BETWEEN FASHION AND TESETTÜR: MARKETING AND CONSUMING WOMEN’S ISLAMIC DRESS

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, fashionable Islamic dress for women, or tesettür, has become a growing segment of the textile industry in Turkey, yet its meaning and practice remain hotly contested. Through an analysis of the representation of these styles in company catalogs and of the ways in which covered women in Turkey view the styles, this article provides insight into how women’s fashion and the question of tesettür become negotiable elements of everyday practice. Our analysis shows that while there may be no easy reconciliation between the demands for modesty that underlie tesettür and the spectacle of ever changing fashion, women accept this disjunction and knowingly engage in a constant mediation between the two.

INTRODUCTION

What is tesettür? The term comes from the Arabic root s-t-r, meaning covering. It is used in Turkish to signify a set of Islamic practices wherein women cover their heads and bodies and avoid contact with unrelated men. But tesettür has proven to be a slippery signifier in Turkish society. Is it a spiritual concept, an ideal of Islamic womanhood that devout Muslim women may strive toward throughout their lives? Or is it a mode of dress, a set of sartorial signifiers that can shift with the seasons? Since the 1980s, fashionable Islamic dress for women, widely associated with the rise of political Islam and a new Muslim bourgeoisie, has become a growing segment of the textile industry in Turkey. The leading companies in this new tesettür industry present them-

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selves as putting fashion in the service of Islam and thereby counter critics’ accusations that they are “selling Islam.” Aydan Tesettür, one of Turkey’s largest manufacturers and retailers of fashionable Islamic dress for women, claims that the company “has followed a line that has not incorporated tesettür into fashion, but fashion into tesettür.” Similarly, in a 1992 interview in the Islamic women’s magazine, Yeni Bizim Aile, Mustafa Karaduman, CEO of Tekbir, the leading company in the industry, asserted, “We have no intention of using tesettür for the purpose of fashion. Just the opposite, in fact, we intend to use fashion for the agenda of tesettür” (quoted in Kılıçbay and Binark 2002, 504). For Karaduman, tesettür is both an “agenda,” a program of Islamicization, and a product that can be marketed and sold. Indeed, nearly two decades after the first Tekbir fashion show in 1992, the meaning and practice of tesettür remain hotly contested in Turkey.

Our research takes place within the taut space of tension between fashion and women’s Islamic dress, or tesettür. The global growth of “an Islamic consumer sector, which explicitly forges links between religiosity and fashion, encouraging Muslims to be both covered and fashionable, modest and beautiful,” has been the focus of a small but growing literature (Moors and Tarlo 2007, 138; see also Kılıçbay and Binark 2002; Sandıkcı and Ger 2002; 2005; 2007; Balasescu 2003; 2007; Abaza 2007; Akou 2007; Jones 2007; Gökariksel and Secor 2009). This literature has produced a rich analysis of the emergence of Islamic fashion in a variety of contexts, paying special attention to women’s engagements with piety and fashion through their everyday practices of dress. Yet few studies have attempted to work between and across the marketing and consumption of Islamic fashion. In this paper we aim to fill this gap by analyzing both how companies represent and sell the new styles and how women respond to such representations and consume Islamic fashion, making it one part of their complex embodied performances of identity. We trace out how marketing images seek to suture tesettür and fashion at the same time as consumers negotiate them as competing pulls to which they devise contingent solutions in their everyday practices of dress.

In the summer of 2009, we conducted eleven focus groups with women consumers of Islamic dress, salespeople, and industry workers in Istanbul and Konya. We chose these two cities for this portion of our research based on our nationwide survey of the industry, which
revealed Konya to be the second center of the tesettür textile industry after Istanbul.² This paper draws mostly from our focus group research with consumers in Istanbul and Konya and seeks to provide a snapshot of some of the ways covered (kapalı) women in Turkey negotiate the relationship between style and tesettür. In order to throw into relief what our research participants see as the tension between tesettür-as-Islamic-dress and tesettür-as-fashion, we begin with a visual analysis of the recent (2006–08) catalogs of eleven prominent tesettür-producing firms. Using techniques of visual analysis, we show how these images work to represent these clothes as both stylish and appropriate for pious Muslim women. This representation is very much in line with the claims of the most prominent companies quoted above.

Next we turn to our focus group discussions, in which we asked women to respond to various images from company catalogs. Here we find that, for many covered women in Turkey today, much of what companies such as Tekbür call tesettür is simply fashion; for them, tesettür continues to denote an ideal of women’s modest dress as interpreted from the Qur’an. And yet at the same time as women dismiss these images as “not tesettür,” they also accept that there are questions of age, personal preference, and style when making choices about dress. These focus group discussions betray a general understanding that the way women wear tesettür-fashion is influenced by a series of contingencies and therefore that they wear it in different ways. We argue that, when it comes to covered dress in Turkey, what is acceptable, for whom, and under what circumstances is a contingent and shifting determination. Indeed, the styles presented in the catalogs of prominent companies such as Tekbür or SetrMS shimmer on the horizon of what is acceptable, of what may be considered tesettür in Turkish society. Finally, our study of these representations and their reception among their target market³ reveals the fissured and hybrid practices that emerge in the gap between marketing and embodying Muslim women’s dress in Turkey.

THE TESETTÜR-FASHION NEXUS IN TURKEY

The tesettür-fashion nexus in Turkey has emerged over the past thirty years from a particular constellation of economic and political developments. In order to understand the current milieu, it is important to keep in mind that, since its founding in 1923, Turkey has been a consti-
stitutionally secular state with a majority Muslim population. As part of the broad cultural reforms attempted by the secular state, the wearing of headscarves was discouraged in the first decades of the Turkish Republic (Göle 1996). Yet while many Turkish women, especially in urban areas, entered into public arenas with their heads uncovered, throughout the first decades of the Republic the headscarf maintained its casual presence among large sectors of Turkish society. With increasing migration from the rural areas of Anatolia into Turkey’s urban centers in the 1960s and 70s (Karpat 1976; Erder 2001), the headscarf came to be associated with the lower-class status and rural origins of migrants (Öncü 1999; Secor 2002; White 2002; Gökariksel 2007).

In the 1980s, however, the role of the headscarf and Islamic dress in Turkey entered into a new phase of political and cultural contention. Economic restructuring in Turkey spurred by IMF structural adjustment in the 1980s and Turkey’s entrance into a Customs Union with the EU contributed to the rise of a new entrepreneurial class of conservative businessmen with roots outside of Turkey’s urban, secularist elite (Buğra 1998; 2003; Tokatlı 2003; Yavuz 2003; Adas 2006). At the same time, the political restructuring of Turkish society following the 1980 coup d’état led to the repression of leftist politics and the ascendance of Islam as an increasingly prominent political and cultural force. Together, these shifting economic and political sands gave rise to what in Turkey has been called a new Islamic bourgeoisie, an aspiring middle class with tastes and distinctions far removed from the secular, Western-oriented lifestyles of the dominant Turkish elite (Göle 1999; White 1999; 2002; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Saktanber 2002; Göle and Ammann 2006). In this context, a new style of women’s modest dress began to appear in the 1980s among young women in urban areas. Neither fashionable nor an industry at that time, tesettür consisted mainly of boxy ankle-length overcoats and large patterned scarves drawn tightly around the face and draped over the neck and shoulders. The colors were muted, dark or neutral. Many of the coats were sewn at home or by tailors, yet a few early companies began to advertise tesettür styles using simple line-drawn illustrations that left women’s faces undrawn (Kılıçbay and Binark 2002; Sandıkçı and Ger 2007). Worn by young, urban women with interests in attending university, this new mode of dress became associated with the headscarf protests that erupted on Turkish campuses.
beginning in the mid-1980s. Indeed, during this period there was increasing enforcement of a headscarf ban that affected public offices such as courts, government offices, Parliament, military facilities, and public universities (Olson 1985; Arat 1998; Özdalga 1998). Over the course of the following decades, the headscarf has become a high-profile political issue in Turkish society (Secor 2005).

From this early emergence of a distinctly urban and modern style of covering has evolved a significant, diverse, and profitable tesettür-fashion industry. Our survey of tesettür-producing firms in Turkey shows that the industry has exploded since the late 1990s, with 50 percent of surveyed firms having been established between 1996 and 2008. The proliferation of the tesettür-fashion industry has taken place in tandem with both the rise of Islam-oriented political parties in Turkey since 1994, and a broader trend toward the marketing of Islamic products and lifestyles (Henry and Wilson 2004; Fealy and White 2008; Fischer 2008). Today’s tesettür producers market colorful, diverse, and constantly changing styles. In the last decade, Tekbir and its competitors (Aydan, SetrMS, Selam, Armine, and others) have become recognizable brand names with glossy catalogs, advertisements, and even fashion shows that send professional models down the runway wearing not only everyday wear, but also the impossible concoctions of haute couture. With hotel weddings, beach vacations, and country club sports becoming desirable elements of a high-class Islamic lifestyle (Bilici 1999), tesettür-producers manufacture and market covered swimwear, bridal gowns, sportswear, suits, and maternity clothes. The styles, colors, and cuts of this apparel vary greatly, from bold and close-fitting to more conservative looks. Whether and to what extent these styles and their marketing are “Islamic” is a topic of ongoing debate (Aktaş 1991; Şişman 2001; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Eygi 2005). Through an analysis of the representation of these styles in company catalogs, and of the ways in which covered women in Turkey view the styles, the goal of this article is to provide insight into how women’s fashion and the question of tesettür become negotiable elements of everyday practice.

ANALYSIS OF CATALOG IMAGES

Our visual analysis of the recent catalogs of some prominent tesettür-
producing firms surveys the field of images and projected lifestyles that confront consumers of Islamic dress in Turkey. We selected these catalogs because they represent the collections of several of the most prominent brands in the industry (see Table 1). In addition, based on our broader survey, we find that these companies are generally representative of the sector in terms of location, when they were founded, their overall size, and the percentage of their production that they would call tesettür.

Table 1
Basic data on the eleven firms whose catalogs were part of the analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year founded</th>
<th>Location of HQ</th>
<th>Number of branches</th>
<th>Number of employees</th>
<th>Annual prod. in USD millions</th>
<th>Percent of prod. in tesettür</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Armine</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Istanbul</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>3–7</td>
<td>75–90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aydan</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Istanbul</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>&gt; 90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dicle</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Istanbul</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>3–7</td>
<td>51–75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliz</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Konya</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.7–1.0</td>
<td>75–90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hünerli</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Konya</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0.7–1.0</td>
<td>51–75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selam</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Istanbul</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>10–25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SetrMS</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Ankara</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>7–10</td>
<td>51–75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitare</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Ankara</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>0.7–1.0</td>
<td>75–90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Şelale</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Ankara</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>3–7</td>
<td>26–50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tekbir</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Istanbul</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1,450</td>
<td>&gt; 10</td>
<td>&gt; 90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuğba</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Istanbul</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>3–7</td>
<td>51–75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The approach we take to this analysis is what Gillian Rose (2001) has called a “critical visual methodology.” Following Rose, our visual analysis of these catalogs takes place through three modalities: technological, or the visual technology of catalog images; compositional, or the formal strategies of the image; and social, or more broadly, “the range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used” (17). While our analysis proceeds from and through catalog images, we are particularly interested in the social production of these visual representations and the multiplicity of their effects. We regard these catalogs not only as demonstrating the visions of the producers (that is, their ideas about their potential customers’ aspirations and desires),
but also as working to teach viewers to see and to desire in particular ways (Appadurai 1996). In other words, these images are not passive representations of a particular style, but rather active participants in the ongoing struggle over the (re)definition of fashion, femininity, class, and tesettür. In this section, we present an overview of the catalogs with regard to their technological and compositional modalities before turning to the social modalities of the images in the following section.

In terms of their visual technology, many of these images appear in both print and web catalogs. The print catalogs that we collected are of two varieties: the very large, heavy, often oddly shaped ones, and the small, light ones that are clearly designed to be mailed. For the former, metallic print on the cover (SetrMS, Hünerli, and Sitare), extra high gloss paper (Eliz and Sitare), and vibrant colors lend a feeling of opulence to the catalogs themselves. Oversized with non-standard proportions and filled with professional photographs of models, these catalogs seem to announce that no expense was spared in their production. Visually, the images presented are strikingly different from the very simple line drawings of early industry advertisements. On the websites of these companies, catalogs are usually posted under the title “Collections.” Catalog images are displayed one page at a time, often with accompanying (shopping mall–type) music. The images on the website do not differ from those in the catalogs. These are not sites where consumers can order clothes, since internet shopping has yet to become popular in Turkey. Instead, they are sites that profile the company, display the styles, and provide the addresses of retail outlets carrying the brand. Some sites, such as SetrMS and Tügba, are up to date, very stylish, and visually appealing. Many, however, are somewhat or very much out of date, with the most recent collections posted a year to six years ago. It appears that the print catalog is still the leading way for these companies to display images of their products—though print and television advertisements, billboards, and store windows are likely to be more important media for reaching a wide market, since these catalogs are more like coffee table books than circulars. The image of a woman in a white dress, a black and white floral headscarf, dramatic gold jewelry, and an evening bag present on Armine billboards in Istanbul in the summer of 2009, for example, also appeared in the company’s 2009 summer collection catalog.

There are many similarities across these images in terms of their
compositional modalities. With the exception of Tekbir’s and Dicle’s, all of the catalogs display a single woman on each page. She is a vertical shape usually centered in the middle of the page. This verticality is emphasized by the styles portrayed, with the long raincoats and narrow lines usually broken only by a handbag (Figure 1). The overcoated model is like a pillar, a column placed in the foreground of a scene that is often no more than an artificial montage. As in Figure 1, the model is often not actually on location but rather part of a Photoshop assemblage. While many of the catalogs do not show any background environment (just an abstract design behind the image of the woman), others pose the models within luxurious interiors, vacation-like scenes, or European-looking urban environments. The SetrMS catalog goes furthest with this latter motif by placing models in front of collages of foreign skylines and historical sites (see Figure 2). The catalog is laid out like a scrapbook with travel photos and strips of negatives assembled behind images of chic women wearing headscarves, mid-length coats, and pants. The images underline the idealized mobility of the SetrMS consumer, her ability to travel, to experience the goods of the world, and to fit in as a member of the cosmopolitan elite.

An alternative narrative of cosmopolitanism structures the images in Şelale’s catalog for their label İklim. The catalog features models posed in outerwear (ankle-length coats, headscarves, and handbags) within an opulent interior decorated in a style meant to evoke an Ottoman heritage. The walls are decorated with historical maps of the Dardanelles, Greece, and Italy, and miniature portraits of Ottoman figures. Prominently displayed on bookshelves behind the models is a collection of travel and history books with English and Turkish titles such as “Vienna,” “Renaissance,” and “Troia” (Troy). Thus while SetrMS places its models as tourists in Paris, Şelale likewise blurs the boundaries between “Europe” and “Asia,” but by positioning them within a narrative of Ottoman cosmopolitanism. More conspicuously, Tekbir has also drawn on Ottoman motifs in its designs, as illustrated by the ornate detailing and especially the turban-like headgear shown in Figure 3. Note also that the color of this ensemble, a chartreuse tone, was very much in fashion in spring 2007, as was the hint of suggestive tulle, here improbably peeking out beneath the ankle-length skirt.

The models in these catalogs sometimes gaze directly at the camera,
2. Catalog image from SetrMS, Spring–Summer 2008. Courtesy of SetrMS.
but more often they look off to one side or another, perhaps to signal their modesty. Rarely are they seen in any pose other than standing, though some of the women in Aydan’s 2008 catalog sit, lean, and in one case, almost sprawl. The models wear full makeup, though they never have bright red lips or colored polish on their fingernails. In line with popular standards of beauty in Turkey, they are generally light-skinned and often green- or blue-eyed. The colors of the clothes are often bright, though white and gray are also popular. Many catalogs feature dramatic red overcoats and outfits, the significance of which we discuss when we turn to our focus group analysis. The overall effect of these images is typical for a clothing catalog. As in other fashion catalogs, what is on display and being marketed is not just an outfit, but a complex set of aspirations about lifestyle, taste, and beauty.

What is particular to this case is how these tropes intersect with another strong component of these images, and that is their portrayal of Islamic dress. While some catalogs show pictures only of women wearing headscarves (Tekbir, Hünerrli, SetrMS, Aydan, and Armine), others mix images of women with heads covered and uncovered. The Sitare catalog shows women in headscarves from page one to twenty-one, but uses a different, uncovered, light-haired model in the last ten pages. These latter pages also portray more “uncovered”-type styles such as a short-sleeved blouse and a waist-length jacket. While Sitare puts these images in the back of the catalog—almost as though they were the “interior” images, sequestered from the public in the same way as the covered woman’s body might be—Dicle intersperses images of women in headscarves with images of a blue-eyed, long-haired blonde woman modeling floor-length overcoats. This is an odd image strategy because it is generally unlikely that uncovered women in Turkey would wear such dramatically long coats; not only does the length transgress the fashion norms of the moment, but the style is closely associated with tesettür. Perhaps Dicle is attempting to appeal to the broadest possible market by displaying this style on an uncovered woman, but more likely these images work by making covered women feel that the style is universally appealing, that they are able to participate in “fashion” in a way that includes them within a broad consuming class. Tuğba, which also intersperses images of covered and uncovered women in its catalogs, seems more convincingly to be trying to appeal to both groups of consumers.
The styles shown on the uncovered women are shorter, with coats hitting mid-thigh. These juxtapositions seem to say to the covered woman, “You are included within the realm of style and fashion. There is no difference between you and any other woman. You too desire to be beautiful, chic, and individual.”

Finally, there are two exceptional catalogs in the group. The Eliz catalog uses a single dark-haired, dark-eyed model who displays styles on each page with her head uncovered. Interspersed with floor-length coats are shorter coats modeled with bare legs exposed. On the final page, she wears a short jacket that is open over her midriff, revealing a pierced naval. And at the other end of the spectrum, Selam’s catalog reverts to earlier norms of tesettür advertising and refrains from showing any women’s faces throughout. Each page has an image of a woman standing serenely in either a floor-length overcoat or a shorter, tunic-like coat worn over pants. In each case, her head is cut off at the top of the page, though the bottom of the headscarf is visible at the opening of the lapels (see Figure 4). This strategy of not showing women’s faces was common in the early tesettür ads of the 1980s and reflects concerns for women’s modesty and the norms of representation in Islam (see Kılıçbay and Binark 2002).

Of these eleven firms, Selam is the one with the least of its production in specifically tesettür-style clothing. In other words, the choice to produce a markedly conservative catalog does not necessarily reflect a more ideological commitment to tesettür, but rather appears to be a marketing strategy. Indeed, even though Selam goes to the extreme in not showing faces, it features short coats over pants, a combination whose acceptability as tesettür is in question (see focus group discussion below). While other catalogs seem to emphasize the lack of difference between covered and uncovered women, Selam’s strategy is to create a unique and explicitly Islamic look for its catalog. In order to further untangle some of the social modalities of these images, we turn to our focus groups with consumers of Islamic fashion in Istanbul and Konya.

WAYS OF SEEING: FOCUS GROUP RESPONSES TO IMAGES

In May–June 2009, we conducted six focus group interviews with consumers of tesettür clothing. There were eight women in each group and
the interviews lasted from two to two and a half hours. Five of these focus groups were in Istanbul and one was in Konya. The groups in Istanbul were differentiated according to age and socioeconomic status. We organized our interviews with young/middle-aged women (ages 25–35) into two groups according to their socioeconomic status (AB and CD). Similarly, we interviewed two groups of older women (ages 45–60) of AB and CD socioeconomic status. One group in Istanbul consisted of the youngest research participants, spanning the age range 18–25. The consumer group in Konya was mixed in terms of age and socioeconomic status. In addition to open-ended questions about their practices of veiling, fashion, and shopping, we asked women to discuss ten images we had selected from the catalogs and fashion shows of prominent tesettür companies, including Tekbir and Armine. We also included a snapshot of a street scene showing different styles of covering and an image clipped from a newspaper article about a fashion show. We passed around color photocopies of these images two at a time, usually toward the middle of the session.

In all of the groups, women responded to the catalog images by overwhelmingly stating that none could be considered tesettür by their standards. There was general agreement on this point even in the groups with the most disagreement. The discussion of the images then proceeded to evaluate the styles, colors, fabrics, and cuts, as well as their compositional and professional, technical aspects. The participants described in detail and debated which age group, individual style, and lifestyle the particular outfit under discussion could be appropriate and acceptable for. Another layer was added to the discussion when the participants considered whether or not they themselves would wear a particular style. This series of contingencies determined the wearability of these clothes, not strictly as tesettür but as a mediation between the demands of fashion and the demands of covering.

The first image we asked our participants to respond to was a street scene from the Fatih neighborhood of Istanbul photographed in 2004, showing women dressed in different covered styles. In the foreground there is an older woman wearing a long, blue, loose-fitting overcoat and a large headscarf, carrying a plastic bag. This is generally considered tesettür, the kind of clothing that came to be seen in the 1970s and 80s. It is the headscarf-coat combination that tesettür companies developed,
altered, and diversified. In the focus groups it was recognized as tesettür by most, but was quickly dismissed as unwearable by many because it was out of fashion, a style they described as “grandma.” To the left of this older woman in the photo are two young women wearing sporty outfits in that year’s trendy cuts and colors, underneath bold and colorful headscarves. One wears a bright pink and white patterned headscarf that matches a pink tunic and ankle-length white skirt. The other has an orange, red, and black headscarf, a pink top, a short white jacket, a long black skirt, and white slouchy boots. Their styles showcase the 2004 youth fashion.

*Moderator:* Now we have some photographs we’d like to show you. Please take a look at the first one and tell me what you think. We’ll see different tesettür outfits now. Tell me if you like them, and what sort of differences you see between them.

*Nuray:* This is what everyone calls “modern” these days. And then there’s the old style, what our grandmothers [wear].

*Ayşe:* This is a much more colorful and joyful outfit. It has the flair of the new summer season; it’s more modern. And then this one is more in line with the old style, what our grandmothers used to wear.

*Zeynep:* I don’t quite understand what you mean by the “old style.” Is that what covering is? [Covering] is not a style of dress but a style of belief, and it has its boundaries and rules. If we believe those rules, if we signify that belief, we have to act within those boundaries.

*Ayşe:* But everyone considers age-appropriateness.

*Özge:* Well, maybe most people, I mean we all covered because of our faith, obviously. That’s for sure. But even when I wasn’t covered, there were things I would wear and things I wouldn’t wear. You see? I would wear skirts but I wouldn’t wear a miniskirt, you know?

*Zeynep:* Being covered cannot be your style.

*Özge:* We’re talking about clothes, not the headscarf.

*Moderator:* So you’re saying that there cannot be different styles of covering.

*Zeynep:* When I say there can’t be, I mean there could be a style in colors, or maybe in the cut. However, apart from that, farz and Sünnet determine the rules [of Islamic dress]. You have to obey those rules if you’re covering because of your faith.
The identification of “old” in contrast to “more modern” fashionable styles of covering in this discussion was echoed in all the other focus groups. Here “modern,” a loaded concept that is often understood to be implicitly secular in Turkey, is indexed to fashion and its constant demand for being up to date. It signals participation in the ever shifting economic and cultural cycles of fashion. Yet this discussion proceeds to reveal the tension between tesettür and style. Zeynep’s objection to using “style” as a lens to look at and talk about tesettür stands out.

Zeynep began to cover at age 25, two years prior to the focus group. She has a secondary school degree and was not working at the time of the interview. She described herself as having led an “extremely açık” (non-covered) lifestyle before covering. She mixed with a cosmopolitan crowd of different faiths when she worked in a posh area of Istanbul. She went from wearing tiny dresses and shorts to the all brown, large headscarf and ankle-length overcoat combination she wore to the focus group. Her self-introduction to the group emphasized her training as a religious teacher. She was studying Arabic and taking lessons in Qur’anic interpretation. In this discussion, she sets herself apart by injecting a religiously defined notion of tesettür, one bound solely by the Qur’an and Hadith. In so doing, she categorically negates the possibility of tesettür-fashion. Instead, she insists on keeping the two realms separate and distinct. Her insistence on Islamic injunctions as determining tesettür puts forward an ideal based on religious teachings. In this and other focus groups, women accepted this ideal highlighted by Zeynep. However, like Ayşe and Özge above, they also recognized that there were other social, personal, and aesthetic concerns and considerations that shaped their everyday practices of dress.

Ayşe and Özge both have high school degrees and are in their late 20s, married, and housewives. They emphasized “yakıştırmak” (making it fit and look good) in their sartorial choices and commonly considered age, modesty (as Özge’s point about miniskirts illustrates), and fitting into their socio-spatial environments as important elements of their dress. Even Zeynep acknowledged the style element in Islamic dress at the end of the discussion quoted above. While for her, style should be reserved for the color and to some degree for the cut, the majority of the women thought there was more room for fashion in tesettür. On several occasions women went further to assert that tesettür-fashion exists even
though ideally it should not. The proof for this was the dramatic change in what is accepted or worn as tesettür over time. They pointed out that things that would have been considered “günah” (a sin) ten to twenty years ago are worn today and are no longer considered as such by many. In another group of older women of lower socioeconomic status, women described a common sight on city streets: tight pants worn with a headscarf. The debate about this style ended with this comment by Nesrin, a 44-year-old housewife:

Nesrin: This is not covering, this is fashion. If you had said to the covered community twenty years ago, “You’ll wear pants, a shirt, and on top of that, a headscarf,” they would have booed you. But now this is the fashion.

Here, Nesrin underlines the element of fashion in covering that is bound up with time. In the past, pants were widely considered inappropriate for tesettür. Today, it has become commonplace to wear pants in tesettür ensembles. Companies such as Tekbir and SetrMS have long incorporated pants into their collections. But our focus groups show that pants are still controversial for everyday covered wear. The above quote illustrates the view that fashion has made what was unacceptable in the past acceptable today. In these ways, the focus group participants did not necessarily reject the Islamic ideal of tesettür but they did assert that the practice of dress is more complex and contingent. They made clear both the intersections and the distinction between fashion and covering.

Paired with the street photo discussed above was a Tekbir catalog picture (Figure 5). Two women are seen in the square of an exclusive gated community, with pointy high-heeled shoes showing beneath long skirts and coats. The colors are bright. One woman wears a white coat over a white blouse and a long coral-red skirt. The other wears a coat in the same coral shade over a coral, pink, and yellow flowered dress. The women sport matching coral, yellow, and white headscarves. It is an urban and sophisticated scene. In different focus groups women challenged both the fashionableness of these outfits and their appropriateness as tesettür. The objection to these outfits from the perspective of covering was their color. The following discussion from the group of mixed age and socioeconomic status in Konya captures some of these reactions:
Nalan: I might not include the second one completely in tesettür. Someone who’s completely covered wouldn’t wear this red. This is modern covering, tesettür is different. But this is chic.

Filiz: I agree.

Elif: There should be less attention-getting things [in tesettür].

Moderator: What is the difference between covering and tesettür?

İlknur: Drawing attention.

Nalan: The extreme, religiously motivated covering would have a muted palette of colors that doesn’t draw attention. This woman [in the picture] is saying, “I’m covered but this is my görgü [cultural capital], my habit, I will dress stylishly. I’m covered and I’m chic.”

Ideally, a woman who is covered should not draw attention, but the color red clearly attracts the eye. Across the groups, women debated the colors of tesettür and especially the question of wearing red. They argued that in Islam, red is considered haram (banned) for women’s outerwear. Yet Tekbir, which prides itself on directing women to appropriate tesettür styles, is promoting this color as stylish and distinctive (see also Gökarıksel and Secor 2010). Some women viewed such styles and colors as unwearable. For example, in the group of younger women of higher socioeconomic status, Nilgün expressed her discomfort with wearing bright colors on the street. She is 31 years old, has a high school degree, and worked as an accountant until she married, had children, and covered. For her, the appeal of bright colors is a temptation that leads one away from the ideals of modesty embodied in tesettür.

Nilgün: I prefer earth-tone and pastel colors. When I wear these colors on the street, I feel very comfortable. I feel as if I’m not there when I’m at the market. I like red and white [clothes], I find them appealing, but when I walk around [in those colors] I feel uneasy. Are people looking at me? Am I drawing attention? Maybe it’s because I’m not used to it....

For some women, the question of wearing red came down to the delicate distinction between shades: one woman said that a darker red would be acceptable, but not a bright red. Whether one dressed in subdued colors or bright ones seemed to be a defining characteristic of personal style, with many young women (and a fair number of older women) often asserting their preference for lively hues. In these discus-
sions, color became a touchstone for the question of personal preferences and how they mediate religious imperatives:

_Tülin_: Older women probably choose darker hues.

_Moderator_: But she says she used to wear dark colors when she was young as well.

_Merve_: I like lighter colors, [I like] bright colors a lot because my heart still feels like an 18-year-old’s.

_Moderator_: You’re saying then, there’s nothing wrong [with bright colors], women of all ages can wear [them].

_Merve_: No, but personally I feel that way, and I really love colorful clothes. I compete with my daughters in that respect.

_Fazilet_: My aunt is 55 years old and she dresses very flamboyantly. She says, “I like to be this way, I enjoy it.”

_Moderator_: Is your aunt covered?

_Fazilet_: She is covered and she went to hajj. But she says, “I like to dress like this.”

This discussion took place among older women of higher socioeconomic standing. Here, the association of bright colors with youth is both asserted and challenged. While _Tülin_ (a 43-year-old housewife) voices the widely held view that darker, subdued colors are more appropriate for older women, _Fazilet_ (a 44-year-old housewife) brings up the case of her aunt who is covered and has made hajj but challenges this norm. This aunt, because of her age and religious status as a _hacı_, would have been expected to turn away from the world of showy clothes. But here she is shown to have her own preferences and to enact them despite these normative expectations. She has not given up her personal preferences for colorful and eye-catching clothing even after the pilgrimage, and through her sartorial performances asserts her individuality and independence. Her example throws into question the strict associations made between color, age, and faith, while also clarifying existing norms that govern women’s dress practices.

While some women considered the outfits in Figure 5 chic but too showy (as the previous discussion shows), other women considered them boxy and shapeless. Younger women often spoke of Tekbir styles as being lady-ish (i.e. unstylish, for older women). As one woman put it, wearing some of these styles would be “like wearing a tablecloth.” Regarding a
series of Tekbir catalog photos, women were critical of the cut and the detailing of the clothes:

Yelda: I don’t think these clothes complement one another, they don’t fit [the models] properly.
Moderator: Which one?
Yelda: All of them. These denim clothes, for example.
Özlem: The cut is too simple. There’s nothing special about the design. The fabric is simply cut and draped over [the models]. I can take this tablecloth and put it over my head now. That’s what these clothes look like. They definitely don’t have anything distinctive, anything different [in their design].
Elif: If these clothes had a bit more detailing, I might wear them. But I wouldn’t wear all denim like that [jeans under a long denim tunic], I’d wear something different underneath.

In women’s criticisms of catalog photos, the coordination of colors was significant: the combination of scarf, coat, and whatever is worn underneath was an important element of style. Handbags and shoes were also frequently mentioned as items to be carefully coordinated. Women often objected to images in which the palette was too narrow, with pants and coat in the same hue, as Elif does above. These outfits looked like uniforms or picnic clothes to them and lacked the frisson of fashion.

The next image (Figure 6) we shared with the focus groups portrayed a more daring style, called “Lolita” by one participant. It shows a short, girlish dress layered over black pants and a long-sleeved bodysuit. The top half of the dress is a shiny red, black, and white plaid with a plethora of detailing: ruffles, double-breasted buttons, and puffed sleeves. The plain black headscarf is tucked into the ruffled collar. The skirt hits mid-thigh and is shiny, stiff, and pleated. Beneath the black pants, red patent leather shoes peak out. The model pulls her skirt coquettishly to the side as she gazes off into the distance with her mouth slightly open, a teasing smile on her lips. Her environment is ostentatious, with marble molding and wainscoting, a gilded table, and a blue carpet with an arabesque design.

Women responded to this style by suggesting that it was for younger women—in fact, even the groups that we considered “younger” (25–35 years old) said the same. They saw this style as perhaps a teen-
age fashion, and many said that they frequently saw it on the streets. In the Konya group, women also discussed the stylishness of layering a spaghetti-strap dress over long sleeves and pants, even as two in the group were wearing such outfits. Regarding the style shown in Figure 6, women often focused on the question of fashion rather than covering: Is it appealing? Does it come together as a coherent and elegant look to wear pants under a shorter skirt? In the group of younger women of higher socioeconomic status in Istanbul, the immediate reaction to this photo was the following:

_Esin:_ She looks like Lolita.

_Nilgün:_ This looks like what our mothers used to wear when they were young. It was fashionable to wear pants under skirts then. My mother still has photos [of herself] dressed like this.

_Jale:_ So does my mother. She used to wear bell-bottom pants too.

_Nilgün:_ Fashion always seems to go back to the past [to pick up on old trends].

_Esra:_ This is more for younger people, I think.

_Jale:_ I could wear this at home, for instance, when I have guests over, women friends. But I couldn’t go visiting them like this because I don’t wear pants under my overcoat.

_Moderator:_ Could you wear this and go out in the summer?

_Emine:_ Some young women do but I don’t wear bodysuits. It’s too warm in the summer for those layers, you know, a [short-sleeved] dress and a long-sleeved top underneath.

_Moderator (introducing photos of other pants combinations):_ Let me ask you this. If we had held this meeting ten years ago and shown the same pictures, what would the participants have said?

_Jale:_ “Oh my, what, these [are tesettür]? These are sinful, these can’t be [tesettür].”

_Songül:_ They’d say, “We can’t wear those.”

_Ebru:_ But I still think it shouldn’t be this way today. My daughter is covered, for instance, and she wouldn’t dress like that. She might be able to wear a longer version of the jacket.

_Emine:_ There are women who dress like that [in a tunic-pants combination], mostly young people though.

The audacious style featured in the Tekbir catalog was immediately iden-
tified as such and as a reference back to the styles of the 1960s and 70s. This discussion reveals an understanding of fashion’s constant recycling of previous trends and the tesettür industry’s participation in this process. Many women approached this provocative style through the lens of age-appropriateness and deemed it fitting mostly for the very young. Some questioned the aesthetics of layering, which has become widely fashionable in the last few years, especially for covered youth.

In the Konya group, one woman expressed her disdain for such layering by asking why anyone would wear pants underneath a short skirt. Yet in this group there were two young women who were dressed in this style. One of them, Özlem, a 25-year-old university student, confidently drew attention to her own outfit as an example. She was wearing a vibrant green, short, spaghetti-strap summer dress over a white bodysuit, with a green and bright pink flowery headscarf tied in a bow on the side (a style of tying that she claimed to have invented and made trendy at the local university), and matching shimmery green eye shadow. In response, the women in the group agreed that this style looked nice on her, that she was able to pull it off, while the picture in the catalog fell short. Indeed, Özlem is a very tall, thin, and striking woman whose dress appears to draw attention to her beauty. It all came down to making it fit. In many cases, women appreciated the aesthetics of a style while making it clear that they themselves would not wear it, whether because they felt themselves too old, too short, or it was simply not their style.

Yelda: Sometimes you love an outfit on someone but hate it on another person.

İlknur: It’s all about carrying it, making it fit. This outfit doesn’t fit.

Elif: If this skirt were made of a softer gauzy fabric, then pants would look better underneath. When [the skirt over pants] makes such a coarse combination, it looks ugly.

Fülya: Overall this looks indelicate.

Moderator: What do you think about the scarf?

Melike: Looks good, I think, it’s fitting.

Moderator: Does it go with the outfit?

Elif: It’s worn in this style.

Emel (pointing to another colorful tunic–black pants combination): I wouldn’t wear this headscarf with these clothes. I would choose a
color, a green or a blue, to match [the tunic].

Melike: If the tunic is patterned like this, then the scarf should have vibrant colors.

Özlem: In [Figure 6], the job [of creating the image] was really taken seriously, it was done professionally. But this other one was shot just to get a photo.... The scarf is sloppily done.

As seen above, in addition to discussing the aesthetics of the fashions themselves, women also shared observations regarding the technological modality of the images: the quality of the catalog, its production value, and the overall impression of professionalism. The question of presentation was important to them; they did not want to see images that were carelessly put together just to display the clothes. They demanded that all the elements of sleek advertisement be present in the catalog images: professional photography, professional models, tastefully designed scenes, and attention to every detail, such as the pinning of a scarf. The look as a whole and the model’s ability to carry it, to pull it off, were all put into question in the focus group discussions. Just as we observed in our analysis of industry catalogs, it was an entire consumer lifestyle that women considered to be at stake in these photos.

CONCLUSION

Ayşe: Honestly, tesettür has really gone haywire, it’s turned into something else.

Moderator: How did it go haywire?

Ayşe: It did, I swear.

Moderator: How was it originally?

Ayşe: It had to do with faith, covering your head, not revealing the shape of your body. I’ve been covered since the age of 12 and I covered of my own will. But now I feel like even I have to keep up with the changing fashion trends. Because I can’t find what I want.

Özge: “Even I have changed,” you’re saying.

Ayşe: I started to buy a size smaller, and then another size, and finally now my outfit sticks to my body. Fashion designers have caused this.

There is a deep ambivalence in the relationship between tesettür and fashion. For Ayşe, the decision to veil came early and for religious reasons, but even for her the compulsion of fashion has changed how she
interprets covered dress. Ayşe is a 27-year-old woman who introduced herself as having foregone university education because of her decision to wear a headscarf and instead has been taking various classes, including courses in home tailoring. She said she puts this training to use and often makes alterations to personalize purchased clothing items. She came to the focus group dressed in a majestic long grey coat and a striking grey and purple headscarf, an outfit she jokingly introduced to the group as “elegant.” She feels that tesettür has gone haywire, and yet she herself continues to fit into the ever more form-fitting clothes promoted by the tesettür-fashion industry. Despite the piety that underwrites her choice to cover, personal style and fashion are important to her. Thus while she insists that tesettür should be a single piece—that is, a long coat rather than a tunic-pants combination—within these self-imposed parameters she finds room for personal style and interpretation. The coat she wore to the focus group was tailored, with precise detailing, and her comments throughout the group discussion revealed her fashion consciousness.

Ayşe’s story underlines women’s recognition that fashion is transforming the ways in which tesettür is worn. Thus while some tesettür-producing companies (such as Tekbir and Aydan) claim to be putting fashion in the service of an Islamic ideal of covering, in fact the fashion industry is actively shifting the frontiers and diversifying the realm of tesettür. As the catalog images we have discussed show, tesettür-fashion companies are marketing a cosmopolitan lifestyle that embraces covered women within the pleasures of consumption, personal style, and beauty. They promote tesettür-fashion as seamlessly combining piety and fashion. Yet our focus group participants challenge this fundamental premise of Islamic fashion marketing. In their view the relationship between tesettür and fashion is fraught with tensions. On the one hand, they see a disjuncture between the Islamic ideal of tesettür and the images these companies put forward. On the other hand, they recognize the role of style, fashion, and personal preference in their own sartorial practices. While there may be no easy reconciliation between the demands for modesty that underlie tesettür and the spectacle of ever-changing fashion, women do not simply reject tesettür-fashion. They accept the disjuncture between tesettür and fashion and knowingly engage in a constant mediation between the two. This mediation becomes central
to their sense of self and their embodied performances of identity. Their complex engagements with piety and fashion in the context of their personal preferences, social environments, class, and age demonstrate that it cannot be assumed, even for the devout, that Islamic injunctions regarding modesty operate in a tranhistorical, decontextualized way to determine Muslim women’s dress. While the women in our focus groups held up this ideal, they also talked about accommodating other aesthetic considerations and personal desires in their lived practices of dress. Neither eyes-to-heaven ascetics nor the vacant-eyed, coquettish Lolitas of the catalogs, these women actively stake out a middle ground in a long continuum of choices between fashion and tesettür.

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NOTES

2. In 2008, we conducted a survey of 174 tesettür-producing companies in Turkey. Participating firms included both retail and wholesale operations. We estimate this to be 80–90 percent of firms with a significant presence in the tesettür market operating in Turkey today. Half of the firms surveyed considered tesettür clothing to comprise over 90 percent of their production; 75 percent of the firms reported over 50 percent of their production to be tesettür clothing.
3. Our survey research shows that women between the ages of 19 and 40 are the prime target market for the tesettür-producing firms, with a substantial 80 percent of firms also considering women between the ages of 41 and 60 to be an important market. We conducted focus groups with consumers between the ages of 18 and 50. These groups of eight women each were organized by age and socio-economic status. Participants did not previously know each other. The discussions were conducted in Turkish, and the excerpts quoted here were translated by the authors.
4. See Gökariksel and Secor 2010 for a more detailed analysis of survey results.
5. In the 1994 municipal elections, an explicitly Islamic political party (Re-
fah Partisi or Welfare Party) surprised the pundits by coming to power not only in many rural municipalities but in Turkey’s major urban centers of Ankara and Istanbul. Since then, Islam-oriented political parties have taken increasingly large proportions of the vote in both municipal and national elections. Turkey’s current ruling Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP, Justice and Development Party) emerged from the more moderate branch of the Islamist parties of the 1990s. It does not call itself an Islamist political party but is generally pro-Islam in orientation.

6. One reason for not making current styles available online may be the concern about other companies replicating the designs as much cheaper knock-offs. This worry was mentioned in focus group discussions with sales assistants as well as in interviews with company representatives.

7. We could not obtain the company’s permission to print this image.

8. Many of our research participants viewed themselves as “middle-aged” and referred to those in their teens or early twenties and single as “young.”

9. Farz (fardh) are the obligatory duties specified in the Qur’an, while Sünnet (Sunna) are based on the Prophet Muhammad’s words, actions, and practices.

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