

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of Study

Hall (1997) argued that identity is the quality, beliefs, personality, looks, and expressions that makes a person or a group. Using Hall's concept of identity, Barker (1999) explained that identities are not fixed. Rather, it is an unfinished descriptions of ourselves, constantly transforming, and always in a process of becoming. In addition to that, Ahmed (2019) argued that 'Muslim identity' cannot be regarded as static or rigid representations of every individual either. This is due to the reason that among Muslims, there are immense diversity that can be recognized, along the lines of ethnicity, social class, levels of education and employment, geographical location, language, gender and age. Pihlaja and Thompson (2017) assert that describing Muslims' identities are remarkably difficult because they comprise a wide span of various ethnicities and stages of religiosity. The category of Muslim represents a diverse community, and people from Muslim heritage always privilege the religious element of their identity (p. 53).

Even though scholars have argued that the identity of every Muslim is diverse, stereotypes generalize them into single categorizations, thus seeing them as a monolithic group. According to Pickering (2015), stereotypes make a way for people to represent and judge others in fixed and inflexible terms. Those people are reduced to the stereotypes, rather than being seen as individuals with their own personal characteristics and qualities. Regarding stereotypes about Muslim

women, European Network Against Racism (ENAR) reports in 2016 that Western media tend to portray them as weak and oppressed, without the right or ability to think by

themselves or take control of their own lives, or as being brainwashed by patriarchal visions. In addition, they are believed to embody a monolithic group supporting domestic violence, gender inequality, and traditional gender roles (Abdullahi, 2018).

By being stereotyped, Muslim women are not considered and treated as their specific and unique traits but represented only from the simplified categorizations and homogenized attributes that they have to carry. Muslim women may lose their individual identities in the process (Aly & Walker, 2007: 208). Moreover, as the results, other groups' perspectives in the society regarding veiled Muslim women's identities will become fixed and unchanged (Ryan, 2006). This situation could be worse since the composition of the media workers are hardly diverse enough to comprise Muslim women's presence. Thus, they will be more excluded by the media when there are issues about Muslims (Abdullahi, 2018).

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However, those issues do not cease Muslim women from finding other mediums to assert their individualities to counter the stereotypes. Although the mass media cannot be reached for some reasons, many of them make use of the internet and social media platforms to demystify misconceptions. As Ellison and Vitak (2015, p.205) said, social media is an online medium that enables peer-to-peer communication in ways not supported by mass media which uses a 'one-to-many' broadcast model. By using social media, Muslim women can create unrestricted flows of information and contents in the context of wider groups, communities, or networks.

The emergence of social media has given advantage for Islamic cosmopolitanism to raise. According to Potts (2009), Islamic cosmopolitanism is a phenomenon which encourages Muslim women to show their individuality through the latest fashion trends with various styles and accessories while confirming the covered dressing rules in their participation in the public spheres. Hijab fashion is then mix-and-matched by a lot of Muslim women to accommodate their self-images or their preferred images. This phenomenon thus

becomes a medium to combine other fashion elements from other cultures to construct the personal and customized identity.

Under the emergences of social media and Islamic cosmopolitanism, many Muslim women have transformed themselves as '*hijabista*', who are "Muslim women who dress in a fashionable manner and/or design fashionable clothes, while confirming to what is being assigned by their religion in terms of dress" (Blommaert & Varis, 2015, p. 161). Plenty of *hijabistas* are fashion influencers, e.g. designers, entrepreneurs. With the support from internet and social media, they are able to showcase their 'outfit of the day' as well as other works, projects or businesses regarding fashion, declaring that hijab is "a part of a Muslim woman's identity, an identity they are asserting more confidently" (Paton 2016).

One of the notable '*hijabista*' is Melanie Elturk, the fashion influencer, designer, and entrepreneur who believes that "fashion is one of the outlets in which we can start that cultural shift in today's society to normalise hijab in America so as to break down stereotypes and demystify misconceptions" (Asher, 2016). Elturk is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), co-founder of Haute Hijab, the so-called leading American modest fashion brand and a regular contributor on ELLE.com. Her figure has been featured in the New York Times, Glamour, InStyle, Vogue Arabia, NBC Today, USA Today, PopSugar and others. Her hijab brand, Haute Hijab, raises the tagline and mission which implicitly aims to empower Muslim women: 'The world's best hijabs for the world's most powerful women' and describes itself as 'The global community that celebrates and empowers the hijab-wearing woman by designing innovative products fuelled by an obsession with superior service and craftsmanship'. Through Haute Hijab's

social media, Instagram (@hautehijab) account that has over 292k followers (as of February, 2020), Elturk often publishes posts about her activities and fashion elements to constructs her own personal identity as a Muslim woman which is opposite from the stereotypes portrayed by Western media. This contributes to Muslim women's agency and increasing engagement in society that enables them to carve out new spaces for constructing their own individual identities.

The way Melanie Elturk presents herself in Haute Hijab's Instagram posts is actually in line with Goffman's (2016) concept of self-performance. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (2016), he states that every individual actually establishes construction of their identities through the use of signs. However, it is basically formed to create some impressions of audiences or social environments. Therefore, the identity that appears is the one from one's desire in order to gain social recognition. Through Haute hijab's Instagram posts, Elturk showcases some visual and textual elements as the signs to make the viewer get the impressions that her personal Muslimah identities are the opposite from Western media stereotypes about Muslim women.

The researches regarding the issues regarding Muslim women's identity constructions and issues around it have been conducted by several scholars. At first, in order to understand how Muslim women internally perceive negative stereotypes about them, Mosquera et al.'s (2017) study is included in the reference. This study examined gender differences in perceptions of and emotions about perceived in-group social image among American Muslims. The researchers measured perceived in-group social image by asking American Muslim participants to rate how much they believe a series of adjectives reflect the way

Muslims are seen in U.S. society. The result shows that Muslim both men and women believed Muslims are seen in stereotypical ways (i.e., as ‘frightening’ and ‘oppressed’) more than in non-stereotypical ways (i.e., as ‘powerful’ and ‘honorable’). Besides, responses to perceived social image as ‘oppressed’ were subsided by gender. American Muslim female participants believed that Muslims are seen as ‘oppressed’ in U.S. society to a stronger extent than male participants did. In addition, perceived social image as ‘oppressed’ only resulted anger for female participants: the more female participants believed Muslims are seen as ‘oppressed,’ the more extreme their anger. This study was conducted by using quantitative method while my research uses descriptive analytical method.

Khan and Zahra’s (2016) study also evaluates the portrayal of Muslim women particularly in the news magazines *Time* and *Newsweek*. Prime objective of the study is to explore the utilization of several implications and associations to depict Muslim women in particular perspective. Qualitative tool provides a better chance to thoroughly interpret the latent and manifest meanings of the content. Furthermore, qualitative research method (textual analysis) deals with the understanding of the content. This study uses textual analysis (qualitative research tool) to find out the hidden meanings enclosed in the published text. The assessment of the study qualitatively revealed that Western print media still practiced the same prejudiced frames to identify Muslim women. The researchers also contends that real Muslim women who own Islamic values and their veils with pride were never seemed to be focused as positive subject by the Western print media. The differences of this research with mine lie on the data source, topic, and focus.

Several researches have been conducted to examine how Muslim women manage their external images to break the stereotypes. Van Es (2017) explores how Muslim women in Dutch society try to counteract the stereotypes of the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ by running their own conduct in everyday interactions with non-Muslims. By representing themselves as modern and emancipated women, they try to challenge mass perceptions of Muslim women in Dutch society. This is also because in contemporary Western societies, being ‘emancipated’ has become an ideal that women – particularly Muslim women – should live up to. This article demonstrates Butler’s (1988) theory of performative performance to study self-representations of minority groups in the light of existing stereotypes, arguing that Muslim women’s self-representations should be seen as part of a politics of belonging. In the exploration, Van Es uses ethnographic method with interviews as source of data, while my research will use descriptive analytical method with Instagram posts as source of data.

In the more specific context i.e. British context, Ahmed (2020) explores how Muslim women have created spaces for themselves in both community and mainstream British media by producing their own publications and working for mainstream media. In converging their gender and religious identities, they have created emerging discourses that are crossing both ‘ethnic’ or community media as well as mainstream media. Using interview data from five journalists and examples of media discourses, this paper shows how the articulation of gendered and religious identities is evidence of a growing confidence and continued agency among young Muslim women in the UK. The difference of Ahmed’s study with mine are based on the corpus, theory, and topic.

Other study also shows that the act of omitting Muslim stereotypes is conducted in the medium of blogging as well. Evolvi (2017) argues that narrative practices can challenge those negative idea by articulating Muslim hybrid identities that are appropriate with Italian culture and society. The blog *Yalla Italia* represents a ‘third space’ where young Italian Muslims contrast popular media stereotypes, thus creating ‘uncontrollable flows of arguments’. This article situates itself within existing scholarship about Islam in Italy and Europe, while taking the innovative approach of analysing internet discourses. This study performed a qualitative textual analysis of *Yalla Italia* by analysing posts and readers’ comments from 2011 – when the blog went online – until March 2015, when the blog started to decrease the number of its posts. In addition, interviews with the two founders of the blog and four of the bloggers were conducted in May and June 2015. While this study uses qualitative textual analysis as the method and interviews as source of data, my study will use descriptive analytical method and Instagram posts as the source of data.

Similar with Evolvi’s, Sim’s (2019) study investigates the visual analysis of three highly-followed conservative women’s fashion blogs in Turkey. In this context, ‘conservative’ refers to the practice of religion according to Islamic rules and codes and hijab wearing. This study adds to the literature on representation of self and self-branding techniques in cyberspace. The study found that while forming the contents, the Turkey Muslim bloggers also fight stereotypes that “veiled women are traditional”, that even though they practice religious rules, they also perform modern activities in public spheres such as running business and traveling. This study was conducted by using quantitative content analysis on

Turkey bloggers' blog and Instagram posts, while my study is going to use Social Semiotic and Systemic Functional Linguistics to analyze Haute Hijab's Instagram posts.

Due to all those considerations, this study will investigate the construction of Muslimah identity displayed in Haute Hijab's Instagram posts. Since Instagram posts consist of visuals (pictures) and texts (captions), the analysis will be conducted using Kress and Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotics (visual text) and M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (written text). Both theories are significant to investigate the meanings or the process of making meaning over images and languages. This study will be conducted with descriptive analysis method and qualitative approach.

1.2. Research Question

Based on the background of the study and the reason for choosing the topic, the study tries to answer this following question:

How does Haute Hijab's Instagram posts construct Melanie Elturk's Muslimah identity?

1.3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to investigate the construction of Melanie Elturk's Muslimah identity in Instagram posts of Haute Hijab.

1.4. Scope of the Study

The study focuses on investigating the construction of Muslimah identity through Kress and Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotics and M.A.K. Halliday's

Systemic Functional Linguistics (transitivity) on 8 Instagram posts from Haute Hijab (posts from November 8, 2019, September 30, 2019, September 4, 2019, October 17, 2019, June 13, 2019, June 11, 2019, April 9, 2019, January 21, 2019). Social Semiotic by Kress and Van Leeuwen is used to analyze the picture while Systemic Functional Linguistics (transitivity) by M.A.K. Halliday is used to analyze the caption. The data are chosen with purposive sampling.

1.5. Significance of the Study

The writer hopes that this study will be useful for reference related to identity construction in the cultural studies perspective. The result of this research is aimed to give an academic input in cultural studies field through a construction of a cultural product. Last but not least, this study is also expected to be useful for the readers who are interested in discussing identity construction issues.

