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## Hijab and the Malay-Muslim Woman in Media

Nurzihan Hassim<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*School of Communication, Taylor's University, 47500 Subang Jaya, Malaysia*

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### Abstract

The globalization of Islamic countries worldwide inadvertently changed the representation of Muslim woman and the hijab. Displays of Islamic modesty in print, broadcast and social networking channels create opportunities for Muslim women to experience empowerment and diminish oppressive stereotypes. This communal experience penetrated Malaysian media and influenced Malays that represent a large majority of the country's Muslims. This paper explores the role of Malay-Muslim women in creating a renewed perception upon the hijab in the Malaysian public, pursuing a more liberated, Islamic identity whilst offering a renewed social construction of the Malay society through the evolution of mass communication.

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### 1. Introduction

The veil or more commonly known as the hijab is worn among Muslim women as enforcement of Islamic values based on Quranic teachings and is largely associated to masculine views that intend to safeguard women and their honour. In the last century, veiling trends proliferated in media following global Islamic resurgence in the Middle East from the 1970s up until the wave of Islamophobia that surfaced after 9/11. Two types of research patterns emerged during this period; the first is centred upon the hijab as a dominant factor in religion-ethnic discrimination, whilst another focused on the growth of a consumption culture stemming from recursive imageries of the hijab on print, television and internet that stimulated public interest in Islamic modesty, heightening awareness of its purpose

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6-035-629-5694; Fax: +6-035-629-5705.  
E-mail address: [nurzihan.hassim@taylors.edu.my](mailto:nurzihan.hassim@taylors.edu.my)

among both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. The latter revealed that the appearance of contemporary, stylish veiling by female Muslim bodies in mainstream media sparked a radicalization in the representation of Islamic modesty. Largely influenced by market forces and consumer trends, reformation of the hijab as a cultural identity is fused with Western paradigms that blur the lines between protecting Muslim women from the male gaze and increasing her opacity for public display. Göle (2000) argued that this is a resistance to religious conservatism where Muslim women are more inclined towards “cosmopolitanism” offered in contemporary hijab styles. Female modesty is susceptible to transnational flows of the modern hijab shaped by a variety of themes, merchandise and communication technologies that stray from true practice of Islam as compared to traditionalist “Wahabbism” ideology.

While heightened social mobility and improved education standards were achieved in Malaysia, the process of building national identity and development was predisposed to western imperialism that encouraged self-expression among female bodies. In Malaysia, women are similarly affected by issues concerning the hijab and are inclined to choose media that links it to beauty, fashion and self-image. The main purpose of this paper is to give insight to the assimilation of the hijab through history, progress and shifts in Malaysian media whilst correlating these changes with globalization and the development of media. This paper also explores the role of Malay-Muslim women that inspire the transformation the hijab within the development of Malaysian socio-economics and politics in negotiating their faith.

## **2. Global hegemony on modesty**

The criteria of newsworthiness in Western media reporting have persistently positioned hijab issues on lower priority thus limiting opportunities for the Muslim community to gain public acceptance of Islam. In an example, Islam was deplorable in Canada and the Americas during the late 1990s because the practice of veiling is considered backwards and associated to underdeveloped nations, mainly due to the Gulf War and the struggles of the Middle East. Popular Hollywood media such as films and television programmes further distort perception of media audiences with power relations that put the Muslim groups in “weaker” or “flawed” positions that indirectly affect a sense of inferiority within a hijab wearer, whilst amplifying a domineering construct of terrorist Islam through textual discourse and general conversational currency even before the occurrence of 9/11 (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005). Ironically, emergence of Islamic dress debates such as the banning of the hijab and burqa in France, UK, Turkey and the Netherlands instigated public appreciation for veiling. Audiences are able to decipher subjective meanings of Islam with visuals and textual discourse available through media. In Australia, Muslim women are highlighted in press photos and television news in settings belonging to Islamic centres or mosques which will become the visual cue that establishes a story and despite the stereotyping, viewers are able to recognize them as Muslims. The hijab have helped women who wear them obtain confidence and pride from belonging to a shared religious community. As such, the hijab pulls Muslim women who wear it into a closed and more privileged status, whilst those who do not would feel compelled to be a part of the movement.

In Muslim-majority countries better versed in veiling issues such as Turkey and Egypt, the hijab became a tool for transnational empowerment and popularization of political Islam that projects a civilized identity through advertisements and fashion-related materials more superior than the West. Al-Jazeera, the international news network based in Qatar approached the issues of hijab bans in France since mid-2002 by crafting a vision of imagined transnational Muslim community with emphasis on “Islamic chic” among female news anchors that all wore hijab and produced repetitive hijab-inclined content in its programmes (Cherribi, 2006). By way of conditioning, Al Jazeera encouraged the public to participate in the controversial modesty debate through expression of moral judgment. The process of modernization in Egypt welcomed the rise of international trade zones that penetrate enhanced media and entertainment technology that shaped a “state hybrid” of globalized Arabic identity while maintaining a stronghold in its existing Islamic religious ties.

### 3. Hijab in the Malaysian context

As stated in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, all Malays are born Muslim hence enabling perception of hijab as Malay-Muslim identification. Even so, wearing the hijab is not compulsory despite Islam being made the nation's official religion, thus wearing of the hijab or "tudung" as it is more commonly known in the Malay language remains a choice among Malay women. Since independence of Malaya in 1957, several developments influenced the constitutional settlement, which modified religio-political realities among the nation's citizenry. Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) state victories in 1959 Kelantan overturned the nation's Islamic practice, of which until today negotiation of Islamist politics by UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) and Barisan Nasional (BN) cater to ground-level demands of both Malays and non-Malays. Worldwide resurgence in the 1970s intensified Islamic radicalism; however the extent of female modesty in Malaysia differs on several gradients compared to other Muslim-majority countries as the seemingly "Malay" state offers promising secular nation through its multi-ethnic convergence. Further to this debacle, Sisters in Islam (SIS) is established as a modernist human rights movement that refutes the autonomy of sharia law among Malay-Muslims in 1987 by Zainah Anwar (Sisters in Islam, n.d.). Criticizing PAS extremism and the manipulation of Muslim socio-economic ideology by ruling coalition Barisan Nasional; A resonating statement released from their collection of articles states mentioned the hijab as a "...sovereign choice of the individual, not any external human authority under any pretext" (Sisters in Islam, 2006). SIS is significant not only for symbolism but substance, drawing upon Muslim women's rights to uphold female empowerment in worldwide Islamic debates.

#### 3.1. Media and the Malay-Muslim woman

The era of Tun Dr. Mahathir as Prime Minister in the 1980s saw extensive media campaigns that highlighted Malaysia as a developing Islamic country with evidence of successful economic progress under his administration in attempt to validate the relevance of BN among its Malay constituents. Hussin (1993) as cited by Buyong & Ismail (2011), the Ministry of Information announced that more coverage on the religion would be aired on radio and television to enforce among citizens the importance of Islam compared to other faith. The impact of this proclamation on local entertainment and informational content sees Islam as a prominent culture and lifestyle that cuts across regions. As such, certain degree of control is exercised upon imports of foreign television and film production to make way for local content that persistently display a multi-ethnic Malaysian community that upholds Islamic values, which is beneficial to economy and politics on an international scale. Looking into the increasing demand for Muslim content, Malaysian cable provider ASTRO established its own Islamic channel, "Oasis", featuring popular hijab-wearing local celebrity, Heliza Helmi as its exclusive ambassador alongside her fellow Akademi Fantasia alumni, Mawi. TV Alhijrah followed in 2009 as an independent media platform promoting Islam for viewers under the age of 40 and is also available via its own Youtube channel, TVAH (TVALHIJRAH.COM, n.d.). Meanwhile, TV9 became one of the first free-to-air television stations under the Media Prima network group that is Malay-Muslim centric and the first in Malaysia featuring all female news anchors in hijab. Islamic themed shows such as '*SIS - Semangat Intelek Swadaya*', and '*Hijab Stailista*' that covered women's issues such as health, wellbeing and fashion were widely accepted by audiences. Media Prima is also known for numerous drama series that appeal to the Malay-Muslim women through its principal television station, TV3. Setting the precedent to love stories centred on Malay-Muslim women that are often in trend-setting hijab garments was Khabir Bhatia's '*Nur Kasih*', garnering 4.3 million viewers and was later adapted to the silver screen with the title '*Nur Kasih - The Movie*' in 2011 (Karim, 2010).

Even in gaining acceptance, the act of female modesty remained to be a taboo subject, as the choice to adopt it remains an open discussion. In 2003, News Straits Times highlighted that the Kelantan State Government spent RM 60,000 on media campaigns and road shows educating women wear the hijab that simply asserts that improper dressing leads to premarital sex, rape, incest and abortion (Saat, 2010: 34). This undoubtedly shifts the blame on non hijab-wearing Malay women for not conforming to the Islamic code of attire, and conversely reversing the their liberated, assimilated roles in the society with those who apply the hijab. The vast reach of traditional print media reminds Muslim women to safeguard their image in public with moral and ethical evaluations, while assuming the practice of veiling as an cultural identifier. In the more recent incident of MH370 tragedy, popular Muslim elite

speaker Dr Ridhuan Tee Abdullah in his weekly column in Malay newspaper Sinar Harian reminded Malaysia Airlines to take heed of God's will by encouraging recitation of prayers prior to take off, abolish the serving of alcohol on flights and the urgent need for stewardesses to cover themselves - including their hair in order to not incite sin and caring for hygiene as well making it a Malaysian cultural identity to cover modesty and utterance of Arabic greetings to other Muslims (Abdullah, 2014).

### 3.2. *Commodification of the hijab*

The hijab has recently turned into as a symbol of sophistication when local celebrities came out of the woodwork with various styles of veiling, braving criticism to introduce their craft. The hijab appeared most unusually in the Malaysian music scene, of which Malay-Muslims are burdened by the stigma that they are discouraged from projecting their voices in public and female singers are swiftly associated to lack of moral decadence. Young artistes such as Yuna is known mostly for love songs that have no relations to the Islamic faith and personal hijab style but quickly became a fad among adoring youth fans nonetheless. Several other celebrities have also adopted the hijab at a later age in life but have taken other steps in promoting the hijab rather than use it to further a singing career. Several other areas of information increased familiarity and integration to Malay-Muslims in hijab. Khoo (2006) asserted that Malay women's magazines are actors in the emergence of urban culture and middle-class which where Muslim wives refer to in upkeeping family values. Among well-received Islamic women's magazines with high readership is Nur that targets middle class readers from age 20 to 40 years old with guidance on worship, career tips, marriage and fashion; whilst in 2012, 'Hijabista', a fashion periodical was released by the same publisher but with reduced pursuit of religiosity, mainly enticing readers with lavish fashion editorials (Hassim, 2014). 'Hijabista' was discussed on social platforms and claimed to have exploited Muslim women where their representation do not necessarily comply with sharia requirements (Mizan, 2013). Writer and columnist Dina Zaman maintains a weekly column in The Malay Mail Online, fresh from her memoirs as a liberal Muslim in the book 'I am Muslim' (Noor, 2007) that discussed afterthoughts of Malay folk. Struggles of its women that balance life and religion remain a theme her opinion pieces. Her work continues to analyse urban the Malay-Muslim woman who desires to liberate herself, interpreting her disconnect from patriarchal Islamic practices and adaptation of more carefree habits that may not be the norm among conservative Malays. Some of her significant articles brought new light to Malay "hijabi" smokers and "pole dancers" that make up the new generation of practicing Muslim women who set their own boundaries in this modern age.

### 3.3. *Hijab as a form of hybridity*

The Malay-Muslim community itself is an assimilation of other major civilizations and the rest of the contemporary Muslim world; of which the Malay-Muslims at present is the hybrid offspring of a global process (Noor, 2000). On one hand, this convergence saw a renewed form Islam that influenced highly educated women, adding substance to the manifesto of protecting women's honour. On the other hand, the wants of Malay women for modernity in globalized media consumption contradicts moral values. By enabling public events such as Kuala Lumpur International Fashion Festival (Newmaster, 2013) and reality shows like '*Hijabku Gayaku*' (Rotikaya Staff, 2013) similar to Project Runway that display the Malay-Muslim women among males and females alike, although the objective of such shows is the contrary. Several scholars indicated that a woman's decision to veil can be vastly different, among them to differentiate their genders whilst some do so to denounce Western imperialism; as illustrated in the chronology of developments in the Malaysian landscape – variables of Western influence of discord still exist, fusing an innate desire for Muslim women to be in control of their bodies and allowing opportunities for them to debate about the legitimacy of Islamic jurisprudence to suit adopt to their ongoing progress within the society. In doing so, female agency was ethnocentric to Malay peasantry and progressive state of experience and motivations of rural women during the phase of Islamic revivalism, and was observed to have had blind spots upon more educated, urbanite women that made up a major portion in the resurgence of the identity (Ong, 1990).

#### 4. Theoretical framework

The proliferation of the hijab worn by Malay-Muslim women can be studied by looking into on the affected individuals' attitudes and knowledge acquired through their personal experiences and background. According to Dominick, (2011, p. 445), an individual relies on “agencies of socialization” that encompass family upbringing, friends, personal experiences and mass media as a primary source of information that extends throughout his or her years growth and development. Foundation of this approach was derived from selected works on Uses and Gratifications Theory that assumes people are active in choosing and using particular media to satisfy specific needs; emphasizing the media as having a limited effect on certain aspects of users' personal and social lives where they are able to exercise choice and control to accomplish personal goals (Dominick, 2011). The framework also includes the foundation of the “structuration” theory. Largely related to cultural studies, Giddens discusses the “duality of structure”, an individual's adaptation to social actions and ability to reproduce them through embedded memory or “memory traces” which are recursive and constituted as a systemic practice that allow similar social practices to exist. Meanwhile, Berger (1998) argued through Freud's approach in her study of the hijab that it is indeed a “phallic” economy where the act of covering up actually highlights a woman; where she veils to show how “priceless” she is in the sexual economy. The virality of hijab social phenomenon is in fact, carrying a political identity that allows an individual to develop self-believe and life principles upon embracing it as a positive influence upon her personal development.

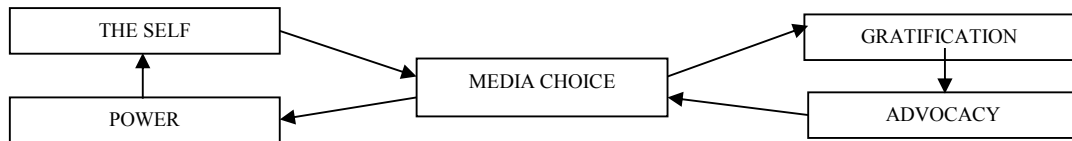


Fig.1: Framework on media effects of female modesty on Malay-muslim women.

As Figure.1 illustrates, representations of the hijab featured in prominent media perceived by Malay-Muslim women provides them with gratifications that produce a sense of belonging in a new, modern community of hijab wearers. The actors of the veiling-fashion industry negotiate economics and ethics as they formulate an Islamic neoliberal capitalism that increasingly redefine and change the practice and values of Islam. This new consumption culture evokes the emergence of urbanized and sexual Muslim women. As such, support and advocacy for a more contemporary hijab movement increases from information-seeking on various media that amplify benefits of the hijab to the audiences. Overall, this will underpin power relations shaped through media messages that correlate with Malay-Muslim woman's attitudes as well as beliefs and change in social construct.

#### 5. Conclusion

The new breed of modern Malay-Muslim women possess interchangeable roles as media consumer and as empowered source of information in the communication process where their opinions matter and in turn will influence others. Traditionalists usually argue that the effect of the West is a form of corruption, however one of the perspectives that need to be looked into is the diverse area of the media becomes and effective tool for deliberation and reflection upon old traditions hence facilitates the flow of change in new ideas with a more globalized perception. Although the discourse among patriarchal and conservative Muslims often impede the value in this transformative channel of communication as it is claimed that the practicality of this new lifestyle is often ignored, the impact of the media proliferation that spills over continues to affect emotions and encourage young Malaysian women to join the homogenization of vibrant, trendy Muslims in hijab wear. Wilson (2012) studied a variety of subcultures and religious groups who are influenced by the globalization of consumerism and symbolism of

modesty in fashion and argued that current definitions of modesty in media denotes two entirely different things, first meaning exposure of the female body, and another concerning the diminishing visibility of Muslim women. It is seen that in the background of this paper, that change in global political structures and change in local largely influenced the representation of the Malay-Muslim women in Malaysia. Groups within the local power struggle deliberately created such image between opposition and governing parties. It is concurred that media reforms are closely linked to local media ownership and governance in Malaysia that is fast being identified as a Muslim country. In order to fully dissect the extent of authentic female modesty display in media through this capacity, it is imperative to also analyse the power of the hijab agency and penetration of the veiling act among Malay-Muslims in countries that have Islam as a minority as well to determine cultural differences and influence of imperialism.

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