

MODEST DRESSING

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FAITH-BASED FASHION AND INTERNET RETAIL

The last two decades has seen the development of a rapidly expanding and diversifying market for modest fashion, arising initially from and serving the needs of women from the three Abrahamic faiths, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, who are motivated to dress modestly for religious reasons. This market is also sustained by women whose 'look' may share many elements of modest styling but who do not regard their processes of self-fashioning in terms of religion or modesty as such. For both groups the internet has been central to the rapid growth of the modest fashion sector, fostering the development of a niche market through e-commerce, and providing virtual platforms for debates on modesty and fashion on websites, blogs, and discussion groups (fora).

Modest Dressing: Faith-based fashion and internet retail set out to explore the market for and the dialogues about modest dressing that were developing online, and their relationship to practices off-line. The project set out specifically to explore if and how e-commerce and commentary online were encouraging shopping and dialogue that went across boundaries of faith.



The project was led by Principal Investigator Reina Lewis, Professor of Cultural Studies at the London College of Fashion, with Dr Emma Tarlo, who is Reader in Anthropology at Goldsmiths, London, as the Co-Investigator, and with the appointment of Jane Cameron as the project researcher.

Modest Fashion: Faith-based fashion and internet retail ran from March 2010 for one year under the auspices of the Religion and Society Programme funded by the British research councils, the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Science Research Council. A second, further phase of the project has been funded by the London College of Fashion in order to present the work to the widest possible audience with a conference, a media event, a book publication, and this project summary (see links at end of this document for more information).

INTRODUCTION



WHY THIS RESEARCH AND WHY NOW?



Having been researching and publishing on Muslim women and dress for some time, we had recognised that modest dressing was on the increase among women from other faiths as well – although both in the UK, and elsewhere, the press and popular focus was nearly always on Muslim women wearing hijab. This project was designed to widen the frame in which modest dressing is discussed by exploring how women from different, or no, faith communities were getting involved in and sharing their ideas about modest dressing.

The project was focused on the use of the internet by modest dressers and those companies that seek to supply them with clothing. From research already carried out, it was our hypothesis that e-retail was making it possible for companies and brands to meet the needs of this niche market. We also thought that women seeking modest apparel were more likely to shop from online companies outside of their faith because shopping online is de-territorialised and de-materialised: nobody sees what you look like or what you buy. It was also our contention that the internet did more than simply sell: we wanted to explore how internet discussions on blogs and in discussion fora were bringing women from different faith and secular backgrounds into discussion with each other about their varying interpretations of modesty.

CONTEXT

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STYLING A NEW MODEST GENERATION

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The numbers of women wanting to dress modesty in accordance with their understanding of their faith is growing in the UK and around the world, most notably among the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. In all three of these religious communities it is especially among young women that modest dressing is on the rise, and they, more so than their mothers or grandmothers, are combining modest dress with mainstream fashion styles and shapes. For this digital generation, as well as for older women, the internet has proved indispensable in sourcing fashionable solutions to modesty requirements.

In the UK it has been Muslim designers and entrepreneurs who have led the way in the development of the niche market in modest clothing. In the US and Canada other faith groups that have dress requirements show similar developments in the commercial production and distribution of clothing: predominantly but not exclusively ultra-orthodox and modern orthodox Jews, and some Christian groups like Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or LDS). In most cases, internet marketing allows brands to reach beyond their immediate location, serving consumers nationally, internationally, and across boundaries of faith.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INTERNET



Opportunities for commerce

The reduced costs and marketing opportunities associated with internet retail have facilitated the creation, invention even, of all sorts of new niche markets. It is in this context that modest fashion has emerged as a lively specialist market offering new routes to consumers for existing off-line companies and providing affordable lower risk opportunities for e-retail start-ups.

Companies involved in e-retail often have material on their websites about modesty or faith that is not directly commercial, and frequently host links to other sites of educational, spiritual, and political material, as well as to fashion websites generally. Increasingly brands, even small brands, also run a blog and have a presence on social media like Facebook and Twitter. This is sometimes outsourced to companies specialising in social media, sometimes from within the brand originator's faith community. In this modest fashion brands are replicating the marketing practices now common in mainstream fashion and lifestyle sectors of trying to encourage consumers to identify with the brand not just the product. In this case, the identification fostered is both with the brand and with practices of modesty.



Opportunities for commentary

The significance of the internet in stimulating activity in relation to modest dressing does not apply only to designers, manufacturers, and brands, but also to the development of new forms of fashion advice and mediation such as blogs, virtual magazines, and discussion fora that make it easier for women to join in discussions about modest dressing and its role in their lives.

The rise of the modest blogosphere

Outside of the commercial sector the blogosphere is increasingly populated with modest fashion bloggers from all three faith groups. Like all fashion bloggers the modest fashion bloggers were initially independent. Like other sectors of the blogosphere, an A list of 'star' modest fashion bloggers is emerging. Increasingly the most well-known are being sought for collaborations with brands, some of them starting their own brands or e-shops. This coincides with the emergence of corporate blogs on brand websites, often presented as if they are the output of a single person/author. Composite blogs made up of groups of modest fashion aficionados are also appearing as the modest blog sector continues to expand and experiment. Key bloggers attract large numbers of followers, and often run very active comments streams with respondents from all over the world and from a variety of faith, or secular, positions.

ONLINE DIALOGUE ABOUT RELIGIOUS & 'SECULAR' MODESTY



The internet also offers opportunities for more sustained reflection about modest fashion in discussion fora, some of which are linked to particular religious groups, others of which are built around the notion of modesty. Like the comments posted on blogs, discussion fora make dialogue possible between women from different faiths who might not interact in other circumstances. They create a very interesting space for interfaith engagement where women share subjective experiences of modesty and recognise points of similarity and difference between faiths.

Women who are interested in modesty without necessarily linking it to faith are also participating in fora debates. Age, position in the life cycle and so forth emerge as factors which play a significant role in people's engagement with modesty at different stages of their lives. These discussions often highlight women's ambivalence towards mainstream fashion trends.

MODEST WARDROBE COMPONENTS

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This research has found convergence and divergence in the definitions of modesty and styles of dressing required and preferred by the three faith communities studied. Whilst all three religions share a concern with which parts of the body should be revealed to which people and in which spaces, there is no consensus between faiths on modesty policy and there is considerable debate within each faith about how modesty should be expressed. It is therefore impossible to provide a fool-proof guide to what women in different faith communities want in relation to modest dress – how women interpret modesty can change in relation to mainstream fashions (which might make it easier or harder to shop on the high street for example) or to their life circumstances. But here are a few very broad summaries that may be of use to our different readers.

In terms of apparel, ultra-orthodox Jewish women often require sleeves that extend to the wrist and necklines that cover or reach above the collar bone. Modern orthodox Jewish women may also want to cover to their elbows and sometimes to the collar bone, though sometimes a neckline that is simply reasonably high will be considered sufficient. Many Muslim women will also cover their chest and collarbone when in the presence of non-familial men, but as this is often accompanied by wearing forms of head-covering (hijab), the garments underneath may not need to be so high cut. Ultra-orthodox and modern orthodox Jewish women who are married will often also cover their heads or hair with a combination of headscarves, wigs, or hats. But unlike some, but not all, Muslim women who wear hijab, Jewish women are not likely to consider it essential to cover their neck between the ears and the shoulders.

Both Jewish and Muslim modest dressers are unlikely to wear clothes that cling to or reveal the shape of the body. But whereas ultra-orthodox Jewish women regard trousers as male clothing

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and therefore entirely unsuitable, Muslim women, many of whom especially in the UK come from Asian communities with a tradition of bifurcated dress for both women and men, see no obstacle to wearing trousers per se. In this Muslim women are aligned with many Christian women, such as those in the LDS community who regularly wear trousers – although there is also evidence in the US of women from diverse Christian denominations and communities who commit to wearing ‘no pants’ (i.e. trousers) within an understanding that certain versions of femininity and feminine behaviour are more religiously appropriate.

Unlike Jewish or Muslim women, LDS women are more likely to wear clothing that reveals the shape of the body. This is because, within a general emphasis on modesty, dress requirements are often understood as necessary to cover the holy Temple garment worn under their clothes by many church members rather than to obscure the shape of the body that wears it.

Ultra-orthodox Jewish groups may require clothes to be manufactured in line with the laws of kashrut (not mixing wool with linen for example), whilst Christian and other Jewish groups do not have requirements about manufacture as such. (All groups also shop at mainstream fashion stores even if they sometimes end up modifying the clothes to suit demands of modesty.)

Women in all three faiths groups are united by a shared desire to look fashionable. Though the degree to which one’s fashionability should be conspicuous may vary, women in their thirties and forties and most especially their daughters in their teens and twenties no longer expect to achieve modesty through wearing ‘ethnic’ or home-made clothing. They want to buy apparel that is directly related to mainstream global fashion trends.

WHAT WERE OUR FINDINGS?

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As we had thought, our research did indeed demonstrate that there is a thriving online market for modest clothing. This is a market that is growing, segmenting, and diversifying. It is also a market that is being fuelled by women from a variety of faiths, with consumers increasingly shopping from brands originating in faith groups other than their own.

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We also found that brands are often prepared to adapt their offering and their web presence to welcome cross faith consumers. Some brands have speculated on altering their name and/or website presentation so that their company and its products are less overtly associated with a particular faith.

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Some companies, especially more recent start-ups, deliberately avoid specific religious connotations at all, and some also avoid the term 'modest' itself finding that it can obstruct sales to mainstream wholesalers and put off some retail consumers.

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Our research tracked the many ways that the internet is facilitating discussions about modest dressing and behaviour in commercial and non-profit online modes. These discussions involve women in forms of intra- and inter-faith dialogue that they might not enter into offline – with bloggers at the forefront of the development of thoughtful new netiquettes.

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Modest dressing is not solely the preserve of the religious: we discovered a vocal cohort of modest dressers who define themselves as non-religious, or secular, as well as religious women who don't identify faith as the key motivator for their modest self-presentation. For some women, modest is a useful term, with all its various overtones, whilst other women might simply say that they dress in ways 'appropriate' to their age, occupation, or location.

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As well as including 'secular' dressers, one of the key contributions of this research, in the European context especially, is to widen understandings of Muslim modest dress to include Muslim women who are committed to modest self-presentation but do not interpret this to include a headscarf (hijab) let alone a face veil.

WHAT WERE OUR FINDINGS?

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Looking at women entrepreneurs and bloggers, our research identified virtual activity about modest fashion as an important arena through which women can participate in the development online of new forms of religious authority, usually seen as male-dominated. This has the potential to displace discourses about modesty away from traditional religious authority structures.

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In light of this thriving set of online communities, we have concluded that the internet is not simply selling products that facilitate pre-existent practices of modest dress but is – though the combination of commerce and commentary – helping to grow and legitimate modest practices.

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The market is diversifying and segmenting with entrepreneurs branching out to cater to specific sectors of the modest dressing population. It seems likely that modest dressing consumers in the future will be able to choose from companies that design styles aimed at sub-segments of the modest sector in line with the forms of segmentation common within mainstream apparel marketing (age, occupation, lifestyle, taste, and income). This trend to micro-marketing is likely to continue whilst participation in modest dressing continues to rise in numbers and to diversify in trends and tastes.

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Across all three faith communities generation was a significant factor, with several designers and entrepreneurs telling us that they were motivated to start their companies in the early 2000s in order to provide clothes for their pre-teen and teenage daughters that could meet their needs to be fashionable without making their parents too anxious about transgressing community norms regarding modesty.

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The modest fashion sector and related commentary is a very fast moving field. Already by 2011 we can talk about a 'second generation' of young designers and fashion advisors (on blogs, social media, digital magazines) who are increasingly confident with mainstream fashion industry styles and methods and can adapt them for the modest market with more flexibility than the modest sector pioneers even of the early 2000s.

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This new cohort is able to combine modesty with more radical fashion forward aesthetics, benefiting from the ground broken by the earliest modest fashion manufacturers and mediators. They can presume on audience of their peers – younger consumers who have grown up with globalised consumer culture and style media – who are able to decode the modest potential of on-trend garments presented on websites whose styling owes more to *Dazed and Confused* than the Church circular.

CONCLUSION



The markets for modest clothing aimed at, and produced by, particular faith groups have expanded and segmented. This development facilitates access to modest fashion and to some extent also stimulates interest in it. In a sense what we have seen is the birth or rebirth of the category of 'modest fashion' which has become legitimated through and by the internet. It functions simultaneously as a taste making mechanism, an ideological category, and a marketing device. This combination of activities in relation to modest fashion contributes to a situation in which women can find it easier to be able to dress in line with their sense of piety but still in fashion.

The internet is a channel for both commerce and commentary. As a means of commerce the internet facilitates and at times promotes women's participation in forms of modest dressing, often religiously motivated. This is in keeping with the growing commodification of religious experience within modern consumer culture, and is subject to the same tensions and concerns on the part of some religious commentators and authorities. As a mode of communication, the internet offers opportunities for women to develop and express opinions and religious interpretations that may not be easily possible within the often male-dominated formal structures of religious organisations.



Blogs, discussion fora, and social media discussion about modest dressing should be taken seriously not only as new forms of fashion discourse but also as new forms of religious disputation and interfaith dialogue. These digital platforms uniquely foreground women's voices and can foster new forms of connection within, between, and across faiths. They are especially significant for telling us about the lived practices of religion which can not be gleaned from theological texts.

Whilst the mainstream market continues largely to ignore modest dressers as a consumer demographic, within the specialist modest fashion sector the range of garments being sold to meet modesty needs and the ways that they are marketed is expanding and diversifying. The presence of apparel designed and marketed to appeal to different segments and the growing range of commentary and debate online indicates the vitality of a field that continues to develop.

RESEARCH METHODS



The research process was made up of a mixture of interviews, ethnographic observation, internet research and plain old-fashioned reading. We read extensively in research publications in related areas (everything from research on fashion marketing to anthropology and religious studies). At the start of the project we spent a long time trawling the internet for verbal and visual representations of and discussions about modest fashion, as well as reading ethnic and religious print media. This meant that we could begin to classify blogs and social media as well as commercial websites relating to modest fashion, and identify the places we wanted to visit and the individuals and companies we wanted to interview. We travelled to different locations in the UK (in greater London, Manchester, Birmingham, and Bradford), in Canada (Toronto and Montreal) and in the United States (Salt Lake City and the surrounding area in Utah,

New York City and New Jersey, and Los Angeles and southern California). In all these places we spent time looking at what people were wearing in the streets and in community venues, we visited general and specialist clothing stores to see what they were selling and how it was being displayed, we talked to consumers and interviewed shop owners and staff. We were also able to meet, or speak on the telephone to, a number of the bloggers and brands that we had identified as important in the development of the modest fashion sector. The interviews told us a lot about how the market was developing. We learned from designers and entrepreneurs about why they had started their businesses, what had developed as they had thought or in new ways, how the internet was helping them reach other sorts of consumers, and how they were moving into social media as part of their marketing strategy.



Our interviews with modest fashion bloggers demonstrated that this was an important new cohort of fashion advisors and mediators – and that they were, like mainstream bloggers, being increasingly incorporated into the modest fashion industry.

Our observations of what women were wearing and how they were shopping were combined with interviews with shop owners and their staff which gave new insights into how women were putting together modest outfits.

Our reading of internet discussion fora enabled us to comprehend some of the levels and nuances of interfaith engagement relating to modest fashion.

Our research was qualitative not quantitative: we did not set out to provide statistics on the modest fashion market, or its component parts. This was not commercial market research, although some of our findings will be of use to entrepreneurs or marketers trying to reach or expand their place in the modest fashion market. Neither was it our intention to promote or oppose modest dressing in any of its forms. We wanted to scope out the field to provide a snapshot of how modest dressing is being sold and discussed online in English-language websites at the start of the 2010s.

We can't wait to see where it goes next...

THANK YOU



We owe a huge debt of thanks to all the people who agreed to be interviewed for this project, and to all those who generously shared contacts, made introductions, and talked through our ideas with us. We interviewed about forty people including bloggers, journalists, designers and entrepreneurs, social media professionals, community activists, consumers, and members of different faith groups based in Britain, the United States and Canada. We also learned a great deal from all the contributors to the many blogs, digital and print magazines, and discussion fora that we studied.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who responded so kindly and with such enthusiasm to this project.

How can I find out more about the Modest Dressing project and related events/publications?

You can look at the Modest Dressing homepage, and see our press coverage, here:
<http://www.fashion.arts.ac.uk/research/projects-collaborations/modest-dressing/>

You can listen to the papers from our symposium, Modest Mediations, held on June 17th 2011, here:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/mediating_modesty_fashioning_faithful_bodies

You can find out more about Reina Lewis' research and publications here:
<http://www.fashion.arts.ac.uk/research/staff/a-z/reina-lewis/>

You can find out more about Emma Tarlo's research and publications here:
<http://www.gold.ac.uk/anthropology/staff/e-tarlo/>

You can find out more about the Religion and Society Programme here:
<http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk>

We will be publishing a book of essays relating to the Modest Dressing conference in 2012. If you would like to be notified when this comes out and to be informed about other project related events and publications you can join the project mailing list by writing to us here:
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