COMMODIFYING ISLAMIC VALUES ON INSTAGRAM: A MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MUSLIM WOMEN'S FASHION BRANDS IN MALAYSIA

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by

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KOMODIFIKASI NILAI-NILAI ISLAM DI INSTAGRAM: ANALISIS WACANA KRITIS MULTIMODAL JENAMA FESYEN WANITA MUSLIM DI MALAYSIA

ABSTRAK

Fesyen muslimah telah meningkat dengan ketara dalam lima tahun kebelakangan ini melalui pelbagai strategi komunikasi penjenamaan. Fesyen muslimah secara keseluruhannya mempunyai pengaruh agama Islam kerana wanita Islam hendaklah menutup kesemua bahagian tubuh kecuali tapak tangan dan muka. Sebaik sahaja fesyen muslimah memasuki industri fesyen arus perdana, banyak jenama pakaian wanita terkemuka mula mengkomodifikasi nilai-nilai Islam dalam usaha menghasilkan dan menjual pakaian mesra Muslimah. Oleh kerana fesyen ini sudah mula diterima pakai di kebanyakan negara, kajian ini meneliti cara sepuluh jenama fesyen wanita Islam di Malaysia menggunakan bahasa dan gambar dalam mengetengahkan fesyen Muslimah di Instagram. Melalui kajian ini, cara wanita Islam membina identiti diri dan fesyen mereka dapat difahami. Dengan mempertimbangkan kedua-dua representasi yang dihasilkan oleh jenama fesyen dan reaksi pengikut mereka, kajian ini meneroka bagaimana komodifikasi prinsip Islam berfungsi sebagai strategi untuk menyampaikan nilai-nilai Islam dalam industri fesyen dan masyarakat secara lebih luas. Dengan menggunakan kerangka daripada Kajian Wacana Kritis untuk menganalisis kapsyen, gambar dan tanda pagar di Instagram, dapatan utama kajian ini diperoleh berdasarkan empat soalan kajian. Soalan kajian pertama yang meneliti kapsyen menggunakan kerangka representasi aktor sosial oleh van Leeuwen (2008) mendapati bahawa wanita Muslim sering digambarkan sebagai moden, bergaya, dan aktif dalam dunia digital, serta ditampilkan sebagai ahli masyarakat yang

berdikari dan berdaya saing. Soalan kajian kedua yang memfokuskan pada representasi visual dan berpandukan kerangka multimodal oleh Ledin dan Machin (2020) menunjukkan bahawa hantaran Instagram menggambarkan wanita Muslim yang bergaya sebagai individu yang yakin, moden dan aktif dalam masyarakat, sekali gus membentuk naratif visual tentang kesopanan yang diolah dengan gaya dan keperibadian. Soalan kajian ketiga melihat bagaimana pengikut di Instagram berinteraksi melalui tanda pagar dan membina hubungan melalui konsep *ambient affiliation* oleh Zappavigna (2012). Interaksi ini mencerminkan nilai bersama, ekspresi keagamaan dan sentimen berkaitan fesyen yang membantu mewujudkan komuniti dalam talian. Akhir sekali, dapatan untuk soalan kajian keempat yang menggunakan konsep pengkomodifikasian agama oleh Kitiarsa (2010) menunjukkan bahawa jenama-jenama ini telah mengkomodifikasikan nilai Islam dengan menyerap makna keagamaan dalam produk dan strategi pemasaran mereka, menjadikan fesyen Islam sebagai satu gaya hidup yang diingini dan boleh dipasarkan. Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa fesyen Islam ialah satu konsep yang fleksibel dan berkembang, yang diterima, disesuaikan atau ditolak oleh wanita Muslim mengikut perubahan nilai dan konteks. Media sosial, khususnya Instagram, memainkan peranan penting dalam membentuk naratif ini dengan membuka ruang kepada bentuk perwakilan diri yang baharu serta menyumbang kepada penstrukturan semula komuniti wanita Muslim melalui interaksi digital.

COMMODIFYING ISLAMIC VALUES ON INSTAGRAM: A MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MUSLIM WOMEN'S FASHION BRANDS IN MALAYSIA

ABSTRACT

Muslim women's fashion has experienced substantial growth over the past five years, driven by diverse branding and communication strategies. Rooted in Islamic ideals, it is profoundly shaped by restrictions on fashion trends for Muslim women in Islam, where the practice of covering all skin is deemed integral to adherence to Islamic beliefs. As Muslim women's fashion enters the mainstream fashion industry, numerous fashion brands have embarked on the commodification of Islamic values to produce and market clothing deemed Muslim-friendly. Since this phenomenon continues to grow, this study examines how ten local Muslim women's fashion brands represent Muslim women on Instagram through captions and pictures. It also looks at hashtags to investigate followers' responses to the brands' representations. By considering both the representations created by fashion brands and the reactions of their followers, this study explores how the commodification of Islamic principles serves as a strategic tool to convey Islamic values within both the fashion industry and broader society. Employing frameworks from Critical Discourse Studies to analyse captions, pictures, and hashtags on Instagram, this research presented key findings based on four research questions. The first research question, which examined the captions using van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor representation framework, indicated that Muslim women were primarily positioned as a distinct consumer group, often portrayed as modern, sophisticated, and digitally engaged, with an emphasis on empowerment that framed them as independent rather than marginalised. The second

research question, focused on visual representations and guided by Ledin and Machin's (2020) multimodal framework, revealed that Instagram posts portrayed fashionable Muslim women as confident, modern, and socially active individuals, thereby shaping a visual narrative of modesty infused with style and individuality. The third research question, based on Zappavigna's (2012) concept of ambient affiliation, examined the engagement of Instagram followers with hashtags and their connections. These interactions reflected shared values, religious expressions, and fashion-related sentiments that helped foster a sense of online community. Finally, the findings for the fourth research question, guided by Kitiarsa's (2010) concept of religious commodification, indicated that brands commodified Islamic values by embedding religious meaning into their products and marketing strategies, making modesty a desirable and marketable lifestyle choice. It has been observed that Islamic fashion is an evolving concept that Muslim women adopt, adapt to, or reject in response to shifting values and contexts. Social media, particularly Instagram, plays a significant role in shaping these narratives by enabling new forms of self-representation and contributing to the restructuring of Muslim women through digital engagement.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction

This chapter includes several subsections. Section 1.2 provides the background of this study, further divided into four subsections (1.2.1 through 1.2.4). Each subsection explores a fundamental concept, including Muslim women's fashion, the commodification of religion, the role of fashion in identity construction, and the influence of social media, particularly Instagram. Section 1.3 presents the problem statement, while Sections 1.4 and 1.5 outline the research objectives and questions, respectively. Section 1.6 delineates the significance of the study, while its scope and limitations can be found under Section 1.7. Since this study employs several specific terms, relevant terminologies are explained in Section 1.8. Section 1.9 explains the structure of this thesis, and this chapter is concluded in Section 1.10.

1.2   Background to the Study

This section outlines the key themes that underpin this study: Muslim women's fashion, the commodification of religion, identity construction through fashion, and the role of social media, particularly Instagram. These themes are situated within the broader framework of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), which views language and other semiotic resources as forms of social practice embedded in broader social and political contexts (Janks, 1997; Bouvier & Machin, 2018). Although CDS was initially applied to elite and institutional texts, its relevance has expanded to digital environments, where discourse is shaped through more participatory, multimodal, and commercially driven interactions (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016; Page et al., 2014). On platforms like Instagram, language, imagery, and branding practices work together to

naturalise particular ideologies and ways of being. CDS enables a critical examination of how these discourses contribute to shaping and circulating dominant ideas about modesty, consumerism, and religious identity in contemporary Malaysian Muslim fashion.

1.2.1 Muslim Women's Fashion

Muslim women's fashion has experienced significant growth over the last five years (Hassan & Ara, 2021a). Despite its humble beginnings, it has gained widespread appeal through various branding communication strategies, including collaborations with well-known international brands and social media influencers (Alanadoly & Salem, 2022; Kütük-Kuriş, 2020; Lodi, 2020; Slater & Demangeot, 2021). Modest fashion, commonly associated with Muslim women, may have diverse interpretations, yet it predominantly incorporates Islamic values and connotations. Although various constraints influence Muslim women's fashion trends in Islam, there has been a consistent effort to align them with Islamic teachings. This entails covering one's skin for women as one of the most significant components, including wearing 'loose and opaque clothing and unperfumed' (Boulanouar & Boulanouar, 2013, p. 291). The Syafi'i school of thought *(madzhab)* is Malaysia's primary basis for Islamic jurisprudence. In this study, the limits of Muslim women's attire are established using Quranic verses from Surah An-Nur:31 and Surah Al-Ahzab:59. The direct interpretations of these verses are based on Ibn Kathir's interpretation, which is widely regarded as one of the most influential interpretations of the Quran (Nur Robaniyah et al., 2023). Recognised for its comprehensive and systematic approach, Ibn Kathir's tafsir remains a principal reference in Quranic interpretation (Ahmad et al., 2018; Setiawan & Fathurrohman, 2022). Its detailed accounts of the historical and sociopolitical contexts during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions

contribute to its lasting significance across generations (Mirza, 2012; Mohamad & Mohd Nawmi, 2024).

According to Ibn Kathir's interpretation (Kathir, 2003), Surah An-Nur (24:31) outlines the ruling on *hijab* and *aurah*, stating that Muslim women should wear an outer garment that covers their chest and ribs. *Aurah* refers to specific parts of the human body that must be concealed or shielded from the view of individuals who are not permitted to see them (Hasmad & Alosman, 2021; Muna, 2021; Mustafa@Busu et al., 2018). In this verse, the Muslim women are instructed not to display their adornments, which include the body shape and accessories such as bracelets, earrings, and necklaces, and must draw their veils to cover their heads. The verse also emphasises that only the face and two palms are allowed to be visible. Meanwhile, Surah Al-Ahzab (33:59) is interpreted as a command to observe the *hijab* and to wear the *jilbab,* which refers to loose clothing that covers the entire body. Both verses aim to preserve the modesty of Muslim women and to protect them from harm and harassment.

These two verses have been cited in various studies examining Muslim women's attire, emphasising that the face and palms are the only parts permitted to be uncovered (Ahmad, 2004; Haji Abd. Majid, 2007; Hasmad & Alosman, 2021; Sesse, 2016). Therefore, these two verses have become the primary guideline and hegemonic convention for how Muslim women should dress in order to comply with religious principles (Boulanouar & Boulanouar, 2013; Hassan et al., 2015). Muslim women's fashion is characterised by covering the head and hair with a veil (Hassan & Ara, 2021a; Hwang & Kim, 2020) and not exposing other body parts except for the hands (palms) and the face (Abdullah & Mohammed Zabidi, 2021; Mat et al., 2017). This style is typically characterised by wearing opaque, long pants or skirts. Thus, the

women whose clothing aligns with this value of Islam indicate their motivation and understanding of the religion. The fashion industry has seen the rise of modest fashion, which primarily focuses on women's clothing in terms of what to wear and how to wear it to appear modest and faithful while remaining trendy.

Across the globe, clothing is touted as the most noticeable sign of religion, particularly in public spaces, because it plays a vital role in identity recognition (Alimen, 2018; Bullock, 2015). In particular, contemporary Muslim women's fashion has evolved globally and embraced significant occidental ideas to make them look modern and stylish (Peterson, 2020). The application of the concept of modesty in fashion discourse is debatable, but the core principle of Islamic fashion is clear. It must reflect the inherent values of Islam by ensuring that women cover their skin, exposing only their faces and palms. (Ahmad, 2004; Muslim, 2020; Sesse, 2016). By definition, Muslim women's fashion generally refers to loose-fitting clothes and features some head covering that can be worn in various ways (Abdullah & Mohammed Zabidi, 2021; Haji Abd. Majid, 2007). Muslim women who wear headscarves or *hijabs* typically pair long-sleeved blouses, which cover their backs and hips, with long pants or maxi skirts (Kamarulzaman & Shaari, 2020; Khondkar, 2021).

In Malaysia, the term "Busana Muslimah" refers to the traditional attire worn by female Muslims (Hassan & Ara, 2021b; Hassim & Khalid, 2015; Salleh, 2021; Sesse, 2016; Sulaiman et al., 2022), which has helped the general population in Malaysia become familiar with the practice of covering one's *aurah* (Hassan & Ara, 2021a). With the Muslim population in Malaysia comprising approximately 61.3% of the country's total population (Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen & A. Manaf, 2019), Muslim women's fashion can flourish due to the ready availability of consumers (Hassan & Ara, 2021a, 2021b). However, as Malaysia has enjoyed a

prosperous economy favouring Western values, the thought of losing the *hijab* has been viewed as part of modernisation, even though it continues to be tolerated in society (Nurzihan & Shahreen, 2015). Modest fashion is a modern trend incorporating restrained characteristics into popular Western fashions, particularly in the UK and France. It is also identified as Islamic fashion due to Islam's emphasis on modesty in life and attire (Bullock, 2018; Krisjanous et al., 2022; Kütük-Kuriş, 2020). In fact, despite some modifications made, modesty is still desired by a wide range of consumers and followers of other religions (Slater & Demangeot, 2021). However, according to Gill (2007, as cited in Peterson, 2020), the feminine body is a source of power and is perpetually rebellious, and thus, it requires ongoing monitoring, surveillance, discipline, and remodelling. Therefore, most studies have shown that Muslim women's fashion has only developed within the confines of this convention in which they are expected to wear *hijab* and are only permitted to expose their faces and palms when out in public (Hasmad & Alosman, 2021; Hassan et al., 2015; Stannard & Islam, 2020; Tarofder et al., 2022; Mohd Zaimmudin Mohd Zain, 2020; Zulkifli & Rajandran, 2024), resulting in the construction of the hegemonic representation of Muslim women and their identities.

1.2.2   The Commodification of Religion

Each religion has distinct characteristics that reveal its unique identity and distinguish it from other religions. Numerous efforts have been made to ensure the continued existence of religion among practitioners and non-practitioners, including the commodification of religion. Generally, commodification revolves around the notion of producing material realities and social relationships. Karl Marx argued that commodities are central to capitalism (Fleischer, 2017; Fuchs & Dyer-Witheford, 2012; Young & Markham, 2020), as they involve the exchange of goods in a

quantitative relationship with money, where a specific quantity of commodity A is equivalent to a certain amount of money (Marx, 1867 as cited in Fuchs & Dyer-Witherford, 2013). As Marxian scholars agree, commodification typically refers to the ability to sell anything and generate a profit from it. It is related to the reduction of people, culture, knowledge and ideology to things that can be sold (Fuchs & Dyer-Witheford, 2012). Fairclough (1992), on the other hand, viewed commodification as 'a process whereby social domains and institutions, whose concern is not producing commodities in the narrower economic sense of goods for sale, come nevertheless to be organised and conceptualised in terms of commodity production, distribution and consumption' (Fairclough, 1992).

As economic needs continue to grow, many more non-material objects have been organised and conceptualised for them to be commoditised, distributed and consumed (Johnstone, 2009), which include culture, heritage as well as religion (Young & Markham, 2020). The process of commodifying religion began when profit-making industries started to venture into reification, which is primarily grounded in the way religious values and ideals are linked to consumerism (Conway, 2006; Muljadji et al., 2017; Zulkifli & Rajandran, 2024). Kitiarsa (2010) describes the commodification of religion as a concept that provides a structured methodology with significant potential to deconstruct the tension between sociological understanding and worldly realities. In other words, it could mean that even though religions contain sacred connotations, there will always be various reconstructions to it that can bring meaning to the world realities as they carry the notions of marketing and consumerism that move along with the growth of people, technology, knowledge and capitals (Smith, 2001; Ward, 2006). Given that the market economy is dominant, where the practice of supply and demand for products and services amplifies significantly,

religions have been found to adapt in order to compete for consumers and affiliations (Kitiarsa, 2007, 2010). Even though the sold commodities may not be directly related to honouring a particular religion, they nonetheless possess the necessary qualities to continue sustaining a country's economic paradigm (Shirazi, 2016).

Globally, there have been many occasions where religions have been commodified to fulfil market economy requirements. In Ireland, for instance, numerous seminars and religious services have been conducted nationwide to offer spiritual healing to those in need (Conway, 2006). The activities, which were offered free of charge, now come at a fee and have gradually transformed the landscape of religious practices in the country. Another study also supports this notion, finding that religious commodification occurs in countries such as the United States and Australia, where many tourists visit religious sites, monuments, and buildings (Olsen, 2003). Profits accrued over the years have motivated the hosts to not only organise religious rites and festivals but also purposefully build more religious buildings to meet the growing demand. However, Olsen's (2003) study found that the intention of the visits became questionable, reflecting the ungenuine motives besides weakening the local community's faith in the area.

Nevertheless, Kitiarsa (2010) argued that commodifying religion does not necessarily lead to a significant decline in religious practice. However, it carries the idea that describes the various configurations of the interactions between religion and the market. Most industries have commodified religion because it could positively affect a nation's social and economic status (Illiyyun, 2018). Yet, Ward (2006) emphasised that when religion is commodified, it becomes fluid and lacks virtues, discipline, and obedience. Meanwhile, little has been found to see how religion is commodified to reach Muslim women, particularly in Malaysia. Moreover, such

actions may make them cognizant of their values and how their spending could draw them closer to their religious values. While studies have shown a 500 percent increase in searches for modest fashion on Pinterest in the first quarter of 2019 (Lodi, 2020) and indicated that it was a trending topic on the platform (Bardakcı & Wood, 2021; Hassim & Khalid, 2015), it remains uncertain whether religious commodification directly contributes to this expansion. According to the statistics in the State of the Global Economy Report from Reuters and DinarStandard, Muslim consumers spent approximately $243 billion on clothing, with modest female apparel accounting for nearly $44 billion in 2015 (Lodi, 2020). In 2017, spending reached $270 billion, and sales are predicted to reach $361 billion and $402 billion by 2023 and 2024, respectively (Karakavak & Özbölük, 2022). Given this context, it is crucial to explore if the Muslim women's fashion industry is intertwined with the commodification of religion. Additionally, it would be pertinent to investigate whether this commodification aims to address social realities and increase religious awareness among practitioners, particularly Instagram users.

1.2.3   The Construction of Muslim Women's Identity through Fashion

Waninger (2015) has asserted that the definition of Muslim women has perpetually undergone various interpretations, mainly when they are constructed within the concept of neoliberalism, which can lead to economic inequality. Thus, the literature about how Muslim women should be represented and whether what they wear empowers or marginalises them has proliferated (Mohd Zaimmudin Mohd Zain, 2020). Muslim women's fashion is widely construed as wearing fully covered garments and covering one's head and hair with a *hijab* or other types of veil (Hassan et al., 2015). The dominance of the veil in manufactured ideas of 'Muslim womanhood' symbolises the traditional perceptions of the *hijab*, which is viewed as

ugly and oppressive (Boulos, 2019; Guessous, 2020), and thus the Muslim women's position is continually contested and subjected to ongoing scrutiny. However, rather than opposing traditional Islamic discourse, the mainstream fashion industry has found a strategy to exploit Islamic ideals by looking for compatibilities to accommodate the needs of consumerism and capitalism since the Muslim population will grow to roughly 30% by 2030 (Khondkar, 2021). Therefore, based on the market trend, there are opportunities where Muslim women's religious expressions could coexist with consumerism.

The modest fashion trend has presented numerous opportunities for key players in the fashion industry to remain both popular and sustainable. In the Malaysian context, Hassan and Ara (2021b) explain that as more women become fashion savvy, hijab fashion has become increasingly popular among Muslim women and has been labelled as a trend (Hassan & Ara, 2021a; Thimm, 2021). The *hijab* has evolved from a religious necessity to a fashionable accessory that often matches the colour of their clothing. The *hijab* fashion business has expanded dramatically, not only in Malaysia but also in many countries worldwide, due to high demand from Muslim customers (Hassan et al., 2015). Hence, Muslim fashion retailers continue to produce more products to create insatiability among consumers, thereby fulfilling the objectives of consumerism (Pemberton & Takhar, 2021). It also indicates that Muslim women are consuming the products without compromising their faith. Thus, it becomes one of the key determinants in ensuring that the modest fashion sector, which adheres to Islamic norms, maintains high sales year after year (Hassan & Ara, 2021b). Besides understanding how the local Muslim women's fashion industry commodifies Islamic values, this study could also examine how women construct their positions and identities when the act of commodification occurs amid the production and

consumption of products, which in turn could change Muslim women's perceptions of the ideal Muslim identity.

1.2.4   Social Media and Instagram

Unlike conventional mass media, social media celebrates the nature of participation and engagement. The user's responses are usually instantaneous, which could lead to the birth of new discourses and practices. Due to active participation and ongoing communication, the entire discourse will likely be politicised, particularly when ordinary people are given the power to influence the system through their engagement. Since the emergence of social media, its discourse has become closely tied to the engagement of netizens. Researchers have increasingly shown interest in analysing not only the discourse itself but also the processes of content production and consumption (Herring, 2010, as cited in KhosraviNik, 2017). This line of inquiry often focuses on identity construction, social actions, and broader social processes and practices. Leppänen et al. (2017) argue that social media discourse reflects sociality and illustrates how social behaviours manifest across diverse platforms. Previous studies have examined a range of discourses within social media research (KhosraviNik, 2020; Makita et al., 2021; Myers West, 2018), with particular attention given to social media practices. These practices have evolved in response to the affordances of digital platforms, prompting shifts in how individuals organise their lifestyles around online interactions. Social media activity typically involves participatory communication and relies heavily on a variety of semiotic resources that contribute to meaning-making within the digital environment (KhosraviNik, 2017; Leppänen et al., 2017).

KhosraviNik (2017) postulated that social media discourse has shifted towards ordinary text or content, which constantly fuels dynamic communication. The nature

of social media communication is generally controlled by the users (Khosravinik, 2017). They are privileged to contextualise their content and audience based on their interests, communities, and directions. The significance of social media extends beyond its immediate content; it lies in its potential to impact individuals' lifestyles, choices, directions, and social practices, fuelling the enthusiasm people feel for it. Social media frequently mediates users' offline and online social practices, and therefore, it has the potential to generate multiple offshoots, intertextualities, and interdiscursivities (Khosravinik, 2017; Makita et al., 2021; Zappavigna & Zhao, 2020).

Social media is a valuable advertising tool for entrepreneurs and businesses to share their ideology, market their products and services, and gain traction within the platform's ecosystem. Since social media has become the primary avenue for businesses to connect with users, customers generally use it to engage with marketers and purchase based on social media reviews (Agnihotri, 2020). The way customers choose, share, and evaluate information has changed considerably due to social media, resulting in changes in marketing communications and proving it to be a promising platform for consumerism (Duff et al., 2013; Zulkifli et al., 2021). Some companies develop a personal branding strategy to connect with users, making the content-sharing process on social media easier and more efficient for marketing their products. Personal branding is the process of creating, harnessing, and presenting personal information in a way that conveys a comprehensive narrative, enabling others to easily understand one's identity through social media (Jacobson, 2020). Most corporations will hire a social media manager to interact with their target audience and clients on social media. The manager will engage with multiple parties, such as social media users, consumers, professionals, and influencers. They are usually first-hand witnesses

to social media challenges, and thus, they have become the new age of social media-based careers (Jacobson, 2020; Ledbetter & Meisner, 2021).

As a social media platform, Instagram has become an effective promotional vehicle due to its ability to incorporate multiple literacies within a single medium. The application began as a digital photography hub and has evolved into a powerful networking platform where users can capture and share photos. Users' postings are usually aesthetically created using pictures, videos, GIFs (short animated images), music stickers, filters, polls, and hashtags (Leaver et al., 2020). A few years after its launch in 2010, Leaver et al. (2020) claimed that Instagram continued to prosper as it began to develop an Application Programming Interface (API) that allows other platforms and applications to integrate into its system. With such technological affordance, users can access multiple social media platforms simultaneously, with more opportunities to connect with many parties and users. The platforms have drawn many users because as smartphones grow, people's habit of sharing their activities in pictures or videos follows suit (Illiyyun, 2018).

Users can see postings from accounts they follow and accounts that have not been made private, even if they are not followers of the account. Users can also find photos or videos quickly by searching for terms connected with hashtags. Hashtags that were first popularised on X (formerly Twitter) quickly became a phenomenon for promoting ideas, rallying movements, and ideologies (Saxton et al., 2015; Veszelszki, 2016). As hashtags encourage engagement and participation among social media users, their presence in every post on social media helps to organise communications, increasing accessibility and allowing organisations to connect them to relevant knowledge and communities. Thus, since Instagram offers a range of multimodal varieties and numerous technological affordances, expanding Muslim women's

fashion becomes much easier on this platform. At the same time, the construction of the discourse continues to evolve and be reshaped. In other words, since social media sites like Instagram depend more on visuals like pictures and videos, Muslim women's fashion has become highly accessible for users to notice and interpret. Therefore, the ideal representation of Muslim women's fashion can be showcased when multiple literacies can be exploited on a single platform.

1.3   Problem Statement

The growing influence of Islamic fashion on Instagram has prompted significant changes in how Muslim women's identities are constructed, expressed and perceived in contemporary Malaysian society. In recent years, Muslim fashion has expanded visibly across fashion hubs such as Turkey, Dubai, Indonesia, Malaysia, and even Monte Carlo (Hassan & Ara, 2021a, 2021b), with Malaysia, in particular, emerging as a notable centre for Islamic modernity. This trend is driven not only by the country's economic progress since the New Economic Policy of 1971 but also by the widespread availability of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube (Thimm, 2021). Among these, Instagram stands out as a highly visual and interactive medium that has transformed how brands communicate with audiences. The expansion of Muslim women's fashion in Malaysia reflects not just a religious or aesthetic trend but a broader socio-cultural shift in which fashion becomes a means for negotiating modernity, faith, and identity.

Firstly, this study investigates the significant relationship between Muslim women, consumerism, religion, and digital culture. In Malaysia, where approximately 62% of the population is Muslim and where Islamic values significantly influence public life (Tarofder et al., 2022; Thimm, 2021), fashion is no longer just a private or

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individual concern. It is a collective, visible practice that operates within and through digital platforms, such as Instagram. The Muslim fashion industry's projected global market value of over US$361 billion by 2023 reflects not just economic growth (Aruan & Wirdania, 2020; Kamarulzaman & Shaari, 2020) but also an increasing commodification of Islamic values, where religious elements are embedded into marketing strategies. In such a context, there is a pressing need to investigate how fashion brands in Malaysia use Instagram to articulate, promote and aestheticise Muslim womanhood, especially through representations that combine modesty with modern consumer appeal.

However, the limited examination of how these fashion brands construct Islamic identity through Instagram's multimodal features remains problematic. As the industry evolves and adapts to consumer demands, it remains unclear whether the representations being circulated continue to align with hegemonic interpretations of Islamic modesty or whether they reshape these values to fit more consumer-driven, commodified narratives. Moreover, the current body of literature lacks comprehensive studies on how Muslim women's identities are constructed through Instagram posts that mix language, pictures and hashtags, especially in the Malaysian context where religious and cultural diversity creates complex identity dynamics. This study proposes a multimodal critical discourse analysis of selected Malaysian Muslim women's fashion brands on Instagram to address this gap. It aims to explore how linguistic and visual strategies, including the use of hashtags, are employed to affiliate with audiences while embedding Islamic values into digital branding. This approach draws on frameworks from Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) and Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS), offering tools to analyse the relationship between identity and ideology as represented through social media content. By examining how

language and pictures function together on Instagram, the study seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which Muslim women's fashion brands craft persuasive, religiously framed brand narratives.

Existing research in this area often focuses on market growth, consumer behaviour, or general trends in modest fashion, but few have engaged with the multimodal construction of Muslim identity through Instagram. Even fewer have analysed how hashtag culture contributes to what Zappavigna (2012) calls ambient affiliation, where users form social bonds around shared values and aesthetics. This form of connectivity is especially relevant in the case of Muslim women's fashion, where hashtags not only signal brand identity but also serve as subtle tools of ideological alignment and community formation. A key limitation in the existing literature is its lack of integration between the commodification of Islamic values and their representation on social media. While some scholars have noted that religious values are increasingly subject to consumerist logic, especially under the influence of digital media, few have systematically examined how this occurs through visual branding and hashtag use in the Islamic fashion industry. The overlapping dynamics of religiosity, consumerism and digital marketing remain underexplored, especially within Malaysian contexts.

Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by employing a critical multimodal discourse approach to analyse Instagram content from selected Muslim fashion brands in Malaysia. By integrating language, pictures and hashtags within the frameworks of CDS and SM-CDS, this study aims to illustrate how Muslim women's fashion brands in Malaysia employ religious principles to produce them and showcase elements that portray an ideal image of Muslim identity while normalising the practices of manufacturing, selling, and purchasing, religious in increasingly reshaping consumers'

social lives and identities. In doing so, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of social media's role in negotiating the boundaries between piety, fashion, and consumer culture in the Muslim world.

1.4   Research Objectives

This study examines three key aspects: the representation of Muslim women on Instagram, the responses of Instagram users to the representations created by local Muslim women's fashion brands, and the commodification of Islamic values in the discourse of Muslim women's fashion. Thus, this research intends to:

1. examine how the selected Muslim women's brands represent Muslim women as social actors in language of the captions

2. analyse how the selected Muslim women's brands use participants, objects, colours, and actions in pictures to represent Muslim women

3. explore how the brands' followers respond to the representation made by the selected brands through hashtags

4. investigate why the selected brands commodify religious beliefs to fit the dynamics of modern consumerism.

1.5   Research Questions

In light of the objectives, the four research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How do the selected Muslim women's brands represent Muslim women as social actors in language of the captions?

2. How do the selected Muslim women's brands use participants, objects, colours, and actions in pictures to represent Muslim women?

3. How do the brands' followers respond to the representations of Muslim women through their use of hashtags?

4. Why do the selected brands commodify religious beliefs to fit into the dynamic structure of modern consumerism?

1.6   Significance of the Study

Social media has become a crucial platform for Muslim women's fashion marketers by allowing users to showcase their products, interact with customers (Vaahensalo, 2021), build rapport (Etaywe & Zappavigna, 2023), and exchange immediate feedback (Lenartowicz & Strzelecki, 2021). Given these traits, this research is crucial because social media wields significant influence over our lifestyles and purchasing behaviours, which in turn may impact the formation of our thoughts and worldviews. Therefore, it will be interesting to observe whether these discourses are biased towards benefiting the fashion industry in order to sustain profits. Alternatively, this study could also see whether religious commodification is employed to justify this approach, aiming to reshape Muslim women's perceptions by suggesting that Islamic principles and fashion can coexist within a similar discourse.

Another key focus of this research is to understand how Muslim women react upon realising they have been targeted by fashion brands that commodify religious values. Given that this scenario may influence their perspectives on religion, this study seeks to determine whether this exploitation is seen as a means for Muslim women to achieve greater liberation, particularly when modest clothing is perceived as a symbol of oppression (Bucar, 2017). Therefore, we could gain insights into how Muslim women reposition themselves within the fashion industry. This repositioning could reveal how brands negotiate with their audiences' backgrounds to create and sustain

relationships, contributing to the development and dissemination of ideas about Muslim women, Muslim women's fashion and social media.

Building on this, the study also carries methodological and theoretical significance. Methodologically, this study employs critical discourse studies (CDS) to analyse the strategic use of language and pictures in Instagram postings by Muslim fashion brands. By analysing language through lexical choices, visual elements in pictures and the use of hashtags, this study uncovers how branding strategies embed Islamic values and attract consumers. The data was coded using NVivo to help organise and analyse the patterns more systematically. Theoretically, the study draws on the concept of religious commodification to explore how Islamic values are packaged and marketed within consumer culture. This approach helps to illuminate how commercial discourses interact with religious identity and how Muslim women's consumption practices may reflect or resist this dynamic. Together, these analytical and theoretical perspectives offer an understanding of the role of Islamic fashion on Instagram, serving as both a marketing tool and a platform for ideological negotiation and identity formation.

Last but not least, since the nature of digitisation permits a more substantial 'redistribution of influences over market outcomes' (Pemberton & Takhar, 2021), which has significantly changed how people view and engage with consumerism, this study explores how the brands in question represent the ideal image of Muslim women. This analysis could help uncover the power dynamics within these discourses, how they shape the Muslim women's fashion industry, and the communication strategies used by these brands, especially on Instagram.

1.7 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This section outlines the scope of this study, specifying the data parameters and the range of analysis. It also identifies the limitations, which reflect the aims that this study seeks to achieve. This study examined ten local Muslim women's fashion brands on Instagram. The language used in captions and the pictures posted by these brands were analysed to answer the first and second research questions. Since Instagram content is highly visual and captions are often brief or inconsistent in length, the textual data was limited. To supplement this, the study also analysed hashtags used by the brands' followers to respond to the third research question. The fourth research question was addressed by examining how Islamic values are commodified, based on insights gained from analysing captions, pictures, and hashtags.

This study provides insights into the textual and visual representation of Muslim women and how their followers engage with it on Instagram. However, like any research, this study has certain limitations that it would like to highlight. Firstly, this study only looked at ten local brands with modest wear in their collections. According to the Global Islamic Economy Report 2020/2021 and 2022, four of them have the highest sales, while the other six have the best assortment criteria, as determined by the Brands Index 2020 (Omnilytics, 2020), and are among the most popular modest wear brands in Malaysia (Team, 2022). However, since the consumers are primarily based in Malaysia, the scope of the results is limited in representing the global construction of Muslim women and the Islamic fashion industry.

Furthermore, the research is constrained by the collection of 500 postings to address Research Questions 1 and 2 and 100 for Research Question 3. The former set was collected from the fashion brands, while the latter came from their followers. The scope of data is restricted to Muslim women's fashion wear and apparel, excluding

other products with Muslim attributes, like *halal* cosmetics and pharmaceuticals. This limitation is imposed due to the considerable number of brands, which may be impractical to evaluate within a reasonable timeframe. Consequently, the study's restricted dataset hinders the generalisation of the construction of Muslim women's fashion across various products containing Islamic connotations and qualities.

Besides that, the data of this study were only confined to postings on Instagram to represent the construction of Muslim women's fashion on social media. Other social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok were not considered. Likewise, the user responses analysed in this research were exclusively from Instagram and likely reflect the views of those who are highly active on this platform. Consequently, the findings cannot generalise how Muslim women's fashion brands represent the broader discourse of Islamic fashion on social media.

Regarding the analytical framework, this study employed van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor representation for language and Ledin and Machin's (2020) multimodal framework to analyse pictures. These frameworks are expected to provide a clear-cut structure for approaching text and pictures by relating them to social contexts and practices on Instagram. Since data on Instagram heavily depends on various technological affordances, such as pictures, videos, stories, hashtags, emojis, and reels, these frameworks are deemed necessary because these components have become fundamental in contributing meaning to its ecology. Consumerism now emphasises sophistication and visual appeal, aligning with Ledin and Machin's (2020) categories. Thus, by applying their framework to the context of Muslim women's fashion on Instagram, this study uncovers how religious and consumer discourses converge, offering detailed insights into the interplay between identity, faith, and fashion within this digital environment.

1.8   Terminology and Definitions

This section elucidates the specific terms and definitions relevant to the research context, aiming to enhance the comprehensibility and coherence of this study.

Terms	Definition & Descriptions
1. Brand	According to the American Marketing Association, a brand is defined as a name, term, design, symbol, or a combination of these (Maurya & Mishra, 2012). Its purpose was to identify the products or services of one seller or group of sellers and set them apart from rivals (Batra, 2019; Maurya & Mishra, 2012).
2. Commodification	Something that is initially not regarded as a commodity but eventually becomes one. Commodification can involve physical (goods and services) and non-physical materials such as ideas, knowledge, institutions, culture and principles that have made their entry into the market realm and provide an economic gain (Ertman & Williams, 2005; Fleischer, 2017; H. Radder, 2010; Thadi & Novaldi, 2019). Commodification enables the exchange value that operates through supply and demand, and can significantly impact the market because materials can be organised and conceptualised into commodities that are profitable for continuous production and consumption (Fleissner, 2009; Illiyyun, 2018; Krzyżanowska, 2020).
3. Consumerism	Consumerism promotes the acquisition of increasing quantities of goods and services. Consumerism is concerned with promoting and protecting consumers' interests, which are predominantly associated with the concept of abundant resources and productivity (Kucuk, 2016; Sharma, 2020). Generally, consumerism fosters the belief that having more materials and resources equates to a happier and more successful life for consumers (Beck & Ladwig, 2021; Panizzut et al., 2021; Sharma, 2020).
4. Critical Discourse Studies (CDS)	CDS is a methodology that examines how language is employed beyond the scope of a single sentence and across diverse modes of meaning transmission, including sounds, images, and other forms of expression. These elements appear crucial in society's semiotic

		(re)production (Wodak, 2015; Wodak & Boukala, 2015).
5.	Discourse	Discourses are belief systems or assertions of knowledge that presume an existence separate from the speaker. For social interactions with others, we often draw on pre-existing discourses as resources. By participating in a variety of discourses, we build our subjectivity and sense of self (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Fairclough, 2000; Stoddart, 2007)
6.	Followers	It refers to the audience of any Instagram profile. Unlike other social media platforms, such as Facebook, users' relationships are referred to as "friends" (Agam, 2017). However, on Instagram, users who wish to get updates from profiles they like must click the "follow" button and are referred to as the profile's followers. As followers, they will receive regular updates to the profile (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). The number of followers typically influences a profile's perception and indicates its popularity (De Veirman et al., 2017).
7.	Hegemony	Hegemony refers to a society's supremacy and dominance in its political, ideological, and cultural spheres. It highlights the contradiction that is always present when building power networks through information (Stoddart, 2007). It involves gaining power by forming alliances and combining classes and groups with mutual consent (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Menon & Hiebert, 2010).
8.	*Hijab*	*Hijab* originates from Arabic, meaning veil/headwear/headscarf to be worn on the head to cover the hair. Muslim women often wear hijabs to signify their affiliation with the Islamic faith and to express their devotion to it (Hassan & Ara, 2021b; Waninger, 2015).
9.	*Hijabista*	The term '*hijabista*' is a blend of two words: *hijab* and fashionista (Karakavak & Özbölük, 2022; Khondkar, 2021). It refers to a Muslim woman who covers her head with a *hijab* and wears modest yet stylish attire. The term refers to a Muslim woman who wears a headscarf but wishes to express herself through her clothing, reflecting her state of mind and worldview (Hassan & Ara, 2021b). While adhering to their religion's dress code, the *hijab*istas prefer to wear fashionable clothing with a variety of styles and bold colours (Hasnah Hassan & Harun, 2016; Hassan, & Ara, 2021; Minnick, 2020).

10. Ideology	According to Marxist theory, ideology is understood as inverted awareness that can be manipulated into perceiving reality differently than it actually is (Stoddart, 2007). It also manipulates commodities that make social relations appear as characteristics of things, manifested through language, images, and other kinds of representation (Fuchs & Dyer-Witheford, 2012; Machin & van Leeuwen, 2016).
11. Influencers/Instafamous	It refers to a group of people who gain fame and influence on social media, especially on Instagram, through a network of followers. Influencers are a type of microcelebrity that earn an influential place on social media by sharing textual and visual narratives about their personal and everyday lives (Abidin, 2016). These narratives serve as the basis for advertorials for products and services, and marketers have shifted their focus to these micro-celebrities to promote their brands through placement in influencers' content (Abidin, 2016; Belanche et al., 2020; Lee & Eastin, 2020; McFarlane & Samsioe, 2020).
12. Multimodality	Multimodal elements can convey meanings that often extend beyond the use of language (Ledin & Machin, 2019b). They are represented in images, gestures, actions, music, colours, signs, sound, scientific symbols, movement and lighting (Ledin & Machin, 2019b; O'Halloran et al., 2011).
13. Muslim women's fashion	A distinctive style of dressing for Muslim women who follow the Islamic faith. According to the Quran, Muslim women must cover the entire body except for the face and two palms. They are also required to wear a veil that covers the hair and extends over the chest. Additionally, the garments must be loose-fitting and opaque. This interpretation has been outlined in detail in Section 1.2.1. It is also known as modest fashion and Islamic fashion globally (Almila & Inglis, 2018; Krisjanous et al., 2022; Shirazi, 2016; Thimm, 2021), as well as *Busana Muslimah* in Malaysia (Hassan & Ara, 2021b; Hassim & Khalid, 2015; Salleh, 2021; Sesse, 2016; Sulaiman et al., 2022), which follow the same criteria. Many Muslim women have practiced the attire as a symbol of devotion to Islam (Bardakcı & Wood, 2021; Radwan et al., 2020; Zabeen et al., 2017), despite its transformation over time through modernisation and cultural shifts brought about by Western influences (Ben Ali & Moussa,

	2022; Hametner et al., 2020; Shirazi, 2016; Slater & Demangeot, 2021; Waninger, 2015).
14. Text	A text is typically thought of as a written work of language. Normally, it comprises a substantial body of books or even poetry. An example of a text would be the words used in a discussion or their written transcription. Text can therefore refer to both spoken and written language (Fairclough, 1992, 1995).

1.9   The Structure of the Thesis

The first chapter provides a summary of the thesis. The relevant literature is reviewed in Chapter Two, covering the theories underpinning the thesis. It covers relevant studies related to social media, the commodification of religion, and Muslim women's fashion, as well as frameworks from Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). Additionally, it presents the conceptual framework that guides the analysis of this research. Chapter Three details the research design, data sources, and analytical techniques employed in the subsequent chapters. Chapters Four through Seven present the analysis and discussion of findings related to the four research questions posed in this study. Chapter Four involves the analysis and discussion of language (research question 1), while Chapter Five focuses on the examination of the pictures (research question 2). The third research question is addressed in Chapter Six, and the fourth is resolved in Chapter Seven. Finally, Chapter Eight serves as the conclusion, summarising the entire study.

1.10   Summary

This chapter has established the direction of this thesis by outlining its background, problem statement, research objectives and questions, as well as delineating the study's scope and limitations. This study employs Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) to analyse the textual and visual representations of Muslim women's