

## **147 Navigating the fashion-faith landscape in Malaysia: the influence of fashion bloggers on Generation Y Malay females' fashion consumption**

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### **Keywords**

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### **Abstract**

Originating as a hobby to journalise one's daily routine, fashion blogging has evolved to become an important fashion reference source and a medium for fashion engagement. Fashion bloggers have become key influencers and opinion leaders, with the ability to persuade followers to buy or adopt their fashion style.

This study explores the role of the fashion blogger in a non-Western cultural context where religious norms restrict females' ability to engage fully with fashion trends. Modest wear is worn by females who embrace Islam as their faith and must cover the entire body, except for face and palms. Malay female fashion bloggers have a different dress code to Western fashion bloggers, due to religious norms and the cultural context. However, in Malaysia there are more options for modest wear than other Islamic nations (e.g. colour, shape, form and fabric), so bloggers engage with global fashion trends by taking a unique 'mix and match' approach that combines Islamic apparel and Western styles.

Although younger Malay generations show interest in Western fashion styles, they must adhere to Muslim values of appropriate dress. Caught between fashion trends, religious values and the cultural context, they must adhere to the limits on their selection of clothing imposed by their faith in order to be accepted by society. Therefore, they need trustworthy sources for style ideas that minimise the social risk of purchasing something inappropriate.

This study takes a qualitative approach to understand how Malay female Generation Y fashion consumers are influenced by fashion bloggers to balance fashion trends, religious values and cultural context when shopping for fashion. Netnographic data was gathered from the comment threads of two Malay female fashion bloggers over a three month period, alongside interview data from 16 Malay female Generation Y fashion consumers.

## **Introduction**

Social media offer many advantages to many parties. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube allow users to search for information quickly and easily (Christodoulides et al. 2013), while Web 2.0 functionality for peer-to-peer exchange of content (Lin et al. 2017) enables users to easily express their opinions or share information with others. Fashion bloggers (or influencers) also use social media to share fashion tips. Famous and influential fashion bloggers are able to connect many fashion fans all around the world and offer fashion information to their followers or other consumers, and at the same time are able to trigger consumer purchase decisions for fashion products (Esteban-Santos et al. 2018).

Nevertheless, consumer behaviour is complex, and socio-demographic factors such as religion, culture or age affect fashion consumption. Certain religions significantly impact the ability of their members to follow fashion, for example, Muslims are restricted in the type of apparel they may choose (O'Cass et al. 2013). Similarly, culture also affects fashion consumption (Almila, 2016), for example in terms of what to wear in order to be accepted by a society. Younger generations may have different fashion tastes compared to their elders, for example by moving from traditional to modern or Western wear. However, they must also conform to Islamic restrictions on dress. Therefore, these consumers are looking for valid sources that can satisfy their needs alongside religious and cultural requirements. Hence, this study explores the role of the fashion blogger in a non-Western cultural context where religious norms restrict females' ability to engage fully with fashion trends, and how they lead fashion consumers to navigate the fashion-faith landscape.

## **Literature Review**

The internet and social media in particular are among the main channels for brand marketing activities (Grewal et al. 2013), due to their functions and features that provide convenience in terms of time, place and accessibility for users (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Fashion products are promoted on social media to reach more consumers, and this has become one of the most important channels for fashion marketing (Esteban-Santos et al. 2018). As social media allow users to exchange content and can be accessed publicly, they provide a means for retailers to learn about consumer behaviour and purchasing decisions (Marian, 2015), for example

reading fashion consumers' comments and reviews to better fulfil their expectations.

Fashion consumer behaviour differs according to demographic factors, for example religion and culture, that may lead to different choices in fashion consumption (O'Cass et al. 2013). For instance, Muslim females adopt different styles to Western fashion consumers due to the dress restrictions that they must follow, emphasising modesty or covering of the body, and avoiding transparent materials or tight apparel, to name a few. However, studies on Muslim fashion consumers are sparse (Farrag & Hassan, 2015). Muslim fashion trends are driven by both dress restrictions and consumer desires for the latest trends. As such, Muslim fashion consumers seek out relevant sources that can lead them to appropriate apparel choices that satisfy religious and cultural expectations. One of these sources is modest fashion bloggers.

Fashion bloggers have evolved from hobbyists to becoming one of the most important stakeholders in the fashion industry. Starting from posting a daily diary of their personal style where they present the latest fashion trends, updates or other fashion issues, they have become valid sources for fashion inspiration or reference (Rocamora, 2011). Although the number of fashion bloggers is increasing, not all bloggers can be famous or influential (SanMiguel & Sadaba, 2018). They must have certain criteria to be influential or considered as fashion opinion leaders, such as great fashion knowledge, involvement in fashion-related activities and a high number of followers, whereby they have the ability to convince others and influence purchase decisions (Delisle & Parmentier, 2016; De Veirman et al. 2017; Shen et al. 2012). Their creativity in sharing fashion information, including text, videos and images, plus being good storytellers, has enabled them to powerfully influence fashion consumers' purchasing decisions (De Valck & Kretz, 2011) and become endorsers for fashion products.

Established fashion bloggers are increasingly employed as endorsers for fashion brands, with the purpose of promoting their products (Sherman, 2013). Examples include Italian fashion blogger Chiara Ferragni, who endorses brands such as Chanel, Balenciaga and Fendi, as well as US fashion blogger Danielle Bernstein who endorses brands such as Banana Republic, Dior and Balmain. However, despite the increasing number of influential fashion bloggers globally, studies on fashion bloggers mostly focus on Western contexts (Kulmala et al. 2013; Halvorsen

et al. 2013; Sadaba & SanMiguel, 2016; Esteban-Santos et al. 2018). Few studies on Islamic fashion bloggers exist, for example Lewis (2015) who identified the role of social media of bringing women into contact with each other for online modest discourse, and how modest bloggers make visible and lend credibility to new forms of modest dress. There is a research gap in exploring how Islamic fashion bloggers can influence Muslim fashion consumers in navigating the faith/fashion landscape by choosing apparel that accords with their beliefs and cultural background.

## **Methodology**

A combination of qualitative techniques was employed to obtain rich data: netnography and semi-structured consumer interviews. Netnography is a qualitative research method of exploring online culture and consumer behaviour through ethnographic techniques that are conducted online, for example by analysing user-generated content such as comment threads on social media platforms (Kozinets 2010; Bartl et al. 2016). Semi-structured interviews permit researchers to gain more insights from relevant respondents who are willing to express their feelings, experience or opinions by answering the questions asked (Rowley, 2012). This mix of qualitative techniques can provide richer data and obtain deeper insights, as seen in previous studies including Ertimur & Gilly (2012), Weijo et al. (2014) and Kozinets et al. (2016). Ertimur et al. (2012) explored consumer-generated ads through a netnography of a website and interviews with 14 respondents. Weijo et al. (2014) undertook a netnography of an online community websites and conducted 16 semi-structured interviews. Kozinets et al. (2016) employed the same approach to investigate online sharing of food photos, with a social media netnography and 17 semi-structured interviews.

Following Kozinets' (2010) guidance, two famous Malaysian bloggers on Instagram were selected based on four criteria (active on social media, posting relevant posts, number of and engagement with followers, and rich in data), as shown in Table 1 below. Instagram is one of the most relevant platforms for fashion engagement and promoting fashion products (Phua et al. 2017) and both bloggers had more followers on Instagram compared to their accounts on other social media platforms. The duration for the netnography data collection was 3 months from 1 January until 31

March 2016, and the final dataset comprised of 85 fashion-related posts from both bloggers (50 by Blogger A and 35 by Blogger B).

Table 1: Selection criteria of fashion bloggers

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Blogger A</b>	<b>Blogger B</b>
Active on social media	Share posts and interacts almost everyday	Share posts and interacts almost everyday
Posting relevant posts (fashion products)	Fashion products, food, work, family, events	Fashion products, beauty and cosmetics, food, work, family, events
Have many followers and engage with other users	The most active social media platform is Instagram, where she has almost 600,000 followers	The most active social media platform is Instagram, where she has almost 100,000 followers
Rich in data (comment threads on social media)	Uses multiple social media platforms – Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Blogspot	Using multiple social media platforms – Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Blogspot

Next, a semi-structured interview topic guide was developed from the literature review and the netnography analysis. Snowball sampling was used to achieve a final sample of 16 consumer respondents for the semi-structured interviews, by asking previous respondents from the initial pilot study if they knew anyone else who met the sampling criteria, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Consumer respondents selection criteria

i	Female
ii	Generation Y (aged 18-36)
iii	Follow fashion bloggers
iv	Engage in social media platforms

Female consumers were chosen because they are associated with fashion and buy fashion products more than men (Ruane & Wallace, 2013; Cho & Workman, 2011).

Generation Y was chosen because its members are more exposed to social media than previous generations (Bolton et al. 2013).

Informed consent was gathered from the interview respondents prior to the interview. The bloggers' and respondents' confidentiality and anonymity were respected by using pseudonyms to replace personal names.

Finally, the data were analysed using template analysis (King, 2012), conducted manually following established procedures in similar previous studies, such as Kulmala et al. (2013), Parrott et al. (2015), Pihl (2014) and DeLassus & Freire (2014). The netnography data were transferred to Microsoft Word and totalled 60 pages (6208 words). The selected comment threads were coded into themes (using different colours of highlighter pens) and narrowed down into subthemes.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

Both bloggers actively use Instagram, with the engagement and number of followers far higher here than on their other social media accounts. Three principle themes and six subthemes emerged, as shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Final Template

<b>THEMES</b>	<b>SUBTHEMES</b>
1. Malay Bloggers' Influence on Followers	1.1 Malay versus International Fashion Bloggers
	1.2 Islamic Fashion Opinion Leaders
	1.3 Fashion Legitimation
	1.4 Life Inspiration
2. Effect of Religion in Fashion	2.1 Restrictions in Fashion
3. Malay Fashion Interpretation	3.1 Flexibility in Fashion

#### **1. Malay Bloggers' Influence on Followers**

International fashion bloggers have a big role in influencing fashion consumers. However, most consumer respondents tended to follow local fashion bloggers for

their fashion reference. This theme is important because it concerns the effects of fashion bloggers on fashion consumers, especially towards adopting the juxtaposition of Islamic and Western trends.

### **1.1 Malay versus International Fashion Bloggers**

Most respondents followed local rather than international fashion bloggers for their different fashion style, as local bloggers emphasise the 'appropriateness' as a Muslim. Respondents feel confident and safe because these fashion bloggers show the correct way of wearing the apparel according to the basic religious values in Islam and are able to satisfy followers' needs for fashion trend information:

*Respondent 1: 'I don't follow the international bloggers because their styles don't fit me as a Muslim. Hence, I will search the other bloggers, particularly local, who I think suitable with my styles as a Muslim'.*

*lym\*: 'I just simply love how you dress up so effortlessly (simple) but still look so classy and modest!!... (referring to a post by a local fashion blogger who is wearing a blue loose top with grey hijab and pants).'*

However, being of a younger generation, respondents expressed a desire to be fashionable as well as modest. Hence, local fashion bloggers become their fashion inspiration by providing valid information and displaying balanced combinations of Islamic and Western styles:

*hdl\*: 'I'm really loving the top (modest wear) with the white jeggings (Western trend) in all honesty! And the heels (western trend), bag (Western trend) and the hijab (modest wear) and the whole combination is on point ok @srh\* @nrl\*'*

### **1.2 Islamic Fashion Opinion Leaders**

Local fashion bloggers become valid fashion sources, confirming the previous Western study by Rocamora (2011) that fashion bloggers are key players in the fashion industry. The bravery of fashion bloggers displaying the combination of modest and modern wear is able to satisfy many parties such as religious values and cultural context, encouraging followers to adopt the same style. Hence, these fashion bloggers have become fashion opinion leaders for current Muslim fashion styles: both modest and modern:

Respondent 11: *'As a member of Generation Y, I feel so lucky to be exposed to the fashion's world. I prefer leisure style but elegant. For example, I like the concept of 'mix and match' displayed by local fashion bloggers. I always stylise a simple robe, but I like to match it with branded handbags (luxury) same like what fashion bloggers display'.*

hdl\*: *'I'm really loving the top (modest wear) with the white jeggings (Western trend) in all honesty! And the heels (western trend), bag (Western trend) and the hijab (modest wear) and the whole combination is on point ok @srh\* @nrl\*'.*

### **1.3 Fashion Legitimation**

Most consumer respondents agreed that Malay female fashion bloggers are able to create new fashion trends to be followed or be a trend setter among Malay fashion consumers, particularly the combination between Islamic and Western style. This style is accepted by followers to fulfil their youthful desire as a Muslim (to be fashionable and respected). Respondents also believe that local fashion bloggers have the power to change fashion trends among Malay females, as they understand the needs and wants of the local consumers, who may be a little afraid to start a new trend:

Respondent 7: *'Fashion bloggers help me a lot. If they do not exist, we don't have trendsetter, so we don't know how to do 'mix and match' (Islamic and Western). Without them, styles are boring and people are afraid to try new things. So when fashion bloggers wear something, we can wear it too, so thanks to them. I really like their styles, follow what they wear, ideas even though not 100% similar. I will search for something similar [...]'.*

yzm\*: *'Wow... that shining top (Western trend) looks good with that hijab (modest wear). I have never thought of that. You are a brilliant fashion trend setter@v\*'.*

### **1.4 Life Inspiration**

Malay fashion bloggers are not only becoming an inspiration for fashion styles but also a life inspiration, particularly showing the improvement of women's life in Malay society by having a career. Their openness in sharing their lifestyle or life journey has become an eye-opener and motivation for other Malay women who would like to develop a career:



Respondent 14: *'A part of being beautiful and cute, they also inspire my life. Being a blogger, I know they are busy. But at the same time, they involve in business, have a family but still have time to update and share the stories, activities and lifestyle on their blogs. So amazing! This has inspired me to be successful like them'*.

fgx\*: *'You are my inspiration, V\* (referring to a local female fashion blogger). You have inspired the world, you have inspired all the young adults and you have inspired me to keep going in terms of business relation. [...] thank you for being an insta-addict :p (i.e. frequently updating the content). It keeps me motivated when I feel like giving up [...]'*.

## **2. Effects of Religion in Fashion**

Findings confirm that religious values affect fashion purchase decisions (O'Cass et al. 2013). This theme is important because it concerns the challenges and guidelines for Malay female consumers in choosing the correct apparel according to religious values.

### **2.1 Restrictions in Fashion**

Despite the existence of dress restrictions, most respondents support the introduction of new fashion trends among Malay fashion consumers by fashion bloggers (juxtaposition between Islamic and Western styles). This suggests that the younger generation of Malay fashion consumers have shifted from pure modesty to a combination of modesty and fashion-consciousness, to improve their style whilst still conforming to societal expectations. It is important to note that religion does not prohibit Muslims from seeking and trying other trends, as long as they know how to balance them with modesty:

Respondent 4: *'Ok, now I am in my early 20's; I really emphasise on the way of wearing clothes, has to be edgy, chic and latest trend (Western), but I match them with modest wear. I am not afraid to wear a funky style at my age'*.

Respondent 14: *'My fashion style is more to body covering (Islamic way) such as shawl, cardigan, pants, hijab, and natural classic such as Bohemian (Western) style and experimental. Experimental means, I want to try something weird but fun'*.

fts\*: *'I am always amazed when you look so good, so stunning in your culottes plus bright hijab (Islamic). Just as simple as that. You win... @v\*'*

### **3. Malay Fashion Interpretation**

Malay culture also affects fashion choices. This theme emphasises how local society (cultural context) influences fashion product selection among Malay female consumers and adaptation of dress as females move away from traditional societal roles and enter the workplace. One sub theme that emerged is flexibility.

#### **3.1 Flexibility in Fashion**

Respondents liked to explore new fashion trends. Despite dress restrictions, their choice of apparel is more flexible than in many other Muslim countries, as in Malaysia there are more options for modest wear than other Islamic nations (e.g. colour, shape, form, and fabric). Hence, they can choose from pure modesty to a combination with other trends (juxtaposition of Islamic and Western) and still be accepted by local society. Additionally, Malay women nowadays are more modern, contemporary and their traditional role in society has evolved as more find paid work and develop careers, with a greater focus on their lifestyles compared to Malay women from previous eras. Therefore, their appearance also changes to fit this new environment and is applied in various contexts, including daily wear and workwear:

*Respondent 11: 'I am able to choose the styles or trends to match my jobs [...] because I consider the correct apparels which satisfy all parties as a motivation and to earn a high level of confidence'*

*Respondent 2: 'I emphasise a lot on fashion styles. As a 28 years old employee in a big company; my appearance needs to be elegant and convincing. [...]. What I mean by elegant is to look good and modern, especially during working hours. I like striking colour because it can attract people to focus on me when I talk to them'*

## Conclusion

The role of the fashion blogger in a non-Western cultural context where religious norms restrict females' ability to engage fully with fashion trends is that of an intermediary figure that leads fashion consumers in their navigation of the fashion-faith landscape. Current fashion styles among Malay fashion consumers are changing from pure modesty to adopting Western styles to enhance their appearance and fit the current society. Nevertheless, the clash of fashion ideas between Islamic and Western remains, due to the dress restrictions practiced in Islam. Therefore, consumers are looking for valid fashion sources to provide them with fashion inspiration that satisfies other requirements too, in particular religious and cultural values.

This study is among the first to study Malay fashion bloggers and consumers. It extends the developing literature on the influence of fashion bloggers as valid fashion sources (e.g. Rocamora, 2011; Esteban-Santos et al. 2018), by showing that fashion bloggers are a key trusted source for the latest Muslim styles and act as an intermediary to reconcile the discord between Islamic and Western styles, thus leading consumers through the faith/fashion landscape. It also contributes to the emerging literature on the modest fashion blogosphere (Lewis, 2015) by uncovering the perspective of Muslim females who want to balance fashion desire with modesty. As young and fashionable Muslims who want to follow the latest trends, Malay consumers have broken with tradition to a certain extent. Instead of rejecting Western or non-Islamic trends, they carefully select apparel that conforms to religious and cultural requirements of dress, and mix them with modest wear. Moreover, this study also reveals that not only do fashion bloggers become a fashion inspiration or reference, but also an overall life inspiration by sharing their life journey openly. Their journey is very different from previous Malay women in terms of their career, and encourages other females to move away from their traditional societal role and improve their life accordingly.

A limitation of this study is the small sample of consumers that may not be generalised to the entire Malay female population. Respondents were recruited from particular regions or states in Malaysia, and therefore might have different religious spectra that may not be generalised to the whole population.

Further research could be conducted on male fashion consumers as their number is also increasing and they also put emphasis on their appearance. A gender comparison between male and female fashion consumers could obtain a deeper insight into fashion consumer behaviour in Malaysia. Future studies could also be extended to the comparison of different generational cohorts, as they may have different tastes or religious perspectives on fashion.

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