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GENDER REPRESENTATION AND GENERATION Z PERSPECTIVES ON MUSLIM FASHION TRENDS IN MALE GAZE STUDIES

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Abstract

This study examines Generation Z Muslim men's perceptions of Muslim women's fashion trends on social media through the lens of male gaze theory and Islamic moral education. Focusing on male university students aged 18–25 years in Palangka Raya, Central Kalimantan, the study investigates how these young men interpret Muslim women's clothing, how the male gaze shapes their moral and aesthetic judgments, and how such perceptions influence social norms in digital spaces. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining a quantitative survey with qualitative Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The survey captured general perceptions, while FGDs offered more profound insight into participants' reflections. Results show that Gen Z men hold diverse and often ambivalent views: while some associate clothing with piety and moral identity, others see it as cultural self-expression. Most participants admitted to engaging in judgment based on women's dress, indicating the persistence of the male gaze in digital culture. Furthermore, all respondents agreed that social media strongly shapes notions of "appropriateness," reinforcing aesthetic and moral standards through algorithms and online interactions. The findings reveal that Muslim men's perceptions of modesty are negotiated between religious values and digital aesthetics, influencing gender relations and online behavior. The study highlights the importance of gender-sensitive digital literacy in Islamic education to promote ethical and inclusive engagement in online environments.

Keywords: *Muslim fashion; Generation Z; male gaze; modesty; social media*

INTRODUCTION

The development of Muslim fashion trends in the digital era is not only related to theological or aesthetic aspects but also concerns gender representation and the formation of social norms. In the social media ecosystem, hijab has shifted in meaning from a symbol of piety to a lifestyle commodity shaped by the logic of consumption and popularity (Özbölük, 2023). Muslim women are often placed as objects of public judgment, where comments, likes, and platform algorithms play a role in determining standards of appropriateness and self-image (Gill, 2021). In this context, the male gaze is a relevant concept because it shapes public perceptions of what is considered proper or not, especially among Generation Z, who actively interact in the digital space (Sheen, Yekani, & Jordan, 2023). This phenomenon raises questions about how men interpret Muslim women's fashion trends and how these perceptions affect the construction of appropriateness norms on social media.

From the perspective of Islamic education, this phenomenon goes beyond cultural representation. It touches on the essence of *tarbiyah islâmiyyah*, namely nurturing faith, moral consciousness, and gender ethics aligned with Qur'anic values of modesty (*haya'*). The way young Muslim men perceive and evaluate women's modesty in online environments reflects not only aesthetic judgments but also the depth of their religious understanding and ethical awareness. Therefore, examining the male gaze within the context of Muslim fashion is relevant to Islamic education because it exposes how religious knowledge, morality, and digital behavior intersect in shaping the identity of Muslim youth. As emphasized by Muhdi et al. (2024), strengthening digital literacy in Islamic education is vital to prevent moral detachment among Muslim students in online spaces.

Previous studies have shown that social media and influencers play a crucial role in reconstructing the meaning of hijab while promoting modest fashion (Özbölük, 2023; Pradana, Elisa, & Syarifuddin, 2023). Generation Z, as digital natives, are intensely involved in this process through online interactions that shape public opinion (Manley, Seock, & Shin, 2023). However, most of the existing studies emphasize women's experiences or the

commercialization of hijab, while men's perceptions, especially those of Generation Z, remain underexplored. However, these perceptions are significant because they influence norms of propriety, religious identity, and gender interaction. Addressing this gap, the present study integrates perspectives from gender studies and Islamic education, highlighting the moral implications of the male gaze and its relationship to digital ethics.

Furthermore, Islamic educators have begun to recognize the need for *progressive Islamic digital literacy* that empowers Muslim youth to navigate online moral dilemmas responsibly (Putra & Abdulhakim, 2025). In this context, understanding how young Muslim men perceive modesty on social media can serve as a valuable reflection for teachers, *da'wah* activists, and policymakers in developing gender-sensitive educational content.

Theoretically, this study expands the concept of the male gaze by positioning Generation Z Muslim men not as passive spectators but as active meaning-makers whose judgments reveal their internalization of religious and ethical values. Practically, the findings can serve as a reference for Islamic educators, *da'wah* institutions, and the modest fashion industry in designing communication and digital literacy programs that promote inclusive and ethical interactions. Based on this background, the study aims to explore how Generation Z Muslim men interpret Muslim women's fashion trends on social media and how such perceptions shape norms of propriety and gender relations in the digital era. Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do Generation Z men interpret Muslim women's fashion trends on social media?
2. How does the male gaze affect their perception of godliness and propriety?
3. How do these perceptions shape social norms and gender interactions in the digital space?

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a simple mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain a more comprehensive

understanding of Generation Z male students' perceptions of Muslim fashion trends. The quantitative approach was carried out through the dissemination of closed-ended questionnaires, while the qualitative approach was implemented through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The combination of these two approaches was intended to map general patterns of perception while exploring deeper meanings expressed by participants.

The research subjects consisted of male Generation Z students aged 18 to 25 years from a university in Palangka Raya, Central Kalimantan. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on specific criteria: Muslim males, active users of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or X/Twitter, and willing to participate voluntarily. From the screening process, four to six participants were selected. Although the number may seem relatively small, it is consistent with methodological recommendations for FGD design, which suggest 4–8 participants to ensure rich, focused, and interactive discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Nyumba et al., 2018). A smaller group allows every participant to share their perspectives in detail, reduces dominance effects, and facilitates deeper reflection on sensitive topics such as gender perception and religious values. Furthermore, data adequacy and representativeness were ensured through data saturation, triangulation among researchers, and a member-checking process to validate interpretations of the discussion.

The instruments used in this study included a closed-ended questionnaire and FGD guidelines. The questionnaire contained five "Yes" or "No" questions designed to map participants' initial perceptions of the relationship between dress, the value of godliness, and the influence of social media on standards of propriety. The quantitative data from the questionnaire were presented as percentages and visualized in pie charts to facilitate interpretation. Meanwhile, the FGDs were used to explore deeper meanings and participants' reflections on the phenomenon being studied. The discussion focused on two main questions: participants' views on Muslim fashion trends on social media and their ideas for creating healthy gender interactions in fashion-related online content.

The research procedure was conducted in several stages. The first stage involved preparing the instruments and recruiting participants in accordance with the established criteria. The second stage was data collection: participants first completed the questionnaire before attending an in-person FGD session lasting 60 to 90 minutes. To ensure the credibility and validity of the data, a member-checking process was conducted in which preliminary findings were reconfirmed to participants to minimize misinterpretation.

Data analysis followed two approaches, one for each data type. Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics to calculate the percentage for each response, which were then presented in pie charts to illustrate the distribution of perceptions. Qualitative data from the FGDs were analyzed thematically using the Braun and Clarke (2021) framework, which involves data coding, pattern identification, and theme construction. Triangulation among researchers was applied to strengthen analytical reliability. Through this approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Generation Z Muslim men interpret Muslim women's fashion trends on social media and how these interpretations relate to the male gaze and Islamic moral awareness in the context of digital culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gen Z Men's Perception of Muslim Fashion Trends

The phenomenon of Muslim fashion trends among the younger generation is growing rapidly, primarily through social media, accelerating their spread and influencing public perception. This research focuses on how Generation Z men interpret these trends, especially in relation to the value of piety and female character.

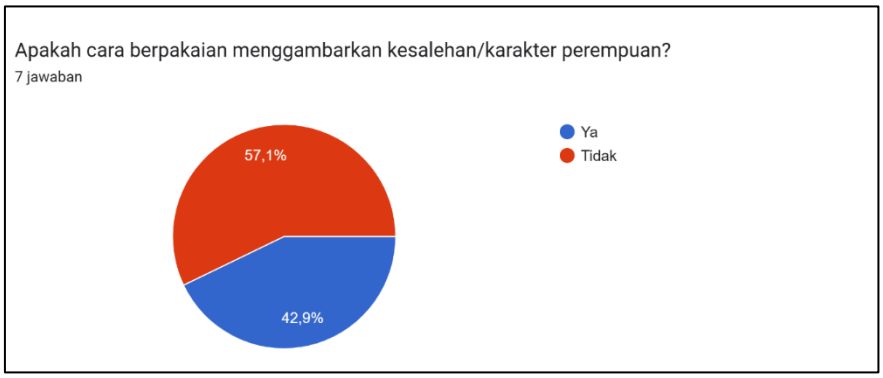

Figure 1. Does the way a woman dresses reflect her piety/character?

The questionnaire results showed that 57.1% of respondents stated that a person's clothing does not always reflect their piety or character. In comparison, 42.9% believe that clothing can represent an individual's character. The findings show a divergence of views among Gen Z men: some still associate fashion with moral judgment, while others see it simply as self-expression and lifestyle.

The FGD interview provides a more in-depth picture. One of the participants stated:

"In my opinion, following the trend is legal; it can even make us look neat and attractive. However, it still has to be in accordance with the sharia. Do not let just because we follow the trend, we forget the main purpose of hijab, which is to cover the awrah and maintain honor." (P4)

This statement illustrates a concrete manifestation of the tension between religious obligation and digital aestheticism among Gen Z Muslim men. The participant's emphasis on being "neat and attractive" while still "in accordance with the sharia" reflects a dual moral reference: one grounded in Islamic ethics and the other in social-media-driven visual culture. The coexistence of these references shows that young Muslim men evaluate women's fashion not only through piety but also through **visibility and the social capital associated with** digital appearances.

In line with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory of social construction, this dual reference emerges from **repeated online interactions**, likes, comments, and algorithmic exposure that normalize aesthetic appreciation as

part of moral evaluation. The data (57.1% disagreeing that dress reflects piety vs. 42.9% agreeing) quantitatively confirms this ambivalence, revealing how **religious and aesthetic judgments intersect rather than oppose each other**. Thus, the "complexity of identity" arises from this intersection: piety becomes performative, expressed not only through modest clothing but also through stylistic alignment with online beauty norms (Özbölük, 2023; Pradana et al., 2023).

Therefore, Gen Z men's perceptions of Muslim women's clothing are not singular but **negotiated across two value systems**, religious piety and digital aesthetics. For some, fashion continues to represent moral identity; for others, it serves as a marker of social participation in online visual culture. This negotiation demonstrates that the identity of Muslim women in the digital age is co-constructed through both moral discourse and visual validation, revealing how spiritual and aesthetic values continually interact rather than merely oppose each other.

The Role of the Male Gaze in the Formation of Appropriateness Norms

The assessment of women through their clothing remains a fairly prevalent phenomenon in digital culture. This section explores the extent to which Gen Z men acknowledge the practice and their reflections on emerging judgment biases.

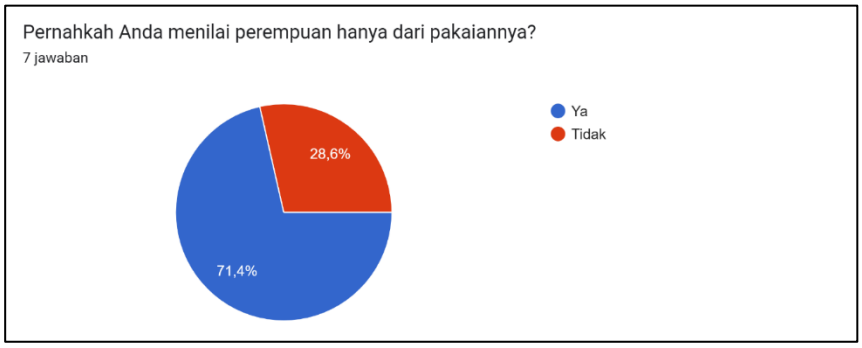

Figure 2. Have you ever judged a woman just by her clothes?

According to the questionnaire, 71.4% of respondents admitted judging women only by their clothes, while 28.6% stated they had never done so. This data shows that the majority still practice visual assessment in line with Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze.

The FGD results reinforce these findings. One participant said:

"Ever, the first impression is usually from the clothes." (P2)

This statement shows that dressing is an early indicator in how women an perceived. However, some participants began to show critical awareness, acknowledging that judgments based on fashion are not always fair and can lead to stereotypes.

This phenomenon can be explained through *the male gaze*, in which women are positioned as visual objects constantly assessed, including in digital space (Supriansyah, 2023). According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), in *objectification theory*, women who are constantly assessed visually can internalize these external views, leading social expectations to influence their behavior and clothing choices. The study of Manley et al. (2023) also found that Gen Z men play an active role in reinforcing or challenging norms of propriety, primarily through comments and interactions on social media.

This finding resonates with Aisyah, Surawan, and Widiastuty (2024), who found that Muslim women living in minority regions tend to perceive the hijab primarily as a symbol of identity and personal belief rather than fashion. In contrast, within Muslim-majority contexts, the hijab often merges with aesthetic and lifestyle trends. This contrast indicates that the meaning of modest fashion varies across cultural settings, reinforcing that interpretations of modesty are socially constructed and context-dependent.

Surawan (2024) emphasizes that societal expectations and visual validation profoundly shape women's self-representation on social media. Platforms such as Instagram not only provide space for self-expression but also reinforce aesthetic and moral standards through likes and comments. This aligns with the male gaze perspective, in which women internalize visual expectations and adjust their appearance to conform to collective ideals of modesty and beauty. In this sense, digital culture transforms the gaze from a personal act into a systemic mechanism that regulates women's self-presentation and identity.

Similar findings were found by Ali and Hassan (2024), who highlight that clothing-based judgment bias is rooted in patriarchal social structures and

reinforced by digital culture. This shows that assessment does not operate only at the individual level but is also a social mechanism that produces and maintains gender norms.

Thus, this practice of assessment is not just a personal perception but part of a broader system that shapes women's identities and norms of appropriateness in a digital society.

The Influence of Social Media and the Role of Men in the Digital Environment

Social media has a significant influence on shaping "appropriate/inappropriate" standards in dressing. In addition, digital platforms are also an arena for negative comments and public judgments that can affect women's freedom of expression.

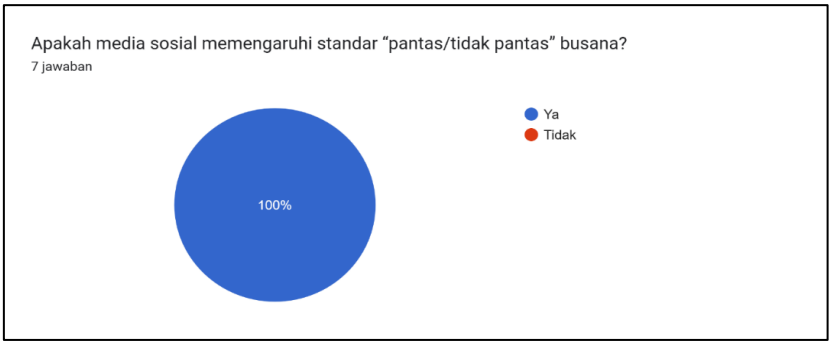

Figure 3. Does Does Social media influence the standards of "appropriate/inappropriate" clothing?

The questionnaire results showed that all respondents (100%) agreed that social media affects standards of appropriateness in dress. This shows how powerful algorithms, viral trends, and digital interactions are in producing a collective perception of Muslim women's clothing.

As Surawan and Risa (2024) highlight, teenage girls often internalize beauty ideals constructed by social media and popular culture, shaping how they perceive and present their bodies. This media-driven body image pressure parallels the influence of the male gaze, which encourages women to conform to aesthetic expectations rather than personal or religious values in their fashion choices.

It is interesting to note that the statistics and FGD results indicate that Gen Z Muslim males use social media as a **paradoxical moral arena**. On the

one hand, it perpetuates gender prejudice by means of the male gaze and digital surveillance, a type of group surveillance that normalises criticism of women's attire. However, it also serves as a **forum for religious expression and identity performance**, where Islamic principles are discussed and even promoted through modest clothing.

These two processes are mutually constitutive rather than conflicting. The same digital channels that facilitate objectification also serve as venues for the performance, reinterpretation, and visibility of religion. This suggests that social media in the Muslim digital world mediates an ongoing bargain between **publicity and piety**: online exposure both challenges and upholds Islamic principles. Therefore, social media's dual effects should be seen as **interacting aspects of digital religiosity**, which simultaneously disciplines and spreads faith-based values, rather than as two opposing poles (Anwar et al., 2024; Tanner & Gillardin, 2025; Rahmawati et al., 2024).

The results of the FGD illustrate this phenomenon more clearly. One of the participants revealed:

"On social media, many comments are not just opinions, but like judgments. For example, there are women whose clothes are slightly different, immediately labeled as inappropriate, and even gossiped about. It makes people afraid to express themselves." (P6)

This quote highlights the phenomenon of digital policing, a form of collective supervision carried out by the community through social media. This surveillance can hinder women's freedom to express their identity through clothing. These findings are in line with Tanner and Gillardin (2025), who found that social media reinforces hegemonic masculinity by creating a sustainable digital surveillance system.

In addition, several FGD participants stated that men also have a responsibility in creating a safe and inclusive digital space. This awareness is important because the responsibility lies not only on women to adhere to specific standards, but also on men not to reinforce gender bias through their comments and behavior. A recent study by Rahmawati et al. (2024) emphasizes

the importance of gender-based digital literacy in reducing online judgment practices that are detrimental to women.

Therefore, creating gender-sensitive digital literacy requires a sophisticated knowledge of this dichotomy. In addition to reducing gender prejudice, ethical interventions should harness social media's positive potential to foster thoughtful, inclusive, and faith-conscious involvement among young Muslims.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

CONCLUSION

1. The study concludes that Generation Z Muslim men perceive Muslim fashion as a multi-layered and negotiated phenomenon, simultaneously expressing religiosity and digital cultural participation. This duality demonstrates that the hijab has evolved from a purely religious marker into a dynamic symbol of both faith and identity performance in online contexts.
2. The study also demonstrates how men's assessments of women's attire, whether intentional or not, reinforce social hierarchies and affect women's online visibility, confirming the ongoing significance of the male gaze in forming norms of modesty and piety. However, the participants' growing consciousness of prejudice points to a potential change towards reflective masculinity and more equal gender relations.
3. Overall, the results show that the ongoing balancing act between digital involvement, aesthetic standards, and spiritual ethics typifies Gen Z's moral thinking. The study is positioned as a significant contribution to the conversation on gender, media, and Islamic moral formation in modern society because of this interaction, which emphasises how religion itself is being reinterpreted within digital modernity.

SUGGESTION

1. For Muslim women, the results of this research can be a reflection material to maintain agency in choosing the style of clothing without

being entirely subject to external judgment. This awareness is important for building a more independent and critical identity.

2. For men, this research is expected to encourage awareness of their role in creating a more inclusive and non-judgmental digital space. Thus, gender interaction on social media can take place more healthily and equally.
3. For the next researcher, it is recommended to expand the scope of the study by involving Gen Z women as a comparator or using mixed methods to obtain a more comprehensive picture of gender relations and Muslim women's fashion trends in the digital space.

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