

Research Article

Hijrah in Style: Surabaya Muslim Women, Hijab Practices, and the Fashioning of Identity

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A B S T R A C T

The term hijrah, originally referring to the Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca, has evolved in contemporary Indonesia to signify a spiritual transformation, often linked to religious practices and attire changes. One prominent expression of this shift is the adoption of hijab shar'i, a veiling style that emphasises modesty and adherence to Islamic teachings. In Surabaya, some Muslim women actively promote hijab shar'i as part of their hijrah, associating it with religious commitment and identity formation. This study examines how hijab shar'i functions as both a fashion statement and a symbolic boundary marker of religious identity. Drawing on Malcolm Barnard's fashion theory, this research explores the intersection of fashion culture, lifestyle, and religious expression among Muslim women. Employing field observations and in-depth interviews, the findings reveal a shifting interpretation of hijrah—not merely as a spiritual journey but also as a dynamic process influenced by sociocultural and fashion trends. The study highlights how hijab shar'i wearers negotiate their identity within the broader discourse of Indonesian Muslim fashion, challenging conventional binaries of piety and modernity. By situating hijab shar'i within fashion culture and lifestyle studies, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of religious dress as a form of self-expression and boundary-making in an increasingly globalised world.

Keywords: Fashion Culture, Hijab Shar'i, Hijrah, Identity, Lifestyle

Introduction

In contemporary Indonesia, the term hijrah has gained prominence among Muslim women, particularly in urban settings like Surabaya. Hijrah is commonly understood as the act of moving from one place to another, often across state or regional borders. While in the history of Islam, hijrah refers to the migration of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina,¹ hijrah has evolved to encompass a broader spectrum of meanings within Islamic discourse. Voll notes that Muslim minorities often found two alternatives: either transforming their societies into Islamic territories or migrating (hijrah) to preserve their faith.

In the Indonesian context, where Muslims form the majority but the country is not officially an Islamic state, hijrah has taken on new meanings, particularly in relation to religious identity and fashion. Hijrah extends beyond this historical event and has broader implications within Islamic teachings, often signifying spiritual transformation, migration, or shifts in religious practices. Interestingly, the term hijrah has recently been applied to describe a specific hijab style known as Hijab Shar'i, which some Muslim women in Surabaya actively promote as their preferred form of modest dress. The concept of hijrah plays a significant role in Islamic discourse; however, scholars continue to debate its contemporary interpretations and applications.^{1,2} This

study extends this broader interpretation of hijrah to the Indonesian context, where Muslims form the majority yet live in a secular state. It examines how the concept of hijrah is internalised and expressed through the hijab practices of women in Surabaya. In this study, I explore how the term hijrah is metaphorically used by women who wear the hijab, particularly in the context of Hijab Shar'i.

A hijab is a head covering worn by Muslim women in accordance with religious prescriptions. Over the past two decades, the hijab has become increasingly common among Indonesian Muslims, but the styles and motivations for wearing it vary widely.³⁻⁸ Scholars such as Smith-Hefner, Carla Jones, Bucar, and Rinaldo⁸ have examined hijab practices in Indonesia, highlighting the ways in which Muslim women navigate religious devotion while engaging with contemporary fashion trends, consumerism, and social status. This negotiation reflects broader tensions between religious commitment and personal agency in interpreting religious texts.^{3, 4, 5, 9}

Most studies have focused on the transition from unveiling to veiling among Muslim women in Indonesia.^{3, 5-9} In contrast, Izharuddin has examined the opposite phenomenon—Muslim women in Malaysia who transition from veiling to unveiling.¹⁰ These processes of veiling and unveiling illustrate the dynamic interplay between external pressures and personal choices. Veiling is not simply a binary decision but rather a complex process that involves gradual shifts, including changes in hijab style.^{11, 12} For example, some women who initially wore a short, layered hijab later adopted a looser, one-piece style known as Hijab Shar'i. This shift is often influenced by participation in Islamic study groups (*pengajian*), the strong social bonds within religious communities, and the consumer culture of urban society.^{13, 14}

This study examines the intersection of hijrah and hijab practices among Muslim women in Surabaya, an urban centre in Indonesia. Specifically, I investigate how Muslim women in Surabaya perceive Hijab Shar'i as part of their hijrah journey and how these women construct their identities through this hijab style and explore the boundaries of identity formation within their community.^{15, 16} Unlike traditional discussions of hijrah, which emphasise physical migration, the application of this term in the context of hijab practices remains relatively unexplored. The lack of research on the intersection of hijrah and hijab highlights the tendency to study these concepts separately, despite their shared significance in Islamic discourse.^{2, 12} While hijrah signifies migration—physically, spiritually, or ideologically—hijab practices encompass more than religious adherence; they also reflect trends in fashion, consumer culture, and individual and collective identity.

Hijab practices, like hijrah, are deeply rooted in Islamic

teachings, yet they also intersect with contemporary concerns such as fashion, consumerism, and identity. Muslim women do not merely wear the hijab as a religious obligation; rather, their hijab styles serve as markers of identity, aligning with their spiritual journeys and community affiliations. This study explores how the term hijrah is appropriated and redefined within the lived experiences of Muslim women, demonstrating the interplay between religious devotion and fashion as a form of self-expression.

The hijab has become a hyper-visible aspect of religious practice, symbolising piety and devotion.^{17, 11} However, for women who have already adopted the hijab, what motivates them to change their style to Hijab Shar'i? This study seeks to understand the broader meanings of hijrah beyond its historical connotation, particularly in relation to contemporary hijab practices among Muslim women in Surabaya, as a framework for interpreting and engaging in hijab practices and how these practices signify broader socio-religious changes in Indonesia.

Indonesian Islam has undergone continuous cycles of Islamisation since its introduction in the 12th century, influencing the daily lives of its adherents, particularly Muslim women. The process of Islamisation has encountered varied responses from society and the state, especially during the New Order era under President Suharto. During this period, religious activities perceived as political threats were suppressed.^{18, 19} The 1982 government policy banning headscarves in state schools and government offices exemplifies this restriction. Women wearing hijabs faced significant social and economic barriers, including difficulties in employment and education.³

However, after the fall of Suharto in 1998, the political and cultural landscape of Indonesia shifted. The Reformation era shows an increasing acceptance of Islamic symbols, including the hijab, which gained popularity as a marker of piety and personal freedom.^{4, 20} The rise in the number of women wearing hijabs led to the emergence of a lucrative Muslim fashion industry, with hijab styles evolving to incorporate global fashion trends.²¹ Today, hijab practices in Indonesia reflect a complex interplay of religious devotion, identity formation, and consumer culture, facilitated by the accessibility of fashion through social media and local designers such as Dian Pelangi, who has been recognised internationally.²¹

In Surabaya, hijab practices have transformed significantly over the past two decades. Previously perceived as a restrictive practice, hijab-wearing has now become an empowering act, allowing women greater participation in public life. The interplay between fashion and faith has shaped new modes of religious expression, illustrating how hijrah is not just about physical migration but also about lifestyle transformation within the urban Muslim community.

Fashion theory provides a critical lens for analysing the evolving hijab styles among Muslim women. Malcolm Barnard argues that fashion is a communicative practice through which individuals convey meanings, values, and identities²² In the context of hijab practices, the shifting styles of Muslim women signify not only aesthetic preferences but also deeper socio-religious transformations. This study hypothesises that beyond mere communication, hijab fashion embodies an ongoing negotiation of identity influenced by the broader process of Islamisation in Indonesia.

Clothing, according to Barnard is imbued with meanings that vary depending on social, economic, and cultural contexts.²² By wearing the hijab in specific styles, Muslim women construct and affirm their belonging to a particular religious and social group. The shared interpretations of hijab reinforce their collective identity, distinguishing them from other Muslim women who may adopt different hijab styles or eschew the hijab altogether. This aligns with Barnard's notion that individuals and groups use fashion to negotiate their relationships with others, asserting their uniqueness while engaging in broader societal discourses.²²

Moreover, Barnard introduces the concept of the "politics of fashion," which underscores how clothing choices reflect ideological positions.²² In the case of Muslim women in Surabaya, hijab fashion is not merely a personal choice but a political statement that asserts religious commitment and moral distinction. By analyzing these sartorial choices, this study seeks to understand how Muslim women in Surabaya navigate their identities in relation to both the larger Muslim community and the broader Indonesian society.

In sum, this study integrates the concept of hijrah with fashion theory to explore how hijab practices function as a site of identity construction among Muslim women in Surabaya. By examining the meanings attached to different hijab styles, it seeks to reveal how these women negotiate their religious, social, and cultural affiliations, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the intersection between Islamic devotion and contemporary fashion trends in Indonesia.

Methods

For this study, a year-long fieldwork was carried out in Surabaya, Indonesia. A year is the usual length of time to stay for collecting ethnographic data. This ethnographic method gave a chance to understand the dynamics and processes of everyday life in which Surabayan Muslim women practice their hijab as part of their everyday life activities.

To get a detailed description of Muslim women's everyday life, I also conducted participant observation by joining the Muslim women's activities. Joining their activities, I got an

opportunity to blend in and hang out with these women. By becoming as much a part of the community being studied as possible, I could gain an insider's perspective of the Muslim women's everyday life. Since I am a woman, Muslim, wearing hijab, and know their language, I could also blend in and hang out with these women easily. Knowing the local language and becoming as much a part of the group being studied as possible to gain the insider's perspective are practices suggested for ethnographers.

Besides conducting participant observation, I also conducted deep interviews. Individual interviews are commonly used in qualitative and interpretative research. Individual interviews helped the researcher to gain in-depth and detailed data. The researcher can explore various areas of life perspective in an individual's life. Furthermore, through individual interviews, the conversation could be conducted in a friendly atmosphere but with a distinctive purpose, that is, for research. For these individual interviews, this study was conducted using a semi-structured, open-ended, and in-depth interview. Unstructured interviews will provide overwhelming data. The interview can also lead to missing the purpose of the interview. Thus, semi-structured interviews helped this study to keep the flexibility of the interview, but it also stayed on its purpose: to answer all the research questions.

Result and Discussion

The hijab shar'i style has emerged in the hijab practices of Muslim women, and in many ways, it has come to symbolise a higher level of religiosity. Muslim women follow this style, which adheres to Islamic rules but remains fashionable. One of the Muslim women explained to me that the hijab in the shar'i style was introduced in 2015. In the beginning, she wore what she referred to as a hijaber style. She explained the hijabers model to me: "The hijab was folded here and there, the sleeves reached the wrists, and the pants reached the ankles, but the shirt still showed the shape of the body." She also wore jeans, which were a bit tight, and the blouse was still tight, both in front and back; the shape of the body could still be seen.

Over time, her hijab style gradually changed. After she attended regular Islamic teachings, the Islamic teachers reminded her to wear clothing that would conceal the shape of the body. Step by step, she began wearing looser clothes—loose blouses, loose pants, even baggy ones—yet still maintaining her fashionable hijab style. Later, she started wearing the abaya, a loose, straight-style dress with no tight front or back, similar to a robe. She also adjusted her hijab style. Now she wears wide hijabs that cover the breasts, and the hijab shar'i style is fully adopted. The hijab covers the breasts, extending from the arms to below the elbows, just above the fingers. When they attend Quran lessons, some of them wear a decker, an extension of

sleeves that covers the hands down to their fingers (see figure 1). “Now, the hijab shar’i style is becoming popular in Surabaya,” explained this Muslim woman. “Many stores are starting to sell matching hijabs and robes.”



Figure 1. Hijab shar’i style

Another Muslim woman recalls the first time she practiced a fashionable hijab style, folding it several times and layering it to create a beautiful look, modified with a suitable brooch. Her blouse was still a bit tight, and she wore jeans. “At that time, my hijab was not shar’i because I was still showing the shape of my body,” she remembered. After attending pengajian, an Islamic teaching activity, many times, she changed her hijab practices because the teacher frequently reminded the female participants to wear their hijab in a way that covered their body shape. Since the first time, she practiced hijab after getting married at the age of 23, and through her participation in pengajian, she gradually changed her practices. Her hijab became wider and longer, and her blouse and pants looser—she began wearing a tunic and baggy pants. Initially, she often wore a turban hijab style, which left her ears and neck exposed. Later, she began practicing a hijab that covered both her ears and neck. As she got older, she participated more frequently in pengajian and wore looser clothes and a wider hijab. Now, at around fifty years old, she has chosen to practice the hijab shar’i style—an abaya, a long-sleeved, ankle-length loose robe paired with a wide long hijab that extends below her bosom and buttocks, covering the shape of her body. She also sometimes wears a decker on her arms, and an extension cover for her arms in case her sleeves are unintentionally pulled up when she moves. “It is time for me to do hijrah by wearing the hijab shar’i style,” she said, concluding that her current hijab choice symbolises her hijrah.

For these Muslim women, hijrah refers to changing their previous hijab style to the new hijab shar’i style. Previously,

they wore more than one piece of hijab, creatively layering them in various colourful styles, which were short. They did not wear long and wide, loose hijabs that covered their front and back parts loosely. Their blouses and pants were also somewhat tight, allowing their body shape to be clearly seen (see figure 2).



(a)



(b)

Figure 2.(a,b)Tight clothes

On the other hand, their current hijab style is completely different from the previous one (see Figure 1). Now, they wear a loose robe in which their body shape cannot be seen. Moreover, they still cover their bodies with a long, wide, loose hijab. This new style is referred to as hijab shar’i. This shift in hijab style is considered a migration or mobility or movement. In this context, the migration is not geographical but pertains to a shift in fashion style, an understanding of Islamic practices related to the hijab, and even a transition through age. The duration of this migration depends on the individual’s process of changing their hijab style. However, the strong social bond within the community also significantly influences the time it

takes for each person to make this change. The strong social bonding among the members of the HMC maintains their hijab style preference. The stronger the social bond among Muslim women, the quicker they are to decide to change their hijab style or to undergo the hijrah. For these women, the hijab shar'i style marks a boundary of normative Muslim womanhood, with its associations with religious moral obedience. These values are internalised when they gather with other Muslim women. Through the strong community bond, the once creative and layered hijab style gradually consolidated into a boundary of identity, signified by their hijab preferences. In other words, once a Muslim woman adopts the hijab shar'i style and is seen wearing it, she is perceived as having undergone hijrah—a symbol of religious and obedient Muslim womanhood.

Conclusion

The Muslim women in Surabaya carry a much broader set of meanings regarding their hijab practices. One significant meaning is linked to the historical event of the Prophet Muhammad's hijrah. In the context of hijab practices, hijrah refers to the transition from one style of hijab to another, crossing the boundaries of identity. This means that changing from a small-sized hijab with two pieces of clothing to a wide hijab made of a single, loose piece of cloth is considered a form of hijrah.

There is another layer of understanding related to piety, which is ultimately what most people seem to agree upon. Even if one is fashionable and believes in the religious righteousness of their hijab practices, many still hold the view that the most pious choice, especially in later stages of life, is to wear a hijab in the shar'i style.

In Indonesia, Muslims are increasingly displaying their piety in visible ways, such as the growing number of Muslim women wearing hijabs. The various types of hijabs represent a journey of mobility or hijrah, moving from less pious to more pious expressions. However, the concepts of "less pious" and "more pious" are not simply binary oppositions of good and bad; they are more complex. The transition from unveiling to veiling and from shorter hijabs to longer, wider ones (up veiling) involves navigating through fashion trends, different life stages, and various religious interpretations.

This study delves deeper into the crossing of identity boundaries, as members of the Muslim women's community adhere to Islamic rules, which all intersect with one another. This journey in hijab practices signifies a hijrah activity, demonstrating that the Muslim women move across identity boundaries. This reflects a shift in understanding the meaning of hijrah. It signifies how individuals interpret hijab, moving from less piety to more piety even though both styles belong to Islamic clothing. By adopting the

hijab shar'i style, they align themselves with the obedient followers of Islamic teachings. However, this is not the end of the process of transmitting from unveiling to veiling; this issue is continuously constituted and contested in the everyday lives of Muslim women in Indonesia, particularly in urban areas such as Surabaya.

The concept of hijrah has evolved from its historical roots to encompass contemporary religious and lifestyle transformations. In Surabaya, Muslim women engage in hijrah through their hijab practices, reflecting broader socio-cultural shifts in Indonesia. The historical evolution of Islamisation, the rise of the Muslim fashion industry, and the theoretical perspectives on fashion and identity all contribute to understanding how hijrah and hijab intersect in shaping modern Muslim women's experiences. By exploring these dynamics, this research illuminates the ways in which religious devotion, consumer culture, and identity politics intertwine in the everyday lives of urban Muslim women in Indonesia.

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