

# **FASHION: MALAYSIAN MUSLIM WOMEN PERSPECTIVE**

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## **Abstract**

This paper introduces an in-depth discussion of the various interpretations of what fashion is, and the items considered as part and parcel of fashion. Generally fashion is seen as an object of beautification for women, yet it brings new meanings to their lives when it enhances self-confidence, facilitates the communication of their self-identity and self-esteem, besides depicting their culture or society. A discussion of the purposes of fashion items such as shoes, makeup/cosmetics, apparel and accessories is discussed. A section of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the Muslim scarves (hijab), as the focus of this paper is on the perception of what fashion means to Muslim women. This paper serves as a fruitful insight into the minds of the Muslim women consumers and provides impetus for the marketing of fashion-related items to serve this segment of the market. A conceptual framework developed for this study would be the initial attempt at developing a more comprehensive study into the related moderating and mediating variables that has an effect on fashion. This study also suggests that future researchers may consider testing the proposed model empirically, not only in Malaysia but also in other countries. Lastly, a promising attempt would be to test for invariance among different countries on the same model.

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**Keywords:** Fashion, muslim women

## **Introduction**

Men and women perceive fashion in the same way and it holds importance for both genders equally. However, women's fashion holds more prominence as women are considered more fashion conscious than men, it tends to attract lots of people. Giving this fact, every year new designer clothes are made on a large scale keeping in view the current fashion (Kaiser and Chandler, 1984).

Apart from this, another aspect that greatly impacts women's fashion is beauty. Therefore, it becomes quite important to be mindful about various beauty trends to match with the latest fashion. Being acknowledged about beauty trends may include various facets, for instance: makeup, footwear, accessories, clutches, matching belts, etc. In simple words, anything that helps in beautifying oneself (Park, 1996, Tan, 1987; Sureshchandra, 2001).

In Malaysia, fashion items are the most purchased items through online sites. Besides clothing, which contributed 54% of all purchases done in the festive seasons, bags and accessories are also a favourite item (53%) ([www.venusbuzz.com/](http://www.venusbuzz.com/)).

In fact, it was reported in the Malaysian Ecommerce Index of August 2013 that, clothing, accessories and jewellery items are the most bought items online contributing 59.5% of all online purchases, more than health and beauty and consumer electronics. Jewellery is also another fashion items for Malaysian women. Malaysia has become a potential market for various international brand costume jewellery as it is favoured over real ones for safety reasons. The market for real jewellery is also in demand, with many outlets such as Habib Jewels, Poh Kong, Wah Chan, to name a few.

The market for cosmetics has also been encouraging. Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MA), reported that the total market for cosmetics was valued at RM321.2 million with imports of cosmetics and toiletries accounting for 72.3% of the domestic consumption in 2012. Clothing for the Muslim women has evolved from the modest Baju Kurong and Kebaya to the more elegantly decorated jubah worn with modern looking head scarfs, blouses, pants, and skirts. A lot of online shopping sites offer the women abundance of choices in materials, designs and colours. Some of these are, Summaya, Zalora, Lazada, and many others.

Fashion is perceived in many ways. Some people see fashion as means of self-expression and beautification. People may dress up in a way that would help them to be associated with a particular clan of people while others dress themselves up like their favorite artist (Jonathan, 1982; Sproles, 1979; Summers, 1970). Apart from this, some people do not like to associate themselves as being fashion conscious and intentionally keep themselves away from the conventional fashion just because they want to be seen as unique in themselves (Kacen, 2000; Kaiser, 1974; Kwon, 1991). However, others may not like to follow fashion trends just because of the mere looks or the current fashion does not hold any importance for them.

Dressing up is part of fashion and it serves as a mean of identifying oneself with others. Cash (1990), Kwon (1991) and Lang (1961) suggested that it becomes important for people to ensure that the way they dress up is accepted by a particular culture or society of which they want to become a part of. If, however, the way a person carries himself does not suit with the

traditions of a society then that individual may change his dress up the way acceptable (Fenigstein *et al.*, 1975; Gould, 1989).

Fashion also communicates one's self-identity (Lang, 1961; Robinson, 1958; and Nam *et al.*, 2006). When an individual is keeping oneself updated with a current fashion knowingly and unknowingly he/she is communicating to the society of who they are and what is important for them. Also it is quite likely that a specific pattern of dressing may be viewed as completely different in two different countries giving their different beliefs and cultures (Manrai, 2001; Park, Richards & Sturman, 1977; 1996; Richards, 1977). For instance, wearing of skirts is seen as normal in the western cultures whereas, the same pattern of dressing sense is not acceptable in Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, etc. Therefore, it becomes quite significant to be aware of the society, culture and beliefs that an individual is living in while they follow latest fashion trends. Hence, it becomes inevitable to explore those factors that are considered "fashion" by Muslim women.

### **Objectives**

The main objective of the present research is to explore those factors that are considered fashion by Muslim women. Further, based on the extensive review of the literature, of the past almost half a century, a conceptual model is also proposed for future empirical testing.

### **Literature review**

According to Psychologist Hurlock (1929) "Fashion is something that keeps changing as a series, when the choices of certain group of people change, which may or may not be complemented by utility, nor are decided by it." From an economics and marketing perspective, Nystrom (1928) stated that "fashion is simply a style that becomes popular for a given period of time." Retailer Daniels (1951) also suggested somewhat the same definition of fashion as "anything that becomes suitable/apt for that current period of time."

Lang (1961) is of the view that fashion "Is a basic form of behavior, wherein the driving force is exhibited through the inherent following and conscious decision of the various masses." Robinson (1958) more generally defined fashion as "a hunt for originality for its very own purpose." Fashion is also considered an ever-changing design of various things to make them more attractive (Robinson, 1961). Further, according to King (1964), "adopting fashion is a social taint by which a consumer adopts a novel style or item when it is introduced by the producer, designer or the retailer."

Fashion is continuously being used in today's world to help people express their identity. Clothes and fashion are becoming a medium for

people to express their behavior. According to Cash (1990), Kwon (1991), and Humphrey *et al.* (1971) people adopt latest fashion in order to raise their self-esteem. These researchers are of the view that when people wear good clothes and are up-to-date with the current fashion, they tend to stay more positive, are more proficient in their work and are more extroverts as compared to people who do not feel good about their appearances. Fashion communicates something about ourselves and Stone (1962), summarizes this clearly in his statement that, “a person’s appearance announces his identity, shows his values, and expresses his mood, or proposes his attitude.”. Evan (1989) summed it up by stating that, “ fashion consumption is often a manifestation of self-image.”

Fashion conscious behavior becomes a significant factor while observing the self-concept of fashionable people Fenigstein *et al.* (1975). Gould (1989) and Fenigstein *et al.* (1975) examines that self-consciousness of fashionable consumers becomes the foundation for concept of fashion consciousness. Fashion consciousness as described by Nam *et al.* (2006) “is the degree to which an individual is involved with the fashionable apparel”. Therefore, according to Richards and Sturman (1977) and Kaiser and Chandler (1984) the clothing retailers find this feature (fashion consciousness) in an individual opportune, as they do not have to put many efforts to make a consumer develop an interest in any fashion apparel discounts/promotions. Any person interested in fashionable apparel and his/her appearance can be considered as fashion conscious; it is not important that an individual has to be a fashion modernizer to be termed as fashion conscious (Kaiser, 1984; Manrai, 2001; Park, 1996; Richards, 1977). Fashion consciousness varies by country. This is evidenced from a study conducted by Parker *et.al.*, (2004), where significant differences were found between Chinese teens and their Japanese and US counterparts. However, fashion is not only clothing or accessories. The meaning of fashion is different for different people (Tan, 1987; Walsh, 2001). Like everything else, people have a different point of view about fashion. For some, it involves only clothing while for others; it may include shoes, bags, purses and other similar things (Tan, 1987; Sureshchandra, 2001; Park, 1996; Richards, 1977; Patterson, 2002; Shim, 1997). Some individuals tend to believe that makeup is the only thing that constitutes as fashion. According to Summers (1970), Sproles (1979), Jonathan (1982), Kacen (2000), Kaiser (1974) and Kwon (1991) fashion is a very broad and general term and encompasses a lot of components that make it a whole. In fact, new things are added into the fashion genre every day. For example, having a snazzy phone cover would not have been considered such a big part of fashion two or three years ago. But today, people consider it essential to have cellphone covers matching to their outfit or at least that their phones look really attractive and flashy.

There are many important aspects of fashion but the focus of this paper would be on those facets, which are extracted from the review of the literature. These are also those aspects that the scholars have shown agreement in considering it as a dimension of fashion. In the following section, these facets will be highlighted separately in light of the literature.

## **Shoes**

Shoes are considered as one of the most important fashion items. According to a survey in the USA, each person holds about an average of 10 pairs of shoes and about 20 billion of shoes are produced worldwide per year (Albers *et al.*, 2008; Kalita, 2004; Joan, 2011; Kim, 2002; Kumar, 2000). Footwear or shoes, includes many categories and types like high heels, sports shoes, sandals etc. Shoes can be designer-made, custom-made or produced in masses. Kumar (2000) and Russel (2003) are of the view that people see shoes as an extension of identity. He, along with Nam (2007), Neill (2007), Parson (2003), Perry (2011), Roslow (2000) and Saha (2010) suggested that people perceive their shoes as not only an extension of one's identity, but also as having effects on the individuals perception about oneself and on others. For instance, women in Korea, who are more image conscious, buy shoes that look more attractive and appealing, without putting much emphasis on the quality (Yoh *et al.*, 2011). However in America, women buy only branded shoes as they consider the shoes as an extension of their expression and identity (Belk, 2003; Roslow, 2000).

Shoes, sometimes also referred to as footwear, can be a captivating item in clothing that help us express our identity, giving an insight to who we are and what we can accomplish (Arnold, 2001; Belk, 2003; Chaudhri, 2006; Clarke, 2002; Goodman, 2011; Koda, 2011; Luce, 1998). Belk (2003), Lancioni (2006) and Seferin and van der Linden (2012) explicated that women's shoes represent a symbol of power and status in the society. In addition to these, Mulhern *et al.* (2003), Nosek *et al.* (2002), Fatt (2000) and Creekmore (1974) postulated that women are very much attracted and give much attention to the footwear that they buy because of comfort and their personal choices. The behavior that is depicted by a woman when it comes to shoes shows how important footwear can be to women. The painstaking efforts that women go to in order to have flattering footwear clearly demonstrates that it is not only a symbol of fashion but also the mental satisfaction of creating a good impression.

## **Makeup/Cosmetics**

When it comes to management of ones looks, it not only limits to clothing or apparel but it can include cosmetics, bags, watches and any other items that helps an individual to add glamour to their appearance. People

tend to purchase more clothes of different brands and flashy colors and cuts to enhance one's social image, in similar manner cosmetics of various brands are preferred by people to enrich an individual's style and appearance (Aaker, 1997; Brown *et al.*, 1990; Bulace, 2000; Cash, 1988; Cash *et al.*, 1989; Craik, 1993). According to Beil (1993), Jamal (2001), Fournier (1994) and Kaiser (1997), it has been seen that when women purchases clothes, the makeup usually follows it. This means that women purchases the cosmetics that complement their clothing to develop a perfect eye catching look. Craik (1993) explicated "make-up as something that engraves the features of who we are, and our personality on our body". Having said that, this means that make-up not only helps us to give a complete eye-catching look but it also reflects "optimistic affirmation of an individual's own self".

It is seen in the western world that women usually use make-up to enhance their attractiveness physically. According to Mulhern *et al.* (2003), Wood (2004), Aucoin (1997), Chao (1998), Cox (1986), Fatt (2000), Kyle (1996) and Nosek *et al.* (2002), cosmetics play an important role when it comes to enhancing ones attractiveness because they improve the overall symmetry of the face. For example, foundation and concealer helps to even down the patches and blemishes or pimples on the face resulting in the perfect and smooth skin while covering all the imperfections, lip-stick and eye make-up helps to beautify and even tone an individual's lips and eyes (Aucoin, 1997; Johnson *et al.*, 1997; Quant, 1996). According to Belk (1984), Elliott (1994), Freitas *et al.* (1997) and Banister and Hogg (2004), if there is uniform evenness in the overall body and face of both sexes, they are automatically perceived as attractive. This uniform symmetry can be useful for both women and men to represent a confident, vibrant and self-possessed character, which can help them to take advantage in the work/employment setting.

Cash *et al.* (1989), Beil (1993), Jamal (2001) and Brown *et al.* (1990) are of the view that women tend to be more self-confident and can express themselves more openly and positively when they have make-up on, as compared to when they are without make-up. Creekmore (1974), while addressing clothing as an "adaptive function", suggested that it could help an individual to enhance ones appearance and feeling about oneself. In a similar manner, cosmetics also help women to feel confident and self-assured about themselves.

### **Apparel & Accessories**

All facets that involve management of an individual's external looks or appearance are significant to the process of fashion. Scholars like Rudd and Lennon (2000), Wood (2004), Tidwell et al; (1992) and Malhotra (1981)

described dress as “as an action of selecting and deciding how and with what products/things can an individual beautify his/her personal appearance”.

According to Zaichkowsky (1985), Mayer and Belk (1985), Goldsmith *et al.* (1996), O’Cass (2000), Chowdhary (2000), Kozar (2005) and Hansen and Jensen (2009), women are more fashion conscious and are more attracted to fashion apparel as compared to men because it (apparel) helps to build ones identity. Kaiser and Freeman (1989), Ogletree *et al.* (1990), Bakewell and Mitchell (2003), Piamphongsant and Mandhachitara (2008), Hansen and Jensen (2009) and Workman and Lee (2011), are of the view that women, as compared to men, are more sentient about their looks and personality. Women are seen to pay more attention to their appearance in comparison to men. Researchers Banister and Hogg (2004) further mentioned that women use fashionable clothing as a way to enhance/improve their self-identity and their self-image. Every woman wants to look unique and distinct from one another and it holds more importance to teenagers. However, other researchers like Greco (1986), Rocha *et al.* (2005), Birtwistle and Tsim, (2005), Szmigin and Carrigan (2006), Borland and Akram (2007), Kozar and Damhorst (2008) and Thomas and Peters (2009) totally contradicted by stating that women of every age group whether young or elderly hold the same obsession about fashionable apparel and fashion consciousness, their obsession with good-looks does not fade away with age. Kozar and Damhorst (2008), Majima (2008) and Thomas and Peters (2009) postulated that in most cases the family or close friends of the aged and elderly women help them to guide in the selection of apparel that focus more on maintaining the self-esteem and the self-identity in the society.

Discussion about Fashion is not complete, if it does not involve accessories. Accessories can involve anything ranging from stocking, gloves, headscarves, sunglasses, hats, belts, jewelry and other hosiery items (Pemala, 1997). However, according to Curan (1996), Dardis *et al.* (1981) and Hessen (1996) when a person talks about Fashion, the first thing that comes to our notice is apparel. Nonetheless, as the topic about fashion broadens, one can see the importance of accessories in fashion as they solely help in enhancing the attractiveness of an outfit (apparel). Moreover, Nelson (1989), Norm (1992), Wagner (1983) and Mckay (1994) suggests that many women believe that apparel alone is not enough to beautify them, but rather, accessories play a major role in adding attractiveness to their looks. Therefore, just as we can say that fashion is not limited to apparel; we can say accessories are much more than just the fashion items (Deaton, 1980; Douthitt, 1988; Silverman, 1996; Zhang & Norton, 1995).

### **Hijab**

Hijab as a symbol of Islam serves as an identity of the Muslim woman showing her devotion and sincerity to her religion (Islam) and helps

her being identified as belonging to the Muslim community (Dunkel *et al.*, 2010). Hijab or covering of head is considered the only way by which women can keep herself distant from all the *fitnah* and endure respect for her in this *Dunya* and *Akhirah*. In the current society, a woman does not veil while at home and outside they wear attractive clothing and accessories along with their Hijab to make them look attractive in the society (Afifi & Abdullah, 1921; Khairat & Ahmed, 1975; Al-Hamid & Muhammad, 1978). According to the Holy Quran in Surah 33:59 and in Surah 24:31 “*the women are not allowed to display her personal charms to anyone except her husband*”. Islam is not a severe religion; women can look good but within the limits that are prescribed in Quran and Sunnah. According to Yusr and Viren (2009), Abbas (2005), Ahmed (1992), Allen (2005), Ruby (2004), Ben and Jawad (2004), Rayuso (2008) and Monkeayeva (2012) now-a-days women cover their heads wearing tight fitting Abaya with different designs and glitteriest look that highlight curves of their body and modestly underlining their best features. Islam does not prohibit women to wear good scarves or veils, veils with a little embroidery within the bounds of Islamic decorum are allowed unless and until they are worn in the right manner without showing of hair and shape of their body.

One of the inborn distinctive characteristics of a human being is striving to look unique and different from others and this characteristic becomes more important when it comes to fashion. Abbas (2005), Neilsen (2001), Vassilis *et al.* (2009), Ruby (2004), Sheridan (2004) and Swami and Hull (2009) suggested that fashion is not just restricted to what we wear but it also depends on other products that include jewelry, perfumes, footwear and Hijab etc. Basically, we can say anything that adds attractiveness to our looks. Muslim Fashion is continuously becoming a recent interest in the fashion line. With inspiration from Western countries, fashion magazines greatly influence Muslim girls to look great in their outfit at the same time covering their Body (Latiff & Fatin, 2013; Robinson *et al.*, 2012; Toprak & Uslu, 2009; Reeves & Azam, 2012; Monkebayeva, 2012). Further, Hanzee and Chitsaz (2011) and Latiff and Fatin (2013) and Robinson *et al.* (2012), are of the view that the role of media gives a kind of exposure to this kind of thinking and show them new ways of wearing Hijab that gives them perfect attractive look, while covering their body. Muslim women, especially today’s generation, are continuously looking for new ways where they can stay up to date with the current fashion and also keep themselves covered, so Muslim designers design clothes and started mixing Hijab with the latest fashion which has blurred the main reason and true meaning of Hijab (Chachi, 2008; Latiff, 2013; Monkebayeva, 2012; Reeves & Azam, 2012; Toprak & Uslau, 2009; Zwick & Chelariu, 2006;).

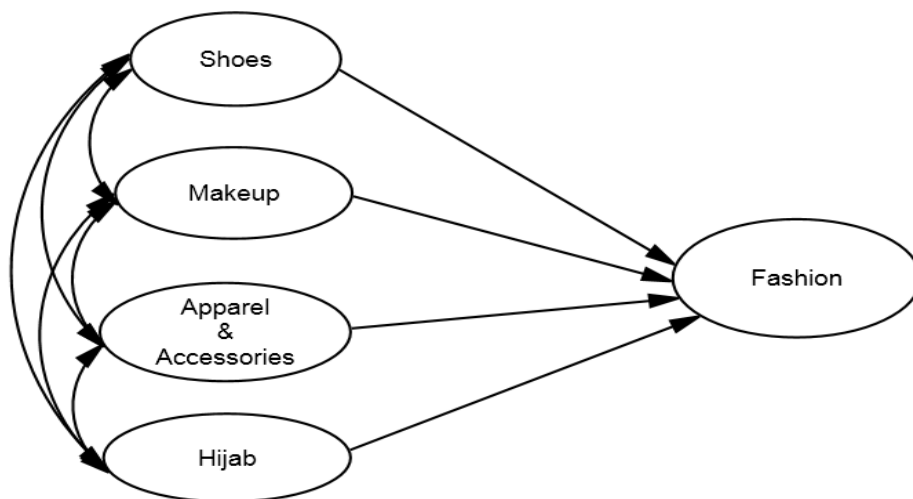


Therefore, this inner dilemma of a woman to stay attractive even while covering her head is solved when hijab becomes trendy (Abbas, 2005; Ben & Jawad, 2004; Buraey, 2004; Latiff & Fatin, 2013; Rayuso, 2008; Ruby, 2004). Many researchers, like, Hanzee and Chitsaz (2006), Monkebayeva, 2012; Rayuso (2008), Robinson *et al.* (2012), Toprak and Uslu (2009), Yusr and Viren (2009), and Zwick and Chelariu (2006) are of the view that this dilemma arises when Muslim women are confused between keeping the modesty in their Hijab according to Islam and following the fashion trends by wearing stylish hijab according to modern fashion that fashion industry demands.

**Proposed model**

The broad examination of the existing literature brought up four main constructs related to fashion; namely, shoes, makeup/cosmetics, Apparel & accessories and Hijab. These facets, as emerged from the literature, are also measured carefully by the authors in assembling the planned model for Hijab as a symbol of fashion. In the projected model (see Figure 1) the four main constructs are treated as independent variables. All these independent variables are supported by the literature and are testified to have positive effect on fashion consciousness.

Figure 1  
Conceptual Model of the study



**Proposed methodology**

For future researchers, who wish to adopt the model of the present study and embark on an empirical testing, it is suggested to follow some important steps in order to test the model. Firstly, data should be collected

from females of different age, education and income level in Malaysia, but special care should be taken, as the study focuses on Muslim women only.

Secondly, the collected data should be checked for any missing responses, outliers and normality, in order to prepare it for further analyses. Reliability tests should be conducted to check the consistency of the scale, followed by exploratory factor analyses (EFA) to find out the number of dimensions underlying the data. It is also an important stage because this way the proposed dimensions and the explored dimensions can be compared. Thirdly, the explored dimensions should be confirmed through confirmatory factor analyses (CFA). This step will help to test for the validity of the instrument too. Finally, the causal linkages or hypotheses, as devised, may be tested to see the impact of the proposed variables on Muslim women fashion.

### **Conclusion**

From the detailed review of the literature on the topic, it is evident that there are many factors that can be crowned as fashion with regard to the perception of women. These factors include: shoes, makeup/ cosmetics, apparel and accessories, and hijab. As this study intended to explore factors from Islamic perspective, especially Muslim women, it can be noted that “Hijab” was also researched and associated with fashion. The present paper, therefore, conceptualized many imperative factors and proposed a model for further investigation and empirical testing, as a valuable contribution to the literature.

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