

## Embodied Values Through Fashion Design: An Application of Human-Centered Design Approach

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Keywords: Human-centered Design, Values, Justice, Expressive, Design elements

Dress is an important nonverbal communication tool for expressing culture and identity (Barnes & Eicher, 1992; McCracken & Roth, 1989). Symbolic interactionism explains how symbolism negotiated through social interaction serves as nonverbal symbols that allow the viewer to interpret the identity of the wearer (Stone, 1962). Prior literature using symbolic interaction theory as a framework found that various design elements such as color, texture, and line can be used to express cultural identity and beliefs (Tawfiq & Marcketti, 2016; Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013). The Saudi government has made efforts in recent years to promote fashion that is aligned with Saudi identity and Islamic values through the Fashion Commission, which was established in June 2018 under the Ministry of Culture (Ministry of Culture, 2019). One of the Fashion Commission's initiatives is to encourage fashion designers and fashion design students at Saudi universities to design dress that represent cultural identity and Islamic values (Fashion Commission, n.d.). Thus, the purpose of this study was to apply human-centered design (HCD) approach to design fashion products that embody justice. The value of justice was selected because it is one of the most important Islamic values (Ahmad & Hassan, 2000). Particularly, this study sought to answer: (a) What are the design elements and symbols associated with justice? And (b) How can designs be created based on the participants' perceptions of justice?

**Framework.** The HCD approach provided theoretical framework for this study to develop fashion designs based on insights gathered from focus group interviews. HCD emphasizes understanding and empathizing with users to uncover hidden needs and desires, rather than relying on assumptions. This process involves delving into user data and iterating through multiple design prototypes until a final product emerges (Norman, 2013; Norman & Draper, 1986). Often, emotions get overlooked when focusing on functional needs. Therefore, HCD utilizes tools like in-depth interviews to gain the user's perspective.

Consequently, HCD is widely used to develop various fashion products by involving users in the design process to get their feedback, ideas, and perspectives (Mui, 2020; Löbler, 2020). In this study, the first two steps of the HCD framework were followed to understand how participants visualize justice in a design: (1) Identify the design elements and symbols associated with justice by creating and analyzing mood boards, and (2) Create multiple designs and choose the one that best represents justice.

**Methods.** The study employed a qualitative research method, with each session consisting of three focus groups with five Saudi female consumers aged 18 to 30 (emerging adulthood stage). The emerging adulthood age group was chosen because they are keen on wearing clothing that expresses their values and beliefs (Tanner et al., 2009). Their clothing choices are closely related to their self-concept and are used as a means of self-expression (Kalinina, 2017). Focus groups were used to collect data because, unlike individual interviews, they allow for interaction which can result in more in-depth information on the topic (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016). Each focus group session lasted between 120 -180 minutes. Data were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were asked questions aimed at exploring how dress can reflect the value of justice, and they were shown a mood board to help them decide on the design elements (i.e. shape, color, line, and texture) to create designs that represent justice.

**Results.** The data were analyzed using Miles & Huberman (1994) process by developing a coding guide, and trustworthiness was established through member checking and peer review (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checking included returning the analyzed data to participants to check for accuracy, and the participants' involvement in the design process until the final designs were created. Analysis revealed two key themes related to expressive considerations in fashion design that can embody the value of justice.

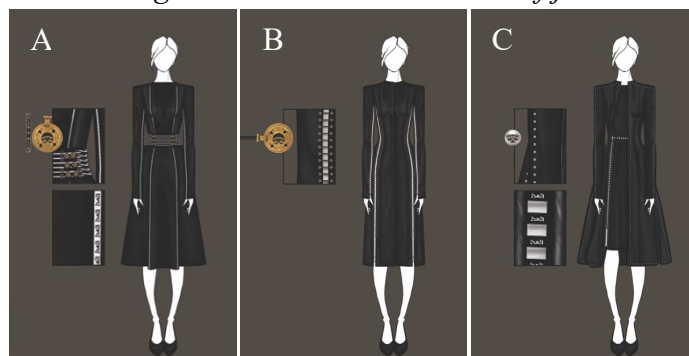
*The meaning and symbolism associated with justice.* Participants identified the "scales" (P2) as a symbol of justice, and this association was justified by citing "Quranic verses and Islamic texts that depict justice with scales" (P6). Some suggested using the scales as a "brooch" or "bouton" in a design (P7). They imagined it as part of "lawyers and judges' attire" (P8).

*The application of various design elements to represent justice.* Participants discussed various design elements that might be employed to visualize justice in fashion pieces. They envisioned justice as a "formal dress with a straight or tubular silhouette" (P9) because "the formality of dress represents the firmness required of the person to be justice"(P2). Regarding color, participants indicated that the justice in dress should be either "black color" (P4) to show "strength and seriousness" (P4), or "contrast colors such as black and white" (P5) to show "clarity of justice" (P2) "with only black and white, not any shades of grey" (P3).

The participants emphasized that "the design lines should be straight" (P8), "the Qur'an makes it clear that justice is based on a straight scale that does not tilt" (P9). According to the participants, "justice appears as a completely symmetrical design" (P1). The researcher sketched initial designs based on the data at the end of the focus group session, and modifications were made based on participant feedback until mutual agreement on the final designs was reached (see Figure 1). Dresses were the sole type of clothing proposed in this study, reflecting the participants' unanimous choice for representing justice through fashion.

**Conclusions.** Designing fashion that embodies specific values is a complex task for designers, and the human-centered design approach provides a powerful tool to represent cultures, values, and beliefs through clothing. Engaging with the participants through in-depth interviews or focus groups allows designers to create pieces that resonate deeply within a specific cultural context. This research demonstrates the power of fashion to communicate non-verbally, enabling designers to advocate for various values and support social causes through their work (cf. Marfin, 2022; Reddy-Best, 2018).

Figure 1  
*Final designs that embodied the value of justice*



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