

# Perception of Hijab Wearing Women Towards the Fashion Industry in Pakistan

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## Abstract

The hijab fashion market in Pakistan has been increasing in terms of the ratio of population and people's income for last few years. This experimental research evaluates hijab-wearing women's perception of how well their hijab and abaya needs are being met by fashion Industry in Pakistan. A focus group discussion methodology was used for data collection. The primary aim of this research was to assess women's satisfaction with hijab marketing, clothing sizes, and the influence of traditional clothing. The consumer's purchasing behavior and dress-body aspects model was applied as the theoretical framework. Twenty-Eight hijab-wearing women from the Lahore, Punjab participated in this research. Findings revealed that women are not satisfied with the marketing and fitting of hijab and abayas. Proposals are provided in this study to solve these problems.

**Keywords:** Pakistani women; Hijab; Abaya; Hijab marketing; Pakistan fashion industry

## Introduction

There has been an increase in the number of fashion products designed and sold to Pakistani women in recent years due to the rise in purchasing power [1]. Pakistan's fashion industry has been growing rapidly, and it has emerged as one of the top trending industries in Pakistan where many domestic and international firms have invested heavily for the last decade. Over the years, fashion retailers in Pakistan have been enjoying 25-35% growth annually. Fashion retailers have started to change their marketing strategies to meet the needs of the hijab fashion market because of the increase in women's purchasing power. The primary objective of this study was to evaluate the perception of hijab-wearing women in Pakistan that how well their fashion needs were being met and to identify whether their clothing needs are different from those women who don't wear hijab.

The specific aims were to determine the following:

- a. Hijab-wearing women's satisfaction with the marketing, clothing sizes, and the influence of traditional clothing
- b. Their design preferences for hijab and abayas.

The focus group discussion method was applied for data collection. In order to generate dialog among participants in the study, this open-ended question method was chosen.

## Literature Review

Pakistan is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world in terms of population, and 95-98% people in Pakistan belong to Islamic religion. The textile industry of Pakistan is country's largest export and manufacturing industry [2,3]. Fashion Industry of Pakistan has been growing fast for a decade now [4]. Most of the brands only design traditional clothes. Hijab is one of the fastest-growing fashion Industries in middle eastern countries, but the hijab fashion industry of Pakistan is yet to do wonders. According to Islam, all Muslim women should cover their heads and wear gowns to cover their body curves in public P [5]. If you look at the history of Hijab it portrays that hijab is ancient custom in Muslims and it has different meanings in different regions, and it varies with the passage of time. Hijab considers as a sign of oppression

in western society P [6] but on the other side, Muslim women who wear Hijab find it so respectful and according to them Hijab is the identity of a Muslim woman [7].

Since Pakistan is a Muslim majority country, so most of the women wear hijab or burqas, but brands and designers are not so focused on this target market. The typical dressing of women in Pakistan is shalwar (trousers) kameez (long shirt) and dupatta (scarf), each dress varying with its colors and designs, that are formed by embroidery. The length of the sleeves, shirts, and other details varies according to the individual's taste as well as the trend following in the country. The trousers are in the form of straight-cut

shalwar, Patiala shalwar, or churidar pajamas. Women wear trendy traditional shirt with headscarf.

Covering the head is not just a religious requirement but a symbol of respect in Pakistan, so most of the women always cover their heads with dupatta in public even if they are not wearing proper hijab or burqa [8-11]. Dupatta comprises of beautiful intricate embroidery designs in kamdani and gota work, which is the traditional Pakistani designing method. Other than the shalwar kameez, women in Pakistan wear purely traditional dresses following the customs for many years on special occasions like the wedding functions and religious festivals (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** First lady of Pakistan wearing white burqa (Malik 2018).

Manufacturers and retailers in Pakistan are not focusing on hijab fashion in Pakistan. The hijab fashion industry should be paid attention because it has the potential to be the game-changer for Pakistan's textile and fashion industries. Designers in Pakistan focus on cultural elements and most of their designs are very colorful and inspired by cultural motifs. Burqa or abaya considers to be a religious and old-fashioned garment in the modern fashion industry, so designers don't often target this market. A few numbers of

brands have started working in this area and began to introduce more abaya designs, but they are unable to do proper advertisements for these products as compared to the other traditional dresses. The purpose of this research is to determine whether hijab-wearing women in Pakistan are satisfied with the three key factors (a) marketing of abayas, (b) clothing fit, and (c) the impact of cultural clothing elements on hijab and abayas (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Clothing preferences of hijab-wearing women.

Clothing Design Preferences	Mean <sup>a</sup>
When I buy abayas, it is essential to me that it fits well	7
I prefer to buy the classic style abayas, that are always in style	5.5
I wear any available abayas even though it is not in fashion	3.7
I prefer to wear clothing that reflects our culture	6.8
I like dark color abayas	4.2
I buy abayas that do not draw attention to myself	6.7
I prefer bright and bold color abayas that people notice	1.3
I buy abayas that complement my skin color	6.3
I prefer loose fitted abayas rather than tightly fitted	3.7
I prefer simple abayas rather than embellished	4.6
I like abayas that could be worn at home as well	5

<sup>a</sup>Responses were 1 = strongly disagree, 4 = neutral, 7 = strongly agree.

## Methodology

We developed two data collection instruments, (1) Participants background information and dress preferences form and (2) a focus group discussion questionnaire. Three key topics were included in the focus group discussion (a) Marketing (b) Clothing Size, and (c) the influence of traditional clothing. We developed thoughtful questions to lead the respondents through the focus group discussion. The opening question about the interest of participants in hijab and abaya fashion had to be answered by everyone at the start of each session. Next, we used an introductory question to introduce the marketing clothing topic to hijab-wearing women in Pakistan. We developed transition questions for each topic, followed by two to six main core questions that explored further into each topic. The term religious and non-religious was included in the questions to see the reactions of the participants to these words. Participants were also asked whether hijab is their personal choice, or they are forced by their families to wear hijab.

Twelve questions about their abayas and hijabs were asked to collect the information about their design preferences. A seven-point Likert scale was used where 7 indicated that participants are strongly agreed and 1 indicated strongly disagreed. Participants were also requested to provide their demographic and psychographic details such as age, income, educational qualifications and traditional and religious events or activities they attended. Four women were selected to serve as the experimental group to pre-test both the data collection instruments, focus group discussion questionnaire, and participants background information and their clothing preferences. The instruments were revised to simplify wording based on the preliminary focus group discussion.

## Participants selection

A qualified volunteer helped in participant selection, using a purposeful sampling technique. This volunteer contacted hijab-wearing women from different universities of Lahore. Most of the participants knew the volunteer. Possible participants were sent a letter explaining the research objectives, and they were requested to complete a reply form with stamped envelope to confirm their willingness to participate. A total of 28 hijab and abaya-wearing women confirmed their desire to participate in the focus group discussions, including two groups of 9 women and one group of 10 women. All 28 participants lived in Lahore. The largest group of women was 45 to 60 years old (36%), while the other groups of participants were between 35 to 45 years old (32%), and 26 to 34 years old (32%). All the women were at least high school graduates; 68% had bachelor's degrees, and 32% had master's degrees. The income range for 68% of the women was 8,000\$ to 12,000\$, for 25 % of the women it was 12,000\$ to 15,000\$, and for 7% of the women it was 16,000to 18,000annually. 54% of the women said they shop "frequently," 17% said they shop "infrequently," and 29% said they shop "sometimes." The focus group discussions were conducted on Sunday at a Hotel. All the participants took part in a written activity and completed the personal information and clothing design preference form. One of the members of our research team took notes during the sessions, and each session lasted 2 hours.

## Findings

**Marketing and advertisement:** These advertisements related to abaya designs were shown to the women to determine their responses to marketing. The women believed that the ads were not so appealing and unfashionable. One of the participants stated, "Brands should focus on marketing strategies and advertise the hijab designs in a modern way. Brands associate hijab and abayas only with religion and advertise in an old-fashioned way". Another participant said "The abayas on the advertisements don't look the same because of the photographic filters" One of the women commented "I am tired of seeing same kinds of ads for hijabs." One participant went on to explain that brands often associate hijab and abaya with public clothing whereas women like to put on stylish abayas at home or in parties as evening gowns, so brands need to introduce more eye-catching ways of advertising hijabs and abayas to attract hijab-wearing women.

**Abaya fit or sizes:** In all the discussion groups, women kept on talking about their clothing needs and fitting issues. Most of the participants explained that 90% of the abayas available in the market are so loose and not body fitted. One participant said "I don't understand if it's the designers who design only loose-fitted abayas or the retailers just focus on specific target markets. Abayas are available in small, medium and large sizes in the market, but usually one abaya can be worn by different sizes of women because it's so loose. I believe Abayas should be available in all sizes". One participant added, "we have no idea about our exact size because it varies store to store"

**Influence of traditional clothing:** Participants were asked several questions regarding the influence of cultural clothing on hijab and abaya. Participants explained since the conventional dress of Pakistan has dupatta or shawl as the essential part for head covering, so most of the brands focus on designing and selling traditional clothing. One woman stated, "brands and designers should design abayas at the same amount as they design traditional dresses because 70-80% of women in Pakistan wear abayas or cover their heads with hijab or scarves.

**Overview:** Participants believed that hijab fashion had been a non-popular market in Pakistan. A participant pointed out that, "We are undeserved because in Pakistan fashion is based on cultural clothing, and it doesn't usually address hijab and abaya fashion." Another woman said, "Most brands and designers have no idea about the needs and desires of hijab-wearing women, so this study which you are doing would be so helpful for them to understand about the hijab market"

## Clothing design preferences

Participants replied to 11 questions that addressed their choices regarding the pattern size, design, trend and color issues. Pattern size was the most important to women. The women wanted more styles of hijab abayas. Moreover, the study disclosed that women desired of the fusion of western fashion and traditional abayas, they were specifically interested in wearing abayas inspired by western evening gowns. Women agreed to some extent with the statement

that their clothing design preferences shouldn't draw unnecessary attention to themselves in any form.

## Discussion

The Internet has made the whole world a global village and people have been following latest fashion trends from all over the world. The hijab-wearing women in our research thought that the hijab fashion should be paid attention any Pakistan. They thought that their needs were not thoroughly addressed, and they perceived that hijab and abayas should be inspired by latest fashion trends, and brands should introduce various designs and size ranges to expand the market. Limitations of our study include the small size of our focus group. All the participants were well educated so results may vary with a larger size of sample group and less educated women.

Participants thought that retailers and manufacturers should do a better job of attracting more consumers. Women explained that retailers and manufacturers have started to introduce the mix match designs of western fashion and cultural clothing, but the efforts should be broadened by adding hijab and abayas design in their catalogs. Women wanted the proper advertisements and marketing of hijab fashion industry through fashion shows and seminars. Furthermore, our research suggests that manufacturers and retailers should pay more attention to the demographics of women. They need to distinguish between high class, lower class, and middle class. Many of the participants in this study thought that good clothing increases their confidence and quality of life in public.

Few suggestions were provided to meet the needs of women more effectively

- a. Merging abayas with latest fashion trends,
- b. Introducing different sizes of body fitted and loose fitted abayas,
- c. Fusion of western evening gowns with the modern fashion
- d. Marketing through fashion shows, social media and seminars.

In addition, manufacturers should hire specific people for specific kinds of clothing, and they should train more abaya designers because this market has potential to grow so fast in Pakistan.

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