

Branding & Rebranding Muslim Fashion: the case of the Burqini/Burkini

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Introduction

The study centres on the branding of Muslim women's fashion, and of the Burqini/Burkini swimsuit in particular, as well as on its rebranding, that is, the way in which popular western clothing brands promote this particular product. According to Muzellec, Doogan & Lambkin (2003: 32), “[...] the term ‘rebranding’ is variously used to describe three different events: changing name, changing the brand aesthetics (colour palette, logo, etc.), and/or repositioning the brand”. It is true that a large part of the population has adopted the view that Islamic societies – where the inviolable religious code that requires women to cover their heads or their entire bodies applies – cannot perceive fashion in the western sense of the word, and that the concepts of “Modern Fashion” and “Islam” are entirely contradictory. However, the idea of “Modest Fashion” is increasingly making its way into western societies, with this covered fashion prevailing as a proud fashion and as an elegant stylistic expression of the new Islamic confidence.

A typical example is that of the Burqini or Burkini, a women's full-body swimsuit that also covers the head with the Islamic Hijood, exposing only the face, hands and feet. The original designer of this swimwear is Aheda Zanetti, a Muslim woman who lives and works in Australia. She also invented the famous name of the Burqini or Burkini, a portmanteau of the words Burqa and Bikini, and of the Hijood, from the words Hijab and hood. It is worth mentioning that the Burqini/Burkini and the Hijoodware designed in accordance with the Islamic dress code have been officially approved and certified by the Islamic community with the aim of encouraging women belonging to Muslim communities to take part in such sports activities.

According to Sandikci (2011), the aim of Islamic branding is to address mainly Muslim consumers who are clearly distinguished from western consumers, given that it uses specific tools to promote the products in the most appealing way possible. More specifically, the “Islamic” accent carries with it the potential of reifying difference rather than interaction.

First, it implies that when addressing Muslim consumers, the practice of marketing needs to take on a particular Islamic character. Such marketing is assumed to be different from marketing in general. Second, it implies that Islamic marketing targets Muslim consumers, consumers who are distinctively different from consumers in general and that it utilises specific resources, skills and tools that are relevant and appealing to this particular segment. Finally, it also assumes that there is a preexisting and uniform Muslim consumer segment, which can be targeted, reached and, to a certain extent, predicted by marketers (Sandikci, 2011: 247).

Muslim consumers seek brand names that appeal to them (Power & Abdullah, 2009), and therefore Halal brands are created based on what Islamic principles permit, not only in the food industry, but also in the clothing industry (Minkus-McKenna, 2007). To Muslim consumers, branding cannot be separated from their faith, and this requires all activities to be divine and all emotions to be in line with the guidance of Allah (Alserhan, 2010a). Branding can use religious values in order to build brands with a global reach that appeal to both Muslim and non-Muslim consumers. It can skilfully combine the emotional characteristics of the consumer's personality, thus giving the brand name a character that is compatible with the consumer public for which it is intended.

1. Fashion as a semiotic system

Lurie (1981) suggests that fashion be viewed through the lens of semiotics with the aim of analysing the typology resulting both in terms of the selection of clothing and in terms of the social roles that arise. Financial standing, professional status, social class, age, religion and subcultures have always revealed the dominant fashion standards. Hodge & Kress (1988), too, believe that social semiotics offers us the necessary tools to analyse the image, views and linguistic choices of individuals and social groups that still follow or question fashion.

Danesi (2004: 177) argues that "like any other common object and artifact, we interpret clothes as signs standing for such things as the personality, the social status, and overall character of the wearer". It is a sign of "personality" and takes the main meaning of the body to a cultural level. Both clothes and the bodies they cover are saturated with moral, social and aesthetic meaning. Danesi (2004: 185) also mentions that "covering the body is an act of modesty. But this has in effect imbued it with secret desirability". Clothing and fashion offer people opportunities to create

messages with many kinds of meanings. In fact, we convert everything we wear into a sign.

For Barthes (1990 [1967]: 269, 288) fashion is:

a semantic system whose only goal is to undermine the meaning which it so luxuriantly elaborates. [. . .] Without content, it [...] makes the insignificant signify.

Barthes points out that fashion continuously changes, given that its fast changes lead to financial success, a fact that has remained constant through time. The sign systems of commercial brands/logos are creatively conveyed through advertisements that tend to become part of the general culture. This integration is enhanced and perpetuated by the advertising campaign. Clearly, the most effective advertising strategy does not just keep up with the times, but shapes them. Danesi (2004: 272) considers how

advertising has become the fuel for an entertainment-driven society that seeks artifice on a daily basis as part of its routine of escapism from the deeper philosophical questions that would otherwise beset it.

2. Branding & rebranding

According to Anholt (2007: 5) “*branding* is the process of designing, planning and communicating the name and the identity, in order to build or manage the reputation”. On the other hand, semiotics explores structures of an ideological and social nature, such as value systems and codes of an extralinguistic origin, through an interdisciplinary approach. Society has a semiotic dimension, considering that it is expressed as a structural function through the institutions and different classifications, and as a signifying practice through communication systems.

This article studies digital websites as a vehicle of ideology that transforms the social symbolic universe, reorganises it and re-codifies it by branding it as a consumer good. Macrae, Parkinson & Sheerman (1995) state that the brand represents a unique combination of features and value, both functional and non-functional, closely related to brand awareness which can be conscious or intuitive. Branding refers to the way in which a consumer perceives a product or service being provided, and to the associations made with regard to the values that make up each company. In fact, branding precedes marketing and includes all those elements that make up a brand, such as the logo, packaging, colour, reputation, etc. The aim of

this article is to explore the rebranding of a very specific garment that has been produced and is intended for Muslim women.

In the end, social views constitute the concept of ideology and branding produces ideology in the framework of suggestion. The text and image create a uniform form and content, which produce a transparent and comprehensible message with convincingly clear and accurate ideas and standards of a “eudaemonistic nature”. Consequently, the recipient of the message becomes a shareholder, and possibly a “consumer”, in commercial terms, of the projected social values. The “image of the self” is thus reflected in the distorting mirrors of a advertising culture and ends up being something completely different to that which the real living needs of a large number of people impose (Adorno 1990).

Therefore, we select fields and levels of analysis for a socio-semiotic and dialectical method as a way to make up concepts on which we can mentally appropriate reality, that is, to reveal the inner causal interrelation and “normality” of phenomena. Ideology, albeit somewhat arbitrarily, could be defined as a system of ideas, which refers to the system of social relationships, given that many theorists have negotiated the concept of ideology and there have been various approaches, even by representatives of the same theoretical movement.

Thus, the objective world is reflected on the individual’s conscience, expressing the strong relationship that is formed between the perceived subject and objective reality. Moral, theoretical, cultural and political views are produced from socialisation procedures. At the same time, the above procedures reflect the similar views of the social groups in which they develop and from which they spring (Althusser 1986).

3. Research methodology

This chapter studies Muslim women’s fashion in view of Barthes’ position that (1990 [1967]), clothing fashion is considerably complicated because it constitutes a set of specific materials/ingredients, photography, and language. Barthes (2013 [1967]: 95) distinguishes two fashions: On the one hand, “fashion tries hard to make the written item of clothing correspond to uses, characters, seasons, functions. [...] Fashion is lying. It is hiding behind social and psychological alibis”. On the other hand, there is another vision of fashion which rejects this system of equivalences and sets up a truly abstract and poetic function. This is a fashion of idleness, of luxury, but which has the merit of declaring itself as a pure form.

Hodge & Kress (1988), too, believe that social semiotics offers us the necessary tools to analyse the image, views and linguistic choices of individuals and social groups that still follow or question fashion.

The following fields of analysis have been defined for this study: (a) the text (linguistic and visual), which constitutes the basic subject and starting point of the research; (b) the specific – historically – society, which forms the social environment in which a text was created; and, (c) the corresponding social ideology that represents the cultural context and functions as an intermediary between society and the text. Umberto Eco (1979 [1976]: 290) argues that “[i]deology is therefore a message which starts with a factual description, and then tries to justify it theoretically, gradually being accepted by society through a process of overcoding”.

The aim of this study is to explore the manner in which the branding of the Muslim women’s swimsuit (Burqini) is structured and correlated, and how it is rebranded in western societies (Burkini), so as to analyse how the semantic codes, which are articulated in the research material, construct the corresponding ideology. The research question constituting the object of socio-semiotic analysis, deals with the manner in which the branding of a product with strong ideology is codified in visual messages.

The fashion or clothing trends that are recorded in every period are linked to beauty, style and glamour, thus constituting a taste category that shapes the perception of what is beautiful and ugly. Fashion mirrors cultural changes, but is also self-defined by the changes, from time to time, in social stereotypes of beauty. O.J. Finkelstein (1991) states that fashion is directly related to women and the two are oftentimes considered to be synonymous.

According to McKendrick (1982), an aesthetic and social stance in the context of postmodern consumer society is formed, defined and reproduced by the desires of women and the needs that arise each time in relation to dress codes, however by following the established mass fashion production system.

It is worth mentioning that semiotics has served as a strong analysis tool in this exploration, given that fashion transforms the social symbolic universe, reorganises it and re-codifies it as a consumer good, as a ready-to-wear garment. On the basis of the above semiotic perspective and with the use of methodological tools drawn from the theories of Barthes (1990 [1967]) and Greimas (1966), an analysis is performed of the adoption of Muslim fashion with the aim of recording the semantic codes and the manner in which they are articulated.

4. Semiotic approach

The chapter analyses the website¹ (e-shop) of the Australian-based company Ahiida, which was the first to launch the Burqini, as well as the website² (e-shop) of the British multinational retailer Marks & Spencer, which re-launched the Burkini in the West. The focus of this research is twofold: it analyses the manner in which the branding and rebranding of a product with strong ideology is presented, as well as the manner in which the results of the website (e-shop) analysis are anchored to the product's reputation.

The multimodality of the websites from which the research material was drawn functions as an intermediary between the producer and the recipient, with the aim of producing mythology. Thus, the myth and mythologies come together in the sense of hegemony and other dominant ideologies, so as to construct mainly, dual value-based patterns of meaning that arise from contradictory mechanisms for the construction of meaning (a vs b).

The myth in branding, as a system of meaning, is analysed from a semiotic perspective in terms of the elements of which it is constructed, its hidden ideology and its relationship with the historical or other socioeconomic contexts. Thus, this myth results in a secondary system, which transforms a pre-existing primary system that is in essence the very society that produces it. The myth in the form of constructed speech reforms the linguistic signs so as to give new meaning with multiple and different semantic loads in order to cancel a series of semantic loads at each signifying signs.

The anchorage of linguistic signs and visual signifieds results as a metalanguage that is applied, not to the entirety of the linguistic message, but only to specific signs, having mainly a clarifying and supplementary function. The image of the consumer product is constructed, since the product characteristics are what shape beforehand, the signifieds that determine the promotion of the product (Barthes 2014).

Barthes (2007) has defined the narrative systems, considering that language can be seen through two fundamental processes: articulation, which creates units, and integration, which collects units on a higher level, the so-called conceptual units. This dual developmental process has been applied to the present analysis, in parallel with Greimas' (1966) problem of production and construction of meaning. Based on concepts of the semantic field and the analysis of coordinates, Greimas proposes a model for the

¹<http://ahiida.com/home.php?cat=265> (accessed on March 10, 2018).

²<http://www.marksandspencer.com/paisley-print-burkini/p/p22431892> (accessed on March 3, 2018).

semantic analysis of texts (Boklund-Lagopoulou 1982). Within each linguistic text there is repetition of the semantic units and their combinations, which are grouped based on their common semantic content, thus ensuring the homogeneity of the text.

5. Research

As previously mentioned, the research material derives from the websites of Ahiida and Marks & Spencer, and is defined as follows:

a) Ahiida presents the following categories:

- Burqini Swim wear: Modest-Fit
- Burqini Swim wear: PLUS Sizes
- Burqini Swim wear: Slim-Fit
- Burqini Swim wear: Sportz-Fit
- Burqini Swim wear: Girls Slim-Fit
- Sun-Safe Swim wear: Ladies
- Sun-Safe Swim wear: Girls/Teens

The first five categories, which use the term “Burqini”, are addressed to Muslim women, while the last two categories, which use the term “Sun-Safe”, are addressed to non-Muslim women. This distinction essentially defines the characteristics of the product, since Sun-Safe Swim wear does not include the Hijood, and its sleeves and legs are shorter than those of the swim wear intended for purely Muslim female consumers. Furthermore, the images of the first five categories use Muslim women as models, while the last two categories use female models from western societies.

b) Marks & Spencer presents the following categories:

- Paisley Print Burkini
- Floral Contrast Burkini

One notices that both categories faithfully follow the dictates of “Modest Fashion”, covering the largest part of the female body except the face, hands and feet, their only difference being the colour. The first category only includes black, while the second category includes two shades of blue (brighter and darker). The main images in both categories do not use models. In the complementary images, however, the Burkinis are worn by female models who are most likely Muslim.

By following the analysis model applied by A.F. Lagopoulos & K. Boklund-Lagopoulou (2016), the following analyses were made:

- **Ahiida:**



Figure 1: Burqini Swimwear: Modest-Fit by Ahiiida.

Going to the website of the Australia n-based company Ahiiida, and in particular the website’s first category, Burqini Swim wear: Modest-Fit, one finds eight images of the promoted product in different shades, vertically laid out in the middle and on the right-hand side of the page. The top part of the website, above the images, provides a detailed presentation of the swim wear in the form of a verbal text. The distinct label, code and price of each swimsuit are stated below each image. Consumers are given the option to purchase the product. When selecting this option, they are transferred to a separate form on the website, where they can enter their personal details, address and bank card details in order to acquire the desired swim suit. The semantic codes and contradictions arising from the website’s visual and verbal text are presented in the analysis table below.

FIELD	GROUP OF ISOTOPIES	ISOTOPIY	CONTRADICTIONS
Space	Non-urban Urban	Beach Swimming pool	Natural Vs Non-Natural Or Comfort Vs Discomfort Athletic Vs Non-Athletic
Health	Protection	Avoidance of sunburns	Safe Vs Dangerous

Society	Clothing	Racial Type Religious	East Vs West Modest Vs Provocative Muslim Vs Christian
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Table 1: Analysis of codes and contradictions.

According to the analysis of the pattern, it is observed that the mechanisms for constructing meaning used in the branding of Ahiida’s Muslim swim suit are structured based on contradictory semantic isotopics. In addition to its reputation, the following connotations are made: in terms of space, suitability vs discomfort, in terms of health, protection vs exposure to the sun, in terms of society with regard to clothing, eastern woman vs western woman, in terms of genre, modest vs provocative, and in terms of religion, Muslim vs Christian.

- **Marks & Spencer**

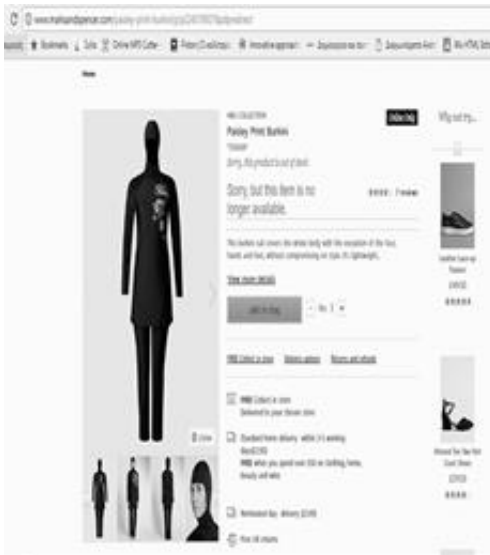


Figure 2: Paisley Print Burkini by Marks & Spencer.

Marks & Spencer’s Paisley Print Burkini category presents the main image of the product that is for sale on the left-hand side of the webpage, and a horizontal scroll bar with six smaller images right below. On the right-hand side of the image is a verbal text presenting the Burkini’s general

characteristics. Upon selecting “view more details”, consumers receive detailed information on the characteristics of the women’s swimsuit. Below this option is the “add to bag” option, which the consumer must select in order to purchase the product. The semantic codes and contradictions arising from the website’s visual and verbal text are presented in the analysis table below.

FIELD	GROUP OF ISOTOPIES	ISOTOPY	CONTRADICTIONS
Society	Clothing	Style Type Colour	Comfort Vs Discomfort Freedom Vs Limitations Traditional Vs Modern

Table 2: Analysis of codes and contradictions.

Similarly, one observes the mechanisms for articulating meaning in the rebranding of the Burkini, as it is promoted on the Marks & Spencer website through contradictory semantic isotopies. Based on the product’s reputation, connotations are only made in terms of society, and in particular in relation to clothing, in terms of style, comfort vs discomfort, in terms of genre, freedom vs limitation of movement, and in terms of colour, traditional vs modern.

6. Research results

The analysis typology above was used to study the seven categories on the website of Australian-based Ahiida, and the two categories on the website of UK-based Marks & Spencer. At the same time, the mechanisms used by Ahiida for constructing meaning were the same for all seven categories of women’s swimwear. The same phenomenon was observed in Marks & Spencer’s two categories.

By following the patterns of the analysis data from the Ahiida website, one observes that the fields of space, health and society lead to the following groups of isotopies: Non-Urban, Urban, Protection and Clothing. The dominant codes that arise, namely those of Beach and Swimming Pool, Avoidance of Sunburns, as well as Racial, Type and Religious codes reproduce the dual value-based patterns of meaning of Natural vs Non-natural, Athletic vs Non-athletic, Safe vs Dangerous, East vs West, Modest vs Provocative, and Muslim vs Christian.

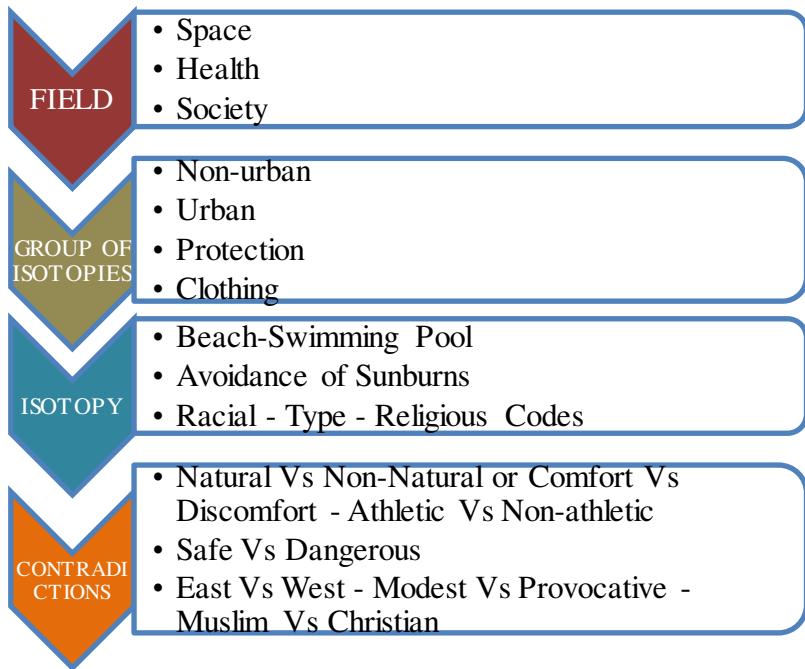


Figure 3: Representation of data: codes and contradictions.

These contradictory mechanisms construct the meaning behind the branding of this Muslim women's swimwear. Modest fashion is presented as a sign of modernity and cultural redefinition, where the terms Burqini or Burkini and hijab or hijood are used, accordingly. Covering the head and entire female body is translated as covered fashion and is presented as a proclamation, as an expression of a contemporary stance or trend towards Islamic culture. It serves as an expression of the contemporary and everyday Muslim way of life, and it reveals a current and modern image of the Muslim identity.

It has been observed, however, that religious codes are detached neither from the garment nor from the mythology it bears. Even in the last two categories, where the swimwear is not defined as a Burqini or Burkini, but as Sun-Safe Swimwear, religious modesty is maintained, even if the hijood was removed or the length of the sleeves and legs were modified to only cover the arms up to the elbows and the legs up to the knees. In a concealed manner, the aesthetics defining Muslim societies is combined and promoted with the current trends in industrial fashion. The Muslim dress tradition

seems to be transforming with the Arabian edition of Vogue, the strongest fashion magazine in the world, which featured world-famous model Gigi Hadid on the debut cover of Vogue Arabia wearing a hijab.

Through the protection code and, mainly, the dress code, covered women try to achieve a certain “invisibility”, thus ensuring their protection and privacy. The “invisibility” that this coverage offers them brings them into direct “contact” and “communication” with God, according to the Islamic doctrine. However, this coverage basically aims at concealing every sexual aspect of the female body and, consequently, at the desexualisation of the woman herself.

The racial code and code regarding the type enhance – by way of connotation – the view that the practice of coverage is an imposed practice. The existence of the hijab in the Burqini categories and its absence in the Sun-Safe Swimwear categories shake the argument that coverage is a matter of “personal choice” and constitutes a “personal decision”. It is religious tradition that imposes – without any room for deviation – the adoption of the practice of coverage, and it is applied as a given and indisputable characteristic of Muslim culture.

The analysis data from the Marks & Spencer website come under the field of society, with the resulting group of isotopies being related to clothing. The dominant codes are those of style, type and colour, while the resulting dual value-based patterns of meaning are those of comfort vs discomfort, freedom vs limitations and tradition vs modernity.

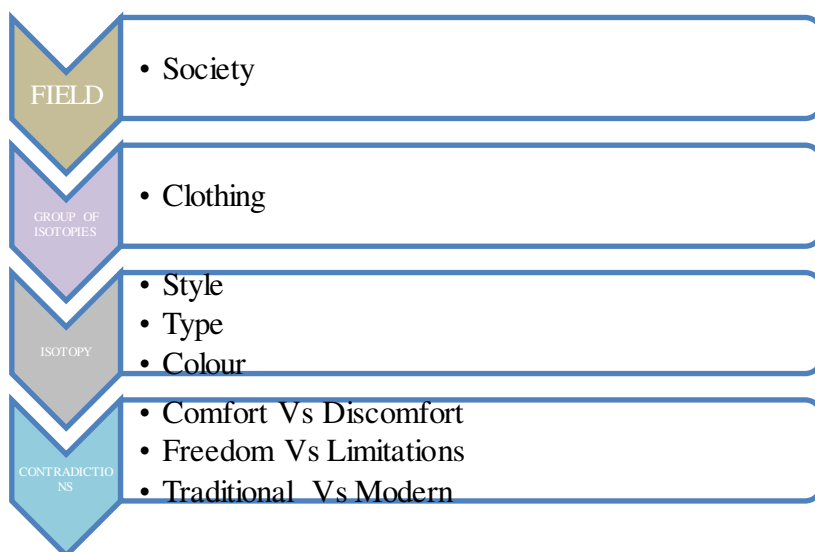


Figure 4: Representation of data: codes and contradictions .

The above contradictory mechanisms for constructing meaning in rebranding transform the product's Muslim nature into a traditional nature so that the female body is not exposed, in some "strange" way making the product look like a diving suit that mainly protects women against men's gazes and not so much against the sun. They choose to spell it as Burkini, thus placing more emphasis on the second combining form (bikini), to which it is more similar in terms of sound. The aesthetics of this swimsuit combines modernity with conservativeness for the comfort and freedom of movement of the women using it.

Thus, in the adoption of modest fashion, efforts are made to detach it from the strong reputation it carries and therefore it is not worn by a model in the product's main photograph on the website. The head remains covered in the hijood, thus maintaining the symbol of Muslim identity. However, the absence of a model bears contradictory semantic expressions. It could be suggested that this practice "unconsciously" complies with the Islamic faith's prohibition in depicting the divine. Perhaps, in the end, it is this Muslim nature itself wearing the Burkini and therefore, it is not portrayed.

The dividing lines are thus maintained; the style and type of this women's garment keeps the two worlds and the two spheres separate: those of men and women, and those of good and evil. Islamic morals promote the dress codes of modesty, isolation and morality. This is the right and proper clothing for a woman. By extension, a covered woman who appears modest and shy is also a religious woman (a devout Muslim).

At the same time, modesty, comfort of movement and traditionality suggest that the Burkini is a great medium for balancing sexual contact between men and women, and functions as a sign of obedience on the part of Muslim women to the Islamic doctrine. In other words, it constitutes clear proof of the substantial differences between men and women, and highlights the obligation that women dress suitably and decently in all their activities. In this way, it functions as a symbol of the devoted Muslim woman against the consumerist cultural habits of the West. Based on this last view, modest fashion serves as an anti-imperialist statement in favour of national and cultural differences.

Conclusion

The issue raises some reasonable questions, such as whether these and other companies aim to cover the consumer needs of a new, perhaps, emerging Islamic urban class in western societies and to highlight its Muslim way of life using fashion. The creation of a fashion constitution lines any publications of this way of life up against discussions on the representation of the female body and the concepts of modesty.

So, this raises the question of how Muslim fashion can be redefined. Is it perhaps the case that certain companies are trying to produce products like the Burqini or Burkini, which meet the needs of modesty and fashion, perhaps by promoting regressive dressing styles and the corresponding cultural codes, aiming exclusively at financial gain? Questions are also raised with regard to the relationship between marketability, fashion and devoutness in the midst of the continuous development of consumer cultures based on faith. This relationship is evaluated in relation to neoliberal criticism on the promotion of consumer pursuits.

Therefore, the companies in question and the “world of fashion” in general do not only promote “tolerance” and acceptance, they also make efforts to promote the morals of Muslim societies, which in this case come in the form of women covered in this dress code...

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