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Digital Consumerism and the Aesthetic Economy of Muslim Women on Instagram

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Abstract

This paper explores how Muslim women engage with digital consumerism and the aesthetic economy on Instagram, focusing on the intersection of modest fashion, faith, and social media marketing. It unpacks how postfeminist sensibilities, self-branding, and religious identity converge in the curated online personas of Muslim fashion influencers. The study critically examines how modesty, a key Islamic virtue, is reinterpreted in commercialized digital spaces, and how the aestheticization of piety is both empowering and problematic. Drawing from media studies, religious discourse, and marketing insights, the paper reflects on how Muslim women navigate the ideological tensions between religious conviction and capitalist consumer culture.

Keywords: digital consumerism, aesthetic economy, Muslim women, modest fashion, Instagram, postfeminism, influencer culture

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Digital Consumerism and the Aesthetic Economy of Muslim Women on Instagram

The rise of Islamic fashion on social media, particularly Instagram, has ushered in a new visual culture in which Muslim women assert their identities through curated aesthetics, modest fashion, and entrepreneurial self-branding. While some interpret this trend as a progressive integration of Islam with modernity, others caution that such visibility often aligns more closely with neoliberal consumerism than with religious values. This paper investigates the phenomenon of Muslim fashion influencers and their entanglement with digital consumerism and the aesthetic economy, offering insights into how modesty, piety, and public image are reconfigured in the digital age.

The growing visibility of Islamic fashion on global platforms like Instagram has brought Muslim women into the center of discussions on modernity, consumerism, and digital identity. This emergence is not merely a reflection of changing fashion sensibilities but also part of a broader cultural negotiation in which Muslim women actively participate in shaping and reshaping meanings of piety, modesty, and visibility within a globalized, digitized consumer culture.

Digital consumerism refers to the online-driven process of buying, selling, and promoting products through digital platforms. It encompasses not only e-commerce but also social media marketing, influencer endorsements, and algorithm-driven advertising. This shift towards digital consumption has been accelerated by the widespread adoption of smartphones, internet connectivity, and platforms like Instagram and YouTube, which blur the lines between content and commerce. In this context, consumption is not merely about acquiring goods, but about identity formation, lifestyle branding, and visual storytelling.

The aesthetic economy, on the other hand, focuses on the increasing commodification of beauty, style, and curated visuals in capitalist societies. According to Böhme (2003), aesthetic labor involves producing appearances, atmospheres, and moods, where value is not just economic but sensorial and affective. Social media influencers exemplify this, as they must continuously perform aesthetic labor to maintain audience engagement and brand partnerships. In the case of Muslim women influencers, this economy involves producing curated, visually appealing content that aligns with ideals of modest fashion while engaging with global trends and Islamic values. The intersection of these two phenomena, digital consumerism and aesthetic labor, forms the analytical framework of this paper.

The emergence of Muslim women influencers on platforms like Instagram marks a complex intersection of religion, gender, and digital consumerism, deeply embedded within what Rosalind Gill (2007) terms postfeminist media culture. In this framework, femininity is no longer articulated primarily as a site of collective resistance or feminist activism, but rather as an individual bodily project, something to be worked on and perfected through self-regulation, aesthetic labor, and consumption. Muslim fashion influencers, by curating visually compelling and stylistically modest content, exemplify this postfeminist sensibility. They are situated within a discourse where empowerment is articulated through choice, visibility, and personal branding, even as they remain rooted in religious identity and pious self-presentation.

These influencers embody a duality: they position themselves as devout Muslim women upholding modesty (*al-haya'*) while simultaneously engaging in practices of entrepreneurial self-branding, aesthetic stylization, and strategic market engagement. Their content, often comprising carefully staged photos, fashion tips, beauty tutorials, and lifestyle narratives, is a form of visual labor that aligns closely with Gill's notion of a sensibility "characterized by a shift from objectification to subjectification," where women are not simply looked at but actively produce their own image within a neoliberal economy of visibility (Gill, 2007).

The visual narratives crafted by Muslim influencers are not passive representations of modesty but are deeply performative and strategic, blending Islamic values with commercial

and aesthetic appeal. This form of identity work exemplifies how piety and postfeminist agency are negotiated in digital spaces, reflecting broader trends in global media where religious identity is not antithetical to modernity or consumerism, but intricately woven into its fabric. The concept of modesty in Islam, traditionally rooted in the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical jurisprudence, emphasizes humility, restraint, and the covering of the *awrah*, defined by scholars like El Guindi (1999) as the parts of a woman's body that should remain covered (typically everything except the face, hands, and feet). However, in the visual economy of Instagram, modesty undergoes a transformation. It becomes a curated aesthetic, performed through selective bodily visibility, layered clothing, color coordination, and accessorizing that aligns with fashion trends while still claiming a commitment to Islamic ethics.

This curated form of modesty is what could be termed "selective visual modesty", a stylized religiosity that balances religious adherence with social and market visibility. Influencers often frame their choices through captions and hashtags that emphasize intention (*niyyah*), spiritual growth, or sisterhood, even when the visual presentation leans toward fashion-forward sensibilities. The tension between scriptural modesty and its aesthetic reinterpretation in online spaces reveals how digital platforms mediate the religious and the fashionable. Such performances raise critical questions about authenticity, religious boundaries, and the commodification of faith. While some view these influencers as role models who make modest fashion accessible and aspirational, others critique them for diluting the spiritual essence of *al-haya'* into consumer-driven visual culture. The Prophet Muhammad's well-known saying, "Faith consists of more than sixty branches, and *al-haya'* is a part of faith" (Sahih Al-Bukhari), is often invoked to legitimize modest presentation, yet the interpretation of what constitutes modesty varies significantly across cultural and sectarian lines.

By turning modesty into a visual brand, Muslim women influencers simultaneously disrupt and reinforce dominant media narratives. On one hand, they challenge orientalist stereotypes of Muslim women as voiceless, oppressed subjects. On the other, they participate in a postfeminist economy that privileges individual expression and consumer power over collective political or spiritual resistance. As Peterson (2017) notes, Instagram becomes a powerful site for visualizing and circulating Islamic fashion, yet it also entangles the religious self with algorithmic visibility and market logic.

Andreas Reckwitz (2017) defines aesthetic labor as the strategic effort to make people, objects, and spaces visually appealing. In the context of modest fashion, aesthetic labor involves the careful curation of outfits, lighting, facial expressions, background settings, and captions, elements that create a coherent visual narrative. This labor is not trivial; it requires emotional investment, technical skill, and social intelligence. Influencers must manage their content with precision to balance religious modesty and aesthetic appeal.

Instagram and YouTube function as visual marketplaces where engagement, branding, and authenticity are commodified. The more attractive and coherent the presentation, the greater the possibility for sponsorships, collaborations, and follower engagement. Here, modest fashion is not merely about covering the body but about selling a narrative, of piety, femininity, elegance, and modernity. The veil, for example, transforms from a symbol of religious devotion into a versatile fashion accessory that can be styled, matched, and monetized.

The contemporary world of digital marketing is increasingly shaped by the strategic deployment of social media influencers, individuals who command a significant and often niche following on platforms like Instagram. These influencers, many of whom originate as fashion bloggers or content creators with stylistic authority, have become essential intermediaries between brands and consumers. In what is now a common industry practice, fashion labels collaborate with these digital personalities not merely for brand visibility but as a direct strategy to influence purchasing behaviors. These influencers are often sent "media

packages” containing clothing or accessories, with the implicit or explicit requirement that they photograph themselves wearing these items and share the content on their social media feeds. These posts are typically stylized and framed with brand-specific hashtags, product tags, and promotional codes, making the influencer both the face and the vehicle of consumer engagement.

This strategy extends beyond static imagery into more dynamic forms of content such as “Unboxing” or “Reveal” videos, wherein influencers document their first impression of the product, review its quality, and discuss its usage in detail. Such videos, typically shared on YouTube and then cross-promoted via Instagram Stories or Reels, function as persuasive tools in the digital marketplace. They blur the lines between entertainment, personal narrative, and advertisement. The informal, intimate tone of these videos, combined with the perceived authenticity of the influencer, enhances consumer trust and emotional investment, thereby increasing the likelihood of product purchase.

Instagram’s visual culture, particularly through selfies and Outfit of the Day (OOTD) posts, has redefined the criteria for fashion modeling and celebrity. The platform itself is no longer just a space for distributing fashion content; it has become a site where models are discovered, created, and validated. Traditional pathways into the modeling industry have been disrupted by Instagram’s algorithmic and participatory logic, which rewards visual appeal, consistency, and audience engagement. Influencers cultivate highly curated visual identities through a steady stream of aesthetic content, often centered on their own bodies and daily fashion choices. As a result, the platform fosters a “cult of personality,” wherein an influencer’s persona becomes a brand in itself. Their followers consume not just the products they endorse, but the lifestyle they represent.

This process is indicative of what scholars term “self-branding,” a neoliberal practice where the self is marketed as a consumable and monetizable asset (Hearn, 2008). Influencers engage in constant self-presentation, transforming their everyday choices, what to wear, how to pose, where to shop, into content that can be evaluated, liked, and shared. Instagram thus becomes a stage for both individual expression and economic activity, where personal aesthetics and consumer behavior are seamlessly interwoven. In this economy, visibility is currency, and the influencer’s identity is both the product and the medium of exchange.

Consequently, Instagram is not merely a tool for fashion marketing but a transformative force in the construction of beauty standards, social capital, and economic value. The rise of influencer marketing reflects a broader shift in consumer culture where authenticity, relatability, and aspirational imagery coalesce into powerful mechanisms of persuasion. The platform’s algorithm further intensifies these dynamics by amplifying content that conforms to certain aesthetic norms, thus reinforcing specific visual cultures and marginalizing others. In this way, the Instagram economy not only sells products but actively shapes the contours of desirability, taste, and identity in the digital age.

Social media algorithms play a pivotal role in shaping what is seen and what remains invisible. AI-driven personalization ensures that users are shown content based on their preferences, interactions, and browsing history. This creates an echo chamber where certain forms of Muslim identity, those aligned with consumer trends and aesthetic norms, gain more visibility. This selective visibility is a form of algorithmic faith, where religiosity is filtered through codes of desirability and marketability. Influencers who can package their faith in line with trending aesthetics are rewarded with reach, while others are pushed to the peripheries. This reinforces existing hierarchies within the Muslim community along lines of class, race, and regionality. It also erodes the diversity of religious expression by privileging a homogenized, Western-friendly form of Islam. What was once a private spiritual commitment is now a public performance of identity. Modesty, as practiced and promoted by influencers, has become a lifestyle brand, signifying not only religious adherence but also taste, confidence,

and digital fluency. Hashtags like #HijabStyle, #ModestChic, and #FaithandFashion exemplify how spirituality is integrated into aspirational living.

This branding is not without contradictions. While modest fashion influencers often cite their intention to inspire and empower other Muslim women, they simultaneously participate in a system that commodifies spiritual values. Clothing becomes content, and faith becomes a function of follower count. The influencer is thus caught in a paradox: to maintain visibility, she must continuously perform piety in ways that are visually stimulating and commercially viable. The integration of social media, influencer marketing, and e-commerce has reshaped consumer behavior in measurable ways. Empirical studies show that digital addiction is linked to impulsive buying behaviors, particularly in contexts where users are bombarded with influencer promotions, discount codes, and aspirational lifestyles. One of the most powerful psychological drivers in this landscape is the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). Users often make unplanned purchases to feel connected, fashionable, or spiritually 'in sync' with their digital peers. This compulsive consumption is further intensified by the use of AI-generated ads, which track user behavior and deliver highly personalized product recommendations. This targeted marketing strategy blurs the line between spiritual aspiration and consumer addiction. Religious motifs and Islamic values become tools to generate emotional appeal and drive sales.

The commodification of Islamic values in the digital marketplace presents serious ethical concerns. As modesty becomes entangled with branding and profitability, the spiritual foundations of humility, restraint, and sincerity are at risk of being diluted. What was once an internalized principle of faith becomes a visual signifier subject to the demands of the market. This tension is most visible in the ways influencers reconcile their religious beliefs with their commercial activities. While many assert that their collaborations are aligned with Islamic ethics, critics argue that this rationale often masks the underlying capitalist motivations. The veil, for instance, is marketed in countless styles, colors, and price ranges, not necessarily to promote modesty, but to fit seasonal trends and brand aesthetics.

Moreover, the influencer model tends to exclude those who do not fit neatly into this market-friendly narrative. Muslim women who cannot afford designer modest wear, who do not conform to beauty standards, or who come from marginalized communities are often invisible in these digital spaces. Their voices are overshadowed by a dominant visual culture that privileges style over substance, and appearance over authenticity. According to the State of the Global Islamic Economy Report, Muslim consumer spending on clothing is projected to grow from \$1.9 trillion in 2014 to \$3 trillion by 2021, with the modest fashion industry expected to reach \$122.73 billion by 2030. The largest growth is seen in Asia, Europe, and North America, regions with significant Muslim populations and advanced digital infrastructure. Brands are increasingly recognizing the economic potential of Muslim women as consumers. Grand View Research (2018) and Brugnoli (2014) note that the fashion industry is rapidly adjusting to cater to this demographic. From Dolce & Gabbana's hijab line to H&M's modest fashion campaigns, mainstream brands are incorporating Islamic elements into their collections. However, this recognition is often superficial, prioritizing tokenistic representation over genuine engagement with Muslim identities. This form of corporate inclusion raises questions about authenticity and exploitation. Are Muslim women being empowered, or are they being instrumentalized as profitable market segments? The latter seems increasingly likely, especially when campaigns use hijab-clad models without engaging with the broader socio-political contexts in which these garments are worn. Representation, in this sense, becomes another commodity, stripped of its cultural and religious specificity.

The rise of Muslim women influencers in the modest fashion economy exemplifies the entanglements of faith, gender, and digital capitalism. While these influencers have created new spaces for representation and self-expression, they have also become enmeshed in

structures that commodify identity and spiritual values. Their work reflects the postfeminist sensibility described by Gill (2007), where empowerment is mediated through consumption, self-discipline, and visual labor.

Yet, this visibility is not without cost. The very logic that allows for greater representation also imposes new exclusions and redefines modesty in ways that prioritize aesthetic appeal over ethical substance. As the modest fashion industry continues to grow, it is crucial to interrogate not only who gets seen but also what kinds of piety and femininity are being amplified, and at what expense. True empowerment may lie not in more visibility, but in redefining the terms of that visibility: moving from market validation to community engagement, from curated performance to lived experience, and from individual branding to collective ethics.

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