wearing modern *baju kurung* rather than a casual two-piece of a blouse and trousers. Similarly, as for fashion on the streets, women too are seen to prefer wearing either traditional-wear or those clothes that are modest in its appearances such as long cardigans, long blouses and jubah. Contrastingly however, it is observed that women on the streets are more daring in their choices of fashion as women are seen to showcase the use of leather jackets and jeans. Street-wear in this case is still very much conservative but women do show a sense of exploration within the streets as they are devoted towards creating expressions of modest dressing that resonates to the postmodern representations of urban modesty (Hassim and Khalid, 2015).

Lastly, one of the most astounding data collected was observed through the focus on mosques as the locality of Muslim women’s fashion. It became apparent that women in this space were made visible through the attributions of the *’akad* or marriage ceremony that has currently been popularized as an act that occurs in the mosques. Women are characterized in magazines as either brides or bridesmaids. Fashion with this significance visually displays a significant amount of imagery on lace *baju kurung*, lace peplum bridal gowns, lace princess dresses and *Abaya* with lace. It could be observed that lace has a large correlation with how women style themselves for weddings. Apart from wedding attributes at the mosques, daily clothing articles such as black *Abaya*, jubah and *baju kurung* are also presented in the categorizations of religious-wear. Although these clothing articles are considered to be the conservative Islamic dress, women give a “personal touch” to their look by typically choosing to wear a piece of article that is colorful, beaded or with embroidery (Chen *et al.*, 2014).

It must be noted that one other commonly focused location is in bridal boutiques. However, imagery of clothing represented in bridal boutiques lie largely in the focus of bridal-wear where the fashion covers a variety from traditional bridal-wear of modern *baju kurung* or *kebaya* to ball-gowns with trains. What is more, it was found that women who were in casual attires in bridal boutiques were either the owner, sales-girls or the tailors of the boutique.

## 5. Discussion

Space has fundamental influences over one's identity formation (Cote, 1996). Cote (1996) identifies three different perspectives of identity. The first understood under the term social identity that designates the position of one within a social structure. The second, prevails the conceptions of personal identity that denotes the more concrete aspects of "individual experiences" rooted within interactions (institutions) and lastly the notion of an ego identity which refers to a "more fundamental subjective sense of continuity" that characterizes the personality. This social structure and personality perspective framework employs the term "space" as intertwined with culture as the interaction between one's personality and the social forces becomes inseparable. The distinction between the private and the public space becomes credible within a number of understandings. This research takes upon its literal meanings of which separates both realms spatially.

Consequently, as it personifies the roles of gender politics in the social arena, clothing becomes specifically regulated and scrutinized within spaces as a management mechanism of public Muslim presence by institutions (Ismail, 2008). This process of control over the bodies of Muslim women and their sexuality through forms of veiling or covering the body becomes interpreted into social forms of backwardness, patriarchal domination, false consciousness and female subservience. Therefore, this symbolic discourse of women's social and sexual submissiveness calls for a re-negotiation of their appearances.

As Muslims live within the *Ummah*, globalization has brought upon many contesting ideas about what is right to wear and what garments are unacceptable. This polarized view of fashion discounts Muslim women as either a) plain, dull, boring, and religious in an overzealous sense or on the contrary as b) flashy, an attention seeker or a free (Sobh, Belk and Gressel, 2012). What becomes apparent here are the discourses of where garments become the subject of debate as fashion choices have offered Muslim women an open field to explore their religion and how they personally wish to express it (Janmohamed, 2016). As a result the understandings of covering are becoming more individualistic, personalized and accustomed to one's own identity formation and thereby convey a vision of Muslim women being endowed with modern agency (Mossière, 2012).

## 6. Conclusion

With the focus of exploring how Muslim women in Malaysia re-invent their identities through this "new look", it is apparent that magazines play a huge role in influencing Muslim women to keep up to date with fashion, yet still remain themselves covered (Muhammad Tahir and Abdullah, 2015). Women have the options to choose the kind of fashion based on their space. By displaying different styles, materials and colors, women make adjustments in their new look. In conjunction with the government's aims in the *Transformasi Nasional 2050* (TN50), this research aspires to guide women in new Muslim fashion avenues as it is the aim of the policy to have a global rise of Islamic values specifically in culture and fashion in order to sustain the norms and values of Malaysia's Islamic and multi-ethnic heritage dressing.

## 7. References

- Appleford, K. (2016) 'Being seen in your pyjamas: the relationship between fashion, class, gender and space', *Gender, Place and Culture*, 23(2), pp. 162–180. doi: 10.1080/0966369X.2015.1013439.
- Arnold, R. (2009) *Fashion : a very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Chen, L. *et al.* (2014) 'Rethinking Hijab: Multiple Themes in Muslim Women's Perception of the Hijab Fashion', in *International Conference on Communication, Media, Technology and Design*.

- Istanbul, pp. 208–214. Available at: <http://www.cmdconf.net/2014/pdf/34.pdf> (Accessed: 15 November 2017).
- Cote, J. E. (1996) 'Cote (1)', *Journal of Adolescence*, 19(1), pp. 417–428.
- Fakhrurroji, M. and Rojiati, U. (2017) 'Religiously Fashionable : Constructing Identity of Urban Muslimah in Indonesia', *Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 33(1), pp. 199–211.
- Hassim, N. (2014) 'A comparative analysis on Hijab wearing in Malaysian muslimah magazines', *SEARCH: The Journal of the South East Asia Research Center for Communications and Humanities.*, 6(1), pp. 79–96.
- Hassim, N. and Khalid, N. L. (2015) "'Stailo & Sopan": Modesty and Malay-Muslim Women', in *International Conference on Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities (TSSH-2015) August 19-20, 2015 Bali, Indonesia*. Emirates Research Publishing, pp. 28–35. doi: 10.17758/ERPUB.ER815031.
- Ismail, S. (2008) 'Muslim Public Self-Presentation: Interrogating the Liberal Public Sphere', *PS: Political Science & Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 41(1), pp. 25–29. doi: 10.1017/S1049096508080037.
- Janmohamed, S. Z. (2016) *Generation M : young Muslims changing the world*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. Available at: [http://www.ibtauris.com/books/economics\\_finance\\_business\\_management/business\\_management/business\\_studies\\_general/generation\\_m](http://www.ibtauris.com/books/economics_finance_business_management/business_management/business_studies_general/generation_m) (Accessed: 15 November 2017).
- Mossière, G. (2012) 'Modesty and style in Islamic attire: Refashioning Muslim garments in a Western context', *Contemporary Islam*. Springer Netherlands, 6(2), pp. 115–134. doi: 10.1007/s11562-011-0180-9.
- Muhammad Tahir and Abdullah, K. (2015) *European scientific journal., European Scientific Journal, ESJ*. European Scientific Institute. Available at: <http://eujournal.org/index.php/esj/article/view/6550> (Accessed: 15 November 2017).
- Noormohamed, Nadia, A. (2008) 'Muslim Women- Adapting Culture To The Modern World', *Journal of Diversity Management*, 3(1), pp. 67–74. Available at: <https://www.cluteinstitute.com/ojs/index.php/JDM/article/view/4982/5074> (Accessed: 15 November 2017).
- Sobh, R., Belk, R. W. and Gressel, J. (2012) 'Modest seductiveness: Reconciling modesty and vanity by reverse assimilation and double resistance', *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 11(5), pp. 357–367. doi: 10.1002/cb.1379.
- Waninger, K. (2015) *The Veiled Identity: Hijabistas, Instagram and Branding In The Online Islamic Fashion Industry, Women's Studies Theses*. Available at: [http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/wsi\\_theses](http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/wsi_theses) (Accessed: 15 November 2017).