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HIJAB, ISLAMIC FASHION,
AND MODEST CLOTHING

Hybrids of modernity and religious commodity

Faegheh Shirazi

Much has been written about the importance of dress as a non-verbal communicator, a visual gender identifier, a creator of first impressions, and its influence in many aspects of our daily lives. Clothing is a signifier of authority and empowerment. Dress and dress codes serve political agendas, religious requirements, cultural heritage, and at the same time can be used to silently defy and disobey. Dress fulfills purposes for activism in local, national, or international agendas. What clothing can signify is variable, based on social and political currents of a society. A Muslim woman’s veil is a good example of how its meaning can change from a cultural and religious meaning in the past to what it means now with many more additional layers of meaning. Clothing is versatile both in purpose and in its meanings (Shirazi, 2001).

Compulsory dress codes for the lay citizen, particularly those established by a government like that in Iran, allow for some room for personal taste and modifications such as choice of material, color combinations, or silhouettes. While uniforms (particularly military uniforms) traditionally do not leave much room for modification, they too are subject to change in recent years due to keeping up with changing regulations and expressing religious liberty in our societies. In recent years in the American military, we have witnessed some changes within the strict boundaries of military uniforms, although in military forces outside the United States, accommodation for religious observances has been adopted years before its adoption in the USA. Such changes to American military dress codes have resulted after a long debate about religious freedom granted to all in the American Constitution. Religious followers can now wear and incorporate some non-military items of clothing in combination with their military uniforms.

Additionally, for members of the American military, some of the strict facial and hair grooming rules have been subject to modifications to accommodate religious requirements. Changes relating to various religious accommodations for military men’s and women’s uniforms have transpired. In 1998, one of the first changes visible in military uniforms was insignias1 denoting Christian, Muslim, and Jewish chaplains. Published by the online news site Army Times, a caption of an image of Simran Lambda, along with
his fellow regiment, clearly shows the incorporation of a required religious item on the military uniform:

Lambda is the first enlisted Soldier to be granted a religious accommodation for his Sikh articles of faith since 1984. Sikhism, a 500-year-old religion founded in India, requires its male followers to wear a turban and beard and keep their hair uncut. Army policies since 1984 had effectively prevented Sikhs from enlisting by barring those items. But Lambda was granted a rare exception because he has skills the Army wants – the Indian languages Hindi and Punjabi. (Myers, 2017)

The directive issued regarding the updates to the Army’s regulations on grooming and appearance allows observant Sikhs and conservative Muslim women to wear religious head coverings. In earlier years the kippa of the Jewish faith was granted permission to be worn on the condition that it be worn under the military hats. According to Army News, as early as 2009 a number of religious accommodation requests related to the Muslim hijab and a Sikh turban and patka (Sikh tight head covering worn under the turban). Another religious accommodation granted in recent years involved an American soldier who practices a Norse Pagan faith, who wanted to grow a beard. Permission was granted in 2017, and ‘beards with approved accommodations must be less than 2 inches long, measured from the bottom of the chin, and cannot be groomed with any petroleum-based products,’ (Myers, 2018) a known fire hazard that could endanger the life of the soldier.

The politics of Islamic fashion in Iran

Muslim women’s garments play a strong role in fashion in trendy clothing designed and manufactured for Muslim consumers and marketed as ‘halal,’ ‘Islamic,’ and even ‘Muslim’ clothing. This profitable relatively new consumer’s market follows a regular updated look with trendy, chic and innovative designs that follow the seasonal fashion styles and trends. Large numbers of clothing shops exist online and sell from any corner of the world, catering to the taste, age, and budget of specific clientele. These online shops appeal to not only Muslim consumers but also to non-Muslims who prefer to buy modest but trendy fashions. In fact, a number of conservative Jews and Christians also surf the same online shops that cater to Muslim women (Murray, 2015; Willett, 2015). Now, we are witnessing a growing community of Muslim, Christian, and Orthodox Jewish women using the internet to redefine what it means to dress modestly. Modesty means different things to different religious groups, people, and places. One thing most modest fashion followers have in common is that whatever they wear is not too form-fitting. Respecting their religions comes with rules, and they abide by those rules (Murray, 2015; Willett, 2015). Based on the popularity and growth of modest fashion, one could conclude that it is possible to dress modestly and look fabulous too, and in addition that there are some consumers who prefer to dress modestly not for religious purposes but for themselves.

The Iranian government, which is so restrictive about many aspects of the lives of its citizens, particularly when it concerns the subject of the women’s hijab, has always attempted to block Western fashions and has created a negative reputation about Western lifestyles, particularly what is perceived as the indecency of women’s dress and the free mixing of genders. In an effort to stop the young generation from dressing in Western styles, where the individual is free to follow any style of clothes, the Islamic Republic
openly condemns young Iranian girls who dress their bodies in fashionable, stylish, and colorful garments, created by designers as street fashion worn with beautiful, long, narrow shawls on the head. The hijab patrol morality police or gasht ī ershad (گشت ارشاد) agency are busy arresting and fining those for the crime of ‘improper hijab.’ However, such frequent arrests do not stop the fashion craze among the young women who also use their hijab in many ways to outwardly and silently express their disapproval of the rigidity of the Iranian government about the compulsory hijab. It is over 40 years since the Islamic Republic of Iran was established in 1979. The issue of the compulsory hijab has always been a part of the political discussion at the center of political gendered debates.

In recent years, various political movements in Iran also used the women’s hijab for activism. Young Iranian women, despite arrests for wearing improper hijabs in public, continue to step out in public arenas dressed in trendy and chic colorful outer gowns and stylish headcovers, disapproved of by the hardliners who are opposed to Western influences. The hardliners do not see such women’s clothes as sufficiently covering and, more importantly, as being in line with what they view as a proper hijab. One must be covered in the most traditional style of hijab in the color black. The hardliners refer to hijabs preferred by young women following trendy, fashion styles as ‘Westernized hijab,’ a term with a negative meaning.

Modest dress should be a choice, not a government mandate. For example, in Iran today, the hijab is compulsory for all women, even for tourists who visit Iran. Upon the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the hijab rule became part of immediate changes that were clearly visible. The compulsory hijab has always created aggression between government officials and various political factions as well as those among the population who do not believe clothes should be regulated and enforced by any government. Very often in the news we hear how Iranian women (mostly young) get into trouble by the hijab patrol (gasht ī ershad) authorities over what is deemed to be an improper hijab, that is, the young women appeared in public in colorful, trendy, stylish, fashionable clothing, or with more hair showing through loosely wrapped scarves draped over the head. At times disobedient women are given tickets (similar to traffic tickets), fining women with various fees depending on what was marked as ‘improper’ by the officer. The hijab arrests continue today, while the intensity of the harshness and easing off the strictures are dependent upon the internal political pulse of the government. One must be aware that the enforcement of the dress code rule in Iran never stays the same, and the method of enforcement changes from time to time. For example, in December 2017 the Wall Street Journal reported that the:

country’s conservative interpretation of Islamic dress code, which includes a ban on wearing nail polish, heavy makeup or loose headscarves. Instead, violators will be ordered to take police-instructed classes on ‘Islamic values,’ while repeat offenders could still be subject to legal action.

(Eqbalī & Fitch, 2017)

In a Women In The World (WITW) staff report, General Hossein Rahimi, Tehran chief of police stated: ‘Those who do not observe the Islamic dress code [including wearing nail polish, heavy makeup, or donning loose headscarves] will no longer be taken to detention centers, nor will judicial cases be filed against them’ (WITW, 2017). Rather than being arrested, the violators must take police-instructed classes on ‘Islamic values.’ Repeat offenders face the legal actions set by the authorities.

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Hijab, Islamic fashion, modest clothing
Today, youth and urban Iranians do not support the compulsory hijab, since it is becoming more difficult to accept the notion that they are not free to choose. Ironically, even the religious Iranian women who prefer to dress conservatively do not agree with the gasht ershad hijab patrols and find their actions and behavior toward women very distasteful. In recent years the government of Iran has been promoting Islamic fashion through an annual event called the Fajr International Fashion Festival, and in 2019 this fashion and clothing festival celebrated its 8th anniversary. Compared to its earlier years, the last festival was much more colorful and showed improved creativity of designs around the restrictions imposed by the government and requiring approval within the code of modesty in Iran – every creation must be approved by inspection before its display. The Iranian ‘fashion industry’ is, in fact, a kind of coverup term for an industry controlled by the government authorities. The censorship of designs limits the creativity of the artists. There is a group, created by the Iranian Parliament, whose task is to help organize the clothing and fashion industries ‘making it compatible with Islamic standards. It is headed by a deputy minister of Iran’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance [a man] and its members are mostly government officials [mostly men] with a handful of representatives from the fashion industry’ (Serjoie, 2014). Parliamentary groups assigned to oversee the fashion and clothing of citizens are surely rare. By analyzing the poster created for the 7th Fajir International Fashion and Clothing Festival (2018), a number interesting facts can be noted (Teheran Times 2018) (see Figure 27.1).

The poster is created against an arabesque, geometric tile work with horizontal-running green patterns. A mix of calligraphic styles in addition to various colors are used in the

![Figure 27.1 7th Fajir International Fashion and Clothing Festival, 2018](https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/420841/Fajr-festival-to-put-spotlight-on-fashion-clothing)
calligraphy (black, purple, and white) that make the poster appear more as an Islamic calligraphic artwork rather than a poster for fashion and clothing; perhaps this was done intentionally. There is no image of any type of clothing displayed on a woman’s body, on the body of a mannequin, or even on a clothes hanger that might be interpreted as a compromise between the hardliners, who are in control of final decisions, and the other more progressive factions among the parliamentary members. Announcing the event, there is a central blue background banner with English text in white, much smaller in font size compared to the huge, dominating Persian/Kufic and Naskh Arabic script. In Iran, Nasta’liq and Shekasteh are the most common styles of script and not Kufic or Naskh.

Several noticeable points of difference appear between the 2018 and 2019 posters for the same event (Lu, 2019) (Figure 27.2). The most obvious change is the font size and style of script. The 2019 poster script is identified as the Iranian national script known as Nasta’liq, which is one of the main calligraphic hands used in writing the Persian alphabet. Nasta’liq is traditionally the predominant style in Persian calligraphy and is also adopted by some other non-Arabic-speaking people. In addition to Nasta’liq, the Shekasteh script is also used as an aesthetic element incorporated into trendy and fashionable clothes. I emphasize this point because no Arabic-speaking person is taught in school how to write in the Nasta’liq or Shekasteh scripts. I question the prime motivation of the usage of some uncommon scripts used in Iran on a poster advertising an Iranian fashion festival.6

In the 2019 poster, white and yellow are used on a plain dark purple background. Nasta’liq and Shekasteh are used in white for the Persian scripts while yellow is reserved for the English. This fashion poster does not include any clothes worn by a model or draped on a body form or on a clothes hanger similar to the previous 2018 fashion poster, but there are differences between the 2019 and 2018 posters. The outside border design of the 2019 poster contains a traditional Mokran hand embroidery. Mokran is an area in the province of Baluchistan on the eastern border of Iran. This event was held in the area of Chabahar, which is a city and capital of Chabahar County, Sistan and Baluchestan Province, Iran. Chabahar is an officially designated Free Trade and Industrial Zone by Iran’s government on the coast of the Gulf of Oman. The choice of this less popular location in Iran is clearly

Figure 27.2 8th Fajir International Fashion and Clothing Festival (2019) – the outside border contains a traditional hand embroidery of Mokran in the province of Baluchistan on the eastern border

Photo credit: Iran Press Mahdieh Baharmast

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a marketing decision as well as a political strategy decision. This region of Iran is known for beautiful hand embroideries that are still a strong tradition in this part of the country.

For the 2019 festival of fashion, promoted by the government, the artwork and handicrafts of this region were incorporated into clothes by the Iranian fashion designers. According to Iranian governmental reports, as a result of this festival, the participating embroiderers from this impoverished region would be provided more economic opportunities, and the event would introduce this highly developed art to international participants (18 countries displayed and participated in this event). In addition to the beautiful traditional colorful costumes and rich hand embroideries of this region, the city of Chabahar is also a free port with strategic geographic opportunities that the government is promoting. Chabahar is situated at the mouth of the Gulf of Oman on the Iranian Mokran coast, with a direct access to the Indian Ocean:

India has formally taken over operations at Iran’s strategic Chabahar Port.

The port on the Indian Ocean, inaugurated last year [2017], is being built largely by India and is expected to provide a key supply route for Afghanistan while allowing India to bypass rival Pakistan to trade with Central Asia.

(\textit{Tehran Times 2018})

Thus, the 8th Fajir Fashion Festival in Iran fulfills many objectives that are not only artistic and economic, but also political. In the case of Iran, the fashion festivals bring attention to a country that is known around the world to be in tight control of women’s lives, as covered by the media in the West. The government acts as the guardian of the women and controls every aspect of their public lives. At the same time, Iran is under a huge weight of international economic sanctions, and so any access to the international market bypassing sanctions is welcome news. Hence, for Iran, any fashion-related subject involving the government’s hand in organizing the event is another propaganda opportunity to control women’s image, implement censorship of designs, while claiming they are not anti-fashion, only anti-Western. First and foremost, the government is fulfilling a political agenda.

\textbf{Islam and commodities}

Most production of commodities disguised under the label of Islam ‘is profit-driven, exploiting the rise of a new Islamic economic paradigm, and not necessarily created with the objective of honoring religious practice and sentiment’ (Shirazi, 2016, p. 1). It is mostly assumed that Muslim women are indifferent to fashion. However, my research reveals that Muslim women are not different from any other women in the world; they are interested in how they look and the clothes they wear.

Islamic fashion is a rapidly growing lucrative business that is reshaping the religious, cultural, and economic lives of Muslims not only in the Muslim majority nations but also globally as well.

Muslims spent $266 billion on clothing and footwear in 2013. That’s more than the total fashion spending of Japan and Italy combined, according to a recent report from Thomson Reuters. The report also notes that that figure is expected to balloon to $484 billion by 2019.\footnote{To trace the start of Islamic clothing as a commodity in the West, one should go back and examine the history of small ethnic grocery stores established during the 1970s and the}
1980s when the number of Muslim immigrant settlements in the Western countries was increasing. With the increase in the number of people coming from diverse parts of the world, the new immigrants created demand for not only ethnic restaurants, but also specific types of groceries that would be uncommon in regular food suppliers to buy in addition to small commodities from the home countries such as clothing or decorative objects. Muslim women during that time were not able to purchase clothes from department stores that specifically catered to modest clothing or hijabi women. The conservative Muslim women had to create their own style of clothing that was not only modest but somewhat fashionable. Ethnic grocery dealers in Western Europe and the United States began importing modest fashion clothing along with other items for the Muslim population, which proved to be lucrative business. Meanwhile, a global resurgence of religions began happening. One of the notable phenomena was the piety of the middle class that gave rise to new potential economic markets. For instance, in Indonesia ‘the role of spiritual lifestyle agents played a pivotal role in helping and shaping the new urban middle class who consume Islam to mark their Islamic identity’ (Utama, 2016, p. 114). The spiritual revival obviously influences the consumers in many ways relating to material culture. Thus, Islamic symbols declaim a new form of outward spirituality and identifier as being a Muslim. When marketing ‘Islamic fashion,’ the hijab is a logical starting point, while using Islam as a portal for selling modest and stylish clothing. In Brand Islam, I write of using Islam as a brand name focusing on ‘marketing campaign in the realm of women’s fashion that capitalizes on the very core of Islamic precepts: Sharia [the Islamic law]’ (Shirazi, 2016, p. 144). Now Islam for the consumer is very much appealing to the Muslim lifestyle, modesty, and enjoyment. In fact, the marketers have created a direct relationship between Islam and capitalism that appears not as a dichotomy, but as complementary. Islam is a symbolic commodity as scholars have studied the relationship between consumption and religion (McDannell, 1998). That religion is commercially viable is not a new discovery; however, Muslims were ignored as a significant profitable segment with market potential. The evidence is clear even in the number of academic journals that exclusively study the Muslim consumer and related marketing strategies.

Islamic marketing and consumerism are new fields of study. For example, a number of authors have measured Muslim consumer attitudes towards Islamic fashion (Salam, Muhamad, & Leong, 2018). Another author (Abalkhail, 2018) has measured the traditional degree of religiosity of Muslim female consumers in purchasing Islamic fashion. Two authors (Grine & Saeed, 2017) have measured Malaysian Muslim women’s attitude to Islamic fashion. Three more authors (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Hassan & Harun, 2016) measured the hijab phenomenon and ‘hijabista culture’ among the Muslim youth. All such continuous interest in Muslims as a potential consumer is an indicator of the economic gain that should not be missed. By now due to Muslim’s purchasing power, the traditional journals in psychology relating to Muslim consumer behavior, advertising, and marketing have become mainstream publications.

The Muslim women who consume ‘Islam’ also follow the Islamic regulations regarding halal (permissible by Sharia, opposite of haram, not permissible), which in principle is analogous to what kosher is to Jews. Those regulations include food items, cosmetic and hygienic products, abstaining from behaviors and actions, to using halal hospitals, or choosing halal hotels and halal tours for the travel destination. In order to demonstrate how, for example, a clothing manufacturer uses Islamic terminology to sell, one only needs to pay attention to the motto used. Among such companies is a Malaysian clothing manufacturer called KIVITZ Brand. This company uses the phrase ‘Syar’i and Stylish,’ which is a very clever way of pairing the word Sya’ri (Sharia) with Stylish, giving the message that their clothes are not only stylish, but are also within the code of modest clothing laid out by the Islamic

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**Hijab, Islamic fashion, modest clothing**
Religious Regulation of the Sharia. Many other clothing companies are using a similar technique to advertise for modest clothes appealing to the Muslim consumer with catch phrases such as the word hijab as a tag on every piece of clothing they produce. As shown in Figure 27.3, the brand words Belemir Moda are used that mean ‘Hijab is a New Style.’ The word Belemir is also a very careful choice based on the Turkish/English dictionary and is a reference to ‘a plant with a bluish-tinge of blue flowers growing up on the fields in Central Anatolia, the prophet’s flower, the blue cantoron (Cephalaria syriaca)’ (Turkish/English Dictionary Online).

The abaya, another Arab woman’s traditional outerwear, is now an offering among the fashionable and modest clothing for women, particularly women in the Arab nations of the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia. Momin Libas is one of the most recognizable brands in luxury fashion offering abayas created in the Persian Gulf region. Again, this brand name is a strategic choice of name and eye catcher. Momin Libas are words are recognizable not only to Arabic speakers but also by most Muslims, translated as ‘Garment of the Believer.’

Fashion weeks displaying modest clothing and the latest hijab styles are now well-established events that happen in various places around the world, including Paris, London, and New York, either independently or as part of regular fashion shows devoted to creative fashion designers. This inclusion has benefited various fashion manufacturers of ready-to-wear garments, while serving as a platform showcasing the best of the designers of modest/Islamic exclusive lines of clothing. The Modest Fashion Week of 2019 scheduled for April
in Istanbul, Turkey, focused on national and international designers catering to the needs of women who purchase modest fashion.

There is no doubt that such modest fashion shows are part of a growing demand by consumers and becoming established business. The suppliers and sellers of modest fashion must understand that the consumers do not compromise their modest standards, no matter how attractive the clothes may be. This relatively new industry still requires research and understandings of the clientele's taste or specific religious requirements. An expert designer would know the regional differences for what would sell in a specific geographic location, budget concerns, and be aware of the social status of those who would be the ultimate consumers. For example, an abaya is not a hot sell for ordinary everyday use in Turkey, Malaysia, or Iran, while it is a perfect choice for the women in the Arab nations in the Persian Gulf nations. The marketing strategy for this type of consumer is the same for any good business and identical in nature and mission to Western fashion industries: anything from exclusive haute couture, boutique buyers, to popular readymade garments mass produced and priced differently. In 2017 The Modist brand was established, founded by Ghizlan Guenez (Algerian born but a Dubai resident for many years). The brand promotes Net-a-Porter modest fashion (Schirrer, 2017). Guenez is listed as one of the 500 people who are ‘shaping the global industry’ (Stock, 2017). Her work is appreciated for its contribution to the modest fashion market. The Modist brand has already been established in London and Dubai and 120 other countries, making Guenez’s creations accessible to many women around the world. She has said that one of her missions in life is to educate people about modest fashion preferences for women, and that she does not belong to any specific religious group.

Over time both national and international designers have participated in fashion, production, and sale of ‘chic Islamic fashion’ in fashion venues. The Islamic fashion shows are known by various names and sometimes they are part of other regular fashion shows. Contemporary Muslim youth around the globe have unlimited access to internet and Islamic consumer products. They are exposed to a huge number of advertisements and online shopping information offering an endless choice of fashion and clothing, even for women who are restricted to following fashion trends of the Western world and must observe the rule of hijab implemented by their respective governments, such as in Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Economic prosperity, in part because of profits from oil and natural gas, is manifest in many material lifestyles in the Middle East. ‘Muslim women have engaged in personal expressions of wealth and status through dress for decades, wearing haute couture beneath their abayas’ (Lindholm, 2014, p. 45). The fashion abaya has become a signifier of luxury, extravagance, and high quality for women who could afford them. Thus, the class stratification is more visible now compared to the days of simple black abayas and ordinary plain hijabs. Of course, the religious class and particularly the religious scholars see the trendy abayas in a negative light. However, for those who follow fashion or do not seem to be bothered by the influence of contemporary fashion on a very traditional symbol of the Muslim Arab woman in the Persian Gulf region, they are glad and welcome any new change. From this perspective one strong argument stands: ‘they [Arab women] are pursuing a global and modern abaya, and not a western [abaya]’ (Sarwar, 2017). One of the most noticeable changes in the silhouette within the traditional abaya that became very popular is al-ʿabaya al-Mukhassara, which is a ‘waisted’ version of this loose gown (Al-Qasimi, 2010).

It is not unusual to find in many Saudi and other Persian Gulf nations among middle-class strata an interest in the fashion scene and fineries including the latest makeup, brand names in fine accessories, or expensive and rare French scents. These women have access to purchase such goods not only online but also in many fashion stores in shopping malls and
boutiques in their own home countries. Some of the finest selections of the hijab are produced in the Persian Gulf regions. Dubai is one of the locations where local designers create stylish abayas.

The traditional abaya serves as a symbol of Islamic identity and national dress for women of the Persian Gulf region of the Arabian Peninsula. The black loose-fitting garment became prevalent in the early 1930s in Saudi Arabia, when King Abdul Aziz Al Saud circulated them to tribal leaders. The abaya was later imposed as part of the official dress code by the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (Almazroiu). The abaya has since transformed into the abaya-as-fashion, a stylish, glamorous, and personalized robe for women of the Gulf region. (Sanvar, 2017)

The modern, contemporary abaya does not need to be black. The younger generation of Arab women in the Persian Gulf region wear different styles of abayas in contemporary, fashionable colors with various embellishments, in combination with the accessories that make it very different from their mother’s black, traditional abaya. Meanwhile, a number of Arab nation governments and other Muslim countries are worried about the effects of globalization on the traditional lives of their nations, particularly concerning Islamic values that are cherished by a large population in those regions of the world.

Creation of trendy designer’s hijab

In our contemporary era, the hijab is appearing more frequently in the Western, modest street fashion and on the runways of the fashion shows. Jihane Hajby states:

as modest fashion is gradually capitalized on, where is the line between empowerment and profit from one of the most visible Islamic symbols of modesty? You’d think the use of hijab-wearing models is a nod to inclusiveness, but it has to be more complex than that.

(Hajby, 2017)

From the moral perspective in the eyes of believers, the use of marketing in the name of Islam to sell material goods is wrong and even sinful. On the one hand, to include the hijab in the mainstream of clothing culture could be considered a positive action. On the other hand, some are bothered by the power of advertising to sell the iconic emblem of a Muslim woman to make profits. I have made this same point in Brand Islam, which is that most of the mundane products that are redressed and advertised as Islamic are for profit. ‘The erroneous belief [is] that entry to halal [Islamic] markets require just a simple step: take an item, as mundane as it can be, market it as ‘Islamic’ – as if Islamic is generically and mechanically defined – and voila’ (Shirazi, 2017).

Modest fashion and the fashionable hijab are more tolerated now compared to the past, but in fact they are still not acceptable to a large number of people, mostly in the Western world. The following gives a clear example. Pierre Bergé (business partner for Yves Saint Laurent fashion house in France) made some inflammatory comments regarding the subjects of the fashion hijab, the role of designers, established clothing manufacturers that create designs and promote the clothes to satisfy hijabi consumers:
‘creators should have nothing to do with Islamic fashion.’ According to The Guardian, he continued: ‘Designers are there to make women more beautiful, to give them their freedom, not to collaborate with this dictatorship which imposes this abominable thing by which we hide women and make them live a hidden life.’ He criticized designers for taking part in what he calls an ‘enslavement of women.’ (Fernandez, 2016)

Pierre Bergé’s comments are problematic in several ways. First, his comment about ‘making women more beautiful’ is subject to interpretation. His idea of beauty is concentrated on the amount of exposed skin of the woman. His standards of beauty are obviously culturally self-centered and quite different from the hijab-wearing or modestly dressed women of other cultures or upbringings. Second, Bergé’s comments rests on the assumption of the superiority of Western clothing designs over the ‘other’ designs created for hijabis or the modestly dressed consumer. A wise marketer caters to the taste of consumer clientele.

Bergé’s comments are a product of a xenophobic and stereotypical attitude of cultural superiority to people who once were colonized by France, such as the large number of Muslim populations from North Africa who are living in France. Bergé’s comments betray the notion and belief in the superiority of French clothing designers, along with an attitude that no Muslim hijabi woman could be considered chic no matter how fashionable her hijab. In the opinions of Bergé and his like-minded type, being a muhajaba (woman who wears the hijab) is equated with a host of negativities, inclusive of being old-fashioned and backward, and not worthy of creating designs to accommodate her hijab in an updated contemporary fashion.

In a surprising move in September 2016 (about five months after Pierre Bergé’s insulting comments about the Muslim hijab), the house of Yves Saint Laurent (YSL) displayed a model wearing a hijab. This was a well-crafted strategic move to publicly demonstrate that YSL has nothing against Muslim hijabi women. This move might have been an indirect public apology for Bergé’s remarks or, more importantly, damage control in order to not jeopardize the business of wealthy Arabs and Muslim hijabi loyal customers in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf nations. Based on Euromonitor International: ‘designer clothing is by far the biggest segment of the luxury goods industry representing 42 percent of overall luxury goods sales in the United Arab Emirate (UAE), the biggest buyer among Gulf states, with women’s designer dresses and skirts leading the way’ (Wendlandt & Fuchs, 2011). Based on this record it was worth $930 million a year. Saudis, Kuwaitis, Qatars in addition to nationals of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and royal families of the Middle East are buying haute couture designer fashions. Most of the women who buy such fineries do not hesitate to spend lavishly on luxury clothes when they attend weddings (which average at several times a year) or other events where men and women are segregated (Wendlandt & Fuchs, 2011). These women dress up in their latest and their finest designer garb not just to please themselves, but also to show off their good taste and wealth to other women attendees.

Despite YSL damage control for the 2016 campaign, another issue surfaced and was exposed to the public, creating yet another disappointment in the campaign when it was revealed that the model wearing the hijab (Ms Isamaya French) was not Muslim. Selina Bakkar comments: ‘a Muslim hijab-wearing woman rocking that white hijab fur and red lipstick would have been revolutionary’ (Bakkar, 2016). Hiring a Muslim fashion model who could model for the YSL 2016 fashion campaign would have been easy. And so Bergé’s incendiary remarks were not exactly put to rest.
In 2014, some well-known Western clothing brands such as Hermes, Dorothy Perkins, and DKNY experimented with an exclusive, timely, marketed line of clothing with long sleeves and maxi dresses during the time of Ramadan when Muslims undergo a one-month period of fasting. At the end of Ramadan, all Muslims celebrate Eid Al Fitr. It is believed that during Ramadan the Qur’an was revealed to mankind through the Prophet Muhammad. This strategy helped UK retailers in London [to enjoy] enjoyed an influx of 25 percent in summer spend. According to data from Worldpay, UK payment service, Middle Eastern visitors spent an average of 152.40 pounds per transaction in August 2013, with visitors from Qatar spending an average of 288.17 per transaction. (Hendrikz, 2015)

Other designers and companies such as Tommy Hilfiger, Dolce & Gabbana, Oscar de la Renta, and Mango also joined the trends in catering to Muslim women’s fashion, offering special designs based on specific Muslim calendar events for celebrations. Creating fashion for Muslims is lucrative and, according to the State for Global Islamic Economy report, there will be more retailers who prefer to focus on clothing for Muslim women (Hendrikz, 2015).

The purchasing power of the Muslim population has been on the rise due to several factors. First, Muslims are the fastest growing religious group, population-wise, and they are the youngest. Based on the Pew Research Center, Muslim births will outpace Christians by 2030. The same report indicated that ‘Between 2010 and 2015, births to Muslim families made up 31% of all births,’ and in addition to the growth of population ‘Muslims spent $1.9 trillion across sectors in 2015, a figure projected to grow to $3 trillion by 2021’ (Cass, 2017). Muslim consumers are also reported to spend an estimated $243 billion on clothing annually alone, which is projected to grow to $368 billion by 2021 (Cass, 2017).

Activism: anti-hijab Iran and Western fashion platforms

The My Stealthy Freedom (azadi i yavashaki آزادی یواوشکی) campaign, which began in 2014, is an online movement created by Masih Alinejad, an Iranian-born journalist and activist. Alinejad stated: ‘I called it “stealthy freedom,” which means you create your own freedom in secret.’ Alinejad’s protest against Iran’s compulsory hijab rule has numerous followers around the world. Any woman inside Iran can join this campaign by posting a picture of themselves not wearing the hijab. Some participants, to not risk being identified, remove their hijab but turn their faces away from the camera, showing their exposed hair from the back. Some women pose while still wearing their hijabs but hold signs with some statements about the hijab. In the most recent postings, many women not only remove their hijab freely in front of the camera, but also speak directly to the recording camera and walk unveiled in public.

What Masih Alinejad started in 2014 has taken another route with an emphasis on weekly, silent protests in the streets of Iran by women (and some men as well) who are fed up with the compulsory hijab. This turmoil has lent itself to a new campaign called White Wednesdays (هزار شنبه های سفید), which is yet another movement for the Iranian woman’s freedom of choice to veil or not to veil. Masih Alinejad is a supporter of this movement too.
High-profile people in the public eye use their status to express political opinions and to engage in activism relating to political and social events important to the world. Movie stars and fashion designers are just two examples among many other groups that relay their political messages during the big events and gatherings when the cameras are rolling. An example is Christian Siriano’s 2017 Fall/Winter show, which surprised the spectators with a black t-shirt with the white script: ‘People are People.’ He and some of his models on the runway were wearing the same t-shirt. This action hit a political chord in people’s minds and hearts, who responded to this message of equality. Other big names in the fashion industry also promoted the message were Dior, Diane von Furstenberg, Prabal Gurung, and others.

When a t-shirt with a political message hits the public streets, it can create the most effective form of activist message, such as: ‘We Should All Be Feminists,’ or famous female Saudi fashion designer Arwa Al Banawi messages (inscribed in both Arabic and English) on t-shirts ‘We are nation’ and ‘the suitable woman’ (Jaber, 2017).

Among other fashion designers who incorporate activist messages as part of their incorporated fashion statement is Yasmeen Mjalli, who was inspired by the ‘Me Too Movement,’ and came out with her message of ‘Not Your Habibti’ denim jackets, translating to ‘Not Your Sweetheart,’ and thereby sending a message of social and cultural resonance to all the Palestinian and Arab people of the world (Jaber, 2017). These are just a small token of growing trends among the fashion designers to support feminism, multi-culturalism, and equality for all.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated that clothing, in terms of its social significance, is versatile even in its most rigid form, as reflected in military uniforms. With the resurgence of all forms of religion since the 1970s onward, clothing has adapted to change too. Some military uniforms around the world reflect this as well. The U.S. military has accommodated several changes in military uniforms based on the challenges they faced by court decisions relating to religion and freedom of practice. The Sikh turban, the Muslim hijab, and the Jewish kippa are allowed to be worn with the military uniform, as set by guidelines from the military. Facial beards and hair, as religiously required by an individual believer, are now allowed within a certain length instructed by the guidelines.

Islamic fashion and its rising popularity can be attributed to several reasons: the rise of the Muslim population, the higher level of education that results in better jobs, in addition to a large population of practicing Muslims who are modern and forward looking in their outlook. The market has reacted positively to the needs of these young consumers by catering specifically to them. Islamic fashion not only fulfills the appetite for consumer products, but also bridges the theological rise of self-identity and rejection of the dominant power of religious communalism in the rise of Muslim women’s visibility in public arenas. Muslims increasingly are engaged in ‘modernity and the resulting hybridity’ (Cevik, 2017).

In Iran in recent years, an active scene has existed against the compulsory hijab. Supporters of the My Stealthy Freedom and White Wednesdays movements are women and men who are defying the imposition of the hijab on women. Despite the arrests and harsh treatment for civil disobedience, they continue their efforts and publicize their pictures in social media.

Clothing and fashion events also serve activism as shown in the example presented on t-shirts: ‘people are people’ or ‘we are one nation,’ and others, which signify human equality. Certain colors of clothes can unite political opposition, in this case to a ruling
government, as we witnessed public actions such as the Green Movement in Iran when women in favor of a particular presidential candidate wore a green hijab.

The war on terror and the political engagements of the Western world meddling in the Muslim-majority nations have galvanized the consumer market to use Islam as a commodified brand catering to Muslims. While Muslim women are visibly present in consumer culture, yet they face discrimination and violence in anti-Muslim environments. Rashmee Kumar states: ‘In order to tap into the multibillion-dollar potential of the U.S. Muslim consumer market, large retailers have positioned themselves as socially conscious havens for Muslims, operating on a profit motive rather than a moral imperative’ (Kumar, 2017) However, this is only one perspective on a subject that is timely and can be argued from multiple perspectives. We should remind ourselves that America is a capitalist and consumer-driven society, thus targeting newly discovered Muslim consumers does not go totally against the capitalist system. Rather, I argue that Muslims choose to lead a life of faithfulness combined with the convenience of modernity. They believe there is no clash between modernity and remaining true to their religious beliefs. Islamic consumption is not simply buying religious commodities, it includes the icon of piety as well.

Notes
1 Insignia is ‘a badge or distinguishing mark of military rank, office, or membership of an organization; an official emblem.’ Webster’s Dictionary online.
2 The term Muslim means the person who follows Islam. An object such as dress could not be a Muslim.
3 In recent years the hijab patrol stopped issuing tickets to those deemed to be wearing an improper hijab. There has been a new solution to fining people; now they make the guilty party attend an educational class to learn about the virtue of the hijab.
4 This was especially in 2009 during the Green Movement uprising, also known as the Persian Awakening or Persian Spring by the Western media. Green was the color of a presidential campaign for Mir Hossein Mousavi in opposition to then president Ahmadinejad who was accused of rigging the votes. Women wore green headscarves or green wristbands to express their support for Mir Hossein Mousavi. Another protest by Iranian women is known in Persian as azadi javashaki zanan/ My Stealthy Freedom: an online movement that began in 2014 by Masih Alinejad, an Iranian-born journalist and activist based in the United Kingdom and the United States. This movement started from a Facebook page, My Stealthy Freedom, where women from Iran post their photos without scarfs, and by the end of 2016 the page surpassed 1 million Facebook likes. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Stealthy_Freedom. The next protest against the compulsory hijab is an offshoot of My Stealthy Freedom and is called the White Wednesdays or in Persian, chaharshanbeh e setid. In this movement, Iranian women in Iran wore white scarves or white clothes and white scarves and went into public places to quietly express their disapproval of compulsory hijab, and some of them also for five minutes would stand in a busy street on a platform and remove their head scarves and place it on a stick and wave it in the air. During this time of silent protest, they did not speak or carry any sign with them. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3lrkEobGbQ.
5 However ‘Islamic values’ is a flexible term, which means different things in different situations.
6 One could conclude that there is even politics used in the choice of selected scripts not commonly used in everyday lives in Iran – I interpret this as a deliberate and strategic choice to visually still be connected to what Islam means to the current government in Iran.
8 The abaya is a loose-fitting full-length robe worn by some Muslim women mostly in Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf nations.
9 www.nhpr.org/post/iran-exposing-hair-public-stealthy-freedom#stream/
Further reading

Hafsa Lodi (2020). *Modesty: A Fashion Paradox: Uncovering The Causes, Controversies and Key Players Behind the Global Trend to Conceal Rather than Reveal*, Neem Tree Press. The global fashion industry welcomes a newcomer, the modest fashion with its multi-billion-dollar business. Modest fashion describes the consumers, the designers, and the social political reasons for this attractive market segment.

Jill D’Alessandro & Reina Lewis (2018). *Contemporary Muslim Fashions*, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. An illustrated book about Muslim fashion, looking at the contemporary modest style that is a major part of today’s fashion industry. This book showcases contemporary works of Muslim fashion designers.

Paul Temporal (2011). *Islamic Branding and Marketing: Creating A Global Islamic Business*, Wiley & Sons. The global Muslim market is now approximately 23 percent of the world’s population, and is projected to grow by about 35 percent in the next 20 years. If current trends continue, there are expected to be 2.2 billion Muslims in 2030 that will make up 26.4 percent of the world’s total projected population of 8.3 billion. This book focuses on various aspects of how to capture Muslim market and creating brands with careful strategic steps to capture this lucrative growing market.

References


