Meanings of Hijab from the Wearers' Perspective

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The most visible and controversial element of Islamic practice in the twenty first century is the practice of modesty or covering, known as hijab (Cooke, 2007). The Arabic word "hijab" simply means "covering" (Halrynjo & Jonker, 2016). Any piece of cloth, or a headscarf, or a long coat that covers the female body is recognized as hijab in the dominant Muslim community (Ruby, 2006). The term hijab traditionally refers to the headscarf in western society (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013). A veiled Muslim woman is often considered as a symbol of oppression and violence by the western society (Haddad, 2007).

While many individuals in Western societies see hijab as oppressing, the actual wearers have been found to attribute different meanings and understandings to the hijab (Droogsma, 2007). Despite some incidents of forced coverings, many Muslim women treat hijab as a multi-purposed, agentic, and often political statement (Afshar, 2008). Some Muslim women consider hijab as a modest dress code prescribed by the Quran and claim that it helps them to express their distinct identity and provides better control over their bodies (Ruby, 2006). However, some Muslim women think wearing hijab is a disadvantage in the western society (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013).

Researchers have studied the meanings of hijab in different cultural contexts and the findings are limited to cultures, and regions only (Al Wazni, 2015; Dakkak & Mikulka, 2012; Litchmore & Safdar, 2016; Siraj, 2011). Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the meanings that the wearers around the world associate with hijab through the lens of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT).

Theoretical Framework

The term "consumer culture" conceptualizes an interconnected system where groups construct overlapping and even conflicting practices, identities, and meanings in order to make collective sense of their environments and to position their experiences and lives through the use of commercially produced images, texts, and objects (Kozinets, 2001, p. 68). CCT theorizes culture as an interwoven fabric of experience, meaning, and action (Geertz, 2008). Authentic religious meanings are combined with cultural meanings through the consumption of hijab fashion experiences (El-Bassiouny, 2018). The CCT explores consumer behavior in four dimensions (1) consumer identity projects, (2) marketplace cultures, (3) the sociohistorical patterning of consumption and (4) mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Methods and Procedure

A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for the current research. To find the actual experiences of women who wear hijab, the researchers decided to investigate Facebook pages related to hijab culture using digital ethnography or netnography (Kozinets, 2002). Facebook pages were searched using the term "hijab." The page, "Word Hijab Day" had the most hijab stories and a huge fan base (809,210 fans), thus, it was selected for data collection (World Hijab Day, 2019).

Constant comparison method was chosen for analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) as it is a method for grouping data into categories and allows themes to emerge. Data was coded in three stages (Straus & Corbin, 1990): (1) concept identification, (2) axial coding to create categories of meaning, and (3) selective coding in which categories were combined to create themes. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was met (Straus & Corbin, 1990).

Results and Discussions

Data was collected in December 2019. The sample included stories from 69 women from 35 countries around the world, who discussed their hijab experiences. The posts also indicated that all of the women had worn hijab from anywhere between six months to several years. Four themes emerged from data analysis.

Identity. The women in the sample felt that the hijab built an identity for themselves as a Muslim. The hijab symbolizes the commitment to their faith and integrated part of themselves. One woman stated, "I wear hijab because it identifies my faith" (Cristina). CCT concerns consumers co-constitutive and co-productive ways of forging a coherent sense of self using marketer-generated materials (Belk, Sherry Jr, & Wallendorf, 1988).

Social Bonds. CCT has contrasting views of consumers as culture bearers and also culture creators (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Consumers bond with each other and create distinctive self-selected cultural worlds through the common consumption interests (Belk & Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2002). One woman claimed, "It unites me in a special sisterhood. My Hijab champions my faith without me speaking a single word. It shows that I am a Muslim woman and proud" (Shreen). The wearers of the hijab shared a similar experiential culture. They reported that the hijab gives them feelings of being respected, sense of comfort, and empowerment. Hijab consumers also reported that the hijab makes them stronger as a woman and they feel proud about their decision of wearing hijab.

Religious Structures. Consumers are considered as enactors of social roles and positions. CCT focuses on the institutional and social structures such as class, ethnicity, community, and gender that influence consumption (Otnes, Lowrey, & Kim, 1993). One woman said, "Knowing the true meaning of hijab and wearing it for no other reason but for God is the best feeling" (Zaynab). Religious social structure of the Muslim community has intense influence on the hijab observers. The participants consider hijab as a religious obligation to them from God. It was reported that wearing the hijab is a choice of the wearer exclusively and it gives them the sense of belonging to the wider Muslim community.

Countering Dominate Culture. CCT explores consumer ideology-systems of meaning in a way to counter dominate interests in society to channel and reproduce consumers' thoughts and actions (Hirschman, 1993). For instance, "I am totally free in my hijab despite of the

propagandas like we are not free. It is my decision. It is my life. It is me" (Echehan Yilmaz). The participants explained hijab as a tool to counter the dominant views of western societies and to establish their Muslim identity. The dominant views of Western cultures regarding hijab being oppressive, restrictive, and limiting freedom of the women are contrasted by the wearers considering hijab as non-constraining and non-oppressing rather it gives them a sense of safety and modesty.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to examine the meanings of the hijab to its wearers using CCT. It was found that the participants held contrasting views and opinions to the dominant Western culture regarding hijab. Even though the Western culture and media often portray hijab as oppressing and a limitation to the freedom of women, the women around the world who wear hijab consider hijab as a freedom of choice and a source of strength. Hijab serves as an identity marker for them (El-Bassiouny, 2018).

This study was conducted using qualitative approach. Hence, the findings cannot be generalized across all hijab participants. Future studies could adopt quantitative approach and include more diverse population.

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