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An Investigative Study of Modest Fashion: The case of the Western and Central Provinces of Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

A fashion trend is emerging in Islamic culture based on the concept of modest fashion all over the world. Significant brands of the Western fashion world have already launched their Hijab and Abaya lines. The objective of the present research is to investigate the important factors of modest fashion in the Islamic culture and to detect the future world fashion trends of Islamic fashion and then to apply the concept of modesty to the fashion market of Sri Lanka. This investigative study is based on the qualitative and questionnaire-based methods. The study is confined to questionnaires which were distributed among a sample of 150 Muslim women with diverse backgrounds to gather data and statistics around Colombo and Kandy. Secondary data were collected from books, articles, web sites and visual data such as pictures and photographs which facilitated to forward a successful research. Examination of the influence of culture on Muslim women's dress etiquettes led to understand what Muslim women expect from their dress and led to identify potential opportunities in the contemporary market of modest fashion.

Keywords: Modest Fashion, Islamic Women, Dress

1. INTRODUCTION

“Modesty” in the present context has three referents: it refers narrowly to patterns of coverage for various parts of the body; more broadly to various character traits-bashfulness,

humility, diffidence, and shyness; and most widely to institutions often associated with the above-the customs and beliefs relating to the chastity, fidelity, purity, seclusion, adultery, animality, and inferiority of women, to the superiority of men, to the legitimacy of children, and to the honor of the group [5]. Over time, the veil has been worn in different ways in a wide range of societies and locations. Whereas it is partly an expression of religious adherence, it is also cushioned in socio-cultural and political factors and has been ‘subject to changing fashion throughout past and present history’ [7].

Veiling is a cultural custom that was associated with high social status in Arabia, and preceded Islam as it was practiced by women of various religions [12]. Clothing is strongly connected to cultural capital. Cultural capital can be embodied, in terms of bodily dispositions and actions such as pose, movement and appearance. Both dress and the way of carrying it on the body are forms of cultural capital [24]. In order to appear fashionable, an individual need to cultivate a certain amount of cultural capital that is recognized as fashionable and is valued by others as such. Religious capital is a particular form of cultural capital, formed of competence in terms of religious practice and religious knowledge. Therefore, a Muslim woman, who seeks to establish her dress practice as a form of religious capital, will likely stress both her knowledge of Islamic doctrine and her difference from letrict forms [4].

In the Islamic world religion is defined as “the religion of the Muslims, a monotheistic faith regarded as revealed through Muhammad as the Prophet of Allah. In Islam, the human body is regarded as a reason of shame that must be hidden and enclosed, a view that relates back to Adam and Eve [6]. A woman’s body is engaged with sexuality: bodily movements and the style, shape and colour of female dress have the strength to prompt male sexual stimulation [15].

References to the Qur’an are integral to examining the hijab as ‘divinely ordained’, yet, although the Qur’an instructs both sexes to dress modestly, there is a particular emphasis on female modesty:

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them. And Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband’s fathers ... and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. (Qur’an 24: 30–31)

Muslims believe that it is needed to keep men and women divided – in their separate, selected spaces (Debra Reece 1996). The interruption of women into men’s spaces is seen as leading to the disturbance, if not the destruction, of the fundamental order of things. If some demand makes it necessary for women to enter into men’s space, they must make themselves ‘faceless,’ or at least as inconspicuous as possible. This is achieved through ‘veiling,’ which is, thus, an extension of the idea of the segregation of the sexes [15]. In a situation where the expression through dress of ethnicity and religion are often united in the minds of their practitioners, the likelihood of veiled women being presumed Muslim by those outside their communities is high [6].

However, “Fashionable hijab” and “modest fashion,” both in Muslim majority countries and among Muslim minorities in Europe and North America, has recently become an important topic within fashion studies [4]. As fashions for hijab get more elaborate (often involving two or three scarves as well as bonnets, or under-caps, and pins) training comes not from senior women in the family or community, but from peer groups of bloggers and especially YouTube tutorials. Comparable style knowledge are emerging as valuable in other faiths, with bloggers operating as semi-professional stylists, working (mostly unpaid) on the fashion shows now proliferating in Muslim, Jewish, and Christian sectors, and advising (an often small number of) private clients [8]. H&M, Zara, Uniqlo, Tommy Hilfiger, and Dolce and Gabbana, among others, are discussed as global brands that successfully reach out to the ‘new’ Muslim consumer [9]. In recent years an Islamic culture industry has developed which serves mostly middle-class Muslim consumers. Muslim consumers are served by international online retailers [2]. Some high-profile “Islamic haute couture” designers [3]. While Muslim women believed that western luxury fashion brands use sexual appeals that are against their beliefs and lifestyles, they still consumed the brand. In fact, incongruity in advertising was appealing and attractive [11].

To be fashionable and cool at the same time, fashionable in my culture is, fashionable in my culture is so correlated with modesty, to be fashionable and respected at the same time, so I will be fashionable but respectable, sometimes even a perfume if you walk in a classroom with heavy perfume, people will talk about me, like even that you should respect, so I will be fashionable with this limit, like I will put an extent and if I do that I will be seen as a cool person like, I don’t have to be respectable wearing the Abaya and the Hijab to show that I’m respectable, because that’s not cool you know (Amal, 20 years) [11].

The statement shows that there is a real fashionability in Muslims but it is bound with Muslim cultural norms and values thoroughly all over the world that would not be differed from Sri Lankan Muslims attitude towards fashion. In examining the recreation needs of Muslims it is essential to understand that Islam be seen as more than just a religion. It is the dominant identifying factor that provides the basis upon which an individual's social environment is built. Recreation is generally not a core contributor to a Muslim woman's identity; her religious identity shapes her recreation choices. Religious requirements, therefore, must be met in order for participation to be possible [12].

1. 1. Problem Identification

Sri Lanka is a densely populated country with an ethnic population following different religions. At a glance we can never identify to which ethnicity or religion a person belongs to except on some special occasions and special dress elements. One of those is the Islamic women’s dress. Even in Western society Muslims wear the hijab, burqa. Therefore, there is a question why Muslims are so adhered to that dress even in Asian countries like Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia and even in tropical Sri Lanka. The modesty we practice throughout our lives time is the knowledge and way of behaving we have learnt from our childhood. It can be stated that people show modesty as a practice they follow in order to not to be ashamed before a society and follow some norms in a particular society. It can be said that they do covering because of modesty which, means “behavior, manner or appearance intended to avoid impropriety and indecency”. A way of dressing in order to show modesty may differ according to circumstances and perspectives. On the one hand it may be covering the body and on the other, it may cover only the genital areas. In Islam, modesty is considered a sacred

concept. In Islam it is that “the vilest amongst women is she who displays her beauty” (for outsiders) (Sunnah). May be that is what modesty stands for in Islam. Modesty in Islam is a kind of sumptuary law / limitation. But within the limitations there is an upcoming market trend for Islamic dress elements like Hijab and Abaya in more fashionable and functional ways in the western world as shown in Figures 1 and 2 below.



Figure 1. Nike launches Hijab for female athletes



Figure 2. Spring & summer 2017 Dolce and Gabbana launched new Hijab and Abaya collections

By considering the above examples it is seen that there is real fashionability coming through the style ‘Abaya’ even in the Western world. Therefore, there is a possibility for Muslim women to follow fashion in a unique way. However, in Sri Lanka it is only seen in the typical black cloak which covers the whole body. Therefore, with an upcoming market it will be valuable to understand the basics of Islamic dress which displays the cultural influence on clothing, in order to explore more possibilities to uplift the Sri Lankan Islamic dress market while staying within the cultural limitations.

2. OBJECTIVES

The objective of the research is to identify key factors in modest fashion in the Islamic culture and observe the upcoming world fashion trends of Islamic fashion and then to implement the concept of modesty favorable to the fashion market of Sri Lanka.

3. LITERATURE SURVEY

3. 1. Islamic Women and Her Role in the Society

Religious Advises

Islamic religion considers the woman to be an independent person and so is fully responsible. Thus, several laws are implemented for them to protect their modesty and to

follow a disciplined lifestyle. Muslim women's knowledge and laws are based on the religious teachings they have been learning from birth.

Hijab, Niqab and Abaya play a main role in Muslim women's dress etiquettes. Quran states that,

“O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and women of the believers to draw their cloaks (veils) all over their bodies. That will be better, that they should be known (as free respectable) so as not to be annoyed and Allah is ever forgiving and merciful” (The noble Quran- Al-Ahzab 33: 59).

It is said that ‘Islam has introduced Hijab as a part of the decency and modesty in interaction between members of the opposite sex’. The Hijab has become the identity of Muslim women. It is a cultural element of the Islamic religion “which shows their faith” [16]. The veil is a means of controlling male sexual desire”. Quran also states that the veil protects the women. “This is more appropriate so that they may be known (as Muslim women) and thus not be harassed” (Al-Quran- verse 59: chapter 33).

“Women are permitted to enter the state of Ihram clothes they wish but avoid clothes that display their body or see through or tight clothes and decorative garments”. Women have always to be accompanied by a ‘Maharam’ in general it is used herein reference to a woman's husband and all the men that are within the prohibited degree of marriage, such as her father, brothers, father-in-law and so forth [10].

There are many hadith and Quran verses regarding dress of women such as covering the body in order to control sexual gazes. In Quran Allah recites to whom do they should reveal their beauty and adornments.

“(tell the believing women) not to reveal their adornments except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husband's sons, or their sisters' sons, or their(Muslim) women or the (female) slaves, or old male servants who lack vigor, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex” (al-Nur; 31). In Islamic holy books women are taught to cover their body and adornments' with a cloak which ultimately led to different types of dresses which cover the body.

Social and cultural Interaction

Sri Lanka which is situated nearby at the Indian subcontinent, consisted of Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils, Sri Lankan Moors, Malays and Burghers [18]. Sri Lankan Moors are the largest group of Muslims in Sri Lanka, comprising nearly 8% of the total population of the island and 96% of the Muslim population. Muslims are usually divided into Sri Lankan Moors, Indian Moors, Malays, Memons and Bohras. Their origin goes back to pre-Islamic times when trade was carried out with Arab and Persian traders who operated between Hormuz in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. With the advent of Islam and the subsequent expansion of the Muslim empire however, increased Arab commercial activities strengthened the Muslim presence in Sri Lanka. Since Sri Lanka is directly on this trade route,

Arab settlers began to settle down in the island and married local women [18]. International Contest on Holy Quran and Qiraath which was held in 2003 paved the way in promoting the Islamic way of life. It is also symbolically and visually discernible in the dress code, especially skull caps for men in rural areas and the veil among both rural and urban women.

Hijab (head scarf) was officially introduced to school uniform in Muslim schools for girl students and teachers of Sri Lanka. In 1982 and it has become part of the dress code for Muslim women across the island, but a small section of elite women of Colombo. The hijab and abaya have become of their identity. By Spring–Summer 2000 and autumn 2006 it was noticed a substantial increase in the use of hijab and abaya. Most women wear either the Abaya and headscarf or a sari with long-sleeved jacket and headscarf. This new sartorial etiquette increased the new job opportunities for Muslim women in Gulf countries since the 1980s, particularly as housemaids.

As women the dress gives them more respectability and freedom if they adopt the hijab when outside and at home. Girls find themselves more accepted among their peers and find it easier to move around in their village and locality; parents say they find it easier to find prospective husbands for their girls if they are observing hijab, even though it is not mandatory. Ferial Ashraff, leader of the NUA (one of the main Muslim political parties and wife of SLMC Founder M.H.M. Ashraff) mentioned that she was not used to wearing the hijab before she joined politics even when she accompanied her husband for official functions. But after her formal entry into politics after (Ashraff's death in September 2000), she was expected to wear the purdah [18].

In Sri Lanka a significant change has taken place in the 20th century. Muslim women have been able to leave their traditional role of mother and become educated and emancipated. At present there are many successful professionals like Doctors, Lawyers accountants and also they have entered the political field.

In every culture women play a major role, it is the same in Islamic culture Also. As per Islam “Woman is an independent entity, thus a fully responsible human”. “In Islamic perspective a woman has an honored position, she has special respect, love, affection and gentle feelings along with her legal and civil rights” [14]. Although there are such Muslim women, most of the Muslim women are getting less expose when compared with other cultures. There are only a very few examples in Sri Lanka of Muslim Women exposure in the society. Muslim women are not allowed to practice the fine arts through which the personality of a human and the way of thinking can be developed.

Islamic practice emphasizes the good usage of leisure time for physical, mental, and social well-being for both individuals and society [13]. Yet despite this religious requirement, many Muslim women do not participate in recreation activities due to the dearth of opportunities that meet their needs. Muslim dress codes and preference for women only programs and space screened from public viewing does not lessen the need, nor the desire for participation in sporting activities. And yet, these factors, which may be easily accommodated in existing facilities and pro- grams, continue to create structural and systemic barriers to the participation of Muslim women and girls in sporting and recreational activities [12].

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Muslim females are becoming involved in sports on account of perceived religious constraints. Women of Islam are allowed to perform in sports but should cover the whole body. Ibtihaj Muhammad competing in the Rio Olympics in 2016 (the first athlete to compete wearing the Hijab)



Figure 3. Ibtihaj Muhammad

Also, recently the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia has introduced a new set of rules which are to be implemented from the following year on women participation in activities like driving, participation in movies and in films which will lead to a great cultural change in Saudi Arabia and will provide freedom and equal rights to women. This will be the “Moderate Islam” to be followed by other Muslim Women who live around the world at the earliest.

Festivals of Muslim Communities

The main festivals of Muslim community are celebrating the Eid-al-Adha and Eid-al-Fit which are celebrated during the month of Ramadan. The month of Ramadan is a special month for Muslims as it is the end month according to the Islamic calendar. People fast during this month observing the hunger of the poor and end this festival with charity. People used to end this festival with functions, dinning out and social gatherings. Women play a major role by making food for the family and they dress nicely and perfectly during the festivals. Women are used to shopping more during this period. With online platforms sales of Muslim women’s wear have significantly increased during the Ramadan period. Muslim women tend to buy more fashionable clothing during this period with a lot of embroidery and accessories. Also people buy gifts. Usually that buy clothes for men, women and children. Most of the clothes are imported from the United Arab Emirates, Bangladesh and Indonesia [11].

Islamic Women in the World of Fashion

Since the early 2000s modest fashion blogs and social media and related e-commerce have composed a zone of women-led fashion intervention fostering dialogue within and across faiths and between religious and secular practitioners. Modest fashion conversation also extends into online domains concerned with home-sewing, thrifting, and parenting, incorporating fashion considerations into the quotidian practices of “everyday religion” characterized by blending, syncretism, and contradiction [10]. The meet between religion, fashion, and new media has raised challenges as well as opportunities: specifically the increase in hostile regulation by co-religionist critics, mostly male; the recurrent notoriety of modest fashion stories in the news (especially the hijab or niqab); and the delicacy of being

interpellated into new forms of recognizability, leadership, and accountability [9]. By 2011 it was noticed that the climate had begun to improve, as what was once contested or dismissed became incorporated as a subject worthy of Muslim media attention, with Islam Channel in 2013 planning regular fashion coverage. Modest bloggers and brands periodically become a mainstream press story because of the perceived novelty of the faith/fashion interface [7].



Figure 4. Cardigans



Figure 5. Kaftans



Figure 6. Trousers



Figure 7. Skirts

The current dress of Islamic women has been more fashionable even though they follow the principle of modesty. They have been able to accept their cultural teachings while being fashionable. Abaya, Jilbab, Burqa, Niqaab, Hijab, Khimaar, Saree with head covers, Cardigans with head cover, Kurthi with head covers, Kaftans with head covers are some variety of dresses worn by Muslim women all over the world.

Many motifs of embroidery and prints have been used as embellishments in the dress. Animal prints are prohibited in Islam. Flora and fauna and geometrical shapes are acceptable and have been used in Islamic culture for a long period of time. Mainly, Islamic cultural motifs are vegetables, flora and fauna, geometrical shapes and letters. With letters Muslims have a unique motif style called 'Calligraphy' which now is a world known style.

The rhythmic repetition of flora and fauna and the geometrical shapes is called 'Arabesque' which is another style unique to Islamic culture.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present research has a qualitative approach. The objective of the research is to identify key factors in modest fashion in the Islamic culture and to implement the concept of modesty favorably to the fashion market of Sri Lanka. As Islamic religion, norms, customs matter the most in Islamic women's dress etiquette the Islamic cultural aspect was investigated. In order to achieve the objectives successfully research sources, research procedure and validity of the research are explored.

4. 1. Research Resources

Primary sources

A structured questionnaire was distributed among a sample of 150 Muslim women of age between 18-45 around Kandy and Colombo as population of educated and financially stable women living in those areas. A pilot questionnaire consisted of ten questions was administered to collect information on the cultural aspect of Muslim women and their purchasing behavior on several occasions. A random sample was selected. There were a few professionals, some were students and most of them were housewives but were educated at least up to the O/L. Secondly a semi structured questionnaire was distributed in order to explore more opportunities. Through this questionnaire covered preferred dress type and head cover, colors, fabric types and embroidery, occasions of buying, were explored. Interviews were carried out with showroom managers of several Muslim womens' wear outlets around Dehiwala around Colombo which has a mass group of Muslim customers, to gather information on the garments most in demand and the occasions of purchasing and the seasons at which the purchases increased most.

Secondary sources

In order to collect relevant data many secondary sources were referred. Books written by Islamic scholars were read which were on religion, women and Islamic sumptuary laws. These data were also incorporated with the verses in Quran, recited by the god Allah and some were taken from the Hadith which were recited by the Prophet and were recorded by Bhukari. Journal articles were also read and articles published by the scholars on web pages

were read. Reports from the Department of Censes were also integrated as to collect some quantitative data. To establish the written data visual data (pictures, photographs and charts) were included.

Validity of the research was confirmed by using a wide variety of data and by cross referring data together. Books, journals, websites, visual data such as pictures and charts and in order to support these data questionnaire and discussion were carried out with relevant persons. By using these variety of sources lots of facts were explained and supportive information was gathered. The facts gathered on Muslim women's' cultural aspect from books were cross referred from the verses recited by Allah in Quran and verses recited by Prophet recorded as Hadith. And these verses in Quran and Hadith correspond with each other too. Some of the information gathered from written sources like articles has been cross referred with visual data like images and photos. Some of the secondary data were cross referred with primary data like interviews. And primary data from interviews were cross referred with questionnaires.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The selected sample is a mix of working women, housewives and students. According to the results 30% of women are working 50% are housewives and the rest 20% are students. It is shown that the most of them are married and are housewives, very few women went to work. But all the women are educated up to a certain level. The set of students are in the level of higher education. It is clearly visible that the young generation is being educated which shows that an educated generation of Muslim women is emerging.

Participation in social activities and sports is high according to the data. Almost all women are participating in religious activities which shows that they are more into a religious way of life. It is also clearly visible that none of the housewives are engaged in sports and only 10% of the working women are engaged in sports. This again shows that culturally Muslim women are bound to the service in family and not to other activities. But most of the students (80%) are engaged in sports. Participation in societies and committees is comparatively considerable in each group and is shown as 80% working women, 50% housewives and 95% of students.

Muslim women's' participation in sports shows that the majority of (52 %) women who are engaged in sports show interest towards outdoor games while a minority (20%) show interest in athletics while the rest (28%) in indoor games. This shows that Muslim women too are interested in outdoor games and the new generation is more orientated towards sports than the generation of married housewives.

There is a high demand for dress during festival seasons. The majority of (90%) tend to purchase during the Ramadan festival while minority (50%) on Birthdays and 20% for other occasions. The second largest purchasing occasion can be seen as weddings with a percentage of 65% while the next is the season of Hajj pilgrimage with 55% and least on other occasions. It shows that Muslim women purchase more during the season of festivals and functions. As it is difficult to target for birthdays particularly it is easier to target religious festivals and wedding seasons to promote products. The different types of dresses can be seen as shown in the figure8 below. All the women cover their head using Hijab and 60% prefers the traditional dress called Abaya. Very few women wear other dress types as shown in the Figure 8.

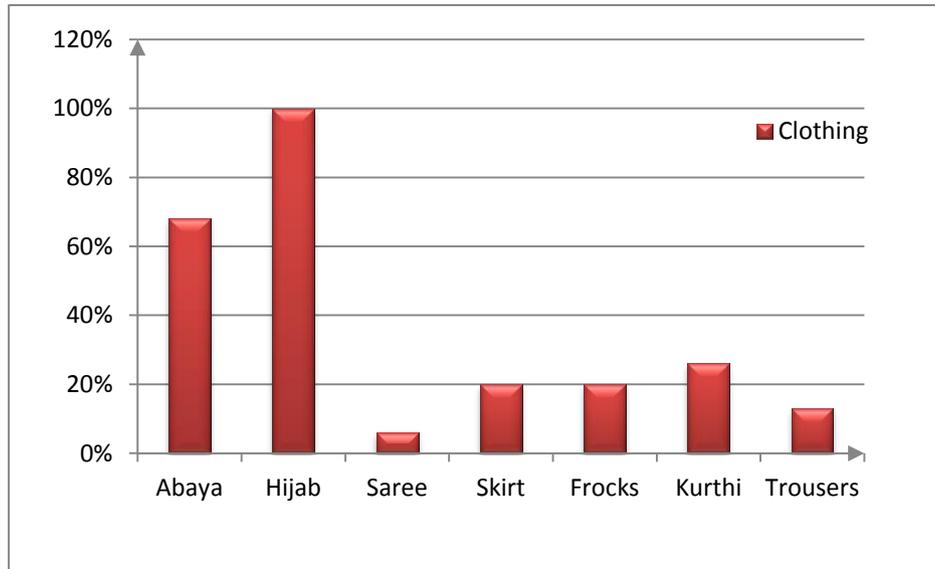


Figure 8. Dress types

The etiquette of covering the head is an essential attitude among Muslim women. The Figure 9 shows the preferred head coverings. The majority of (69%) prefer Hijab while the minority (3.8%) prefer Jilbab. From the sample set 11% prefer niqaab and 15% likes to wear Khimaar.

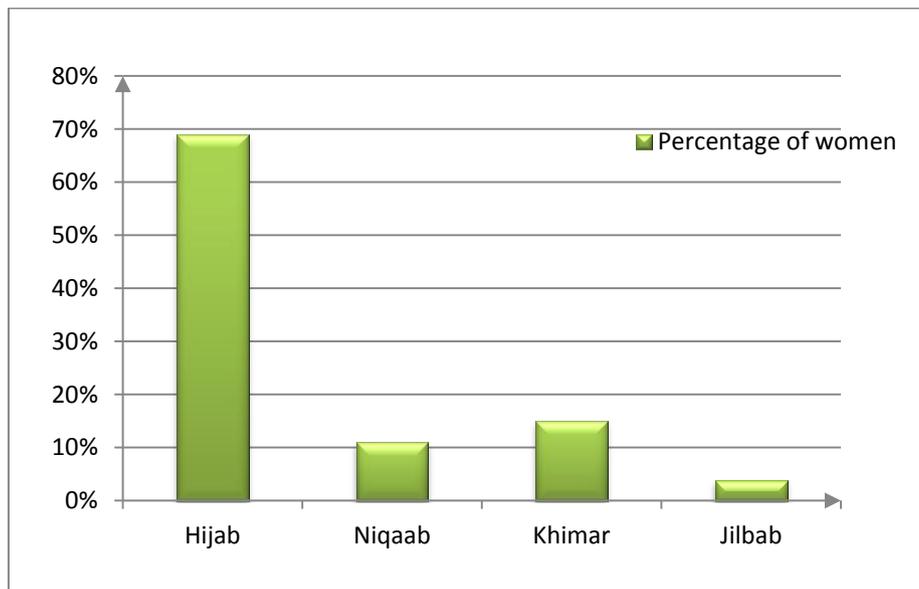


Figure 9. Preferable Head Coverings

Moreover, it was found out that 88% of women like the saree while majority (90%) like Shirts and Kurthi respectively with the head covering. 78% like to wear frocks with the head

cover while 80% of women like cardigans and 87% trousers respectively with covering. Women who dress without covering the head is as low as 12% for Saree, 11% for Skirts, 22% for Frocks, 14% Kaftan, 13% for trousers, 10% for Kurthi and 20% for Cardigans respectively as shown in the figure 10.

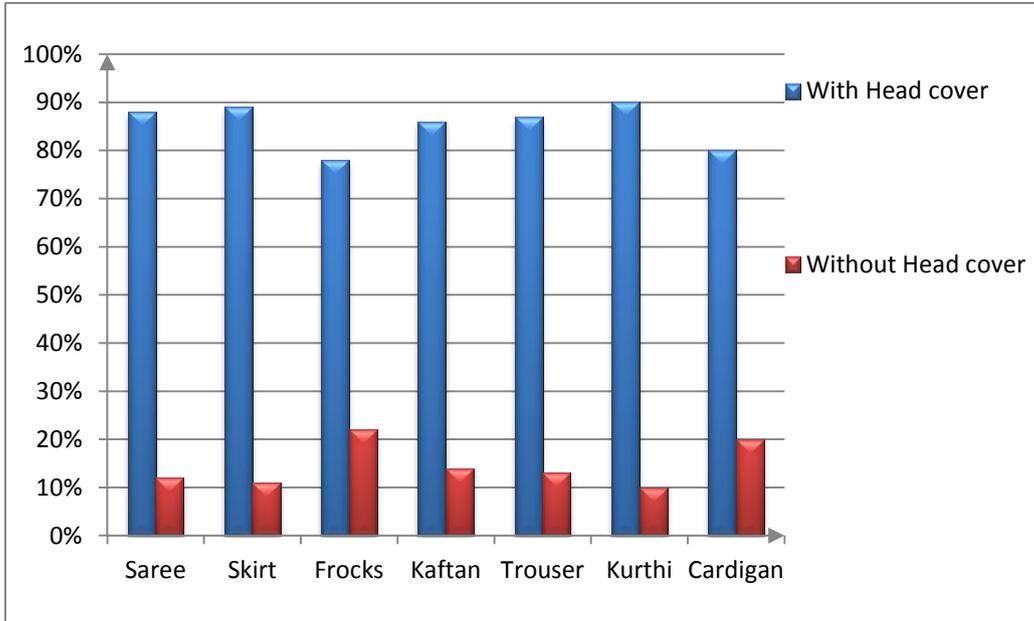


Figure 10. Dress Types with and without Head Cover

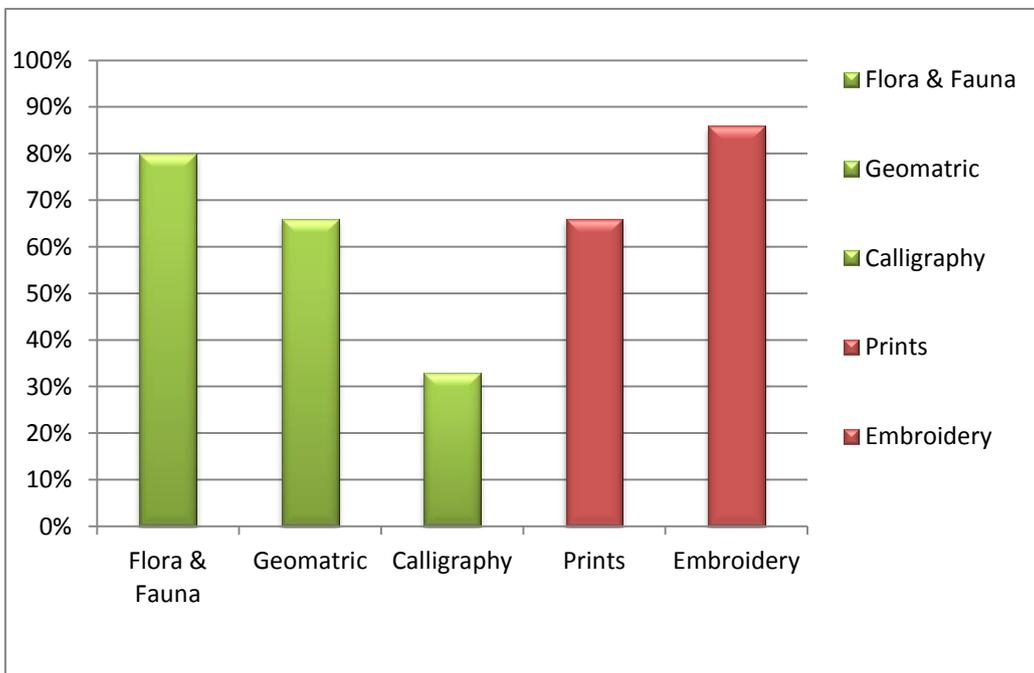


Figure 11. Preference on Motifs and value additions

As shown in the Figure 8 very few numbers of women wear other types of dresses. But when considering the Figure 10 it is clearly visible that Muslim women do wear different types of dresses other than traditional Abaya. Some even desire to dress without covering the head also. And a higher percentage likes to cover their head using the Hijab and a few prefer other types also. It is clearly visible that a fashion-conscious soul is residing inside Muslim women within the frame of modesty.

Muslim women prefer motifs and value adding to their dresses as shown in Figure 11. According to the data analysis it showed that a majority (80%) prefer flora and fauna motifs and 66% of women prefer geometric motifs while 33% prefer calligraphy. Most of the women like embroidery as value additions with a percentage of 86% and prints with a percentage of 66%. A high demand is shown towards embroidery with flora and fauna. Calligraphy is not much preferable on dresses. Women prefer prints as a value addition as well.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Muslim women are bound with their culture, customs and norms of the society. The fashion which is to be introduced to them need to go through their culture, customs and norms. The research found out that Muslim women show a great desire for fashion. Hence the following recommendations are suggested according to the derived results of the research. Women show more interest in religious activities. Therefore, it is recommended to fashion marketers to target religious activities when producing garments. It is clearly visible that people show more attention for purchasing for religious festivals so it is recommended to target Ramadan and Hajj festivals. According to the findings there is an emerging tendency in young women towards outdoor sports. Therefore, a new line of modest sport wear in the fashion market is recommended. There is a high tendency for purchasing during weddings so more luxurious and fashionable garments can be produced during wedding seasons. Women prefer different head covers. However, the most available head cover is the Hijab in Sri Lanka, therefore it is recommended to target other types of head coverings as well. Muslim women show an interest in different types of dresses Therefore, it is recommended to produce different types of modest wear including saree, skirts, cardigans and kaftans.

7. CONCLUSION

Muslim women are bound by cultural customs and norms when considering their dress etiquettes. However, there are opportunities for fashion through the path of modesty, as Muslim women are fashion-conscious and a rare desire to engage in fashion. Decision making in the questionnaire shows that they hope for fashionable and culturally accepted products. Therefore, it can be concluded that opportunities are available for Muslim women's fashion within a cultural margin.

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