

The Eco-Islamic Ambivalence of the Modest Fashion Industry

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Abstract: From an environmental perspective, the modest fashion industry presents real challenges, and further points to some ambivalences when dealing with Islamic ideals on consumption. Examining a selection of case studies can indicate a (re)framing of certain Islamic conceptions, where consumption and spirituality are not mutually exclusive. Further, it points to some of the complexities dealing with consumer behavior.

Keywords: modest fashion, eco-Islam, consumer behavior, environmental ethics

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1. Introduction

An examination of the way in which consumption is treated in the eco-Islamic discourse reveals a conception – based on both verses in the Qur’an and Prophetic narrations (*hadith*) – that encourages moderation and overall support the argument of engaging in ethical and sustainable consumer behavior. The Qur’anic verses on consumption stresses excessive waste and overconsumption as damaging to human spirituality, leading to unjust actions (Abdelzaher et al., 2017). Further, the Islamic concept of *iktisad* encourages a frugal approach to consumption while engaging in spiritual practices that seeks to address inner desires for material goods and build a foundation for greater satisfaction by focusing on gratitude and personal relations (Fagan 2016; Khalid 2019). The emphasis in the eco-Islamic discourse on consumption is commonly placed on spirituality as an alternative cure to overconsumption or consumerism (Abdul-Matin 2010; Fagan 2016; Khalid 2019). However, drawing on a selection of secondary case studies that deal with modest fashion illustrates an ambivalence between these theoretical ideals on consumption and actual Muslim consumer practices. Here, attention is drawn to some of the social and political factors that contribute to shaping consumer behavior, whether conscious or unconscious. Seen through environmental lenses, the ‘Islamic’ fashion industry presents a major challenge to environmental ethics in Islam. It is then relevant to explore how Islamic expressions are communicated through ‘Muslim’ consumption, as well as the ways in which this could inform the eco-Islamic field regarding consumer behavior. While there is a consensus regarding the damage that the capitalist market and overconsumption exert on the environment, there is very little research exploring the impacts of these settings on Muslim practice and thought. In this report, I highlight how a few selected studies dealing with the modest fashion industry all reveal a different discourse on consumption, illustrating that social, cultural, and political factors contribute to shaping consumer behavior.

2. Selected secondary studies dealing with the modest fashion industry

In a study from the Indonesian context, Jones (2010) points to a growing number of fashion brands and fashion magazines promoting a 'modest' style, maintaining Islamic clothing conduct in terms of covering the female body. This discourse frames Islamic ideas of modesty and piety along conceptions of beauty and cleanliness. Arguments such as "God appreciates beauty" and "It's sunnah to always look clean and presentable" are often highlighted to promote the consumption of modest fashion clothing (Jones 2010, 619).

In another study from Kuwait, Al-Mutawa interviews young girls in the Kuwaiti upper-class society who are consumers of Western luxury high-end brands and the cultural role that these brands play in social interactions. The article is directed at marketing agencies, providing insights into advertising appeals for this specific consumer group. While there is no focus on religious or spiritual practice, this study indicates that Islam or at least its cultural signifiers can co-exist with conspicuous and status-seeking consumption in the realm of fashion clothing (Al-Mutawa 2013). In a third study, Imène Ajala introduces terms such as 'cool Islam' and 'pop-Islam' to describe Islamic streetwear worn by Muslim youths. According to Ajala (2018, 61), such terms describe young Muslims abiding by conservative religious practices, while adopting the codes of youth and pop culture. Islamic streetwear is defined as a style of urban clothing which considers Islamic prescriptions in terms of dress and occasionally conveys Islamic messages. The focus of the study is Islamic messages printed on t-shirts and hoodies stating: "I love my Prophet", "Tawhid" (oneness of God), "Sabr" (enduring in hardship) and "Keep smiling it's Sunnah". Ajala argues that these youths' social and political reality must be considered, especially those residing in Western societies. By employing theories of multi-cultural identities and secularism in a globalized religious community, Ajala argues that clothing carrying messages such as "Hijab – My right My choice", "I'm Muslim Don't panic" and "Don't trust media ask me about Islam" must be understood within the socio-political reality in which these young Muslims live. In this sense, in a Western setting, 'cool Islam' or 'pop-Islam' are ways to claim pride in being a westernized Muslim without any contradiction (Ajala 2018, 68). Ajala's research points to some important findings about Muslim consumption in a geopolitical context of a post-9/11 Western society, where many Muslims feel "the urge to counteract the negative label of terrorism attached to them by trying to 'normalize' their image as modern and ordinary citizens in contemporary society" (Jafari and Sandikci 2016, 6).

3. Findings from the Norwegian context

Finally, two examples from the Norwegian context are highlighted in the author's master thesis (Furehaug 2020). Iman Meskini – an influencer and actress from the popular youth series SKAM – and Rawdah Mohamed – a model, influencer, and editor of Scandinavian *Vogue* – are both outspoken about their choice and right to wear the hijab and indicate that modest fashion in many ways is used by Muslim women to counteract views of the Muslim woman as passive, oppressed, and voiceless. These two examples are important because they point to other aspects in addition to reframing ideals of modesty in Islamic clothing conduct, such as their position as role models to the young Muslim community in Norway. It points to issues of inclusivity and representation of a minority in a Western majority setting, contributing to breaking down stereotypes and building bridges to the majority population. This means that issues on inclusivity and representation can be important factors in Muslim consumer behavior. Further, both Meskini and Mohamed highlight personal religiosity, emphasizing

rituals such as praying and fasting, which they openly display on TV and in social media, thus indicating that spirituality can exist alongside expressions of consumption.

4. Conclusion

All of these different studies reveal different discourses on consumer behavior, where consumption and spirituality are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They point to complex relations between consumption and religious practice and identity, reframing ideas of modesty and piety through consumer behavior, as well as navigating stereotypes and negative representation. While there is rich material in the Islamic tradition to support the ideals on consumer behavior outlined in the eco-Islamic discourse, these case studies point to some important insights. This could entail that a holistic approach to consumption should also pay attention to the perspectives of lived religion, social, political, and cultural factors, and the power of relations of contemporary capitalism.

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