

“*Stailo & Sopan*”: Modesty and Malay-Muslim Women

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Abstract: *Islam is commonly represented in Malaysia by the “hijab” or the act of veiling and its use is common among Malay women who are predominantly Muslim. The practice has become even more visible through media with the resurgence of Islam in many parts of the world. Prior to the introduction of “Hijabista” in 2012, Muslim-centric womens’ magazines available on newsstands focused on generally spiritual matters, social issues and female wellbeing. Hijabista penetrated the market with a manifesto of “stailo & sopan” that literally means “stylish & modest” in the Malay language, of which the tagline established a new identity for urban Malay-Muslim women through the portrayal of stylish yet modest women in its articles. This study investigates the construct of the hijab through Hijabista magazine and its role in creating desire among consumers to embrace a modern Islamic lifestyle.*

Keywords: *cultural identity, media effects, hijab, consumer culture*

1. Introduction

The identity of Malay-Muslim women was shaped from the silhouette of local politics and developments of socio-economic landscape since Malaysia achieved its independence in 1957. With Islam established as the official religion, the Malays are compulsorily Muslim under the Federal Constitution whilst others are free to choose their religions [1]. Consequently, the *hijab* or veiling is more commonly seen among Malay women although it remains a recursive debate and a personal choice. The implementation of New Economic Policy (NEP) from 1970 to 1990 resulted in a social transformation that motivated Malay women to subdue their pious and rural upbringing in favour of more western lifestyles with their migration to the city [2]. Another key reason that trigger the Malaysian hijab dilemma is negotiation of multiculturalism in the nation state and Islamic resurgence that mirrored religious movements of the Middle East; producing a plethora of tolerant Islamic perspectives [3]. Religious ideologies expressed by Malay political parties UMNO (United Malays National Organization) and PAS (Parti Agama Islam Se-Malaysia) further homogenized *Malay-Muslimness* [4]. However, privatization of media companies in the late 1990s to gain greater control of the press repealed spiritual discern to create a globalized perception of Malays as envisioned by Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad [3], [5], [6]. A study by Wok and Mohd found that urban Malay women are largely predisposed to Western dressing due to repetitive visuals on broadcast and print media that emphasized on depictions of modern, liberal Malays [7]. Successor Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi returned Muslim governance into the foray and introduced “Islam Hadhari” in 2003, prescribing religiosity in national administration and flow of information [8], [9]. After Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak replaced Badawi in 2008, Malay supremacy was subtly weaned in commitment of 1Malaysia social integration through new media platforms [10]. Henceforth, the female Malay-Muslim identity experienced construction and deconstruction against continuous intercession of ethnic secularity and advent of media technologies over the years. The present hybridity of conservative, modest Malay women with highly-sophisticated yet Islamic clothing lifted the hijab as a status quo and re-addressed the hijab as a globalized religious symbol [11], [12]. The “Islamic cosmopolitanism” of the hijab evolved in Malay media and popular culture, where fashion magazines served as a pivotal surveillance tool that impact the resonance of urban women despite age-old presence of the print platform [13] [14].

2. Study Background

Modesty can be traced to pre-Islamic ages where veiling was implemented to (ironically) distinguish nobles from common folk and unscrupulous women [15]. Scholars have also disputed that the act of covering the hair is not particularly exhumed in the Quran and as such, women are not ordained to do what has been a male-

dominant interpretation of verses [16]. Even so, analyses of the An-Nur verse in the Quran found that modesty was outlined as a form “protection” for women against sexual wrongdoings and slander, albeit from the male perspective; “...O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): this is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And God is of forgiving, most merciful. (33: 59)” [17]. al-Balali contended in a Hadith that among “Hell dwellers” are women who wear clothes but exposes parts of her body that could incite sexual urges from a man such as wearing transparent or tight clothing [23]. Additionally, Al-Azhab verses reiterated the Prophet’s interpretation of Islamic dress as the intention to separate civilized human from the animal state, and as an indication of piety, tidiness and personal tastes upon attending religious ceremonies. Another Hadith from Bukhari and Muslim remarked, “... Abu Mas’ud ‘Uqbah bin Amr al-Ansari al-Badri (ra) reported that the Messenger of Allah said The Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him said: ‘Among the early prophetic teachings that have reached the people is this: if you do not feel shame, do what you wish’ ” [18]. The excerpt proposed the concept of “shame”, where good character and religion is inculcated to avoid it at all costs. In essence, modesty refers to subdued sexuality of female Muslims through respectful garments whilst also determining the role of women in the society that seeks appreciation. The use of hijab for this purpose, however; was influenced by Arabs in its early inception that use embroidery and colors which later experienced worldwide socio-economic and political transcendence over the centuries, commonly referred to as “Arabicization” [4], [11].

Scholars established that print media is imperative in creating awareness for the hijab and modest dressing as an attribute of Islam particularly in non-Muslim majority countries [19],[20]. The use of hijab allows appreciation of Islamic religious practices and the acculturation of non-Muslim audiences in their behavior towards the Muslim community. In more recent years, Turkey has integrated branding strategies with the use of English-related names that promise heightened status quo and suggest that hijab wearers are distinctively modern through commercial visuals of gadgets such as mobile phones [21]. Authors argue that hijab fashion is at the center of capitalism, modernity and consumerism that inadvertently highlighted inconsistencies of religiosity in the images presented, particularly in magazines. [11]. Similarly in Indonesia that is known as the biggest Muslim country in the world, the hijab is inspired by religious teachers but reproduced by local designers for women in modern Islamic fashion magazines and promote exaggerated versions of modesty which ironically contradicts the idea of concealing a woman’s beauty or lowering a man’s gaze [22]. Marketing approaches that push the hijab as elite and unique made female Muslims even more transparent and brings up the question whether if ever the veiling fashion was at all “Islamic”[24].

Despite the grand focus on media visuals that purportedly commodify the practice of the hijab; the practice of modesty in Malaysia was supported by a majority of undergraduates influenced by the Islamic movements in Turkey and Egypt, which only then in the 1980s that modest dressing or commonly referred to as “Busana Muslimah” became popular [25]. As such, available information on Islamic culture helped media users appreciate the phenomena. The build-up of knowledge in various communication channels, such as extensive tourism campaigns had presented Islam as a prevalent culture through representations of Malay women who wear hijab thus became an identifier for Muslim tourists and provided them with a sense of security and camaraderie [26]. Several Muslim-centric women’s magazines such as *Nur* were introduced in 2002, offering spiritual wellbeing through Islamic guidance on lifestyle, career and fashion. A decade later, its publisher *Kumpulan Media Karangkrif* offered a contemporary new magazine called *Hijabista* that specifically represented Muslim fashion for the urban Malay woman and is derived from the fusion of words “hijab” and “fashionista” [27], [28]. Its tagline “Stailo & Sopan” (stylish & modest) gave readers the perception that flows of modernity and modesty should complement each other. *Hijabista* resorted to social media to keep connected with readers where in its first year, it achieved 64,870 likes on Facebook and now the number has increased to 317,965. *Hijabista* is also popularly trending on other platforms such as Twitter (9571), Instagram (47,300 followers) and Pinterest (2839 pins). On conventional media, its commercial success tapped into the production of a weekly television programme by the same name (*Hijabista*) on urban Malay television channel *Astro Ria*. The programme is sponsored by Sunsilks, a prominent haircare brand where the joint venture, aside from discussing the magazine’s covered topics; featured a segment called *Dunia Lola*, which entailed the life of a young woman that dreamed to become a hijab fashion designer whilst promoting Sunsilks shampoo for women in hijab through product placements [29]. Although the growth of *Hijabista* is encouraging, the most significant feedback it received was an open letter written by an anonymous writer, “A Worried Muslimah” that became

viral on the Internet. The post was liked by 2200 users and shared 97 times on Twitter¹ after its contents disapproved the commodification of hijab fashion in Hijabista [30]. As such, a conflict of interest is observed through the public rise of the hijab that sought attention rather than preserving the sanctity of modesty for Malay-Muslim women.

Based on the discussion above, this present study aimed to assess the role of Hijabista magazine in creating awareness of female modesty through Malaysian media. The study examined the possible factors that created resonance of the hijab among urban Malay women by analysing content that reinforce hijab awareness among media audiences. Finally, the study explored the commodification of the hijab that redefined the identity of Malay-Muslim women. For the purpose of this study, the following enquiries were posed: 1) The extent of hijab-wearing that was covered in the magazines; 2) the sources that contributed to content about hijab wearing; 3) frames used in the coverage of hijab-wearing in local media.

3. Theoretical Framework

This exploratory study attempted to make sense of hijab pervasiveness among Malay-Muslim women in conventional Malaysian media, namely magazines. Entman described “framing” as a form of perceived reality which highlights a particular issue for further understanding, ethical evaluation or to prescribe a remedy for the situation defined [31]. The crux of the analysis looked into a framing concept within progresses and shifts of the studied environment to obtain social cues for interpretation. Goffman contended that individuals involved within a social phenomenon sometimes are unaware how adept they are to changes in the frame of time and space. [32]. The study of framing in communication research involves; first, frames of societal discourse and second; the effects of framing upon audiences. This particular study looks into the conduits that are instrumental in “frame building” the cultural context of the hijab in Malaysian media with meaning of its (the hijab’s) re-introduction. Gamson and Modigliani described this culture-specific perspective as a form of cultural resonance [33]; where Scheufele emphasized on the frame contest, a negotiation of media audiences on practices of elite members belonging to a popular culture of which this study refers to the rapid-growing excess of hijab in the media. While such frames could be established inductively and deductively dependent on the paradigm of the study [34]–[36], this study administrated a qualitative approach to the analysis in identifying emergent frames and categorizing them during the analysis as opposed to calculating and evaluating evaluate headlines, texts and such as commonly practiced in the more traditional forms of content analysis. The breadth of coverage on the hijab is derived from generic news frames of selected reports from chosen magazines.

The media frames discovered in the process of analyses are correlated to the uses-and-gratifications (U&G) model by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch [37]. Scholars have long discussed the empirical research of obtaining gratification through an individual’s media usage. The tenets approached in this theory comprise of; i) *cognitive needs*, including acquiring information, knowledge and understanding; ii) *affective needs*, including emotion, pleasure, feelings; iii) *personal integrative needs*, including credibility, stability, status; vi) *social integrative needs*, including interacting with family and friends; and, v) *tension release needs*, including escape and diversion [37]–[39]. Users who are in need of materials to create their personal identities will reinforce the gratification effect of media in itself [39]. Individuals who are involved with the U&G mechanism are likely to possess self-development needs that require resolution through change of perception, lifestyle, and socio-political affiliations retrieved from their media use.

4. Methodology

The method of content analysis was used assess a series of Islamic womens’ magazine for urban Malay women. The title of magazine chosen is Hijabista, a new publication from Kumpulan Media Karangraf produced in the Malay language which circulation are encouraging at 45,000 copies [28]. As this a preliminary study, purposive sampling were administrated on three issues that were examined for this study, from June 2012 to August 2012 to trail the launch of the Hijabista magazine in its first quarter of production. The units of analysis are textual, visual and are focused on columns; including editor’s notes, feature writing, news reports, fashion reviews as well as letters from readers. As such, a total of 40 articles were analysed from all three magazine issues. The intention to sample issues published within this quarter is due Ramadhan and Syawal

¹ Information as at 19 April 2015

celebrations on the Muslim calendar that are expected to have a significant hike in magazine sales and advertising. A 30-item codebook was prepared based on components from Entman’s five traits that have impact on frame reference and information processing [31]: 1) *important judgments*; 2) *agency*, or the answer to a question; 3) *identification*; 4) *categorisation* and 5) *generalisation* in a broader national context. Three elements were chosen and operationalized in this study and those included: 1) *extent of coverage* – measured from quantity of articles obtained mentioning the “hijab”, type of article and category of reporting; 2) *sources* – information obtained about the hijab, which attributes interview sources with interviewees from the industry, community members et cetera; 3) *frames* – the three frames established in this study were: i) *prominence* – stories that include discussion of the hijab with public figures and notable personalities; ii) *communal experience* – stories that highlight events and experiences related to hijab wearing relevant to the readers; iii) *identification* – stories that discuss about the hijab that promote its awareness and proliferation among Malay-Muslim women.

The study deployed two coders to ensure reliability of data where both coders possess relevant communication background to reflect upon the issue at hand. The first coder acted upon creating the codebook for reference of the second coder who was briefed accordingly upon the needful requirements of analysis. Both coders analysed data collected and discussed the similarities and differences that were discovered. All data collected were tabulated manually and are presented as descriptive statistics.

5. Findings

5.1. Extent of Coverage

As seen in Table 1, the data analysed featured the hijab as the core of Hijabista. A majority of its reporting is dedicated to hijab fashion trends and recommendations of the hijab styles. As seen in the August 2012 issue, the core of fashion advice was hijab styles for the festivities of Eid. Nonetheless, other issues examined also displayed continuously highlighted image consulting through fashion editorials, as well as feature articles that speak of the hijab as an important article of clothing. This was similarly evident from news reports of social events and happenings mentioning “hijab” in the texts analysed.

TABLE I: Extent of Coverage on Hijab Wearing

Channels	Hijabista (n=40) %
Editor’s Note	7.5
Feature Writing	20.0
News Report	17.5
Letters from Readers / Opinions	10.0
Fashion Reviews / Recommendations	45.0

5.2. Sources

Obtaining the right source of information is essential to assimilate the theme of modesty onto the readers’ minds. In Table 2, the analysis found feature writers’ experience and observations on the “act-of-veiling” important to make the content relatable to the reader in feeling the personal connection to their own hijab experience. To increase credibility to the content published, endorsement of veiling is highlighted through opinions of image consultants and style experts. A column called “Soal Jawab Fesyen” (Fashion Question and Answers) was facilitated by popular hijab advocate and celebrity named Wardina Safiyyah.

TABLE II: Article Sources

Channels	Hijabista (n=40) %
Feature Writers	27.3
Editors	5.0
Readers	12.5
Style Experts	37.5
Product Consumers	10.0
Prominent Figures	12.5

5.3. Frames

Prominence - In newswriting and reporting, prominence appeals to readers as opinion leaders are able to influence the opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of others [40]. The data obtained in Table 2 saw profiling of opinion leaders such as celebrities and prominent figures that speak about modesty and its role in their lives. This frame of “hijab elite” was established as early as in Hijabista’s introduction issue in June 2012 with film actress Diana Amir, actress and former sex symbol that spoke about adapting easily to hijab with abundance of designer clothes in the market that are suitably modest. Indonesian hijab designer Dian Pelangi strived to change the perception of hijab as “conservative dressing for rural folk” in an article entitled “Fashion is An Option – Love it or Leave It”. A YouTube celebrity and blogger; Maria Elena shared how she first became popular from contributing tutorials on hijab-wearing styles online of which significantly increased her authority as a public figure, thus became the catalyst to her role as host to hijab fashion television show, “Entri Jameela”.

Communal Experience - Hijabista contradicted its goals as a magazine and guidance for Malay-Muslim women. Ideally, a Muslim magazine should offer a sizeable amount of enlightening spiritual advice to its readers in relations to the practice of hijab among women in Islam. The findings of religiosity-related items reported are scarce as seen in Table 3. However, the visibility of hijab in visuals and feature stories written is noticed despite overwhelming fashion-related items and covers mostly on hijab-related events and happenings in major cities for the benefit of the readers to participate in.

TABLE III: Percentages of religiosity presented in articles

Channels	Hijabista (n=40) %
Article headline	15.0
Story content	22.5
Visuals used	30.0

Nevertheless, few articles written attempted reinforce the idea of hijab and reassure the readers that modesty is the right path. In examples, the “Fakta” segment available within the magazine in the August 2012 issue discussed scientific advantages related to the practice of hijab that promoted health and general well-being. In its July 2012 issue, an article entitled “Cetusan Hijab Seantero Loka” chronicled the evolution of hijab as a touch point to young women who are immersed in the creativity and hybridity of hijab fashion as it appears today.

TABLE IV: Percentages of Most Emphasized Topics

Channels	Hijabista (n=40) %
Sharing of hijab styles	27.5
Reiteration of modesty	13.5
Profile of Prominent Figures	12.5

Identification - Hijabista used stylistic narratives such as *hijabista*, *hijabster* and *hijabi* interchangeably as reference to the readers. In the July 2012 issue hijab fashion designer, Hana Tajima revealed veiling trends in her hometown of London, citing the term *hijabi* and *scarflets community* that refer to stylish Malaysian women in hijab. Although unconventional, they provide personalization that creates a bond between the magazine and readers. Meanwhile, photography is also a retention points for readers. In Table 5, the analysis revealed that Hijabista devoted up to 81% of its content to fashion editorials and advertising, which visuals are comparable to international fashion magazines such as Vogue and Cosmopolitan, recursively prescribing products in abstract, futuristic and avant garde themes. A column named “Tiru Gaya” (Copy This Style) featured snapshots of international celebrities’ fashion styles with an accompanying sketch of how women in hijab could look like them albeit with modesty elements illustrated in fashion sketches. This column was consistent in all issues.

TABLE V: Incidence of Photographs in Coverage of Hijab Wearing

Channels	Hijabista (n=40) %
June 2012	81.4
July 2012	77.1
August 2012	75.0

6. Discussion

This present study observed the pageantry of Malay-Muslim women in magazines that are devoted to postmodern representation of Islam in the transformed hijab. Hijabista carried a more liberated construct and denounced conservativeness with adaptation of Western publication styles from popular fashion capitals such as America and the United Kingdom whilst localizing them in efforts to stay relevant with the changing times. Scholars have recognized media development that reorganize around the commercial principle of production of culture for profit or commodification [41]. With a more globalized outlook on media trends that integrate the hijab as an ultimate signifier for modern Malay-Muslims, various forms of creative expressions of modest dressing resonate in the minds of urban Malay-Muslim women.

7. Conclusion

Consumer culture builds frames that allow people to craft a specific personality they want to project, of which a consumer is subject to collecting memories that provide gratification to this desire. “Surrogacy” of cultural artefacts that emerge within a consumer’s consensus through his or her consumption [42] held the view that Hijabista practiced religion-centric marketing (or lacking thereof). Based on the findings of this study, the frames produced by Hijabista magazine built a hybridity of contradicting identities. Returning to the users and gratifications model discussed earlier in this paper, the magazine’s most noticeable strategy is repeating cycle after cycle of hijab visuals, styling consultation and hijab-related jargons in order for audiences to feel accomplished with knowledge obtained from the publication. Prominence of personalities featured in the magazine also incite desire among readers to join the bandwagon and have a sense of belonging amongst the new, trendy elite members of the Malay community and yet still obtain credit as a covered Muslim woman. The hijab has potential to become a tool for social change and economic growth to the community of urban Malay women; however, its place in the identity of Malay-Muslim women is short of conviction and is still muddled between religion and Western imperialism. Nevertheless as a result of the preliminary findings discussed, this study can be extended into a more comprehensive examination of the push and pull of marketing behind the cultivation of modesty that inspire Malay women to experience the hijab.

8. References

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