

**Mini Review**

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# The Fashioning of Southeast Asian Muslim Women's Clothing from the Perspective of Social Phenomena and Global Market Changes

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**\*Corresponding author:** Hyewon Park, Professor, Department of Clothing and Textiles, Changwon National University, Korea.**Received Date:** February 08, 2022**Published Date:** February 16, 2022**Abstract**

Religions are among the most universal and influential social institutions, and they exert significant impacts on the attitudes, values, and behaviors of individuals and societies. Previously quite closed, Muslim women's fashion has become trendy—a phenomenon most evident among young generations of women in Indonesia and Malaysia. This study examines the background and significance of the dynamic changes in fashioning that have occurred in the clothing of Southeast Asian Muslim women. Simultaneously, it investigates the emergence of Southeast Asian Muslim women consumers as an essential force in the global fashion market and the influencers that exert tremendous power over them. Finally, the study analyzes fashion trends in Southeast Asian Muslim countries. As an expression of individual fashion desires, the fashioning of Southeast Asian Muslim women helps elucidate trends in the current social environment. At the same time, in the midst of a rapidly changing international trade environment, Southeast Asia is attracting global attention as a fashion market.

**Keywords:** Modern Muslim fashion; Modest fashion; Hijaber; Hijabista; Indonesian Muslim fashion; Malaysian Muslim fashion**Introduction**

An unprecedented change has occurred in 21<sup>st</sup>-century fashion. The clothing of Muslim women is emerging as an increasingly popular modest fashion in the existing global fashion system. Young Muslim women are driving this trend. They live in big cities, achieve high levels of education, and actively engage in society. They also actively express themselves, both online and offline. This emerging fashion trend in a once very closed society has arisen predominantly within a new generation of women in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia. Given religion's status as among the most universal and influential social institutions that impact the attitudes, values, and behaviors of individual and societies [1], research regarding changes in fashion as a part of "social-cultural phenomena" influenced by religion is crucial to understanding the desires of individual consumers and their social significance.

This study has two purposes. The first is to examine the background and significance of the dynamic changes in fashioning that have occurred as part of Southeast Asian women's social experience. The second is to analyze the influencers who have contributed to the emergence of Southeast Asian Muslim women as a global fashion market and observe Southeast Asian Muslim countries' fashion industry trends. As in other countries, the fashion industry in Korea has recently been forced to contend with two important changes: the industry's digitization and the exploration of new markets abroad to stimulate limited domestic markets. These two challenges could be addressed together. In 2017, the South Korean government announced the New Southern Policy, a foreign policy initiative designed to strengthen political, economic, social, and cultural ties with members of the Association of Southeast

Asian Nations (ASEAN formed in 1967) and India, emphasizing the diversification of the international market. The Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency's strategic report regarding entry into the ASEAN market contended that Korea must appeal to the online and home shopping markets used mainly by young consumer groups and identified five promising consumer goods (agricultural and marine products, cosmetics, fashion and clothing, lifestyle, and children's products, and medical products). In particular, the report identified the fashion industry, and specifically Muslim fashion, as the most promising market [2]. Thus, analyzing and seeking to understand the emerging Southeast Asian Muslim fashion market, which is showing increasingly significant potential in the global market, is critically important.

To this point, studies of Muslim fashion have mostly been conducted in Europe and the Middle East and have focused on the consumption trends of younger generations evident in street fashion, including hybrid identity changes observed among young Muslims living in Europe who are contending with pressure to compromise their traditional cultures. Other studies have considered sensitivity to the fashion product consumption trends among Indonesian Muslim women, hijabber fashion trends, influencers who significantly impact fashion trends among Indonesian Muslim women, and hijabista fashion awareness in Malaysian hijab fashion consumption. Most studies have analyzed the new values emerging among young Muslims. Therefore, this study's consideration of Muslim women's fashioning in terms of changes in social phenomena and the global market is meaningful and timely.

## Islam Revival Movements and Hijab in Southeast Asia

Islam is the largest religion in Southeast Asia. It was first introduced to the region by Muslim traders who frequented Southeast Asia at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. At the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, an Islamic kingdom was established on the northern coast of the island of Sumatra in Indonesia. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the religion had spread to the island of Java and most other Indonesian islands except for Bali [3]. Islam harmonized with prevailing naturalist ideologies in Southeast Asia by emphasizing a faith grounded in central notion that "humans are just a part of nature," which became possible thanks to the natural environment of Southeast Asia [4]. Islamization started in Arab countries in the 1960s and subsequently spread to Southeast Asia, emphasizing a belief that Islamic values and religious activities should play a role in politics, the economy, dress, food, clothing, and people's general lifestyles. Islamic Revivalism emerged in the 1970s in Indonesia and Malaysia; marking a step forward from the past, its proponents called for a "return to Islam by revolting against political corruption" and advocated for the revival of the Islamic spirit and values [5]. Led mostly by intellectuals who benefited from new economic policies (religious groups, university students, the middle class, and city immigrants) that emphasized the fundamental teachings and principles of Islam, this movement impacted the general lifestyles of Indonesians and Malaysians. Islamic Revivalism constituted a political and religious revolution that focused on a democratization, human rights, and freedoms, demanding action to

empower people and boost their economic capabilities. In its focus on the "public demand," it closely resembled other democratic movements. Religion served as an effective medium for delivering these requests [6], and democratization through Islamic Revivalism involved the creation of a new Islam, where the hijab was used as an external expression of Islamic spirit and values. As the movement spread, Muslim women initiated a feminist movement that sought to protect the values, their social status, and identities of Muslims. Wearing a hijab became the symbol of their movement [7]. Similarly, as the movement spread in Indonesia, women who had previously hesitated to wear hijabs began wearing them freely in the 1990s. Once reluctant to wear hijabs due to the negative perception, women who started to attend universities learned the importance of Islam started to wear them. Their actions helped spread the positive image of the public wearing hijab.

Meanwhile, a second wave of Islamic Revivalism during the 2000s gave rise to Pop Islam. Nicknamed Modern Islam, Pop Islam refers to a mix of Islam, democracy, and the culture that developed among middle class urban-dwelling Muslims. Media advances heavily influenced the democratization of Pop Islam. The number of conscious and educated Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia who received Western education or higher education (i.e., universities) increased in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This increased women's participation in professional jobs, made more jobs available to them, and boosted their social status. Most importantly, it transformed the social meaning of wearing a hijab. For professional women, wearing a hijab became a symbol of the higher education they had received. In other words, for middle-class women, it became both an expression of high socioeconomic status and a fashion item to express beauty.

Thus, although Western Christian countries tend to equate hijabs with the oppression of women's rights and freedom, wearing a hijab in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a primary means by which Muslim women distinguish themselves from other cultures and a potent symbol that defines their identities. We can no longer say that Muslim women wearing hijabs means they are bereft of freedom: the "hijab is a symbol that represents the identity of Muslim women with Islam values." With the emergence of Pop Islam, Indonesian Muslim college students stated, "It is cool to wear the hijab." They understood that the hijab is not about oppression, and most educated people know that Islam is very democratic [8]. In Pop Islam, the hijab is "an item that helps express oneself," "chosen by the person wearing it willingly." Changes in perceptions regarding the wearing of the hijab started with Islamic Revivalism in Indonesia and Malaysia, and the act came to carry great significance beyond the covering of a person's head; interacting with modesty, morality, beauty, religion, and society, donning the hijab became a tool to communicate one's identity. Non-Muslims need to acknowledge such cultural differences and learn to appreciate diversity in fashion.

## Economic Growth and the Fashion Industries in Indonesia and Malaysia

Among Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia and Malaysia have particularly high proportions of young people who are keenly interested in fashion. Rapid economic growth and urbanization have

fueled the preference and consumption of luxury brands. In 2013, Muslims spent \$266 billion on clothing, surpassing the fashion revenues of Japan and Italy [9]. The US-based magazine *Fortune* has stated that while Muslim-associated businesses have tended to skew toward finance and halal food, fashion has unlimited potential in the Muslim market [10]. The fourth most populous country in the world, Indonesia is home to 250 million people, 87% of whom are Muslims. It is the best and largest country in terms of geography and culture in ASEAN and is the third-largest democratic country (after India and the United States). Indonesia emerged as the Mecca of Muslim fashion thanks to its unique culture that blends years of tradition with extensive Westernization caused by prolonged colonial occupation. Moreover, it is one of the most open countries in Southeast Asia and among Islamic countries. Economic growth spurred a rapid expansion in the Indonesian middle class after 2000. Fast-paced economic growth also triggered modernization and the elevation of the lifestyle goods consumption market. While the Indonesian consumption market previously focused on price, middle-class purchasing power has driven a shift toward a focus on brands and quality. The high proportion of people in their 20s and 30s has also contributed substantially to the popularity of the beauty and fashion industry.

At the heart of Indonesia's fashion industry lies the government and the Femina Group, the country's most representative fashion media group. Since 2008, the Femina Group has hosted Jakarta Fashion Week—Southeast Asia's largest fashion show. In addition, the Indonesia Islamic Fashion Consortium, a consortium backed by the Indonesian government, has endeavored to help the country's fashion industry develop into a Mecca of Muslim fashion. Meanwhile, the Muslim Fashion Festival, first hosted in Jakarta in 2016, draws together six countries and gives Indonesian fashion designers opportunities to experience the global popularity of Islamic fashion and expand their brands abroad.

Meanwhile, Malaysia is the epicenter of finance in Southeast Asia. It boasts great diversity, mixing Asian, European, and Middle Eastern cultures. Muslims comprise more than 60% of its population, and it is deemed an open, modern country that serves as a crossroads between the Muslim consumption market and Western consumption patterns. Malaysia is now simultaneously undergoing rapid urbanization and economic growth, and this expansion of urban populations, high earners, and the middle class has initiated changes in the quantity and quality of goods in the market. In particular, with piquing interest in fashion and beauty, many luxury goods and fast fashion companies have entered the Malaysian market and begun competing fiercely for survival. Meanwhile, thanks to active government support, the e-commerce market is also growing, and many experts predict the Malaysian fashion market continue to grow. The Malaysia External Trade Development Cooperation pushes for fashion as the country's core export industry. Although domestic brands remain small, Malaysia has hosted the Malaysia Fashion Week since 2014, attracting many talented Asian designers to Malaysia and making Kuala Lumpur the hub of Asian fashion [11]. As such, thanks to rapid economic growth, an expanding young population and middle class, and active government support for the fashion industry, Malaysia, once

the financial hub of Asia, is increasingly an important locus for the fashion industry as well.

In the past, the flat, shallow seabed between the Malaysian Peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago has facilitated connections between Indonesia and Malaysia. This geographical proximity has naturally given rise to population exchange and trade. Thus, numerous factors including language origins, tropical climate lifestyle patterns, colonial experience, and the economic power of overseas are common to both countries. Most Southeast Asian countries have achieved meaningful economic growth despite global economic depression, and the Indonesia and Malaysia are attracting global attention as two promising markets. Moreover, the determination of the two countries' governments to open up their economies has facilitated their emergence and growth. With high labor productivity and proper infrastructure and networks in place, they are growing together as important contributors to the global fashion industry.

### **Acknowledgment of Diversity and the Globalization of the Modest Fashion**

Modest fashion refers to a modern fashion style that seeks to avoid revealing individuals' silhouettes and minimizes body exposure by conforming to the traditional Islamic religious values of humility and modesty. It has gained global popularity since global fashion designers took an interest in Muslim culture and incorporated traditional Islamic clothes into their fashion collections. These designs acknowledge multiethnicity and multiculturalism, proposing modern and unique looks by reinterpreting the traditional image of the hijab, a characteristic item worn by Muslim women.

For example, Max Mara presented a Muslim city look with Halima Aiden wearing a hijab over a trench coat. Aden was once a Somali refugee. She also appeared on the cover of *Vogue* in May 2018 under the theme "The next-generation fashion faces as forces of change." Meanwhile, in 2015, British model Mariah Idrissi became the first Muslim model to wear a hijab in H&M's "Close the Loop" campaign. Alexander Wang's collection also included a model wearing a hijab tightly over her head and other fashion items in black and white to create a sophisticated city look. In addition, since 2015, UNIQLO, a fast-fashion brand, has collaborated with fashion designer Hana Tajima, who redesigns traditional styles to give them a modern and sophisticated look. They have introduced Modest Fashion lines for Muslim women that include items such as hijab skirts and tunics every season. In sum, global fashion companies have influenced the fashionization of hijabs by showcasing various items that go well with them. They have also cast celebrities to wear hijabs in commercials. Lastly, the national-level support for the fashion industry has impacted people's perceptions of the hijab by introducing Muslim fashions that embrace both traditional elements and modern trends.

When famous Western designer brands joined the hijab fashion trend, fashion shows featuring Muslim clothing began to be held in non-Islamic countries. This trend indicates that the branding and differentiation of the hijab as a luxury item are underway. Furthermore, the hijab is being converted into a fashion outside the

context of religious attire. Once a specific religious item, the hijab is now at the center of the global fashion trend involving numerous reinterpretations and creations by world-class fashion designers, from high to fast fashion. This development paved the way for Modest fashion to gain fame in the global market where it can be enjoyed by everyone regardless of religion or culture. The fashion industry is changing—moving away from conventional standards of beauty, acknowledging diversity, and respecting the value of fashion itself. This change has helped demonstrate the potential and value of traditional Muslim fashion.

### The Impact of Hijabista

The emergence of hijab fashion is strongly connected to the rise of the hijabistas, a group of influencers who wear fashionable clothes and influence the public while conforming to Islamic norms of attire. The numbers of hijabistas have increased [12]. In addition, since information is now easily accessible through social media, modern Muslim women can easily keep up with the latest trends. Today, trendier and more stylish hijab fashions are broadly accepted. Representative hijabistas include Dian Pelangi, an Indonesian Modest Fashion designer and founder of the hijaber community. Another is Neelofa, a Malaysian actor, who launched her own brand targeting Muslim women around the world. These hijabistas' fashion is helping people to see the symbolic meaning of social prejudice or discrimination against Muslim women in a new light. Their influence on Muslim women has spread rapidly thanks to increasing Internet penetration and the spread of social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, which have enabled hijabistas to share new and various hijab-wearing styles and unique fashions in real-time. As such, social media play an important role in Indonesian Muslim women's consumption of Islamic fashion. Social media also help them to see how fashionable Muslim women can be and reaffirm their identities as Muslim women. Fashion consumption is an expression of desire to clarify one's identity. Hijabistas still follow their religious doctrines but are also very trendy, which means they see the development of their community as positive.

Hijabistas like Dian Pelangi, Zaskia Sungkar, Zaskia Adya Mecca in Indonesia and Neelofa, Vivvy Yusof, and Yuna Zarai in Malaysia have introduced new and diverse lifestyles and uniquely Muslim fashions to the world through social media. They showcase fashions for Muslim women who wear veils. The expansion of the online market and the consumption behavior of the younger generation implies that these Indonesian and Malaysian influencers are using religious symbols such as veils and fashion clothing items to follow Islamic norms while pursuing a wide variety of global fashion trends. In the end, from a strategic point of view, hijabista fashion is an important force that should not be overlooked when considering the expansion of global fashion—these women exert a great influence on general Muslim consumers.

### Results

This study examined the emergence of Muslim women's clothing as a fashion phenomenon in the Islamic cultures of Southeast Asia, focusing on Indonesia and Malaysia, which are attracting increasing attention as new global fashion markets. It analyzed the

global fashion industry from the perspective of social phenomena and global fashion. Pop Islam, born out of post-2000s democratic movements in Indonesia and Malaysia, increased the number of Muslim women with Western higher education or experience studying abroad, and as women's social status and participation increased, a rapid change took place in wearing the hijab. Indeed, the hijab has become a fashion item middle-class Muslim women use to express diverse aesthetic desires while boasting of their high social and economic backgrounds. For young Muslim women living in cities, the hijab has come to represent a lifestyle that balances religion and fashion. The act of wearing the hijab has changed since it has come to be perceived as a social fashion item. From college students, politicians, and bankers to artists, the hijab has become an indispensable part of women's lives. Wearing a hijab does not make religion stronger; it is just "one of the clothing lifestyles of modern Indonesia." Although hijabs are related to religion, they also represent a trend whereby women believe they look prettier when they wear them. Younger generations have embraced hijabs for two reasons: "to belong to Islam" and to symbolize their engagement with "modern life" and their status as "modern women." Therefore, while young Muslim women in Indonesia may be wearing hijabs for religious reasons, unlike in the past, they are also doing so to convey a modernized global female image. They regard wearing the hijab as more beautiful. Young female Muslims now consider wearing the hijab as fashionable and a form of self-expression. Meanwhile, the development of the Internet and social media has strengthened the influence of hijabistas and paved the way for the emergence of Modest Fashion in the global market. Today, the global fashion culture has come to respect the diversity of aesthetic values. Thanks to this movement, the hijab, a religious item, has been widely reinterpreted by global fashion brands and designers. In their free approach to fashion, hijabistas have come to serve as role models for young Muslim women, fusing their religious beliefs and individual personalities while embracing global fashion and helping to make Southeast Asian Muslim clothes a global phenomenon. This mini review has demonstrated that young Muslim women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century clearly view the hijab as a fashion item rather than restrictive, religion-mandated body covering. This fashionization of Southeast Asian Muslim women is a form of self-expression that simultaneously reflects the desire for fashion and provides a glimpse of the contemporary social environment. Furthermore, it shows that the Muslim community is increasingly drawing the world's attention as an important fashion market in the rapidly changing international trade environment.

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### Conflict of Interest

Author declares no conflict of interest.

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