

## **Women's Islamic modest wear fashion brands in the U.S.: Empowerment, modernity, self-expression, and a rising market demand**

Shanti Amalanathan and Kelly L. Reddy-Best, Iowa State University

### **Abstract**

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, racialization against Muslim women in the U.S. significantly increased and prompted second generation Muslim women to embrace the hijab (Haddad, 20007). During this time, “the fashion industry was deeply averse to being publicly associated with Muslims, whether as designers, models, consumers or influencers” (Lewis, 2018); however, “the market for Muslims’ modest apparel is now a lucrative global industry” (Hwang & Kim, 2020, p. 1). Wearing the hijab and modest clothing has traditionally been associated with repression and submission by those in the western world (Watt, 2012); however, due to the Muslim youth population, modest dress is becoming a personal choice and being adopted by non-secular consumers as well (Usher, 2018). A growing demand by young Muslim American women embracing their cultural identities, an expected growth in the Muslim American population in the U.S. (Mohamed, 2018), and an expected increase in Muslim consumer spending over the next three years has renewed interest of the modest wear market. Retailers such as Dolce & Gabana, DKNY, Mango, and Nike have developed modest wear lines or special collections (Alleyne, 2016, Solomon, 2019, Usher, 2018). While niche Islamic modest wear focused brands, such as Artizara, Haute Hijab, and Urban Modesty are emerging in the fashion industry, there is little research about these brands, how they position themselves, and the discourse surrounding the brands and their brand images. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study is to critically analyze U.S. Islamic modest wear niche brands.

We critically analyzed how eleven niche Islamic modest fashion brands in the U.S. position themselves across multiple online spaces (brands’ websites and social media: Instagram and Facebook). We limited our sample to U.S. brands that exclusively sell modest wear fashion, including Islamic head coverings. Additionally, we limited our sample to those with a website and social-media presence: Al Shams Abayas, Artizara, B. Zarina, Covered Bliss, Cultured Hijab, Co., Haute Hijab, Modish Hijab, Niswa Fashion, Styled by Zubaidah, Urban Modesty, and Veiled Collection. We first drew upon netnography (Kozinets, 2002) with a “descriptive richness” (p. 64) of the brands’ online content including the brand positioning statements found on the brands’ websites in addition to the surrounding online discourse produced by the brands in the form of website and social media (Instagram and Facebook) text and images. Next, we followed the “close reading” critical discourse analysis (CDA) method (Fairclough, 2010, p. 176) where we focused on the tension of power relations, specifically, Muslim women’s

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oppression and empowerment and assumptions about the Muslim identity as a monolith (Selod, 2015).

We identified five themes in our CDA analysis: (a) women's empowerment; (b) reclaiming modesty as modern, beautiful, and sexy; (c) size inclusivity; (d) colorism; and (e) fashionable modest wear demand. We also identified numerous issues of power and tension within and between these themes. We found that the brands positioned themselves as *empowering women*. For example, this was evident in Haute Hijab's mission: "to create a world where every woman feels comfortable and confident." On Instagram, Haute Hijab captioned a photo with: "the world's best hijabs for the most powerful women." To support its mission, the brand launched their "Can't Beat Us" campaign in 2018, empowering Muslim women to defy longstanding prejudices from the sports industry that prevent women who wear head scarves from playing sports (Fadel, para 2). Haute Hijab's consistent message of empowering Muslim women was intended to dismantle existing stereotypes against the Muslim community that faith is an obstruction to sports. The brands also actively reclaimed *modesty as modern, beautiful, and sexy*. They often emphasized a need for fashionable Islamic modest wear that meets their *modern* lifestyles. Urban Modesty was founded by a Muslim mother of six who struggled to find "modest clothing to fit [her] lifestyle that was still fashionable." Its mission was to design products without the "plunging necklines and sheer materials" often found on clothing in the mainstream market, identifying an *unmet demand* for modern modest wear. Covered Bliss also positioned themselves as reclaiming modesty as their Instagram page read: "Where Traditional Meets Modern;" on the brand's homepage, page five young women who appeared to be from racially different backgrounds were casually conversing along a city street wearing long sleeve white shirts and ripped jeans with hijabs and large hoop earrings. These messages reclaimed young Muslim woman as trendy and modern while remaining modest, countering longstanding stereotypes that Muslim women are backwards. The brands also positioned their products as *beautiful* and *sexy*. For example, Artizara's clothing and jewelry were often embroidered or engraved with cultural details, reflecting the: "deep beauty and diverse artistry of global Muslim cultures." The owner described drawing inspiration from the beautiful and interconnected patterns she discovered in the Mosque as a child. Artizara's emphasis on beauty reclaimed Muslim culture as beautiful, non-conforming to western ideals. Veiled Collection's models conveyed a message of heightened *sex* appeal as the camera emphasized their seductive eyes and luscious lips; wearing a neutral-colored hijab and abaya on the brand's homepage, a model posed in a seated position leaning in towards the camera with a dreamy gaze and lips slightly ajar. Although modestly dressed, most of Veiled Collection's models incited seductive attitudes

through their facial expressions, reflecting the need for Muslim women to negotiate their identities with modest dress.

Many of the brands also promoted size *inclusivity*. Due to the lack of plus sizing in the modest wear industry, Styled by Zubaidah expanded from a jewelry business to offer plus size clothing “for Muslimah’s over the size XL” with their motto being “Love Your Curves.” The emergence of Styled by Zubaidah to offer only plus sized modest wear indicated a lack of inclusive size ranges in the niche Islamic fashion market. Despite the work towards considering Muslim identities and fat bodies, the modest wear fashion industry is fraught with *colorism* as many of the brands, such as Urban Modesty and Al Shams Abayas, featured models with mostly light-colored skin.

While we uncovered tensions surrounding colorism, size inclusivity, and demand for stylish, beautiful, sexy, and modern modest wear, we also found that the emergence of these niche brands encouraged young Muslim women to balance faith and fashion by “affirming [their] authentic Muslim American identit[ies]” (Haddad, 2007, p. 254) through dress. However, by empowering Muslim American women to embrace their identities, the brands’ activist-centric positionings cannot be interpreted outside of their profit-driven, self-interests. Engaging with colorism and fatphobia highlighted tensions of the brands’ free-market capitalist positions providing appearance-modifying commodities to negotiate personal ambiguity and ambivalence. Our findings have implications to the growing Islamic modest wear consumer market in the U.S., yet we *strongly* caution entrepreneurs to consider issues of interest convergence, where those in dominant groups only consider marginalized communities for their own benefit (Bell, 1992).

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