

Muslim girl culture and social control in Southeast Asia: Exploring the hijabista and hijabster phenomena

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Abstract

While research on youth cultures in Southeast Asia has traditionally focused on crime, class, and delinquency among adolescent and young-adult males, the 21st century has seen an increase in research on the intersections among youth, religion, popular culture, media, identity, and consumption. As part of this trend, we report on an exploration of the terms hijabista and hijabster, which refer to female Muslim cultural identities centered on the nontraditional use of the hijab or Muslim headscarf. After situating the phenomena within the larger context of conservative regional politics and religion, we consider their cultural meanings in terms of mass and social media, suggesting that hijabista and hijabster cultures and identities are simultaneously hybrid and negotiated as young Muslim women, culture industries, and political and religious agents all employ a variety of strategies to shape emerging definitions. Finally, we reflexively discuss the implications of our own theoretical interests on interpretations of what it means to be a hijabista or hijabster.

Keywords

hijabista, hijabster, Islam, Southeast Asia, youth culture

Introduction

There has been increasing focus on youth cultures in Southeast Asia in recent years, as seen in a spate of new empirical research (e.g. Daniels, 2013; Heryanto, 2008; Kamaludeen, 2016a; Weintraub, 2011). Many of the studies reported in the literature have dealt with particularistic examinations of youths in local or national contexts, as well as through cross-cultural and cross-national

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comparisons. Religion is a strong research theme—no surprise given both the rise in global awareness of Islam and that Southeast Asia is home to more than a quarter billion Muslims (Pew Research Center, 2011) and to three modern Islamic nations—Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. In addition to a focus on religion itself, there is a growing interest in how youth cultures intersect with global processes such as commodification and consumerism, media use, cultural politics, and identity. In all this, there seems to be a collective focus both in conceptualizing contemporary youth cultures and practices, and in studying the various media through which youth cultures are created, communicated, and consumed across Southeast Asia, through fashion, magazines, film, mobile phones, music, the internet, and so on.

This growing research literature is notably different from the 20th-century literature on Southeast Asian youth, which carried with it sets of either implicit or explicit concerns. Since the mid-20th century, youth cultures and later youth subcultures have been seen globally as transitional and problematic cultural formations in their own right, or else as implicit representations of larger cultural struggles in society (Williams, 2011). Much 20th-century theory and research was built upon assumptions that young people often do things in ways that are either naïve, problematic, or downright wrong. And because youths are seen “to embody the future and the possibility of change or continuity” (Maira, 2014: 104), there seems to be perennial angst attached to youth cultural practices that make clear the possibilities of change. The angst experienced is perhaps even sharper in Southeast Asia, where Chinese and syncretic Malayo-Islamic philosophical traditions have entrenched relatively conservative conceptions of what everyday life should look like for young people (Kamaludeen, 2016b; Lim and Soriano, 2015). Regardless, youths across the region have often been studied in terms of their relative naivety or vulnerability, and the social changes they spur and/or embrace are often met with some mixture of concern, suspicion, or fear.

The 21st century, in contrast, has seen new foci emerge in the study of Southeast Asian youths and youth cultures. With economic growth and the expansion of the middle class across the region, Southeast Asian youths are increasingly able to communicate and consume global/foreign cultures and identities via mass and social media technologies. Television, film, music, internet, and other media complexify the opportunities, means, and outcomes of youths’ cultural practices. Western popular culture has deeply penetrated Southeast Asian countries, opening up new horizons of expectations. Local cultures have also flourished via social media, as increasing numbers of youths go online to share their experiences and connect with like-minded others. As Buckingham, Bragg, and Kehily (2014) suggest, the expansion of media in everyday life in the 21st century requires both careful rethinking and new studies to fairly assess the relationship between culture and media technologies. This suggestion can be extended to how academics link media technologies to youth, culture, and identity more broadly.

Alongside youth and media scholars, cultural criminologists have also turned their attention to the popular cultural contexts within which struggles over meaning can create problems for individuals and groups.

Everyday popular cultural undertakings—those social activities organized around art, music, and fashion—are regularly recast as crime. Certainly much in the worlds of art, music, and fashion gets caught up in controversies over “good taste,” public decency, and the alleged influences of popular culture. (Ferrell and Sanders, 1995: 7)¹

Working at the cleavages of cultural criminology, deviance, youth studies, and subculture studies, this article reports on the initial stages of an exploration of the hijabista and hijabster phenomena—Muslim girl cultures centered on nontraditional use of the hijab or Muslim headscarf. Although, judging by the attention given to them in mass and social media, the terms hijabista and hijabster have become increasingly salient around the world, there has been little-to-nothing published on them within academic literatures. Our work on this topic is developing and in this article we do not report on an empirical investigation of hijabistas or hijabsters *per se*. Rather, we map out larger arrangements of culture, media, and social control in Southeast Asia that we believe are important for a more comprehensive subsequent study.

To situate hijabistas and hijabsters, we analyze what appear to be some of their basic characteristics within the broader history of youth-culture research in Southeast Asia. We argue that the dominance of Western theories of crime and class, combined with the region's conservative and authoritarian characteristics, do not provide an easy means of conceptualizing who hijabistas/hijabsters are or what they are about. We then look at how the hijabista and hijabster phenomena have emerged globally and regionally, first by emphasizing the role of media in communicating new ideas about Muslim identity and fashion, and then by considering several conservative elements in Southeast Asia that problematize these emergent meanings. Finally, we summarize some of our initial insights and engage in a self-reflexive analysis of the extent to which our initial theoretical assumptions about hijabistas and hijabsters have been borne out in our preliminary work.

The rise of the hijabista and hijabster phenomena illuminates changes in generational norms as well as conflicts over the meanings of gender roles, sexuality, class, and religion among urban Southeast Asian Muslims who struggle with the malleability of Islamic modesty. We argue that the terms hijabista and hijabster are not only fluid, but also negotiated and contested across a range of contexts and media. Some young Muslim women appear to be ambivalent about adopting such labels amid attempts by the media, the fashion industry, moral entrepreneurs, and even the state to create more coherent cultural identities that can be commodified, commercialized, coopted, or controlled. In order to make sense of hijabistas and hijabsters, we discuss our emerging perspective, which is aligned with contemporary youth and media studies, subcultural theory, and cultural criminology, and which seeks to trace the contours of transgression and control within Southeast Asia, while paying attention to the connections between institutional and technological processes, youth cultural trends, and personal experience.

Youth (sub)cultures in conservative Southeast Asia

The hijabista and hijabster phenomena may be amenable to study from any of the perspectives keyed in our introduction—youth studies, subcultural studies, media studies, or cultural criminology. They do not, however, easily align with traditional criminological studies of Southeast Asian youth. This is in part due to the types of youth groups historically identified in Southeast Asia as worthy of expert study—often triads or organized criminal gangs (Chin, 1980; Long and Elliott, 1988) or other groups that have been constructed as folk devils, such as mat rockers, skinheads, and extreme metalists (Ferrarese, 2013; Fu and Liew, 2008; Yadoni, 2002; Yusof, 2010). Classic criminology and criminal justice theories and methods have over time proven themselves quite useful to regional authorities, who rely on realist psychological ontologies and a predictive

epistemology to legitimate a variety of parochial responses and proactive strategies to control young people's collective practices (Austin, 1987; Count-Van Manen, 1971; Murphy, 1963). Only recently have more contextualized, ground-up approaches to understanding youth cultural processes become more apparent in regional studies (Fraser, 2013; Liew and Tan, 2013), and such research is rarely supported by the state.

Youth cultures in Southeast Asia exist within rather clearly demarcated conservative structures that seek to control alternative ideas and practices, either by guiding or curtailing them. In general, Southeast Asia can be characterized by a relative distrust of both the value of individuality and the open flow of information; dominant political processes have sought to curtail the growth of each in turn (Valbuena and Lock, 1987; Williams and Liew, 2016). In Singapore for example, the state subscribes to a Confucianist philosophy, which has become a dominant cultural structure that guides not only Chinese Singaporeans but to an extent members of other ethnic groups as well. In its ideal formulation, Confucianism promotes "absolute submissiveness and obedience of the child to parental authority [such that] the child's attitudes are likely to reflect a certain set of mostly traditional expectations" (Thomas, 1990: 196). The government has ensured the sanctity of the family unit and created policies that maintain the necessity of filial piety, for example by severely limiting social welfare policies in favor of requiring that families take care of themselves. This places pressure on children from a young age to be successful so that they can care for their parents in retirement or emergency. Beyond the family, the state has developed a moral education system that teaches Confucianist ideals in school alongside a discourse that ingrains the belief that citizens are the nation's only natural resource and thus their minds and bodies are key to the country's survival.

Young Singaporeans thus live in a system that places a premium on individual performance and accomplishment to a degree beyond that which young people typically experience in the West. Students' individual actions are politically framed as being first and foremost for the larger good, and a variety of discursive structures encourage young people's acceptance of the idea that the nation, community, and family all supersede the individual (Weninger and Kho, 2014). As such, individuality and nonconformity become problematic breaches of civic responsibility (Kamaludeen and Turner, 2014). For example, in 2013 a group of five female secondary school students had their heads shaved at a Children's Cancer Foundation's "Hair for Hope" charity event. When three of them returned to school without wearing wigs, they were suspended by the female principal, who argued, "The school's rules do not allow punk, unfeminine or sloppy hairstyles ... It's very clear in our mission: it's about their turnout as a young lady [sic]" (Chua, 2013). Rather than see the girls' willingness to shave their heads as a sign of solidarity with cancer victims/survivors, the principal assumed the girls' shaved heads to be controversial (despite knowing in advance about the charity event) and attempted to legitimize punishing their failure to cover their deviant appearance through the uncritical assertion that "rules must be followed."

This raises two important points related to our research. First, it demonstrates the larger discursive environment within which youth styles and practices are framed both by authorities and experts. Especially in terms of criminological as well as youth research that relies on state funding, there has been a typical focus on the identification and control of delinquency and other antisocial behaviors among young people (Ganapathy, 2000, 2004). Classic criminological theories have been the norm, with a preference toward studying groups of young people—overwhelmingly males—judged to be simultaneously dangerous and at risk (Ang and Huan, 2008; Chin, 1980; Lim

et al., 2013). Second, it points out the complexity of interpreting young people's actions and raises issues related to deviance and social control on the one hand, and theories of resistance on the other. A subcultural approach may facilitate or even promote framing certain behaviors, including the shaving of one's head or wearing a hijab in a certain way, as deviant and/or resistant (Williams, 2009). However, we need to remain cautious given the tendency among youth cultural scholars and cultural criminologists alike to over-ascribe styles and actions in everyday life to political resistance (see Hayward, 2016).

The conservative search for and subsequent control of non-conforming behavior—whether delinquent, resistant, or whatever—can be found more broadly in Southeast Asia. In the neighboring Islamic countries of Malaysia and Indonesia, youth cultures are often framed within two ideological binaries—modernity vs. traditionalism and religion vs. secularism—with the conservative status quo being traditional and religious. For many Malay youths, alternative cultural practices signify a connection with modern (Western) global practices and enable them to escape the confines of traditional Malay culture (Yusof, 2010). There thus exist both legal and religious control structures through which various authorities handle Malay “troubled” youths, who are often identified through their non-normative styles. For example, underground music scenes are increasingly popular in Malaysia and Indonesia and both countries have extensive subcultural networks of musicians and fans. In Malaysia in the early 2000s, black metal music came to the authorities' attention through media coverage that suggested that music gigs were the sites of devil-worship and desecration of the Quran. Youths wearing black t-shirts on the streets were arbitrarily apprehended and sent to counseling, while during subsequent police raids at gigs, Malays were separated from non-Malays and subjected to religiously-oriented questioning and punishment by authorities “on suspicion they had committed acts contrary to Islam” (Yusof, 2010: 181). Similarly in Indonesia, alternative youth cultures clash with traditional and/or religious cultures around the country. In one example, 65 youths participating in a charity concert in Banda Aceh in 2011 were apprehended on suspicion of being punks and assigned to “reeducation.” The Aceh police saw their role as a moral one, imprisoning the youths for weeks without any legal charges filed against them, but providing “toothpaste, shampoo, sandals and prayer gear” (Hasan, 2011). The police chief later described how the imprisoned youths were “enthusiastic during their education” and referred to some of the young people's constant crying as a sign of their sincere regret for having strayed so far from proper Muslim lives (*Jakarta Globe*, 2011).

The examples above represent rather common conservative-authoritarian reactions to alternative youth cultures and styles in Southeast Asia. Young people whose practices do not conform to traditional Confucianist or Islamic values become problems to be dealt with and thus find themselves susceptible to deviant labels. Hijabistas and hijabsters alike become (at least potential) problems from some perspectives because they too break with traditional culture, yet the situation is neither simple nor straightforward. Certainly there are pressures placed upon young women in contemporary Southeast Asia to conform to entrenched conservative conceptions of what everyday life should look like. However, the examples above also reveal disjunctures between traditional conservative regimes and the hybridity of youths' everyday lives. It is therefore important to take into account changes occurring throughout the region—most obviously the widespread availability and deep penetration of western consumer and media cultural products—that affect youth cultural participation.

Hybridity and Muslim girl culture

Contemporary Islam in Southeast Asia “is being synthesized with some of the lifestyle characteristics of late modernity—urbanization, consumption for consumption’s sake, dependency on technology, extended periods of education and training” (Nilan, 2006: 92), and so on. These changes are occurring more broadly in Asia (O’Connor, 2011) as well as in Europe and the Americas (AlSayyad and Castells, 2002; Mandaville, 2001). The result is a hybrid existence for many Muslim youths. Young Muslim women tend not to exemplify what feminist youth scholars would typically recognize as the creators of a transgressive “girl culture” (Kearney, 1998a). Questions about the nature of their leisure practices or about the roles that “hedonism, fantasy escapes and imaginary solutions play in their lives” (McRobbie, 1980: 38) have only recently begun to be asked. Instead, young Muslimahs are typically seen as pious and modest, with the hijab understood by many as an objectification of that “truth.”

The hijab, hijabistas, and hijabsters

The Quran mandates that Muslim women cover themselves with the hijab—including their hair, shoulders, arms, bosom, legs, feet, and other body parts—from strangers and distant relatives (Abdullah, 1999; Hassim, 2014). As a global symbol, the hijab is mired in controversy, implicitly linked in the Occidental mind to a rigid and patriarchal Islam and thus both to terrorism and violence on the one hand, and female victim status on the other. In Southeast Asia, however, the hijab has experienced significant popularization and increasing acceptance among Malays over the past two decades, in part due to the growth of consumerism (Jones, 2010) and digital media technologies (see Han and Kamaludeen, 2016). The scarf no longer only represents supporters of conservative Islam, but rather functions as part of a more complex process of contemporary identity politics.

Contemporary ethnographic work on hijab-wearers in Southeast Asia has demonstrated the malleability of Islamic piety and women’s ability to negotiate between contemporary fashion trends and the maintenance of modesty as a component of faith. Such studies have emphasized negotiations of the meaning of the hijab as well as of their own religious identities (Hussein, 2009; Kamaludeen et al., 2010; Tarlo, 2010; Wok and Mohd, 2008). These changes have played out in no small way through the emergence of a Muslim fashion culture ranging in the Muslim world from Turkey to Indonesia in the 1990s, and beyond via Muslim groups in Western Europe, the UK, and the US. Catering to veiled women from a variety of backgrounds, first Muslim fashion magazines and later WordPress, Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, YouTube, and other social media have played particularly strong roles in disseminating ideas about the feminine Muslim self. These ideas do not always sit easily alongside traditional conceptions of womanhood in Islam (Balasescu, 2007; Jones, 2007; Kılıçbay, 2002), as those who adapt the hijab to contemporary urban life are often viewed as letting their interests in secularism and fashion—which invoke a focus on individuality and beauty—get in the way of religious piety and modesty. Despite this, the growth of Islamic consumer culture has enabled the rise of contemporary cultural and identity politics centered on the hijab and its wearer. Mediating the boundary between personal identity and consumerism on the one side, and collective (i.e. religious) identity and piety on the other, appears to be a primary focal concern for both hijabistas and hijabsters.

The hijabista and hijabster phenomena are heavily tied to media production and consumption. The terms are similar but not synonymous, despite some mass and social media sources using

them interchangeably, and we find it necessary to tease out what each term may index.² The term *hijabista* is a paradoxical portmanteau of “hijab” and “fashionista.” Fashionistas are seen as devoted followers of fashion who participate in a variety of discourses about dress, gender, and beauty, creating content for and consuming content from magazines as well as a plethora of online fashion-related media sources. These sources provide social networks through which women develop aesthetics vis-a-vis fashion and identity (Moeran, 2006) that are simultaneously collective and multivalent. So while the fashionista’s ensemble and identity are juxtaposed by the hijab as the primary symbol of female Muslim modesty, mass and social media provide interlinking and/or interactive functions through which young women can effectively communicate collective identities that, as we will discuss later, may be labeled as problematic in everyday life (Lim et al., 2013; Van Hellefont, 2012).

While *hijabista* thus seems to refer more to mainstream fashion-seeking Muslimahs, the term *hijabster* has been used to signify young women whose styles represent a more intentionally progressive identity. *Hijabster* is an amalgamation of “hijab” and “hipster,” the latter being seen generally as a “post-subcultural” (Muggleton, 2000) formation of middle and upper class 20- and 30-somethings who are said to value creative and independent thinking on the one hand, while following distinct but rather predictable fashion sensibilities on the other. Despite shared styles, hipsters lack the cohesive ideological structure that British cultural studies imputed onto post-Second World War youth subcultures (Bennett, 1999; Williams, 2011). Instead of articulating resistance through style, contemporary youths such as hipsters may be characterized by the collective but playful pursuit of leisure lifestyles (see Williams, 2011: 29–35). Thus, while seemingly progressive, *hijabster* culture “does not battle ... the authorities; it does not market itself discursively as a distinct alternative or rebellious lifestyle ...” (Schiermer, 2013: 170). Instead, whatever politics may exist among its adherents—something we are keenly interested in exploring—are articulated through individual expressions of style that may fly in the face of religious calls to conformity.

Regardless of these terminological distinctions, what we find most interesting are the implicitly paradoxical features that apply to both identity labels. On the one hand, we are talking about young Muslim women, a demographic historically known neither for its radical politics nor its deviant qualities. On the other hand, whether followers of fashion or agents of progressive politics, *hijabistas* and *hijabsters* alike are sometimes identified in an antagonistic position vis-a-vis conservative cultural logics, not least because their stylistic choices conflict with conservative-authoritarian strategies for control in everyday life. All the while, the young women involved attempt to sidestep such labeling and focus on themselves and their styles as simultaneously personal, modern, and religious. Understanding the complexity of these dynamics requires an approach that takes into account macro processes of contemporary capitalism and governance, as well as micro interactions and experiences of the young women whose style is seen as a problem (see Hayward, 2016).

Our exploration thus far has not revealed *hijabistas* or *hijabsters* to be collectively counter-cultural (Williams and Hannerz 2014), nor engaged in bricolage in the same way that male subcultural youths were described a half-century ago (Clarke, 1976; Hebdige, 1976). We see potential in framing some aspects of the phenomena in terms of an emerging “adherence to an identity politics which foregrounds their multiple and often contradictory subjectivities” (Kearney, 1998b: 149) within both secular and religious contexts, while also remaining open to the possibility of a

coherent subculture emerging. The extent to which such processes may result in “powerful assertions of political and cultural agency” (Kearney, 1998b: 149) remain to be seen, but given the continued politicization of the hijab in and beyond Southeast Asia, hijabistas and hijabsters will likely continue to signify contradictory narratives among young Muslim women. In order to understand the everyday lives of hijabistas and hijabsters, however, we must first consider the larger contexts within which those identities are emerging.

Fashion, consumption, and media

The hijabista and hijabster phenomena are emerging within multiple contexts but one of the best-known cases in the West is from a 2013 YouTube video entitled, “Somewhere in America #Mipsterz,” which featured modern, stylish Muslimahs wearing hijabs and strutting around the streets of urban America in non-traditional Muslim garb. This video was significant as it was one of the first style memes that was picked up by Western media, which helped move the now-stereotypical hijabista and hijabster imagery into the international limelight (Hafiz, 2013). The video was filmed and produced in the United States, and as such identified a newly-emerging Muslim youth identity. But in Southeast Asia, the styles and identities were already building youth cultural cachet. A 2011 opinion article on *Free Malaysia Today's* online news portal described the rise of “young smart Muslimah feminists” and credited Malaysian singer/songwriter Yuna Zarai and British-Japanese fashion designer turned Muslim, Hana Tajima, as being primary sources for the emerging phenomenon (Baharuddin, 2011).

In 2012, Malaysia's *Hijabista* magazine published its first issue. As Hassim and Khalid (2015) note, Muslim women's magazines had traditionally focused on matters of spiritual and female well-being, as well as social issues. *Hijabista* magazine, however, engaged in two significant processes that promoted the hijabista/hijabster phenomena. First, the magazine largely set aside spiritual content in order to focus more prominently on fashion and beauty topics in ways comparable to international fashion magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*. Second, the magazine “used stylistic narratives such as hijabista, hijabster, and hijabi interchangeably as reference to the readers” in order to develop among them a sense of shared identity (Hassim and Khalid, 2015: 5). Further, editorials provided a more global perspective on the hijab and supported the idea of adorning the hijab as a sign of Malay Muslim progressiveness (Hassim, 2014). *Hijabista* magazine now boasts an international following of more than half a million users on Facebook. In March 2016, the magazine held a hijabi model search in Malaysia and Singapore. The two-day event was broadcast over live feeds on their website. Some young women have even started their own clothing lines, such as Abaya Addict, and their impact on the mainstream world of Muslimah fashion is growing, with Instagrammers such as Dina Torkia garnering nearly 70,000 followers by mid-2016. Especially in multicultural urban environments, young Muslimahs are increasingly identifying with these fashions and the values they symbolize, such as self-expression, empowerment, and individuality.

A 2015 article in the UK's *Financial Times* documented the coming-of-age of Southeast Asia's young, hip, fashionable, and affluent Muslimah demographic (Robinson, 2015) alongside how multinational corporations Procter & Gamble and L'Oreal were investing in the market, scooping famous Muslimah bloggers with tens of thousands of followers onto their payrolls to market beauty products to groups that historically have been kept away from them. The article came complete with descriptive statistics on the educational attainment and job types among a

sample of hijabistas and hijabsters. By the end of 2015, Japanese clothing company Uniqlo and Swedish brand H&M had announced “modest wear” collections and were featuring hijab-wearing models. Meanwhile, connections between micro celebrities and mainstream Muslim politics were developing as well. In Malaysia, hijabster icon Yuna Zarai signed on to produce a music video for the country’s Visit Malaysia Year 2014 campaign, with politicians being quick to assert interpretive control over her image. The chief of the women’s youth wing of the *United Malays National Organisation* (Malaysia’s largest political party) called on young women in the country to emulate Yuna.

Let us take the example of Yuna, who always covers herself and is a “hijabster”, and is a strong influence on teenagers and youth today ... Although she sings pop songs, she also promotes Islam through her personality and appearance ... In fact, Yuna’s impact has encouraged many other new-age female artistes to wear the headscarf. (Chen, 2014)

Similarly, in Indonesia, the government has moved from banning the hijab in the 1980s in the name of the New Order version of civil religion, to “sponsoring Muslim fashion as part of its economic development plan and national branding strategy” (Lewis, 2015: 5). Recognizing the financial and cultural boons, Islamic political-economic actors in Southeast Asia have coopted and are now promoting hijabista and hijabster styles, with Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore all becoming noteworthy nodes in the global Muslim fashion nexus.

The significance of media technologies must also be considered. Over the last decade, social media have enabled the presentation of a plethora of mediated images circling primarily around Malay women with “highly sophisticated yet Islamic clothing” (Hassim and Khalid, 2015: 28). Looking broadly, we have found many examples of social networking platforms with sites/pages/channels featuring hijabista style. On sites such as *The Hybrid Headpiece* or *Abaya Addict*, bloggers shared images of their OOTDs (outfit of the day). Fashion tips, hijab tutorials, and makeup tutorials were broadcast in *Vela* and the clothes bloggers wore could be seen on websites like *Automatighigh*, with fashion trends visible on Instagram and Tumblr via searches for hashtags such as #hijabista, #hijabster, #hijaboftheday, #hijablif, #ootd, #modestfashion, #hijabstyle, and #modestyisgorgeous.

In all this we see the hijabista and hijabster style and culture as part of a larger process of social change toward what scholars have called “Islamic cosmopolitanism” (Aljunied, 2016; Beta and Hum, 2011). This cosmopolitanism, however, contains still-emerging and somewhat contradictory discourses about the hijab and its relation to Muslim girl culture. New hijab stylizations appear to be part of a collective, youth-driven quest for identity and authenticity set within larger processes that are creating new cultural hybridities, but also are being increasingly controlled by cultural-industry and political elites who recognize the potential of style and who seek opportunities to incorporate it into their own discourses about who Muslim youth ought to be and how they ought to dress and act. Seeing these linkages enables us to foresee an extension of Ferrell’s (1995) and others’ insights into how subcultural styles shape “not only aesthetic communities, but official and unofficial reactions to subcultural identity” (Ferrell, 1999: 404). Of utmost importance is reconciling how young hijabistas, hijabsters, market agents, and political authorities articulate these styles and identities. As such, it will be necessary to pay attention to what extent disseminated styles and identities are being produced from within hijabista or hijabster communities,

versus from cultural industries and political sources, versus from emerging collaborations among these various actors.

Conservatism and pushback

The emergence of the hijabista and hijabster as cultural identities is not only entangled in global and regional neo-liberal political economies and social media developments, but is counterbalanced by rather strong conservative discourses that align with authoritarian governance structures. To be sure, young Muslims in Southeast Asia have in recent decades been subject to high- and low-profile Muslim identity projects alike by their respective governments that further maintain the hybrid aspects of living between “authority-defined” and “everyday-defined” realities (Shamsul, 1996). Despite overt proclamations of the celebration of diversity and pluralism, some Malay Muslim youth in Southeast Asia are nevertheless still the targets of paternalistic interventions (Kamaludeen, 2007; Musa, 2016; Williams and Zaini, 2016; Yusof, 2010) and subsequent efforts aimed at controlling both private and public behaviors.

Harkening back to our earlier comments on hybridity, Singapore’s Muslim identity project, officialized in 2004, purports holding onto Islamic principles while riding the modernization wave in the context of a secular state. Hijabistas and hijabsters have emerged on the wrong side of state policies as the hijab is outlawed in all national primary and secondary schools, local junior colleges, and institutes of technical education. The state has also prohibited the wearing of the hijab in jobs adjudged to be “frontline” in multicultural contexts, such as nursing and policing. This is enforced despite Muslim schoolgirls, female nurses and women police officers being able to observe the hijab in a number of Western secular societies where Muslims also live as minorities, including Australia, Canada, and the United States. There has been repeated lobbying and contestation over these policies by the Singaporean Muslim community over the last two decades, with many taking to social media to voice their discontent, though to no avail. Two often-mentioned examples are the suspension of four primary school girls in 2002 and the subsequent labeling of their parents for insisting that their children don the hijab in national schools, and the 2013 campaign to enable nurses to wear the hijab in Singapore’s hospitals (Kamaludeen and Aljunied, 2009; Law, 2003). In short, the decision to wear the hijab can limit a young woman’s opportunities in school, at work, and elsewhere. Compare this to teens who have begun wearing the hijab in public, even when their mothers refrain from doing so. Some young women have described how their parents ask them not to wear it for fear of their daughters being labeled or blacklisted. This is similar to O’Connor’s (2011) findings that Muslim parents in Hong Kong want their children to downplay their religious identities and to excel in school and at work so they will become happy through financial success, even though such cultural goals are antithetical to Islam precepts concerning the significance of wealth vis-a-vis happiness. More research is needed to understand the cultural significance of such choices, as well as both their subjective and objective effects.

Hijabistas and hijabsters also come in for criticism within local Muslim communities, and it appears that these criticisms are rooted in the increasing hybridization of everyday life. Here, we identify three interweaving factors embedded within everyday life in Southeast Asia that make the hijabista and hijabster identities problematic. The first challenge is a moral and theological conundrum that is posed by some segments of the Muslim population, who see the hijabistas’ and hijabsters’ emphasis on style as fractious (Tarlo, 2010). Condemnations have little to do with the

hijab as an article of faith, as by definition wearers are already following Islamic tenets. The reproaches are instead displaced onto how the headscarf is worn and onto the paradox of following a code of modesty through the conspicuous consumption of attention-grabbing clothes and designer labels. Such reproaches suggest the status quo belief that ironic or resistant intentions underlie modesty as a practice supported by young women who, while conservative in terms of covering their physique, may be extravagant consumers or who nevertheless draw attention to themselves in ways defined as morally problematic.

The second factor is an extension of the first and highlights that much of the discourse surrounding hijabistas and hijabsters is rooted in class distinctions. This can be explained by the growing Muslim middle class in Southeast Asia. Much ink has been spilled over the last three decades in analyses of the rise of a new educated and urban middle class in the region. Hijabistas and hijabsters are depicted as part of this new class, who are relatively affluent, technologically savvy, and quite embedded in secular popular culture (Robinson, 2015). This is apparent in the negative labeling of hijabistas and hijabsters in popular fiction and in blogs. Dayang's (2014) account of two hijabistas hanging out at an expensive cafe, speaking in a mix of Malay and English, uploading their photos on Instagram, checking-in via Facebook, updating their status via Twitter on their tablets, and WhatsApping on smartphones, opens up these identities for widespread reaction within the Malay community (see also Fauzi, 2015). Although perhaps innocuous to an outside (especially Western) reader, such stories are readily interpretable from a Malay-Muslim perspective as veiled criticisms of the pretentiousness of hijabistas and hijabsters, who allegedly come from the educated class and thus additionally subvert the dominant narrative of the subservient Malay Muslim woman.

The third factor involves generational tensions. Many young Muslims in Southeast Asia have "discovered, or are in the process of discovering, a youthful, popular, and chic 'Islam' that is a potent mix of Muslim themes and global consumer culture" (Kamaludeen, 2016a: 198). Similar processes have already affected some Christian communities in the West (McCracken, 2010). Mushaben (2008) points to the development of a pop-Islam among young people, which spawned from Arabia near the turn of the new millennium, and cites the increasing influence of charismatic *imams* and the impact of Islamic satellite television in creating idols and entertainment celebrities. Tensions within the Muslim community centering on generational gaps had appeared pre-September 11, but the increasing influence of Western consumer culture in the new millennium seems to have exacerbated them in many ways. Although elders still hold the thresholds of power in which Muslim communities are governed, the status quo is increasingly challenged by a young and more educated population, who are often guided by a generation of more youthful religious *imams* or *ustazs* emerging in local mosques. Within these younger social realms, beliefs about modesty, style, and identity may be significantly at odds with those of older, more conservative Muslim circles.

Researcher reflexivity and theorizing youth cultural identity

Hijabistas and hijabsters are creating and consuming new styles and fashion that make the hijab more conspicuous than ever in Southeast Asia's conservatively managed socio-religious landscape. Building upon both international hijabista fashion and the progressive youth cultural practices that

accompany new forms of cultural and social hybridity, these Muslimahs may be seen as active participants in urban consumer culture while also living out a central tenet of subcultures: the personal is political. But is either of these interpretations more valid than the other? To answer such a question, one key issue that scholars must deal with is how their own epistemological assumptions might affect their theorizations of the hijab and of hijabista and/or hijabster cultures and identities. This is in part why we constantly refer both to hijabistas and hijabsters throughout this article, as we recognize that these are used by a variety of social actors for a variety of purposes, and that neither term in itself does justice to the variety of perspectives, tastes, and practices involved.

While seeking in some ways to blend into contemporary urban youth lifestyles, hijabistas and hijabsters still hold on to rituals of intimacy and articles of faith like the hijab. We have no doubt that many young Muslim women are sincere in their religious practice while also engaging in increasingly consumer-based identity projects. As such, it is possible—and perhaps even potentially fruitful—to analyze hijabista and hijabster styles as subcultural homologies that articulate young Muslim women’s contradictory positions within modern, secular, urban youth scenes on the one hand, and within the conservative, religious, and sexed environments of family and mosque on the other. Yet, such a reading risks unnecessarily simplifying matters, especially given the popularization of “girl power” through social media and the ever-growing methods through which young women are creating their own pop-culture identities (Harris, 2015).

As our study began, we assumed that young women who were wearing the hijab in non-normative ways would reveal themselves in rather cohesive cultural terms. But as we considered various insights from contemporary youth studies, cultural criminology, and media studies alongside our collection of preliminary data, the less like a cohesive youth culture it appeared. What at first seemed to be a transnational scene of young women engaged in disruptions of traditional Islamic conceptions of piety and modesty became something in which consumer culture and secular politics played a much more important role than we had anticipated. Where we thought we might find a coherent subcultural identity, we instead found a mixture of support for, and rejection of, the idea that non-traditional use of the hijab was a problem at all. In short, we went looking for an emerging youth subculture and thus far have found complex relations to class, education, religion, national identity politics, consumerism, media, taste, and authenticity. Additional research is needed to tease out these various relations and their significance, and investigating the actual experiences of the young women connected to these emerging cultural identities remains key to a better understanding of the links among these variables.

So far, we have noticed that many young women’s experiences with the hijab, including non-traditional stylizations and discussions on fashion, begin in “private,” (quasi-)anonymous social media communities. Stivens (2002: 192) has argued that modernity in the Malay world is to be understood at least partly within the “shifting relations and representations of the so-called private sphere [that] are ... a favored site for the expression of tensions and ambivalence.” To the young women whose voices we have heard through student research³ and seen while surfing Instagram and web forums, social media are like bedrooms—important because they offer safe spaces in which to develop and articulate independent expressions of self with less fear of adult condescension (Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008; Lincoln and Robards, 2016). Social media may function both as reflexive sites for exploration and as sites involving the contestation over

meaning. These contestations may occur among self-identifying hijabistas and hijabsters, or between them and outsiders.

Following from our analysis of the socio-cultural backdrop to the hijabista and hijabster phenomena, we have noticed that young Muslim women, at least in Singapore, often express ambivalence toward both contemporary urban culture and traditional Malay culture when sharing pictures of or discussing the hijab. Their style places them simultaneously half-in and half-out of both cultures. Adorning the hijab as a component of a chic urban ensemble communicates a personal desire to be seen as simultaneously modern and modest, but on their own terms. Like the cholas in Mendoza-Denton's (2008) study of Mexican-American female gang members, hijabistas and hijabsters are making unconventional use of a traditional symbol, wearing on their heads

a semiotics that work[s] parallel to and in careful concert with other symbolic behaviors all focusing toward the same end: the articulation of a distinct style, different from their parents, who continually ask why their little girls must dress like this. (Mendoza-Denton, 2008: 152)

These concerns about living simultaneously in secular youth culture and a religious milieu need to be investigated in much more depth. The concept of cultural hybridity stands out as a particularly useful one (Burke, 2009).

We also see concern over the circulation of the terms hijabista and hijabster, not least because the young women involved do not have full control of their meanings. Mass and social media alike have enabled the circulation of contested youth-cultural identities in Southeast Asia. And while participation in hijabista/hijabster discourse oftentimes means "to speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of tastes," it also means "to accept what has been labeled a subordinated position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutional authorities" (Jenkins, 1992: 23). Youth identities circulate across various mass and social media platforms and are constantly being (re) shaped through mediated interactions. In a recent study of K-pop fandom in Singapore for example, Williams and Ho (2016) found a host of undesirable characteristics attributed to enthusiastic K-pop fans, which together formed an overwhelmingly negative portrayal that distinguished those youths from "normal" society. Meanwhile, those fans engaged in their own narratives and debates about the meaning of K-pop fandom, which were only partially affected by larger pejorative discourses. We see similar processes occurring among Muslimahs, not least in the unwillingness of many to self-identify as either hijabista or hijabster, which some see as labels that limit the possibilities of them becoming closer to God. The extent of this (un)willingness to self-identify, and its relation to theorizing cultural identities, is something that requires reflexive analysis and interpretation on the part of researchers.

Conclusion

Today, more and more youths grow up in highly mediated and commodified societies. Southeast Asia is home to booming growth in the number of middle-class youths who are exposed to a wide array of transcultural images, ideas, and styles disseminated through a variety of top-down and bottom-up cultural processes. The political and economic stability of the region, combined with

the growing affluence and purchasing power of youths, facilitates investments in material goods through which youths construct personal and collective identities. At the same time, youths across the region are becoming more knowledgeable about identity politics. In the cases of hijabistas and hijabsters, we see one or more emerging cultures through which young Muslim women are learning to negotiate their identities at a number of crossroads: consumer and DIY cultures; secularism and religion; fashion and modesty. It will be interesting to see how these cultural identities mature and what these women may accomplish with them.

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Notes

1. While Ferrell and Sanders emphasize crime in this quote, Ferrell noted soon after that the notion of criminalization was already being widened to refer to more than legal issues. He called this larger process "cultural criminalization" (see Ferrell, 1998: 80–82), which refers to the mediated reconstruction of meaning and perception around issues of culture and unacceptable identities and behaviors.
2. Our definitional work here is based on our analysis of the terms' uses across a variety of contexts and may not fit with how those terms are used by the young women to whom they refer. In other words, we do not seek to produce static definitions, but rather to characterize their current use across mass and social media.
3. We would like to thank Nazreen Nasser and Magdalene Simon for collecting some of the data that helped us identify the patterns we discuss here. The students were enrolled in the first author's honors seminar course on youth cultures and subcultures and conducted the research under his supervision.

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