

# **The World of Modest Fashion**

A qualitative study on the perceptions of the representation of modest fashion in mainstream fashion campaigns and the media.



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### **ABSTRACT**

*Modest fashion is mostly concealing rather than accentuating the shape of the body, and refers to individuals (specifically women) who dress in a manner that satisfies their stylistic necessities for personal and/or religious preference. In addition, there are many feminist responses to modesty promoting it as an empowering style. While from an outsider's perspective modest women may be unexplored consumers, the growing number of women who prefer to dress more covered resulted in greater recognition of the modest fashion sector, becoming one of the largest markets in the global fashion industry. This popularity has not gone unnoticed by the mainstream fashion industry, and many international mainstream fashion brands also jumped on the bandwagon by launching modest fashion campaigns – showing that the mainstream fashion industry has entered the world of modest fashion, whilst simultaneously modest fashion has stepped into the world of mainstream fashion. Since modest fashion encompasses many elements and is still seen by many as a paradoxical phenomenon (e.g. connecting it to patriarchy and oppression of Muslim women), this study aimed to shed light on the perceptions of the modest fashion market, specifically in mainstream fashion campaigns and the media, to dispel the paradoxical interpretations. The inquiry was based on fashion and personal choices rather than solely religious choices for dressing modestly, and therefore the feminist consumerism strategy (Taylor et al., 2016) was used as a theoretical lens in this study – to discover whether mainstream modest fashion campaigns are seen as compatible with modest fashion supporter's vision of modest fashion. The study was guided by the research question: How do modest fashion supporters perceive the representation of modest fashion in mainstream fashion campaigns and the media? A thematic analysis of twelve in-depth interviews with modest fashion supporters resulted in fourteen main themes that were divided into four main categories. The results conclude that both the mainstream and digital media are indispensable to the modest fashion sector and that the modest fashion supporters, albeit remaining critical, generally have a positive stance towards modest fashion campaigns by mainstream fashion brands. Nevertheless, both the mainstream media and fashion industry generally ignore the true essence of what modest fashion stands for and a need for more understanding is required. Furthermore, this research showed that the themes of sustainability and diversity/inclusivity in fashion are closely related to the industry and fit in with the conscious mindset behind modest fashion.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Modest Fashion, Mainstream Fashion Industry, Media, Fashion campaigns, Feminism, Religion, Muslim Women*

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## **Preface/Acknowledgements**

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## 1. Introduction

In the summer of 2014, New York fashion label DKNY attracted considerable media attention when it announced a Ramadan-specific clothing collection, including pieces suitable for modest dressers (Shah, 2014). It was the first major Western brand to do this, and eventually many more international mainstream fashion brands (e.g. H&M, Zara, Uniqlo and Tommy Hilfiger) also jumped on the bandwagon, leading to modest fashion taking over as a market term for the fashion industry (Lewis, 2019). As its name suggests, modest fashion is mostly concealing rather than accentuating the shape of the body, and refers to individuals who dress in a manner that satisfies their spiritual and stylistic necessities for personal and/or religious preference (Lewis & Moors, 2013). The increasing number of women who dress in a more body-covering manner has resulted in a rise of awareness around the modest fashion sector and the growth of that consumer category as a shopping power (Lewis & Tarlo, 2011; Khatun Dewan, 2019). Accordingly, the modest fashion sector has become one of the largest markets in the global fashion industry (Radwan et al., 2019), with a worth of 283 billion US dollars in 2018 – a number that is expected to billow out to 402 billion US dollars by 2024 (“Measuring for size”, 2019). Clearly, these numbers show that “modest” clothing – clothing that used to be viewed primarily as a religious uniform rather than fashion – has now become part of a trendy global mainstream fashion style and creates implications for the public understanding of modest dressing (Khatun Dewan, 2019).

### 1.1 Modest dressing

The interpretation of modesty and its corresponding dress code is subjective, and often depends on culture, generation, ethnicity and class (Lodi, 2020). Yet modest dressing is still mostly associated with religious commitment by one of the three Abrahamic faiths (i.e. Christianity, Judaism and Islam) (Lewis & Tarlo, 2011). In today’s fashion world, modest fashion refers to clothing that generally has longer sleeves (covering the shoulders and sometimes elbows and wrists), a looser fit, higher necklines, covering knees/ankles, opaque fabrics and includes an optional element of covering the hair – which depends on the personal motivations to dress modestly (Lodi, 2020). Modest clothing is, however, not merely allocated to the religious: it is also embraced by lots of women without religious affiliations (Lewis & Moors, 2013; Lewis 2019; Lodi, 2020). For them, it stems from more social related reasons such as political/social statements, rejecting the male gaze or just because they feel more comfortable in it (Bucar, 2018; Khatun Dewan, 2019). That said, the resonating message at the core of the modest fashion movement is uniform: deciding to cover oneself is a matter of personal choice and ownership of one’s body (Lodi, 2020). Over the past decades, religious fashion entrepreneurs began to fill the gaps they observed in the fashion market by creating modest fashion labels (Gander, 2017). Subsequently, the market for modest clothing expanded greatly, facilitating access to and interest in modest fashion (Lewis & Tarlo, 2011). The term “modest” is usually used by individuals who associate this type of dressing with religion. Yet at some point in their lives, modest clothing is worn by everyone (i.e. winter

clothing, office dress-codes, clothing for occasions such as funerals), which is why the term “modest” has been introduced in the fashion world as a more encompassing term not only aimed at religious, but also other body-conscious individuals (Noronha, 2020).

## **1.2 The controversies of modesty and fashion**

Despite the fact that trends are the economic engine of the fashion industry, modesty was from the beginning far more than merely a fashion trend since it reflects ownership of one’s identity and inner ideals through garment (Lodi, 2020). Although the study of religion and dress cultures is not new, Lewis and Moors (2013) state that there is still hesitation in placing the concepts “modest” and “fashion” together as it raises questions, criticism, comments and even disbelief. To clarify, since modest fashion – predominantly – concerns clothing worn for faith-based purposes, it is presumed that “fashionable” clothing goes against religious ideas of modesty and therefore some argue that it is the opposite of fashion and cannot be connected to the rapid fluctuations of global trends that represent modernity (Lewis, 2015). In addition, visual signs of cultural attributes – including religious symbols worn in public – remain a long-standing controversy in various areas in the world. Some, for instance, adopt a more anti-feminist stance and speak of the “Islamification” of fashion – claiming that modest clothing and covering oneself for religious reasons is a symbol of women’s oppression rather than freedom of choice in self-expression (Hahner & Varda, 2012; Ajala, 2017; Bucar, 2018). A recent example reflecting this controversy is the banning of the headscarf for minors and adults accompanying school trips as part of France’s “anti-separatism” law (“Law Against Islam”, 2021). The proposed law affects *all* religious symbols, though some suggest it targets only the Muslim population. As a result, the amendment sparked a viral online protest across French borders under the hashtag #HandsOffMyHijab [#PasToucheAMonHijab] (“Law against Islam”, 2021). As Salim (2013) notes: “regardless of how overcharged the sign of hijab is for Europe, the hijab, as many writers have made clear, is still just a piece of cloth that only bears meaning when put into a social context” (p. 211). Then again, that piece of cloth is connected to discrimination that possibly originates from the idea that religion and fashion have long been considered as incompatible (Rosenberg, 2019). Nonetheless, as visible minorities such as underage Muslim girls are challenged by European political developments, it becomes clear that clothing really matters (Rosenberg, 2019) and it is therefore vital to examine why the concepts “modest” and “fashion” are essential to connect. In addition, some mainstream fashion brands use modest fashion as another marketing gimmick for commercial purposes to drive sales and advertise with diversity (Lodi, 2020). This was a reason for hijab-wearing supermodel Halima Aden to stop modeling for the mainstream fashion industry, since her identity was not respected by brands as she had to compromise her own modesty and continued to feel treated as a minority while being recruited by Western brands for their campaigns (Janmohamed, 2021; Lodi, 2021). These conceptions show that although the modest fashion market is one of the largest in the fashion world, it is still loaded with controversy, misunderstanding and critical voices. This thesis therefore aims to provide a better understanding of the

modest fashion market and shed light on the perceptions of the implementation of modest fashion by the mainstream fashion industry.

### **1.3 Modest fashion, the internet and digital media**

Aside from the controversies, it is also highly important to highlight the positive side of modest fashion, as many stakeholders in the modest fashion sector – be they consumers, entrepreneurs or fashion advocates, see the increasing recognition of modest fashion as a celebration (Lewis & Moors, 2013). Moreover, by rejecting the negative associations, modest wearers – especially Muslim women – will gain more agency over their self-expressions and personal choices (Evolvi, 2019). After all, this is what the modest fashion movement is all about, and there are many feminist responses to modesty promoting it as an empowering style (Hahner & Varda, 2012). The internet has fueled the rapid development of the modest fashion sector and played a pivotal role in the growth of this specific fashion market (Lewis & Tarlo, 2011). Both the internet and digital media have proved essential in finding fashionable solutions to modest guidelines for both the younger digital generation and older women. Moreover, e-commerce has encouraged modest shopping for an audience beyond the boundaries of religion, and virtual platforms such as blogs and social media have facilitated the dialogue about modesty and fashion (Lewis & Tarlo, 2011). In addition, the employment of social media influencers is a common strategy to incorporate modesty into fashion marketing initiatives and product ranges of brands (Lodi, 2020). These transnational modest fashion influencers use the virtual sphere of social media to represent modest fashion and to teach their followers how to compose fashionable modest looks (Ajala, 2017). Moreover, influencers have played a major role in the visibility of modest fashion in the mainstream fashion and media industry (Lodi, 2020) and showed that women of different backgrounds, shapes, colors and religions can be just as stylish as “regular” models usually depicted in advertisements, encouraging diversity to become a mainstay in the fashion industry (Almassi, 2019).

### **1.4 Social and scientific relevance**

As has become clear from the previous sections, today, fashion remains central to the prominent understanding of popular culture, and defines modern life like no other visual medium (Breward, 2003). In addition, the internet and digital media play an essential role in assisting consumers to keep abreast of the latest updates in fashion. Social media in particular proves to be powerful in facilitating interest in various fashion elements, which in turn have a huge effect on consumer behavior in the fashion industry (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Moreover, fashion continues to receive unprecedented attention in the media, and the international reactions the modest fashion sector receives every time it is addressed shows how eager this fashion sector wants to be catered and spoken to (Almassi, 2019). This media attention for modest fashion also brings diversity in the fashion market more to the fore, especially Muslim women can feel more included as they are still often marginalized in Western countries (Evolvi, 2019).

As the modest fashion sector has become one of the largest markets in the global fashion industry (Radwan et al., 2019) and the aforementioned numbers indicate that it continues to grow, it is vital that academic research on this subject remains current. As a result of the rapid growth of the sector, several studies regarding modest fashion and its cultural and societal implications have already been conducted (e.g. Tarlo, 2011; Lewis & Moors, 2013; Lewis, 2014; Tarlo, 2016) and mostly from the Islamic viewpoint (e.g. Tarlo, 2010; Ajala, 2017; Bucar, 2018; Radwan, 2019; Lewis, 2019). However, research on the modest fashion industry from a media and business perspective is scarce. It is very important to explore this connection, specifically by discovering the perceptions around it, as modest fashion is still received by many as a “paradox” whilst it is performed by women all over the world and should be taken very seriously according to Lewis (2013). Moreover, this thesis is innovative in that it starts the inquiry based on fashion and personal choices rather than solely religious choices for dressing modestly which is evident in previous scholarship. Further, Lövheim (2013) notes that there is still a lack of research analyzing the interplay between media, religion and contemporary culture from a gender perspective. Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the expansion of scientific knowledge in these fields – as well as the fashion business domain – by taking a feminist approach, which will be further explored in the theoretical framework by presenting feminist theories. Modest fashion is an interesting topic to study from a feminist perspective, as it involves a debate around both a movement that shows that covering the body can be seen as empowering and ownership of a woman’s body – as well as a symptom of religious oppression and patriarchy (Hahner & Varda, 2012; Rosenberg, 2019). This study, therefore, uses the feminist consumerism strategy – “a corporate strategy that employs feminist themes of empowerment to market products to women” (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 124) – as a theoretical lens in this study to discover whether the representation of modest fashion by mainstream fashion brands and the media is seen as compatible with modest fashion supporter’s perceptions on modest fashion.

In spite of the fact that this research is not necessarily aimed for the commercial market, the findings may be useful for marketers or entrepreneurs in modest fashion who seek to expand their position in the modest fashion market. With many countries on lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic, modest fashion fitted in with the global trend of a sharp decline in clothing sales, which had an overall negative impact on the supply chains and the sector’s revenues (Janmohamed, 2020; Elverina & Furinto, 2021). Therefore, greater understanding of the modest fashion market is needed, as it can guide brands that sell or design modest fashion to remain relevant and attract consumer recognition and loyalty (Zainudin et al., 2019).

### **1.5 The research focus**

Taking into account all the above aspects, the aim of this research is to discover perceptions, experiences and attitudes towards the modest fashion market – especially modest fashion implemented by mainstream fashion brands, as these brands still generate the most comments in the industry. This is explored through qualitative in-depth interviews with supporters of the modest fashion sector. The term

“modest fashion supporters” was assigned to the participants based on the sampling criteria and after the interviews were conducted, as they are individuals who approve and encourage the modest fashion industry by wearing/consuming modest fashion themselves and being involved in modest fashion on a daily basis. For that reason, they are qualified to judge these campaigns and it is relevant to study their perceptions. In addition, some of the interviewed modest fashion supporters are professionally involved in the sector and can therefore be regarded as experts in modest fashion. The study is guided by the research question:

*How do modest fashion supporters perceive the representation of modest fashion in mainstream fashion campaigns and the media?*

During the interviews, modest fashion campaigns of Zara, H&M and Uniqlo have been discussed, alongside other questions related to the modest fashion sector. In much current academic literature on modest fashion, scholars mention the modest fashion campaigns of mainstream fashion brands but none have studied their perceptions. This, however, is of great importance because advertising is a reflection of society (Sheehan, 2013) and studying perceptions of these campaigns yields more valuable insights into the thinking behind and the interpretation of these campaigns – and whether these campaigns align with what the modest fashion sector stands for.

The following chapter serves as a theoretical framework and will dive deeper into previous research and academic literature related to the research topic. Subsequently, chapter three will clarify the qualitative method used for this study, after which chapter four critically discusses and interprets the findings that have been derived from the in-depth interviews with modest fashion supporters – revealing that despite a general positive attitude about the implementation of modest fashion by the mainstream fashion industry, they remain critical about its representation and lack of sufficient knowledge of the real modest customer. To close up, the fifth and final chapter provides a conclusion that will answer the research question, reflects on the research process and implications of the study, and addresses suggestions for further research on this topic.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, previous research and academic literature related to the research topic and associated concepts will be thoroughly outlined and discussed. This theoretical discussion presents a framework for this study, and will highlight essential topics that are related to the modest fashion sector, which integrates the aspects of modesty within international mainstream fashion styles and focuses on the different reasons and ways in which modest self-presentation is carried out by women. As stated in chapter one, by intersecting a feminist theory, this research ties into the concept of modest fashion from a broader perspective, i.e. from a gendered approach rather than just a religious perspective – which is done by presenting the feminist consumerism strategy (Taylor et al., 2016). The following paragraphs provide more clarity on the evolution of modest fashion; modesty from a religious perspective; the controversies; feminist interpretation of modest fashion; the modest fashion market and lastly the role of the Internet, (digital) media and modest fashion campaigns.

### 2.1 The evolution of modest fashion

In previous literature, the history of clothing encompasses every element of human activity and fashion in particular has been positioned as an essential element to express identity, aesthetic taste and political/social beliefs (Beward, 2003; Snodgrass, 2015). Before diving into the evolution of modest fashion, it is important to distinguish the various terms that apply to garmenting. As Ross (2008) explains, “clothing” refers to items of apparel made from some type of textile, being it cotton, leather, linen and so forth. Second, “dress” stands for the total look – including accessories, cosmetics, hair styling or tattooing. Then there is “costume”, that is worn to express a particular identity and according to the dictionary of fashion history the concept of “fashion” stems from the French *façon* and denotes: “the process of making something, creating a particular shape or style – amongst various applications and meanings it became increasingly associated with clothing” (Cumming et al., 2017, p. 79). In this thesis, “modesty” is usually associated with the concept “fashion”, as this research is focused on the recent modest fashion market in the fashion industry which distinguishes “modest” fashion as a separate style in respect to “regular” fashion. However, “modest dressing” and “modest clothing” are also used to describe the concept when talking specifically about female body-covering clothing.

While modesty as a “trend” in the mainstream fashion industry is a fashion development of recent years, modest dressing is not something new and can be observed in many different time periods in history and throughout various cultures. In her book, Snodgrass (2015) explores the diverse and vivid history of human garment from various perspectives. From prehistoric times to the era of globalization, the long history of covering the body is clearly reflected in former traditional customs and veiling. For example, for Germanic tribes or ancient Greek brides, the blanket – a shapeless garment – has served as a sign of modesty; the female kirtle from the late Middle Ages into the Baroque period represented a

modest style; in the sixteenth century, the Safavid Empire in Persia pressured urban women to cover their faces; and in the nineteenth century a veil was adopted in Victorian homes and public parks to detach Parisian women from public life (Snodgrass, 2015). Taking a leap to a more recent era, the twentieth-century pioneering designer Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel – who famously quoted: “Modesty, what elegance” – advocated a new way of dressing based on modesty, adaptability and simplicity, and adjusted the feminine silhouette by liberating women from corsets and adding loser menswear features to her designs and fabrics (Samaha & Ying Hyde, 2021).

Coco Chanel’s motives for a more modest silhouette have slumbered through to contemporary fashion, in which both a religious and a non-religious interpretation of modest fashion coexist (Lodi, 2020). Dressing modestly is therefore different for every woman and the meaning can change over the course of their lives (Lewis, 2013). As mentioned in the first chapter, the modest fashion industry has experienced exponential growth over the past two decades, starting as a niche market with small fashion labels mainly led by faith, followed by high fashion catwalks, modest fashion collections by international mainstream fashion brands and eventually becoming a popular retail norm (Lodi, 2020). Modest fashion thus became a separate category in the fashion industry, catering to the group of women who desire to dress modestly in a fashionable manner, and no longer want to carry out modesty by wearing self-made or “ethnic” clothing (Lewis & Tarlo, 2011). Yet as this separate fashion category is increasingly being adopted into mainstream fashion, it is questionable whether modest fashion should still be regarded as separate, as every woman dresses modestly at some point in their lives. Nevertheless, personal beliefs such as religion play an essential role in the reasons why women dress modestly, therefore the following section provides insights into the religious aspect of modest fashion.

## **2.2 Modesty within holy texts**

As discussed above, women have different reasons to dress modestly but historically, modest dressing is oftentimes associated with religious commitment (Fry, 2017). In addition to the above-mentioned examples of modest dressing through ages, modest clothing is also an essential symbol of religious identification for many religious groups. A large number of existing studies in the broader literature of the history of clothing have examined the relationship between religion and dress cultures (e.g. Perrot, 1994; Ross, 2008; Snodgrass, 2015; Arthur, 2020). For example, Arthur (2020) talks about the “sacred” and “secular” clothing categories for religiously engaged clothing. She argues that what is considered sacred clothing has significant cultural implications regarding gendered power. To clarify, in patriarchal religions, men are given the responsibility of ensuring the enforcement of religious precepts, and some garments are primarily associated with the sacred through prescribing and enforcing a dress code. An example of the relationship between clothing and gendered power is the Taliban regulation that women in Afghanistan must wear the burqa. At the same time, everyday modest dress for certain ethno-religious subcultures, such as Hasidic Jews and the Anabaptist groups, is also considered sacred where the sacred dress is deliberately used to visually separate these religious groups

from the larger dominant culture (Arthur, 2020). Here too, the covered-dress code is often imposed on female members of the community by men – showing that these patriarchal religious societies also use dress codes to retain an imbalance of gendered power (Arthur, 2020). Ali et al. (2008) explain that while religion is often negatively linked to patriarchy and the oppression of women’s rights, insufficient attention is paid to the positive aspects of religion in women’s lives. Women embrace strong religious values with empowerment derived from their faith, which demonstrates the role feminism can play in the lives of religious women (Ali et al., 2008) and reflects women’s agency in wearing modest clothes for religious reasons (specifically veiling) being not just a visible statement of inner devotion, but an element in the creation and maintenance of the pious self (Mahmood, 2011).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, modest fashion today is particularly – but not exclusively – popular among women who adopt one of the three Abrahamic religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism (Lewis & Tarlo, 2011; Lewis & Moors, 2013). For instance, Muslim women regularly wear figure-concealing, loose-fitting clothing in the public sphere including variations of the hijab (Shirazi, 2020); Orthodox Jews follow the laws of *tsniut* (Hebrew’s for “modesty”) according to which a woman’s body should be covered (Bloch, 2018); and long dresses or skirts are required to be worn by women in traditional Christian communities (Hansen, 2004). The study by Tarlo and Lewis (2011) had found both divergence and convergence in the views on modest clothing that the three before-mentioned faiths prefer and require. Despite the difference in the fundamentals, there are striking similarities, in that they all emphasize feminine modesty to protect women’s chastity and they have a shared concern about which body parts can be revealed in which spaces and to which people (Tarlo & Lewis, 2011; Lodi, 2020). On the other hand there is no accord between religions on modesty policy and there is a continuous debate within each religion on the expression of modesty (Lewis & Moors, 2013). Tarlo (2013) argues that anthropologists also recognized parallels in the meaning of dress codes between faith groups, but that they usually studied their dress performance separately rather than from a cross-religious context to identify possible mutual understanding and identification for members of different religions. Therefore, in her research, she focused on how the Internet has created new ways to frame debates about modesty between Muslim and Orthodox Jewish women, two groups whose distinctively modest dress is commonly seen to preserve the insularity of the community. She found that in discussion groups on the Internet, women of different religions promote quite intimate communication – often faced with similar dilemmas about how to find clothes for fashionable modesty and how to define the limits of modesty within a prevailing etiquette. Taking into account these interfaith connections to modest fashion, it was important to take a broader view on the modest fashion sector in this study.

In addition to the Internet discussion groups on interfaith modesty, from the perceived gap in the market for trendy modest clothing, a new online modest fashion market emerged in which religious women dominated the field as entrepreneurs, designers and opinion-formers (Lewis, 2013). Lewis (2013) states that these modest fashion entrepreneurs perceived “consumer culture as one of the means by which religious identities can be achieved and expressed than to see consumption and religion as

oppositional” (p. 43). Initial modest fashion market entrants soon found out they had a secular and cross-belief customer base (Lewis, 2019). Other large market segments include brands coming from Christian and Jewish designers and creative entrepreneurs, followed by more recent activities starting to develop in other world religions. Lewis (2019) furthermore states that for consumers, designers and digital content creators, “an ethics of inclusivity – though difficult to maintain – characterizes what some see as a cross-faith modest fashion movement” (p. 248), which focuses on a belief to respect individual women’s choices about whether, when and how the body should be covered and reflects a feminist standpoint focusing on stylistic choices from a liberated subject (Hahner & Varda, 2012).

### **2.2.1 Muslim modesty and its ambiguity**

Of all religions, Muslim modest fashion is the most visible and largest of today’s modest fashion market (Lewis, 2019), as modest fashion consumers are often – but not always – part of the global Islamic economy, which consists of approximately 1,8 billion Muslims (Janmohamed, 2020). Therefore, it is important to highlight previous academic scholarship that focuses on modest fashion from an Islamic perspective. With regard to fashion and clothing, both the Quran and the Hadith emphasize on the preservation of modesty. In spite of the different interpretations of modesty among Muslims around the world, the preservation of modesty can be observed in many common elements of Muslim dress (DinarStandard, 2020). Nevertheless, there is no single understanding of modesty that all Muslims adhere to. For instance, while many Muslims consider the veil or headscarf compulsory for a Muslim woman to appear in public, others argue that these standards are intended for specific places/times or that it is not a binding requirement at all (Lodi, 2020). While modest fashion is most popular among the Middle Eastern countries, it is not limited to niche, Middle Eastern brands (Lodi, 2020). According to Janmohamed (2016), this is partly due to growing number of Muslim millennials and entrepreneurs – also referred to as Generation M – that are scattered all over the world and are proud of their faith, believing that modern living and faithfulness are not opposites, but go hand in hand. An example includes the Muslim modest fashion influencers, who are sometimes called “hijabistas” (a conjunction of “hijab” and “fashionista”), referring to the more “mainstream fashion-seeking Muslima’s” (Williams & Kamaludeen, 2017, p. 7). Lewis (2010; 2011; 2013; 2014; 2019) conducted extensive research into the contemporary development of Muslim modest fashion. Her study from 2010 found that before modesty got trendy, in early English-language-Muslim lifestyle magazines in North America and the United Kingdom, fashion and the representation of the female body evoke great controversies among the press and readership. Fashion houses did not see the predominantly Muslim readers as target groups for their fashion, and doubted to loan the magazines products for fashion shoots. Therefore some editors and fashion stylists had to hide that their publications were aimed for Muslims, in order to obtain the modest clothing for their publications (Lewis, 2010). This showed that inclusion in fashion media remains a delicate concern and raises questions about the relationship between fashion, modesty, and marketability in the constant development of religion-based consumer cultures (Lewis, 2010).

It thus appears that Muslim women in non-Muslim countries are still often marginalized and criticized, which intersects with the view that Islamic faith is different and threatening to the Western culture (Evolvi, 2018). While the headscarf has become increasingly acceptable in Western fashion, with several mainstream brands selling scarves openly made for use as hijabs, the significance of the hijab appears to be harder to discuss than other elements related to dress because of its religious nature (Wilson, 2013; Khatun Dewan, 2021). For example, French mainstream sports retailer Decathlon withdrew its plan to launch sports hijabs on the market in 2019 after a public outcry and political threats to boycott the brand (Chrisafis, 2019). Two years later, there is still controversy about this in France, as evidenced by the example of the hijab ban on minors discussed in the previous chapter. Scott (2009) and Aslan (2011) argue that Western countries such as France are provoked by the veil because covering the head and body with conservative cloaks is seen as extreme and contrary to their perception of freedom and liberal lifestyle, which is rooted in the historically European principles of the Enlightenment that promoted individualism over tradition. They hold the erroneous misogynistic belief that no Muslim woman would voluntarily choose to wear the veil and that modest dressing is often seen as an act of patriarchal submission (Aslan, 2011). For many Muslims, however, modesty is a decision to reclaim their bodies, positioning modesty as a feminist action (Hahner & Varda, 2012). Wilson (2013) explains that some call themselves “Muslim feminists”, who believe that dressing modestly restores a woman’s dignity and allows women to be related and viewed as a person rather than a sexualized body.

Wilson (2013) also discusses some of the obstacles that complicate the discussion of religious – especially Muslim – modest clothing. She explains that the competing views on the hijab or veil also summarize arguments on a number of other issues, such as the social position of religion, especially in Western countries; the role of freedoms such as freedom of identity expression; the relationships (sexual and familial) and the space occupation of women and men; and the position of immigrant groups in Western societies. The latter is consistent with Western societies’ associations with immigrant communities, although many are actually born in the “host country” (Wilson, 2013). Another example that Lodi (2020) cites is that modesty is advocated to ensure privacy between Muslim women and men. However, the phenomenon of the aforementioned modest fashion influencers is sparking a debate in the sense that one may question the privacy when sharing selfies with billions of strangers on Instagram (albeit conservatively dressed). Khatun Dewan (2019) explains that this blurring of boundaries is also reflected in the wearing of the headscarf: by being a recognizable sign of (religious) modesty, but also by being an occasional fashion accessory. She argues that it is difficult to tell the difference between the headscarves consistently worn for religious purposes and the headscarves worn for fashion style purposes on e.g. magazine covers. In addition, a large proportion of predominantly millennial Muslim women today decide to take off their hijabs or wear them in a trendy, non-traditional way, such as a scarf tied like a trendy turban or a beanie-like hat (Lodi, 2020). Nevertheless, the conversation around the hijab has somewhat shifted due to the growing worldwide popularity of the modest fashion sector, which has united fashion fans – religious and non-religious alike (Khatun Dewan, 2021). In addition,

Western brands continue to try to respond to the lucrative market of Muslim customers and attempt to hire hijab-wearing models such as Halima Aden for their fashion campaigns and catwalks. Yet the space fashion has thus far created for the hijab remains one in its own image: limited and reductive (Khatun Dewan, 2021).

### **2.3 Feminist interpretation of modest fashion**

Besides the large share of religious enthusiasts in modest fashion, celebrities have also played a major role in the popularization of modest fashion. For instance, the fashion empire of the Olsen twins has gained much attention on the red carpet – showing long and loose garments and designs that cover from foot to neck (Lodi, 2020). Lodi (2020) states that some fashion journalists claim that this is a direct result of the #MeToo movement, which gained much attention in 2017 after American film producer Harvey Weinstein was accused of sexual abuse and rape. The discussion about the viral hashtag that spread through social media has been wide and expansive. It was not just about Hollywood or workplace harassment, but sexual assault on the whole, and originated more than a decade ago as part of a grassroots movement led by African-American activist Tarana Burke for young women of color who survived sexual violence (Jaffe, 2018). It is important to note that the #MeToo movement was in part able to gain such widespread appeal at this particular point in history, as feminism had already been embraced by powerful famous women such as Hollywood star Emma Watson, American business executive Sheryl Sandberg, and music celebrity Beyoncé (Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg, 2020). In short, the #MeToo movement is a rejection of patriarchal power – and the beginning of a representation of what a society would look like without that power (Jaffe, 2018). As a result, the #MeToo era has seen women focus more on female empowerment and dress less for the masculine gaze by a more modest approach to dressing (Gordon-Smith, 2018).

In the contemporary, internet-dominated neoliberal society, feminism takes various forms. Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg (2020), three feminist scholars in the media/cultural studies field, released a distinctive paper in which they outlined through a three-way “conversation” how they view the relationship between post-, neoliberal and popular feminism. Banet-Weiser (2018) wrote a book on popular feminism, in which she explained that “popular feminism” is “popular” in the following ways: it indicates the condition of being valued by like-minded individuals and groups; circulates in commercial and popular media such as broadcast media and digital social media platforms (e.g. Twitter and Instagram); and serves as a site of power conflict – as derived from the culture theorist Stuart Hall. She explains that popular feminism is by all means not “angry”, which appears to be an outdated vestige of feminism’s past. Gill (e.g. 2016) has written extensively on post-feminism, which can be considered as the historical shift – the period “after” (second wave) feminism, in which the emphasis is on individualism and agency as dominant ways of accounting. It can be seen as a critical analytical term that refers to the modified relationships between feminism, femininity and popular culture. Rottenberg (e.g. 2014) coined the term neoliberal feminism, which posits that women have gained more agency in

the neoliberal climate, with full responsibility for their own well-being and increasingly powerful women are publicly embracing feminism unabashedly. In their paper, Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg (2020) argue that all three feminist perspectives are empowered by and dependent on neoliberal capitalism and media platforms/organizations. Their conversations concluded that the contemporary feminist landscape is changing quite rapidly and a few years ago no one could have predicted that feminism would have become as popular as it is today. Hahner and Varda (2012) explain that some feminist authors reject the discourse of modesty as an outspoken anti-feminist agenda (i.e. enshrining patriarchal values under the “disguise” of empowerment). However, most contemporary feminists take the opposite view, arguing that feminist critics should not dismiss modesty so easily, as both perspectives assume that aesthetic styling is a choice performed by a liberated subject (Hahner & Varda, 2012). In addition, Lodi (2020) explains when the modesty movement gathered momentum, the fashion industry began to reconsider the “sex sells” phenomenon. A significant number of women in the West now want to feel protected as a rejection of the sexualization of women’s bodies. Thus, modest fashion can be considered as an adequate alternative to the hyper sexualization of girls and women that is observed in many other different global fashion trends (Hahner & Varda, 2012).

It is important to note that in Western mainstream media-driven ideologies, female empowerment is commonly depicted from a Western, middle-class, cis-gender and specifically *white* feminist perspective (Zakaria, 2021). However, modest fashion presents an interesting movement addressing that “women” or “gender” does not refer only to a single concept and therefore can be considered an intersectional feminist phenomenon, as it ties into various aspects of women’s identity including e.g. ethnicity, race, body shape and religion (Dastagir, 2017). The global media attention, transnational modest fashion influencers and the modest fashion campaigns of mainstream fashion brands also help to draw attention to racial minorities or individuals with a migrant background in Western countries – which underlines the intersectional feminist belief: “gender justice, is racial justice, is economic justice” (Dastagir, 2017). Hence, modest dressing as a movement is an exciting evolution in fashion for the group of women who have felt disregarded by the mainstream for many decades (Gander, 2017). In fact, modest fashion gives women, specifically Muslim women, the potential of being represented in a manner they have never been before. Taking democracy and human rights into account, modest fashion became a visible strategy whereby this group of women finally could find validation and acknowledgment (Rosenberg, 2019). For that reason, modest fashion is an interesting subject for study as modesty has been promoted as an empowering style by a large amount of advocates in the media and provides agency for women to take ownership of their own body (Hahner & Varda, 2012; Rosenberg, 2019).

The modest fashion movement also offers a new form of female power dressing in this neoliberal feminist era, advocating female entrepreneurship and normalizing the concept of “girl boss” – which stands for ambitious and confident working women (Lodi, 2020). While it is not uncommon for women to dress modestly in certain professional positions (e.g. lawyers or office dress codes), many women

who have long dressed in this way for faith-based purposes are still expected to explain and justify their reasons for wearing body-covering clothing (Lodi, 2020). This reveals a recurring aspect in fashion: the phenomenon of trends that only seem to gain the stamp of approval when the white, Western public embraces them (Lodi 2020; Zakaria, 2021). This also corresponds to the fact that those who dress modestly – Muslim women in particular – are often considered “different” in European culture and may be further marginalized because of their religious affiliation, ethnic background and gender – especially when wearing a hijab (Mahmudova & Evolvi, 2021). Hence, it is the task of the modest fashion movement to emphasize on intersectionality by uniting and celebrate women from all kinds of backgrounds with this form of dressing – as the main point of dressing modestly is that women should feel confident and empowered to wear as much or as little as they please.

### **2.3.1 Feminist consumerism**

According to Brewer (2003), fashion is significant for the prominent understanding of popular culture, and while feminism has always been a useful lens for *understanding* popular culture, Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017) note that feminism in the present day undoubtedly has *become* popular culture. For that reason, and taking into account the approaches of feminism and modesty discussed above, the study of Taylor, Johnston and Whitehead (2016) – who examined how young, feminist-identified women understood the exponentially successful Dove ‘Real Beauty’ campaign – serves as an inspiration for this research. The global campaign for Real Beauty by Dove generated much public attention and increase in sales, yet it also demonstrated how social criticism was implemented into consumer capitalism via marketing campaigns (Taylor et al., 2016). Their study identified whether the campaign was seen as congruent with the participants’ perceptions of feminism, and whether businesses could serve as a medium for feminist change. Inspired by this study, this research focuses on whether modest fashion campaigns by mainstream fashion brands are seen as compatible with modest fashion supporter’s vision of modest fashion. As has become clear from previous sections, modest fashion is embedded in feminist viewpoints, and therefore this research builds on the feminist consumerism phenomenon introduced by Johnston and Taylor (2008) which is “a corporate strategy that employs feminist themes of empowerment to market products to women” (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 124). Companies have a long history of integrating emancipatory ideals into advertising campaigns, oftentimes with limited transformative results, but in some cases, such business strategies appear to be both well-meant and well-received (Johnston & Taylor, 2008). According to Johnston and Taylor (2008), feminist consumerism is a successful marketing strategy as “it is part of a hegemonic common sense of consumerism that allows to credibly present itself as the vanguard of a consumer movement facilitating women’s agitation and channeling resistance into commodity purchases” (p. 944). Since modest fashion supporters are involved with modest fashion on a daily basis, consume modest fashion themselves and thus encounter these campaigns regularly, it is relevant to study their perceptions from this lens.

## **2.4 The modest fashion market**

Whether for religious beliefs or personal preference, the modest fashion market has fans worldwide. Although Lewis and Tarlo stated in 2011 that “the mainstream market continues largely to ignore modest dressers as a consumer demographic” (p. 17), modest fashion has now become increasingly relevant: not only because it concerns a large part of the world population, but also because international companies are showing more interest in this market (Radwan et al., 2019). For instance, high-end mainstream brands such as H&M, Zara, Uniqlo and Tommy Hilfiger launched modest fashion collections, and also catwalks and magazines are becoming more inclusive (Ajala, 2017; Radwan et al., 2019; Noronha, 2020). Although modest fashion is especially popular among Muslim women, most fashion companies have embraced the term “modest” fashion rather than “religious” or “Islamic” fashion, so as not to limit it to just one religion and to encompass a broader understanding of modest fashion that also includes non-religious interpretations (Lewis, 2013; Noronha, 2020). In addition, modest fashion varies from country to country and culture to culture. For instance, modest wearers in Indonesia have different wishes in terms of dressing than modest dressers from Africa or Western countries (Lodi, 2020). Interestingly, modesty is rarely discussed when it comes to menswear – probably because religious cultures tend to place the protection on women’s chastity rather than men’s (Writer, 2020). However, despite being a female-focused retail category, modest fashion is a burgeoning market for men, spearheaded by a group of Muslim men who promote modesty through styling, designing, and increasingly social media expressions (Writer, 2020). Nevertheless, despite the fact that modest fashion slowly gained ground in mainstream fashion, among all existing fashion genres, modest fashion is still a developing fashion market and searches for more recognition among fashion consumers and real understanding of the wishes of the modest consumer (Zainudin et al., 2019).

In North America, the Muslim modest fashion scene has developed alongside a large number of Christian and Jewish modest fashion brands, seen in smaller numbers in Western Europe and Australia where the modest fashion market is mainly led by Muslim designers and creative entrepreneurs (Lewis, 2017). The United Arab Emirates (UAE), however, make up the world’s largest modest fashion market due to its reputation as a fashion hub and being the third largest Islamic economy in the world (Janmohamed, 2020). Janmohamed (2020) notes that the months of Ramadan and Eid are normally the industry’s biggest selling season, but as many countries were in lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic, modest fashion suited the global trend of a sharp decline in clothing sales. It is no coincidence that mainstream brands and fashion designers are influenced by what they see as the style preferences of Muslim consumers – there are financial motives too (Gander, 2017; Janmohamed, 2020; Lodi, 2020). Brands hold preconceptions about wealth in the Middle East, and many mainstream fashion brands and top fashion houses are capitalizing on the “petroleum dollar” or “Muslim euro” (Gander, 2017; Islam, 2018; Lewis, 2019; Lodi, 2020), showing that it is not a simple embracement of diversity and inclusion (Janmohamed, 2020). Nevertheless, it is imperative for newcomers to the modest fashion market to

understand the many niches and not make the mistake of diving into the more saturated markets of traditional Islamic modest clothing such as hijabs and abayas. While these segments are prominent, it has become clear that there are so many other segments within this industry that remain untapped (DinarStandard, 2020).

Speaking of finances, one of the biggest challenges the modest fashion industry faces is price point (DinarStandard, 2020). Although the modest fashion industry by now is a billion dollar industry, it still consists out of many smaller brands that could not survive during the times of the coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, there are giants in the fashion industry with very large production capacities, own factories and elastic supply lines that can produce at a much lower price and therefore modest fashion brands with lower production capacities have a hard time competing with these industry giants – which is a major hurdle for smaller modest fashion brands (DinarStandard, 2020). These brands understand the needs of the modest fashion consumer better than any mainstream brand, but research and development requires financial support, and investments can encourage them to increase their innovations or even become market leaders (DinarStandard, 2020).

## **2.5 The role of the Internet, (digital) media and modest fashion campaigns**

Both the (digital) media and modest fashion campaigns by mainstream fashion brands have greatly influenced the development of the global modest fashion market and provided a platform for the discussion and visibility of modest fashion (Lewis, 2019). Specifically the Internet had a positive impact on this spread of modest fashion (Radwan et al., 2019) and “has been indispensable to the advancement of both commerce and commentary concerned with modest fashion” (Lewis & Moors, 2013, p. 41). E-commerce and internet marketing enabled brands to reach more consumers more cheaply, beyond their immediate location in more international geographic areas, and created opportunities for the emergence of the modest fashion market across religious groups (Tarlo, 2010; Tarlo, 2011; Lewis & Moors, 2013). Moreover, Radwan et al. (2019) state that it provided women with fashionable solutions to modesty requirements, that were formerly missing. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, many modest fashion companies have switched to new marketing methods by embracing more digital sales channels such as selling via WhatsApp, more advertising on social media, email marketing, but also implementing home viewing services for regular customers (DinarStandard, 2020). Other opportunities for the modest fashion market are the modest fashion weeks, which are organized worldwide in both the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and non-OIC countries, such as the Amsterdam Modest Fashion Week in 2019. These events provide a platform for designers and buyers to interact and ensuring discussions about modesty (DinarStandard, 2020). Consequently, modest fashion brands continue to grow, gain more recognition and trigger competition with other brands, building on the rising popularity of the modest fashion market (DinarStandard, 2020). All this shows that women have been given a growing (e-commerce) sector that sells clothing designed to promote fashionable modesty and advised by an increasing number of blogs and social media accounts about modest styles (Lewis & Moors, 2013). In

addition, the before-mentioned modest fashion influencers also have played a great part in this and mainstream retailers continuously incorporate modest fashion offerings through collaborations with these influencers and designers (Ajala, 2017; Williams & Kamaludeen, 2017; DinarStandard, 2020). Understandably, modest fashion influencers (from any background) are important to religion's relationship with society and the state, as these women develop and spread new forms of religious practice by combining religious devotion and minority participation with the everyday trends of mainstream fashion (Lewis, 2017). Alongside the significant attention on modest fashion in digital media, contemporary feminism is also conditioned by the affordances of digital communication. For instance, as for modest fashion influencers, among young feminists digital media is used as a tool for feminist practices unfolding on social media, where they generate debates about gender-based injustices (Jackson, 2018). As a result, feminists and modest women have received significant attention in the mainstream media with articles in *Vogue*, the *New York Times* and many others writing about women with fashionable styles, while adhering to their standards of modesty and – often – religious guidelines.

The modest fashion campaigns by international mainstream fashion brands also came under great attention in media articles. These modest fashion campaigns touched on the idea that the mainstream fashion industry seemed to have entered the world of modest fashion, while at the same time modest fashion entered the world of mainstream fashion (Ajala, 2017). For instance, in 2015 H&M featured Mariah Idrissi – a hijab-wearing model – in their first modest fashion campaign that generated positive responses from other hijab-wearing women who claimed that it offered a fashion forward-thinking view of femininity in their culture and helped boost the positive visibility of the hijab (Rogers, 2015). Later in 2018 and 2020, H&M introduced other spring collections aimed at the modest shopper from the motivation to be diverse and inclusive across all markets they operate in (LeSavage, 2018). Zara has also served the modest customer several times and received positive reactions specifically for their campaign for the modest autumn collection in 2018, which seemed to be inspired by Orthodox Jewish Shabbat clothing as some items resembled a commercialized version of the Friday night “Sabbath robe” – a long floor-length dress worn by some religious women to usher in the Sabbath. In addition, the models wore gold scarves wrapped around their heads without showing any hair, making it Zara's linchpin to cater to its Muslim consumers. Not forgetting British-Japanese designer Hana Tajima, who has been designing collections for Uniqlo for a number of years, starting with Uniqlo's first hijab – made from Uniqlo's own AIRism fabric, with currently collections that are not solely about modesty for Muslim women – but for everyone (Yotka, 2019). However, there are also critical reactions. Low-cost Irish mainstream retailer Primark's modest collection received mixed reactions on Twitter, discussing that modesty should no longer be separated so as not to further alienate Muslim women (Harley, 2020). The tweets present an interesting discussion, taking into account the aforementioned aspect of the marginalization of Muslim women in the West. It is noteworthy that mainstream fashion brands usually have a Western background and there is a so-called “Euroamerican” dominance in fashion (Baizerman, 1993) and a major criticism in internationalized or globalized marketing campaigns is that they do not

take cultural distinctions into consideration (Kalliny & Ghanem, 2009). Therefore, as modest fashion targets a broader group than solely Muslims, others did welcome the modest collection of Primark and hailed it as a win for modest women (Harley, 2020).

The modest fashion campaigns discussed above show that modest fashion is a lively topic within the fashion industry and it is important to fill up the research gap on modest fashion campaigns and people's reactions to them as modest fashion is still considered a "paradox" by many due to a lack of understanding what modest fashion really means to women (Lewis, 2013; Lodi, 2020). It is therefore essential to study perceptions of modest fashion that is implemented by the mainstream fashion industry in order to obtain the most accurate information from an "insider" perspective and connect this to the already available scientific knowledge. The literature discussed above helped with this research as it explains the interplay between the modest fashion market, contemporary culture and (digital) media from a (intersectional) feminist perspective. What is most evident in this collection of literature is that, regardless of the different motives for modest dressing, modest fashion is intended to empower women and give them agency in their appearance – thus, demonstrating that modest fashion has become a visible strategy through which women can find validation and recognition (Rosenberg, 2019).

### **3. Methodology**

To answer the research question, an in-depth understanding of the modest fashion market and its representation in the mainstream fashion industry is required. The theoretical framework has already extensively analyzed existing literature on the modest fashion market from various perspectives, and this thesis will contribute to this existing scientific knowledge through a study based on a series of qualitative in-depth interviews with modest fashion supporters, asking questions embedded in the theoretical framework, complemented by a discussion of modest fashion campaigns by three major global mainstream clothing retailers (H&M, Zara and Uniqlo). Discovering the perceptions of these campaigns is of great relevance as it can provide more knowledge on whether these campaigns are seen as compatible with modest fashion supporter's vision of modest fashion. The aim of this chapter is to provide a clear and detailed explanation of how the research was conducted. The following paragraphs will accurately describe and justify the chosen qualitative method – in-depth interviews, and provide more details about the sample, data collection and analysis.

#### **3.1 Description and justification of methods**

In order to investigate modest fashion supporters' perceptions, experiences and attitudes towards modest fashion campaigns by mainstream fashion brands, implementing a qualitative approach was the most preferred. The rationale behind this is that this research process is considered within relevant social practices, and the focus lies on the in-depth meaning-making process of perceptions and experiences for which a quantitative approach is too narrow (Brennen, 2017). In addition, qualitative research may reveal underlying attitudes, emotions and values towards a specific aspect – in this case modest fashion – which provides a greater academic relevance than a quantitative numerical study would (Hoek et al., 2017). Over the past decades, a considerable amount of research on advertising has been conducted through qualitative studies including, for example, research on what advertising says about society, or research that attempts to understand how advertising does and does not have an influence on individuals (Belk, 2017). Belk (2017) states that this research is necessary, as the effects and meanings of campaigns may not necessarily be what their makers intend. For instance, consumers reshape campaigns to create their own meaning, and some readers may remember and interpret the campaign in distinct manners (Belk, 2017). The qualitative research technique of this study includes in-depth interviews, which “probe more deeply how an advertisement is regarded by consumers and what meanings they take away” (Belk, 2017, p. 38). In-depth interviewing requires asking a small number of participants, in this case twelve, what their perspectives are on a particular issue, situation or idea (Boyce & Neale, 2006). As stated in the first two chapters, previous research on the modest fashion market has mostly been conducted through a religious lens. Therefore, this study has sought to encompass a broader perspective on modest fashion and focuses more on the personal choices of dressing modestly. Furthermore, wearing modest fashion is by many perceived as a feminist strategy (Rosenberg, 2019) and therefore the study of Taylor,

Johnston and Whitehead (2016) – who examined how young, feminist-identified women understood the successful Dove ‘Real Beauty’ campaign – served as inspiration for this study. All this together makes this research unique and aims to fill the gap in the academic literature about the modest fashion industry.

### **3.2 Details of data collection and sampling**

The starting point for conducting the in-depth interviews was the creation of sampling criteria for the participants that were going to be involved in this research (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Boyce and Neale (2006) state that it is necessary to first identify what information is required and from whom. For this research, twelve interviews of approximately 45-75 minutes have been conducted with individuals who support and wear modest fashion. The term “modest fashion supporters” was given to participants after all interviews were conducted to create an umbrella term describing the sample. Modest fashion supporters are individuals who approve of, and encourage the modest fashion sector by wearing/consuming modest fashion themselves and being involved with modest fashion on a daily basis. In addition, some of the interviewed modest fashion supporters are professionally involved in the sector and can therefore be regarded as experts in modest fashion. Industry experts are deeply committed to a specific industry, and are considered as the thought leaders and influencers with much knowledge and experience in that particular field (Whitmore, 2015). Thus, by conducting interviews with modest fashion supporters, it becomes possible to obtain the most relevant and accurate information and perception on the subject.

The sample was selected based on the following criteria: first, the interviewees must self-identify as women; second, they must regularly – if not always – wear modest fashion; third, they must be very interested in and enthusiastic about in the modest fashion industry; and fourth, the participants needed to be between the ages of 18-65. Despite the fact that there also men who wear modest clothing – though to a lesser extent and particularly in the UAE and OIC countries – the modest fashion sector is specifically catered to women (Lewis, 2013). In addition, this research has been conducted through the “feminist consumerism” lens (Johnston & Taylor, 2008), and even though there are male feminists too, it was less complicated to find female modest fashion supporters and therefore the choice was made to only include women in the sample. A specific nationality or geographical area has not been a sampling criteria, since the modest fashion sector is a global phenomenon and there are inhabitants in every country in the world who dress modestly, if not occasionally (Lodi, 2020). Moreover, including participants with various backgrounds provides more valuable data, and given the small sample, representation of diversity is highly important in that the research evidence reflects diversity in the population as well as possible (Allmark, 2004). Hence, for this study, an attempt was made to recruit participants from as many different places in the world as possible, so that the data can be compared properly to see if any differences in outcome may occur. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, most of the interviews had to be conducted online, making it easier to interview participants from different countries. The participants came from: Dubai, Indonesia, Qatar, Russia, Turkey, Italy, Canada, the United States,

South Africa and the Netherlands. It is important to note that having a diversified sample (in this case in terms of geographic areas) also can have drawbacks, as it can bring up views that are too heterogeneous and with different life experiences. Nevertheless, the heterogeneity and homogeneity of the sample depends on the nature and purpose of the research, as the same sample may be homogeneous for one research project and heterogeneous for another (Alvi, 2016). In terms of this research, the geographical heterogeneity is an advantage precisely because of the reasons mentioned earlier.

Women of all ages dress modestly and among other things, age emerges as a factor that plays a significant role in an individual’s engagement with modesty at different life stages (Lewis & Tarlo, 2011). For this reason, adult women aged 18-65 were chosen as the age category for this study. Despite the fact that this research does not specifically focuses on religious motivations for dressing modestly, it was inevitable to have religious women in the sample as they are the most regular modest wearers. In the sample, one woman identifies as Orthodox Jew, one is Christian, two are non-religious and eight of the twelve participants were Muslim women. A clarification for the large proportion of Muslim women in the sample is that Muslim women hold the largest share worldwide of the modest fashion sector and are the most visible modest fashion wearers (Lewis, 2019). This is then also reflected in the sample, which has been determined through a non-probability sampling technique that will be further explained in the next paragraph. Table 3.1 below provides a clear illustration of the sample, including the participants’ personal involvement with modest fashion.

**Table 3.1 The research sample**

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Age category</b>	<b>Geographical location</b>	<b>Involvement with modest fashion</b>
Madina	25-34	Dubai	Non-religious modest fashion consumer/enthusiast/abaya designer (±2,5K followers on Instagram)
Evelyn	25-34	Italy/France	Non-religious modest fashion expert/blogger/entrepreneur (±6K followers on Instagram)
Farida	25-34	Qatar	Muslim modest fashion consumer/enthusiast (not wearing hijab)
Selin	18-24	Turkey	Muslim modest fashion consumer/enthusiast (wearing hijab)
Esma	25-34	The Netherlands	Muslim modest fashion consumer/photographer (wearing hijab) (±2,5K followers on Instagram)

Francesca	35-44	Indonesia	Muslim modest fashion expert/entrepreneur (±23K followers on Instagram) (wearing hijab)
Romina	45-54	Canada	Muslim modest fashion expert/academic (wearing hijab)
Dilan	45-54	Russia	Modest fashion expert/entrepreneur (±4K followers on Instagram) (wearing headscarf in various ways)
Ozara	25-34	Turkey	Muslim modest fashion expert/entrepreneur (±10,7K followers on Instagram) (not wearing hijab)
Rosa	25-34	Israel	Jewish modest fashion blogger/influencer (±40,2K followers on Instagram) (wearing Sheitel – Jewish wig)
Nicole	25-34	United States	Christian modest fashion blogger/influencer (±6,5K followers on Instagram)
Rabia	35-44	South Africa	Modest fashion expert/entrepreneur (±18K followers on Instagram) (wearing headscarf in various ways)

This sample selection process used a form of purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in which the researcher’s judgment of who is most representative for the research is selected for the interviews (Babbie, 2011). To decide if someone was a suitable participant for this study, the aforementioned sampling criteria were looked at. Since modest fashion has a huge social media presence, especially on Instagram, Instagram has been used to recruit three of the participants through specific modest fashion accounts found for example by the hashtag #modestfashion. In addition, while doing research to the modest fashion market, a YouTube video by Global News Canada on modest fashion was viewed, including speakers who were engaged in the modest fashion scene. Hence, some of the speakers in the video were also approached if they met the above criteria and one of them was actually interviewed. Finally, in Lodi’s (2020) book on modest fashion many modest fashion stakeholders were mentioned, who were then searched and approached on Instagram of which one was finally interviewed. Since Instagram has been a useful platform for the recruitment, the number of Instagram followers for some participants has been added in Table 3.1, to give an indication of their

reachability on the social media platform and to demonstrate that they have a larger social media following than the average personal user. Their influencer practices were also discussed during the interviews, as this clearly shows their involvement with modest fashion. In Appendix D, a template used for e-mails and direct messages to possible participants in Instagram can be found. Another type of purposive sampling that has been used was snowball sampling, in which research participants recruit others to participate in a study (Babbie, 2011). This was useful for this research, as the participants helped for the most representative sample possible for the research into the modest fashion market. In this case, the researcher had an acquaintance who had valuable connections that are entrepreneurs, professionals or experts in the modest fashion sector, and were willing to take part in this research. In addition, a fellow student had a connection that also met the sampling criteria, resulting in an overall representative sample for the data collection.

Since the participants are individuals engaged in modest fashion, some of them have a religious background. The interview can therefore relate to religious and personal aspects that might be sensitive topics. Therefore, during the data collection process, participants have been treated with respect for their cultural/religious norms and care has been taken to ensure that their anonymity is not compromised. In addition, it was always ensured that the participant felt at ease. To safeguard all of the above, prior to the start of the data collection, permission was requested and obtained from the Ethical Council of the Erasmus University. Furthermore, informed consent from the participants before the start of the interview was obtained including consent to audio-record the interview (Appendix B) (Boyce & Neale, 2006). It is worth mentioning that the researcher is a non-religious woman, who is very interested in modest fashion and could therefore empathize well with the participants. Moreover, objectivity was ensured by using previous scientific literature from the theoretical framework when talking about the research-related topics during the interviews, and when analyzing the evidence through a systematic procedure by creating thematic categories in Atlas.ti to detect characteristics from the data through theoretical concepts (Ratner, 2002).

### **3.3 Processing and analysis of data**

Boyce and Neale (2006) note that in-depth interviews are flexible in that there is not a specific determined format to follow, and there are a number of ways in presenting them. Babbie (2011) explains that qualitative interviews are in fact conversations in which “the interviewer establishes a general direction for the conversation and pursues specific topics raised by the respondent” (p. 340). Before conducting the in-depth interviews, an interview protocol must first be drawn up to ensure consistency between the interviews (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Therefore, an interview guide was developed and instructions for each interview were designed and included for instance: how to build rapport, what to say to the interviewees, what to do during the interview, and what to do after the interview (see Appendix A) (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Prior to the start of asking the research-related questions related, it was important to build rapport to establish the tone of the conversation and gain trust of the participant

(Brennen, 2017). This was done by first asking them how they were doing and then expressing gratitude for their help with the research. Then, a short summary of the research project was drafted (which was also stated in the recruitment messages), as a way of informing the participants of what will be talked about in the interview, why it is relevant to discuss and to express genuine interest in their perspectives and experiences (Brennen, 2017). The first part of the interview consisted of personal-related and icebreaker questions, asking for example how the participants are involved in modest fashion and what modest fashion means to them. Thereafter, the main topics covered in the interview were inspired by previous literature on modest fashion discussed in the theoretical framework. For example, the participants were asked what role religion and media, in their view, play in modest fashion; their perspective on women's empowerment and individual choice in what to wear; their perception of mainstream fashion brands' modest fashion campaigns and finally what they think the future of modest fashion will look like. After the interview guide was prepared, a pilot interview was conducted with a peer to establish how well it works in the actual research by identifying potential issues that may need to be adjusted, ensuring the reliability of the research (Dikko, 2016). The global pandemic made it more difficult to conduct the interviews face-to-face and therefore they needed to be done online, which was a disadvantage on the one hand as it was harder to observe the participants' non-verbal communication, but on the other hand it allowed the researcher to recruit participants from all over the world. These online interviews were conducted via Zoom, a video conferencing software program, which has a built-in transcription tool that facilitated the transcription of the interview afterwards. One Dutch participant agreed to have the interview offline, so a coronavirus-proof face-to-face meeting was arranged with her. All interviews were conducted in English, except for the interview with the Dutch participant of which the quotes used in the results chapter were translated into English and a short English summary was added to the interview transcript.

As has become clear, the modest fashion market and modest fashion campaigns of mainstream fashion brands were the main topics of the conversations. To initiate thoughts and refresh their memory, the interviewees were shown a slide depicting examples of previous modest fashion campaigns by the global mainstream fashion retailers Zara (Inditex), H&M (H&M Group) and Uniqlo (Fast Retailing), to provide them with a common set of images to review (Appendix C1). These campaigns were chosen, as these retailers are recognized as one of the major apparel manufacturers and retailers worldwide (Statista, 2020) and several academic articles on modest fashion mention these brands (e.g. Moors, 2013; Ajala, 2017; Radwan et al., 2019). In addition, Zara's modest Fall 2018 collection, Uniqlo's Fall/Winter 2018 campaign, and H&M's 2020 kaftan campaign, have in common that they are not specifically labeled as "Muslim modest" but are committed to all modest customers, and have received generally positive response from the public as discussed in chapter two. Furthermore, both Zara's and Uniqlo's campaigns have depicted women with covered hair, while H&M did not. The reason for including both covered and uncovered hair campaigns is to keep the broader aspect of modest fashion. The slide with these campaigns was presented for several minutes whilst the conversation was going on. This is most

likely much longer than one would see a campaign when reading a magazine or driving past a billboard aside the highway, causing the interviewees to look longer and more critically at the images and think further than usual when encountering a fashion campaign in daily life. During some of the interviews, the interviewee tailored her thoughts closely to the campaigns depicted on the slide, keeping it on for reference, whilst others quickly looked and then continued to their own approach and perspectives without specifically referring back to them – which then led a more organic conversation. After showing and discussing these particular campaigns, two Tweets that criticize low-cost Irish mainstream retailer Primark’s modest collection were shown (including an image of Primark’s campaign, depicting a hijab-wearing model) (Appendix C2). These particular Tweets were mentioned in the article by Harley (2020) and were considered interesting to add to the discussion on modest fashion campaigns, as they question whether “modest collections” need to be labeled separately and touch upon the fact that Primark is a fast-fashion retailer. The participants were then asked to reflect on these reactions to see if they would agree with the view that modesty should no longer be separated so as not to further alienate Muslim women (Harley, 2020) and whether these fast-fashion companies are ethically in line with the intentions of modest fashion. In order to not forget essential details, the key data (including non-verbal aspects) were summarized as accurately as possible directly after the interview.

Lastly, a thorough analysis has been performed by means of the six phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) – searching for themes and patterns between the interviews through connecting the evidence with the theoretical framework (Boyce & Neale, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), it is important in the first phase of the thematic analysis to become familiar with the data, and the verbal data from the interviews must be converted into written form. The interviews were transcribed using Zoom’s built-in transcription tool. While the Zoom transcripts were not completely accurate, transcribing became easier and faster with this tool. These transcripts were uploaded to Atlas.ti – a qualitative data analysis software program to manage textual, graphic, video and audio data (<https://atlasti.com>). Silver and Lewins (2014) describe ATLAS.ti as a useful software for researchers to systematically analyze unstructured data, as the software provides tools to locate, comment on and most importantly code findings in initial data material. In the second phase, the initial codes were determined by selecting the most relevant and interesting features of the data. Third, the codes were collected into potential themes by assigning all data relevant to each potential theme that were formed aided by the theoretical framework. Subsequently, in phase four, the themes were checked to see whether the themes matched 1) the coded extract and 2) the entire data set, creating a thematic sequence of the analysis. The fifth phase refined each theme with clear names and definitions, and the last phase consists of the final analysis – producing the scientific discussion to answer the research question, in which the theoretical framework functioned as contextual guidance. In the next chapter, the fourteen different main themes that have been identified are presented and interpreted in detail to explain how modest fashion supporters perceive the representation of modest fashion in mainstream fashion and the media.

## **4. Results**

As explained in the methodology chapter, this study conducted in-depth interviews with modest fashion supporters, and the following chapter provides an accurate description and interpretation of the research findings obtained during these interviews. First, the research findings will be outlined and the main themes derived from the thematic analysis will be presented. Thereafter, the key patterns and themes will be thoroughly interpreted, supported by the theoretical lens and relevant academic literature that has been discussed in chapter two. In order to answer the research question, it appears that these fourteen main themes are essential to be taken into account, and they provide an accurate interpretation of the current perspectives of the modest fashion sector.

### **4.1 Research Findings**

After the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a total of 329 codes have been assigned, after which 41 initial themes have been found and eventually fourteen main themes were determined. The codebook has been added as a separate file, including the corresponding initial themes and codes. Table 4.1 on the next page demonstrates an overview of the main themes derived from the thematic analysis of the interviews, and is divided into four categories. The first category includes four main themes that all have to do with the general perception around the phenomenon of modest fashion. The next category, contains two themes that are connected to the role of the media in the modest fashion sector. Then, six main themes shed a light on the business aspect of the modest fashion sector and the last category reveals political/societal/cultural factors related to modest fashion and contains two main themes. While the six phases of analysis yielded fourteen different main themes that are all able to explain how modest fashion supporters perceive the modest fashion market, the main themes were not entirely equally divided among all interviewees. Nevertheless, the majority of the interviews covered all of the themes. Furthermore, the thematic analysis revealed that although these main themes can be divided into four categories, most themes have a mutual connection, and some are even interdependent. To clarify, some codes were allocated to multiple initial themes and some initial themes were connected to multiple main themes. For instance, media is closely related to the business aspect of modest fashion, since digital media has facilitated many business opportunities for the modest fashion sector showing that these two themes rely on each other (Lewis, 2019). The next section of this chapter will provide a further explanation and interpretation of all the findings.

**Table 4.1 Main themes and assigned categories**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Main themes</b>
Perception of modest fashion	Interpretations of modest fashion
	Sense of community, connection and belonging
	The need for more understanding around modest fashion
Media and modest fashion	The (digital) media is indispensable for the modest fashion sector
	Critical on representation of modest fashion in (mainstream/digital) media
Modest fashion business	Positive attitude towards modest fashion campaigns by mainstream fashion brands
	Many modest fashion initiatives are commercially minded
	Critical thinking about the (modest) fashion industry
	Diversity, inclusion and body positivity in the modest fashion sector
	Challenges for the modest fashion market
	Business strategies and solutions for the modest fashion market
Political and Societal factors	Modest fashion has become political
	Modest fashion as women's empowerment
	Critical thinking about traditional ideals of beauty

## 4.2 Discussion and Interpretation

The following paragraphs provide a thorough analysis and interpretation of the research findings within each category and each main theme determined from the thematic analysis. In addition, to further clarify the results obtained, examples from the data collection are illustrated on the basis of verbatim quotes from the interviewees.

### 4.2.1 Category 1: Perception of modest fashion

The first main theme encompasses the interviewees' interpretations of modest fashion. All interviewees emphasize that modest fashion is for everyone and it cannot be described as one type of style, for one type of woman. This is in line with, among others, Lewis' (2013) interpretation of modest fashion, in which she also states that the degree of modesty is person-dependent. Participant Dilan – a modest fashion expert and entrepreneur – agrees with this and explains there are no written rules about the level of modesty that a person must adhere to, only the customer chooses the level of modesty according to their own rules. In addition, as various authors note (e.g. Lewis, 2013; Khatun Dewan, 2019; Lodi, 2020), individuals may dress modestly just because it is their style, regardless of any culture or religion. Robina, for example, explains that some women prefer to conceal rather than accentuate the body shape because that is how they feel most comfortable and “it does not necessarily always have to do with religion, patriarchy and oppression and all of those things”, which confirms previous discussed literature. Also for Rosa, a 28 year old Orthodox Jewish modest fashion blogger/influencer from Israel, modest fashion is definitely a lifestyle and reflects her identity and passion, but specifically her religion. She explains:

I'm an Orthodox Jew, so as an Orthodox Jewish woman we have guidelines, as I said: no short sleeves, our knees have to be covered, no cleavage showing, that has to be covered... Yeah, and then, since I'm married, I also wear a wig to cover my hair. So, you can either cover your hair with a wig or you can cover with a scarf, but I like to wear the wig, because it's nice and cool. And so that's another layer of modesty when you get married. (Rosa, Israel)

Interestingly, she said that since she is married, she welcomed another factor of modesty in her life: covering her hair. The article by Tarlo (2016) explored the dynamics of the relationship between fashion and religious dress/appearance regulation, specifically addressing human-hair sheitels (wigs) amongst married Jewish Orthodox women and Islamic sportswear. Rosa stated that although the wig itself is hair too, the wig covers her *own* hair and therefore it is accepted according to the Jewish guidelines. Yet similar to what Tarlo (2016) states, Rosa explains that the idea of religious fashion remains a kind of oxymoron, and some Jewish people like the wig, while others prefer a different method of covering the hair. This corresponds to the mythology of both fashion, as well as religion, explained by Tarlo (2016): although fashion attaches great importance to freedom of expression and originality, it also relies greatly

on social conformity. Religion too places high value on social conformity and obedience, yet religious often find ways to make the rules more attractive by including creative engagement with the expressive aspects of fashion (Tarlo, 2016). Rosa agrees to this and stated: “But we were put on this earth to make Judaism look beautiful. So, if the wig is what you want to wear, then you wear it – I don’t see anything wrong with that!”. Interestingly, Rosa was the only participant who did not have feminist motivations to dress modestly, and solely connects it to her religious identity and passion for fashion. Nevertheless, she did cited the #MeToo movement as an example that dressing modestly becomes more under attention to other women “who want to feel like bosses” – as Rosa states, which connects to Rottenberg’s (2014) neoliberal feminism concept that emphasizes on women’s agency in the neoliberal climate. All other participants, regardless of their background or faith, agree on the empowering feeling of dressing modestly – supporting the discussion in the theoretical framework that modest styling is a choice performed by a liberated subject to take ownership of one’s own body (Hahner & Varda, 2012; Rosenberg, 2019).

In addition to viewing modesty as a personal style or reflection of faith, Farida speaks specifically about having a relationship and sentiment with garment to recognize its value. Furthermore, eight of the twelve interviewees specifically emphasize on the sense of comfort that modest fashion brings. However, in spite of an overall agreement among the interviewees on what modest fashion means, the term “modest” is still questioned by Robina as to whether this is the correct name for the fashion style. She states: “...There’s a problem with calling modest fashion ‘modest’, the term ‘modest’ implies that everything that is not modest fashion is immodest, and that’s certainly not the case”. She prefers to call it “considered fashion”, which as she states “could represent concealing of the body, or could also be another scenario where you’re considering what you’re wearing in order to be appropriate to that moment in time, to that audience, or to that company”. However, in response to the criticism in the discussed Tweets that modest fashion no longer needs to be labeled, Rabia explains that labeling it makes it clearer for the modest customer so that the customer does not have to come up with modest solutions themselves, instead it is made easier for them.

Bearing in mind that modesty is a style you find all over the world, Rabia (wearing a turban while having the interview) explains:

...modest dressers live in all sorts of different parts of the globe. So our needs, and how to dress modestly is slightly different, and also related to the cultural environment in which we find ourselves. So when you asked me about African modest fashion – it’s very unique in the sense that, I mean the turban for women was actually born in Africa, where for men, it was born in Persia, and there are all sorts of ways of wearing the turban and it is not just a religious aspect of Islam, it’s also an African cultural aspect. (Rabia, South-Africa)

Rabia herself is a Muslim woman from South-Africa. Therefore, her Muslim identity intersects with her South-African culture and she specifically touched upon the fact that modest fashion unites cultures that in turn can inspire each other with the different styles from each region. After showing the modest fashion campaigns of Zara, H&M and Uniqlo, Robina explains she finds the modest fashion collections by mainstream fashion brands quite acceptable, but that these brands are trying to copy certain traditional styles, such as Ramadan/Eid clothing. Yet these are not the clothes the modest customer is looking for in mainstream fashion stores, as they already have access to that in their own community stores. She stated that wearing the hijab blended her intersectional identities into a singular presentation of herself, and she explained:

...my style icons in the 1980s, when I was a young adult, were Lady Diana, Mary Tyler Moore and Madonna, and those are the clothes that I like... So I want to wear Western fashions, I want to dress like the latest pop stars and movie stars, I want to reflect the latest trends, so, H&M, don't give me these dresses that I can go to my cultural community store! (Robina, Canada)

Thus, Robina – a hijab-wearing Muslim woman living in a Western country – confirms what Lewis and Tarlo (2011) concluded: modest women (from all three religious groups) seek fashionable solutions to modesty requirements and desire to buy clothes directly related to mainstream global fashion trends. In addition, the statements of Rabia and Robina reflect the intersectional feminist nature of the modest fashion sector as explained in the theoretical framework, in which multiple aspects of women's identities are essential elements in feminism as well as modest fashion (Dastagir, 2017).

Another recurrent aspect all interviewees emphasize on is the sense of community, connection and belonging. Interviewee Evelyn for example, is an Italian modest fashion expert who owns a modest fashion blog and a visual social network specifically designed for and by the Muslim community, to connect cultures and people. She stated that modest fashion goes beyond fashion and can be viewed as a “bridge” or dialogue for different people and different cultures. Furthermore, Francesca states that the modest fashion community stays connected through the smaller/authentic modest brands. She explains that modest fashion is very famous and everybody wants to be involved, but sometimes the core meaning is forgotten and although the large mainstream fashion brands are trying to get a large share in the modest fashion market, the smaller brands, “the true talents of modest fashion”, should not be ignored. As explained in chapter two, the authentic brands understand the needs of the modest fashion customer better than any mainstream brand, and according to Francesca it is crucial to give them recognition and opportunity in the modest fashion industry (DinarStandard, 2020). A clear example of the sense of community and platform within the modest fashion industry is the yearly organization of the international Modest Fashion Week (MFW). Two of the interviewees are closely connected to this event and emphasize on the idea that, since modest fashion is a global phenomenon, it is essential to come together, share all knowledge around modest fashion and define the modest fashion trends worldwide.

Ozara explains that MFW is a platform for global business in modest fashion and it is viewed as a global collaboration in which all modest fashion stakeholders are able to connect with each other.

Notwithstanding its popularity, modest fashion is still a searching and learning process for the mainstream media and fashion industry, and a significant number of the interviewees emphasize on the need for more understanding around modest fashion. Evelyn and Ozara both mention that this is why they are so passionate about the industry, because it still feels like it is a hidden potential. All participants mention the importance of trends in fashion, of which four describe modest fashion as a new trend for the mainstream fashion industry. However, as discussed in the theoretical framework, three of the participants particularly emphasize that modest fashion is *not* a new trend, it has been around since forever. As Rabia puts it:

The mainstream media seems to consider it a trend, but it is not a trend, it has always been there, and will always be there, it's just that modest fashion history has never been recorded because the focus has always been on mainstream Western fashion. (Rabia, South-Africa)

In addition, she explains that there are trends within modest fashion and just like every other fashion style, modest fashion has various genres e.g. ready-to-wear, haute couture, high budget and low budget.

#### **4.2.2 Category 2: Media and modest fashion**

Despite the fact that modest fashion existed long before it came to the attention of the media, the majority of those interviewed conclude that the mainstream media (i.e. traditional broadcasting/publishing media outlets) and digital media (i.e. mobile applications, social media platforms and online lifestyle magazines) are indispensable for the modest fashion industry, and have contributed enormously to the development of the modest fashion sector. In addition, they conclude that it still facilitates the sharing, connecting, collaborating and doing business in modest fashion worldwide. To clarify, Evelyn notes that the whole modest fashion community exists because of it, and experiences many advantages due to the digital development in the past decades, the opportunity of e-commerce (Lewis & Tarlo, 2011; Lewis, 2013; Lodi, 2020) and the use of social media platforms as marketing tools (Lodi, 2020). For instance, Madina – a Dubai-based abaya designer – stated that the media assured for more recognition worldwide and currently helps her with promoting her modest brand by using social media platforms such as Instagram. Moreover, all interviewees made clear that digital social media platforms such as Instagram are still highly valuable in the visibility and application of the modest fashion scene. For instance, Rosa and Nicole express their passion for modest fashion mostly through their Instagram page. As being an influencer, both view it as an amazing tool to connect with other like-minded individuals, to express their passion in (modest) fashion and receiving paid jobs through it. Nicole – a Christian modest fashion influencer from the United States – explains that before starting her Christian fashion blog on Instagram, she did not encounter many others combining fashion and Christian

faith on social media. However, after a short while she found out about many more Christian fashion enthusiasts and created her own Instagram account where she represents and connects Christian fashion bloggers through modest fashion. This shows that, as Tarlo (2010; 2011) and Lewis and Moors (2013) have pointed out, the Internet and digital media give lots of opportunities for modest fashion supporters to get in contact with each other, gain a fair representation and creating opportunities for the modest fashion market between religious groups. Nevertheless, Nicole declared: “Certain brands don’t want to work with faith bloggers because, you know, we talk about God and all that stuff. I think that’s where it’s kind of difficult for us to find brands working with”. This shows that although more than a decade later, Lewis’ (2010) conclusion on her study described in chapter two is still existing – explaining that inclusion in fashion media remains a delicate concern that questions the relationship between fashion, modesty, and marketability in a religion-based consumer culture.

Another concern about the representation of modest fashion on social media relates to Muslim influencers. Robina, Selin, Rabia and Esma noted a strong influence of Western countries on Muslim influencers, who gave up their traditional Islamic life by, for example, taking off their hijabs. Selin stated that since the influencers make money from their practices, they reform themselves according to western standards and what the public wants to see. In addition, Esma, who is generally not very impressed by influencers, used the example of a popular Dutch Muslim modest fashion influencer with more than a million followers on Instagram who entered the mainstream media via a Dutch talk show, and received quite varied reactions about her appearance in the mainstream media. Esma argued that when you have one million followers on the Internet, it means that these followers are somewhat in your own “bubble”. Then, when you are suddenly present in the mainstream media, it turns out you are not that loved at all by the society. In that case, the question is: do you really need the mainstream media these days to get the message out and be successful? This example also stands in line with the previous discussed controversy around Muslim dress and marginalization of Muslim women in non-Muslim countries (Evolvi, 2018).

In addition to this critical attitude towards the representation of modest fashion on social media, it was striking that some interviewees were also quite critical about the representation of modest fashion in the mainstream media. Francesca explained that the original goal of the modest fashion industry was to gain attention and recognition from the mainstream media, which, according to all interviewees, has been achieved. However, four interviewees conclude that the mainstream media generally ignores the real gist of what modest fashion stands for and focuses mainly on the fact that it is a multi-billion dollar industry and another place for companies to make a profit. For example, Dilan states that modest fashion is not portrayed accurately in mainstream media, but rather how the mainstream *wants* it to be. In addition, Francesca notes that the mainstream media specifically sheds a light on the influencers and the mainstream fashion industry incorporating modesty in their collections, whereas the authentic modest fashion brands deserve recognition as well. This is an interesting new finding, as the majority of the literature solely emphasizes the positive side of modest fashion’s media coverage. In addition, Robina

makes a critical point about the controversies around Islamic modest clothing in Western societies presented in the mainstream media. She states that the media covered the story of the burkini bans, but that did not tell the *full* story. Robina explains:

The reality is, the French are very particular about their pools and men who wear boardshorts – so swim shorts that look like regular shorts – even they're not allowed to go into France's public pools. And that has been left out [in the media]!

She furthermore explains that the burkini bans were for a limited time period, which was never mentioned in the media. This highlights that lots of western media coverage regarding modest dress present the controversies around it, and mostly from an Islamic perspective. Hoggard (2013) notes that mainstream fashion journalists feel uncomfortable imagining modest clothing as a real fashion story, and modest dressing in the mainstream press seems to cause distress among liberal feminists and right-wing columnists, most likely because of the earlier discussed societal interpretation of Muslim dress discussed by Aslan (2011) and Scott (2009). In addition, Dilan mentions that journalists/bloggers read each other's articles and rewrite the information, which makes the articles are all quite similar. Moreover, they do not truly understand the modest customer and the real situation in the industry, leading to spreading wrong or incomplete messages about modest fashion. Nevertheless, Dilan explains that it all depends on the reader audience, as the regular modest customer is already familiar with all that is written in the mainstream articles, whereas for people who are not that familiar with modest fashion it might be insightful. However, when the media pays more attention to the existing modest customer, it will be a mutual benefit – giving a sense of recognition to the modest customer and the media hosting a new group of readers. Francesca states that it is a search and understanding process for the media what the modest fashion movement is about. It is therefore worth mentioning that all interviewees themselves contribute to the truthful representation of modest fashion to the public. Dilan, Evelyn and Rabia, for example, write their own articles about modest fashion from their perspective, two of the participants are modest fashion influencers, three are members of the global council of modest fashion that organizes various forums/seminars for the public, not to mention the modest fashion entrepreneurs. This thus testifies to the agency of the participants within the modest fashion sector.

Despite the before-mentioned critical voices, there were also positive notes. Some interviewees touched upon the fact that various journalists from different ethnic backgrounds have written very satisfying articles on modest fashion. In addition, British academic Reina Lewis has been mentioned positively in two interviews as well, about her research in modest and Muslim fashion and related topics which have also been extensively analyzed in the theoretical framework of this thesis. For the future, all interviewees have a positive outlook on the existence of modest fashion. Many state that modest fashion will become more normalized, and will exist parallel to all fashion trends in the media magazines, even if that takes time. This also became clear when showing the interviewees the modest fashion campaigns

of Zara, H&M and Uniqlo – that are according to the majority of the interviewees is already an adequate reflection of how modesty is increasingly being incorporated and normalized in everyday global fashion styles. These modest fashion campaigns, which have been featured in various media (both mainstream and digital), were generally positively received by the participants. For instance, Evelyn reflects on the fact that these brands opened the dialogue about modest fashion for the public via their campaigns and that it is good these bigger brands start to think about diversity and cater to other markets as well. However, other interviewees remained critical by connecting these representations of modest fashion to the aspects of diversity, inclusion and sustainability – which will be further clarified in the following section.

#### **4.2.3 Category 3: Modest fashion business**

As stated above, the interviewees had an overall positive attitude towards modest fashion marketing campaigns by mainstream fashion brands. Rosa and Nicole were both very enthusiastic about the modest collections provided by the mainstream fashion industry. Rosa reacted:

It's just so amazing to see this in the market! Like back in the days, like when I was in high school, or elementary school, I would have to go and buy a pair of pants, and make it into a skirt because there were no options for good skirts. Now it's like you can find it everywhere from like any price point. So it's just amazing to see. I think it's great. But it's not good for my wallet!  
[Laughs] (Rosa, Israel)

Rosa and Nicole's responses confirm Tarlo and Moors' (2013) statement that modest fashion engages with and contributes towards mainstream fashion in various ways and is an essential shopping destination for modest wearers, specifically millennial Muslim women. Interestingly, three interviewees touch upon the fact that besides the occasional modest fashion collections, there is still a lack of various versions of particular garment in stores in the West (e.g. long version and short version of a dress or same top with short and long sleeves option). However, Selin notes that these options are actually present in mainstream stores in Turkey and mentions the term "glocalization", which entails according to the Oxford Dictionary: "the tailoring of global techniques and resources to appeal to increasingly differentiated markets". As has become clear from the discussed literature and the interviews, this proves that the global perception of modest fashion already operates in this mutual interdependent understanding of modest fashion in a globalized world. Thus, it should be only a matter of implementing more modest clothing options in the Western regions as well. Nonetheless, a crucial aspect that is observable in the fashion industry is that the integration of modest fashion with the mainstream brands is there, although still minimal, but several interviewees noted it will be more present in the future.

In general, the participants are satisfied with the growth of modest fashion as a market and the representation of modest fashion by the mainstream fashion industry in their campaigns. However, they also criticize three main points: first, there is a contradiction with modest fashion and the unethical mainstream “fast” fashion industry; second, modest fashion is permeated by capitalist logic; and third, there is still not enough diversity and inclusiveness in the fashion industry. The first critical point made by the interviewees when discussing the examples of modest fashion campaigns, is the connection with “fast fashion” which is “a business strategy which aims to reduce the processes involved in the buying cycle and lead times for getting new fashion product into stores, in order to satisfy consumer demand at its peak” (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006, p. 259). Zara, H&M and Uniqlo are considered as fast fashion businesses, which are associated with exploitative business models that mass-produces catwalk trends and is linked to waste, pollution and unsafe workplaces (Hayes, 2021). For example, Farida immediately indicates a certain irony when looking at the modest fashion campaigns of these mainstream brands, since she perceives modest fashion as conscious fashion and finds fast fashion unethical. She herself is modest in her choices and how she lives her life, preferring rather three clothing pieces that are well made by an artisan, are sustainable and therefore ethical, she explains. Also Francesca feels that there is some kind of contradiction in terms of mainstream fashion brands with modest collections. As she and others state, on the one hand, mainstream “fast” fashion brands promote an unethical and unconscious production cycle. On the other hand, mainstream fashion brands make modest fashion accessible to everyone, also lower incomes. Moreover, Robina points out that modesty – from an Islamic perspective – is carried out in a more humble way and thus does not with fit the idea of fast fashion. Nonetheless, Evelyn predicts that in the future the modest fashion industry will be more ethical, as it stands more in line with the conscious mindset behind modest fashion. In addition, Ozara points out that she already notices a sustainable trend in modest fashion in Europe. For instance, the theme of the Modest Fashion Week in Amsterdam in 2019 was “sustainable fashion” and many ethical and sustainable brands promoted their collections. Madina also promotes custom-made abayas based on the philosophy of sustainability with her slow-fashion atelier.

The second point of criticism on the modest fashion campaigns by the mainstream fashion industry is that the interviewees all point out that many mainstream fashion brands’ modest fashion initiatives are commercially oriented and use these types of campaigns only to sell and make a profit. This points connects well to the “feminist consumerism” phenomenon – which, as explained, entails a strategy that uses feminist themes of empowerment to market products for women (Taylor et al., 2016). As Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg (2020) stated, feminism has become such a popular aspect these days and like feminism, modest fashion is circulating in commercial and popular media such as broadcast media and digital social media platforms, thus tying in well with Banet-Weiser’s (2018) definition of popular feminism. Hence, as Madina stated, these brands saw an opportunity to grow their market, so she understands that they are incorporating these modest collections and create modest fashion campaigns – conforming the feminist consumerism strategy (Taylor et al., 2016). In addition,

Dilan and Evelyn note that for these mainstream brands it is all about profits, business, marketing and checking the customer – using the term as a marketing ploy to attract a specific audience. Moreover, Esma adds that “the brands are still very responsive to what is hot and trending, but if the modest fashion concept had not been commercially successful, many brands would probably have stopped quickly promoting it.” Still, she thinks it is commercially smart to release a Ramadan collection, as it is a missed opportunity for brands if they do not respond to occasions like Ramadan as it contains a large customer base. This, in turn, reflects the phenomenon of intersectional feminism, in which one should not assume one concept of women’s identities, but include a wider range of identity characteristics. However, according to Esma, these campaigns must mirror who they are as a brand and what they stand for. In response to the criticism on the act of labeling collections from mainstream fashion brands as “modest”, Robina makes an interesting point by stating that it is now too early not to separate “modest” fashion from other fashions after they have only entered the mainstream fashion market for about five/six years. It will take some time to normalize. For instance, the fashion industry had to effectively meet the needs of all diverse bodies, from plus size to petite fashion, which also took some time she explains. Lastly, Francesca states she does not want modest fashion to just go into a capitalist direction “with glitz and glamour, fame and money, money. We are different from mainstream fashion,” she said.

The third critical point relates to the importance of diversity and inclusiveness in the fashion world – in which, according to all interviewees, modest fashion plays an important role. Esma states that it is important to truly understand the concepts of diversity and inclusion and explains: “Diversity is being invited to the party and inclusivity is being together on the dance floor. And in addition to that I say: the organization of the party must also be together”. She states that makes no sense if a brand launches one “modest fashion” or “sustainable” campaign just once in their fiftieth anniversary and she thinks it is especially important that body positivity is also included in addition to the diversity and inclusion aspect in the fashion industry. Robina and Ozara also agree with that:

It depends on the fashion industry, the fashion industry has to start meeting the needs of everybody. Not just cis, white, thin bodies, and that’s been a problem in the fashion industry from the start... I think they need to become more diverse overall for all different kinds of bodies. (Robina, Canada)

You know, it’s the same with the plus-size, body positivity... That’s the market there, and that’s the type of woman! If you make one dress, you should make the modest version, and you should make the big size version. (Ozara, Turkey)

Robina and Ozara’s statements reflect the previously discussed phenomenon of white feminism (Zakaria, 2021) and again the importance of the notion of intersectional feminism. Robina states she is fine with many mainstream fashion brands portraying hijabi-wearing women as the faces of modest

collections, because they want to tap into a certain market. However, she does notice that these brands do not realize that everyone dresses modestly at one point or another in their lives, which then is a missed opportunity for them to only use a Muslim woman to represent their modest collection. Furthermore, Esma states that it should not be some kind of “window dressing”, just to show to the outside world that brands also take “other” women into account, when in fact they do not. She explains: “That is why brands’ values must match what they communicate”. Yet, there are also brands that have gone wrong with more inclusive marketing campaigns, and this has not gone unnoticed by Esma. She uses the example of makeup brand MAC:

I think there was one time, I think it was a failure of MAC, the make-up brand, that they said in their ad: “Getting ready for Sahūr” – that’s the moment you get up at night to eat [during Ramadan]. And everyone was like: who looks like this with Sahūr?! Everyone just got out of bed, in their pajamas! (Esma, the Netherlands)

This demonstrates that not only for the media as stated before, but also for brands, much more understanding and research is needed when launching campaigns targeting a specific customer group. To avoid these failures, brands need to partner and collaborate with people who really understand the aspect, in this example the Muslim customer. Esma argues that a brand must have a diverse and inclusive internal organization to make this possible, as solely responding to the demand for diversity does not make you a more inclusive brand, which is still too little reflected by the major mainstream brands according to her. However, despite this, a significant number of the interviewees touch upon the fact that they do observe more inclusivity in the fashion industry, specifically referring to the implementation of modest fashion. Evelyn notes that it is very likely that brands nowadays cannot escape being non-inclusive, because of all the commotion about diversity, inclusiveness, body positivity and sustainability in today’s society – they have to open up their market. Moreover, modest fashion represents many cultures and reflects the intersectional nature of the modest fashion sector. As Rabia explains:

It’s so beautiful to see various cultures come together and see what they bring to the forth in the modest fashion market. In some countries around the globe it is minimalistic, you know, not a lot of colors, whereas Africa, maybe even Russia, Indonesia they are very vibrant so, with materials... playing with textiles, with prints and that is the beauty of it – that you can cater to each other, there’s something for everyone. (Rabia, South-Africa)

Unfortunately, the pandemic has brought major consequences and challenges for the global modest fashion sector, and this is something that has come up in almost every interview. For instance, Ozara explains:

...They [authentic modest fashion brands] can't compete with these big, huge brands... How you will compete price wise? And that's still one of the big, big, you know, challenges... I think that the media should take it as responsibility and focus also really more on talented authentic modest fashion. (Ozara, Turkey)

Francesca notes that many brands and people want to take advantage of the modest fashion industry and she is specifically concerned about the authentic brands that are really struggling. As explained in the second chapter, modest fashion brands need to compete with other brands that are bigger and more established, and therefore it is important these brands receive support and investments (DinarStandard, 2020).

#### **4.2.4 Category 4: Political and Societal factors**

As emphasized in previous chapters and confirmed by the interviewees, in today's society there are still uncomfortable reactions to women covering the body, making modest fashion a political phenomenon (Raphael, 2019). Especially when it comes to modest dressing by Muslim women, who are still often marginalized in non-Western societies (Evolvi, 2018; Mahmudova & Evolvi, 2021). Robina makes an interesting point:

The appropriate most accepted performance of masculinity in the West, is for men to dress modestly... Literally from neck tied with a noose down to covering the toes with shoes... Why aren't they held to account for being oppressed? If man shows any kind of skin, it's appalling, appalling for men to show skin. So different bodies hold different privilege. But I think that there's such a fascination with the headscarf... When it comes to men, they're allowed to cover everything. Not a problem. They're not going to get a ticket on the beach, because they're covered from ankle to neck in a scuba diving suit or a surfing, whatever. But a woman will. She's wearing a burkini.

Thus, as she states, different bodies hold different privilege in terms of appearance acceptance which ties into the recurring aspect that fashion only seems to gain the stamp of approval when the white, Western public embraces it (Lodi 2020; Zakaria, 2021). The majorities of the participants think critically about the traditional ideals of beauty and made clear to all strive for the normalization that there is not one type of beauty standard, which aligns with the previous point about diversity and inclusivity in the fashion industry. Furthermore, Esma states that it is still the male-gaze that has quite an effect on how women feel they should dress and is consistent with the feminist argument to dress modestly to reject women's hyper sexualization and focus on female empowerment, as discussed in the theoretical framework (Hahner & Varda, 2012). Further, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, the feeling of confidence and empowerment for women resulting from wearing modest fashion is very prominent

among all interviewees. Dilan states: “So, we have different aspects, where we can look and see modest fashion from different aspects, and we can research from these different aspects... It’s all, it’s very close to the feminist movement.” Moreover, Ozara notes: “I want to define modest fashion as a style that comes from a strong lifestyle that really empowers the women worldwide” and Francesca argues: “modest fashion is to give women more power, more control of their bodies.” Madina explains she prefers to cover more as she believes it is not necessary to showcase your skin too much. Moreover, it is also good to avoid un-wanted male attention. She states: “...some girls see feminism as getting more naked – that can be a choice. But then on the other hand, for modest fashion it is the opposite, but that can also be considered as feminist – it is all about the choice!” Here she refers to Western mainstream media-driven ideologies in which female empowerment is commonly depicted as women with spirited characters who display their femininity by flaunting their bodies, for which modest fashion proves to be a good alternative (Lodi, 2020).

All in all, the four categories discussed in this chapter reveal that the modest fashion supporters see modest fashion campaigns as a good development for more diversity in the fashion industry that strengthens women’s empowerment and agency (including altering the standard beauty ideal) – albeit more research is needed. Moreover, communication, engagement and understanding should stand central and represent the true idea behind modest fashion – including the link with sustainability which reflects the conscious mindset behind modest fashion and is crucial in the communications about modest fashion.

## 5. Conclusion

In light of the twelve interviews with modest fashion supporters to discover their perceptions on the representation of modest fashion in mainstream fashion campaigns and the media, the thematic analysis found that both the mainstream and digital media are indispensable to the modest fashion sector and that the modest fashion supporters, albeit remaining critical, generally have a positive stance towards the implementation of modest fashion campaigns by mainstream fashion brands. They conclude that digital media platforms such as Instagram are highly valuable in the visibility and application of the modest fashion scene and facilitates the sharing, connecting, collaborating and doing business in modest fashion worldwide. They are, however, quite critical about the representation of modest fashion in the mainstream media. Most interviewees agreed that the media has put modest fashion on a pedestal and created a sensation around it, which was needed to generate awareness around the industry. However, both the mainstream media and mainstream fashion industry generally ignore the true essence of what modest fashion stands for and the interviewees conclude that there is still a need for more understanding.

The modest fashion campaigns by Zara, H&M and Uniqlo received generally positive comments from the interviewees, mostly referring to the fact that bigger brands started to think about diversity and cater to other markets with these campaigns. However, this also created resistance from the interviewees and they cite three main points of criticism: first, these campaigns present a contradiction with modest fashion and the unethical mainstream “fast” fashion industry; second, they present a commercial capitalist logic; and third there is not enough diversity and inclusiveness. All emphasize that these brands have to research more and that these campaigns should be a fixed fact within the practices of these brands to be taken seriously. According to Lewis (2013), modesty is a mutable concept that is adopted, modified, rejected, or in some cases imposed on diverse groups of women in various places and times. However, as has been emphasized in previous literature, modest wearers all share a passion for looking fashionable – albeit in line with their personal interpretations of modesty (Lewis, 2013; Lodi, 2020). The interviewees all confirm this statement and therefore this sample presents a strength for this study. In addition, it shows that although these women come from different kinds of regions and religions in the world, they share the same ideas of modesty in that they all agree that the key point of modest fashion is that it creates one’s own identity and lifestyle, and caters to different types of women’s needs – religious and non-religious alike.

Emphasized and common to all women interviewed is the idea that wearing modest fashion is an individual and personal choice of women, which is inherent in the construction of the neoliberal feminist topic (Lewis, 2010; Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg, 2020). Furthermore, all interviewees touch upon the fact that many modest fashion initiatives are commercially minded and that it is a smart marketing strategy to cater to this consumer group. Therefore it became evident that the modest fashion campaigns by mainstream fashion brands were indeed perceived as a corporate strategy embedded in feminist ideas to market products to this group of women, which corresponds to the feminist

consumerism strategy (Taylor et al., 2016). In addition, the results revealed that modest fashion falls under all three previous discussed forms of feminism by Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg (2020). To clarify, modest fashion is perceived as a popular phenomenon in the fashion industry that is present in commercial and popular media and is connected to popular feminist events such as the #MeToo movement (Banet-Weiser, 2014). Further, it connects to neoliberalist feminism as according to the interviewees it offers a form of female power dressing in a neoliberal feminist era (Rottenberg, 2014). Lastly, modest fashion reflects a post-feminism movement, in which the emphasis lies on individualistic choices and agency, and refers to modified relationships between feminism, femininity and popular culture (i.e. fashion) (Gill, 2016). An interesting new theme that has come up is the connection of modest fashion and sustainability. As mentioned before, all interviewees connected the modest fashion campaigns by mainstream fashion brands to the “fast fashion” phenomenon, and continued talking about the relationship and importance of incorporating sustainability into the business models modest fashion, as it should reflect the conscious mindset behind modest fashion.

### **5.1 Societal and theoretical implications**

This study has various societal implications. To start with the relationship between religious/modest dress in public and religious (Muslim) women’s agency. As discussed in this thesis, controversy persists around religious (Islamic) clothing and the modest fashion sector can help to gain greater understanding and recognition in society around religious dress. Second, as previously stated by Brewerd (2003), fashion is an essential element in popular culture and as has become clear from this research, modest fashion gained ground in popular culture as well – reflecting a popular feminist phenomenon (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Third, in spite of the fact that this research is not necessarily aimed for the commercial market, the findings may be useful for marketers or entrepreneurs in modest fashion who seek to expand their position in the modest fashion market. Modest fashion continues to grow in popularity, and gets a wider range of mainstream retail offerings in non-OIC countries (DinarStandard, 2020). In addition, with many countries on lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic, modest fashion fitted in with the global trend of a sharp decline in clothing sales, which had an overall negative impact on the supply chains and the sector’s revenues (Janmohamed, 2020; Elverina & Furinto, 2021; DinarStandard, 2020) and it is therefore necessary to remain on track with the current perspectives on the sector. Lastly, this research contributes to the education about the modest fashion phenomenon, which, as the interviews shown, proved to be of great importance and it is intended to bring more interest in this fashion phenomenon.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to academic research as it is vital that literature on this subject remains current since the modest fashion sector has become one of the largest markets in the global fashion industry and it continues to grow (Radwan et al., 2019). As has been stated before, there is still a lack of research that touches upon the interplay between media, religion and contemporary culture from a gender perspective – which are all aspects modest fashion relates to. This

study also addresses another academic gap in the literature of modest fashion, namely research into the mainstream implementation of modest fashion. Furthermore, this research showed that the theme of sustainability in fashion is closely related to the industry and fits in with a modest philosophy of life, which was not addressed, or only slightly, in previous literature. Therefore, it contributes to an interesting implication for the research topic on modest fashion, and has potential for further research. Another interesting new finding is that modest fashion is not always portrayed accurately in mainstream media, but rather how the mainstream wants it to be – thus presenting a valuable theoretical implication since the majority of the available literature mostly emphasizes the positive side of modest fashion’s media coverage. Further, the research was conducted through qualitative in-depth interviews, a method that has the advantage of capturing respondents’ sense-making practices and perceptions, which is essential in the study of modest fashion as it is embedded in individual and collective beliefs, enabling the academic contribution of this thesis being original and very valuable.

## **5.2 Limitations and Further Research**

This empirical research has some limitations that need to be stated. First, a relatively small sample size has been used to conduct this research. A larger sample size and time period for future studies would provide more comprehensive insights into perceptions on the representation of modest fashion in the fashion industry. In addition, despite the fact that the heterogenous sample for this study is an advantage, a more equal division in terms of backgrounds among the participants might be valuable, e.g. five Muslim, five Christian, five Orthodox Jews and five non-religious – to gain a better representation of the entire modest fashion supporters’ population. Finally, while the coronavirus pandemic made it difficult to conduct face-to-face interviews and imposed online interviews, it would have been more valuable to have face-to-face meetings with the participants to more fully capture their non-verbal communication.

For future research, it could be interesting to study modest fashion campaigns by mainstream fashion brands from the perspectives of the brands/creators themselves, instead of studying the perceptions of the audience (in this case modest fashion supporters), to discover what their intentions and understandings around modest fashion are. Another interesting suggestion for future research could be studying male modesty, since modest fashion is a burgeoning market for men (Writer, 2020). While modesty has been studied from various religious angles already, it is always valuable to repeat older existing studies to discover whether aspects have changed over time, especially because of the rapid developments of digital media and current political events such as #MeToo and other movements which have become more and more prevalent in recent years and could influence perceptions around personal/cultural/social clothing preferences.

## **5.3 Final Note**

The modest fashion sector has become one of the largest markets in the global fashion industry (Radwan et al., 2019) and while from an outsider's perspective modest women may be unexplored consumers, the growing number of women who prefer to dress more covered resulted in greater recognition of the modest fashion phenomenon (Lewis & Tarlo, 2011). However, modest fashion encompasses many elements and is still seen by many as a paradoxical phenomenon (Lodi, 2020). Therefore, this study has contributed to shed light on the perceptions of the modest fashion market, specifically in mainstream fashion campaigns and the media, to dispel these paradoxical interpretations – and emphasize modesty as a lifestyle choice that reflects an empowering fashion style for women, implemented by the mainstream image to cater and to listen to this particular customer base and reflect the conscious mindset behind modest fashion.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Guide Master's Thesis – The World of Modest Fashion

Perceptions of the representation of modest fashion in mainstream fashion campaigns and the media.

Semi-structured: The interview will be semi-structured and includes a few predetermined questions – allowing myself to explore issues brought forward by the interviewee, so I can probe to dig deeper into the interviewees' responses through follow-up questions.

Building rapport: I will draft a short summary of my research project on modest fashion, and send it to my interviewees prior to the interview as a way of informing them of what to expect will be talked about in the interview and why it is an important topic to discuss.

#### Topic List

- Basic introduction;
  - Icebreaker, questions/conversation to build rapport and make the interviewee comfortable and to familiarize her with the subject of the interview
  - Asking how they have been doing
  - Tell them I chose them to speak with because of their involvement with modest fashion → ask further to what they do etc.
  - Start conversation about the modest fashion sector
    - What is modest fashion according to them?
    - What does it include? (e.g. logo's on clothing/fabrics/fittings/etc.)
    - What is their favorite outfit to wear
  - How long have they been involved with modest fashion? What is it that they do?
- The modest fashion movement
  - How would they describe the modest fashion sector?  
(e.g. women's individual freedom of choice on what to wear)
  - What role religion plays in this aspect according to them?
  - What they think the role of media is for modest fashion (e.g. looking for modest fashion looks, brands, designers)
  - Talk about their perspective on the role modest influencers on social media have
  - Fashion/Feminist perspective: explain and ask for perspective on this  
(i.e. oppression of women - women's individual freedom of choice to dress how she pleases)

- Modest fashion designers and brands
  - Which designers they know and admire – why? Which designers have inspired them
- Mainstream fashion brands incorporating modest fashion collections
  - Which mainstream brands do they know that have modest fashion collections, do they know any campaigns of brands
  - Showing them the images of modest fashion campaigns by Zara/H&M/Uniqlo
  - What is their perspective on these advertising campaigns
  - Which campaign do they think represent well the target audience of modest fashion, which doesn't?
- Comments on modest fashion advertising campaigns of mainstream fashion brands
  - Showing them the Tweets on Primark's modest collection campaign
  - What is their perspective on what is said in these Tweets
  - Bottom line for mainstream fashion brands is making money, what role do modest fashion collections play in this aspect according to them?  
(i.e. feminist consumerism → “a corporate strategy that employs feminist themes of empowerment to market products to women” (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 124))
  - Diversity, inclusion and sustainability
- The future of modest fashion
  - How they see the future of modest fashion
  - What role media will play in the subject of modest fashion (e.g. influencers)
  - What are their plans in the modest fashion sector
- Ending: last words; if the interviewee would like to add further thoughts on the subject

# APPENDIX B

## Informed consent form

Informed Consent Form



**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

<b>Project Title and version</b>	The Richly Layered World of the Modest Fashion Market A qualitative study on the perceptions of the representation of modest fashion in mainstream fashion campaigns and the media.
<b>Name of Principal Investigator</b>	Charlotte Smallembroek
<b>Name of Organisation</b>	Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC)
<b>Name of Sponsor</b>	n.a.
<b>Purpose of the Study</b>	This research is being conducted by Charlotte Smallembroek, a Media and Business Master student from the Erasmus University in Rotterdam. I am inviting you to participate in this research project about the modest fashion sector. The purpose of this research project is to fill the gap in the existing scientific knowledge of the topic around the modest fashion sector, and to discover the perception, experiences and attitudes towards modest fashion and modest fashion marketing/advertising campaigns implemented by mainstream fashion brands.
<b>Procedures</b>	You will participate in an interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. You will be asked questions about the modest fashion sector, your experiences and perspectives regarding it, the role of (social) media and I would like to know your perspective on the modest fashion campaigns of mainstream fashion brands. Sample questions include: "What is modest fashion according to you?", "How would you describe the modest fashion movement?", "What is your perspective on these campaigns?", and "Which campaign do you think represent well the target audience of modest fashion, and which does not" [demonstrating a slide with examples of modest fashion campaigns].  In order to adhere to research protocol, this research project involves making audio recordings of interviews with you. This will be done to make sure the findings are more accessible, and help preserve the integrity of the research.  You must be a woman of at least 18 years old and familiar with modest fashion (e.g. dressing modestly yourself).
<b>Potential and anticipated Risks and Discomforts</b>	There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated with participating in this study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

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Informed Consent Form



	Your participation is voluntary and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time.
<b>Potential Benefits</b>	Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results to you. As a result of participating you may better understand the modest fashion sector and mainstream fashion brands' contribution.  The broader goal of this research is to gain a greater understanding of the modest fashion market from a media and business perspective, and to investigate perceptions of the representation of modest fashion in the mainstream fashion industry. Furthermore, this research aims to provide guidance to brands that sell or design modest fashion to stay relevant and attract modest fashion consumers' recognition and loyalty.
<b>Sharing the results</b>	The findings of this study will be used for my Master Thesis and contribute to the graduation of my Master's Degree (MA) in Media and Business.  In case of success, the research findings might be re-used and shared more broadly in a later stadium through a publication/conference and/or further research.
<b>Confidentiality</b>	Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only trained research staff will have access to your responses. Within these restrictions, results of this study will be made available to you upon request.  As indicated above, this research project involves making audio recordings of interviews with you. Transcribed segments from the audio recordings may be used in published forms (e.g., journal articles and book chapters). In the thesis and in the case of publication, pseudonyms will be used. Care will be taken in that your anonymity will not be endangered. The audio recordings, forms, and other documents created or collected as part of this study will be stored in a secure location in the researchers' offices or on the researchers password-protected computers and will be destroyed within ten years of the initiation of the study.

Informed Consent Form



<b>Right to Withdraw and Questions</b>	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalised or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.  If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the primary investigator:  Charlotte Smallembroek <a href="mailto:457057cs@student.eur.nl">457057cs@student.eur.nl</a> +31 6 31 99 36 67	
<b>Statement of Consent</b>	Your accord/signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.  I have been given the guarantee that this research project has been reviewed and approved by the ESHCC Ethics Review Committee [and IF APPLICABLE: by the EU Ethics Committee]. For research problems or any other question regarding the research project, the Data Protection Officer of Erasmus University, Marlon Dominus, MA ( <a href="mailto:fx@eur.nl">fx@eur.nl</a> )  If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.	
<b>Audio recording</b>	I consent to have my interview audio recorded <input type="checkbox"/> yes <input type="checkbox"/> no	
<b>Secondary use</b>	I consent to have the anonymised data be used for secondary analysis <input type="checkbox"/> yes <input type="checkbox"/> no	
<b>Signature and Date</b>	<b>NAME PARTICIPANT</b>	<b>NAME PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR</b>
	<b>SIGNATURE</b>	<b>SIGNATURE</b>
	<b>DATE</b>	<b>DATE</b>

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APPENDIX C1

Modest fashion campaigns by Zara, H&M and Uniqlo demonstrated during interviews



## APPENDIX C2

Tweets criticizing Primark presented during interviews

 **Nafisa Bakkar**  
@NafisaBakkar

A well known fashion brand announcing a modest collection feels so dated to me now

Do we still use the term "modest fashion"?

 **Primark**  @Primark

Discover The Modest Collection, designed for those who want to be more covered while tapping into the seasons biggest trends 🙌 [ms.spr.ly/6012Tvg1w](https://ms.spr.ly/6012Tvg1w) #Primark #fashion



10:54 PM · Sep 28, 2020 

 81  4  Share this Tweet

 **Saja Elmishri news**  
@ElmishriSaja

Replying to @Primark

I mean where do I start? Why is there this need to separate 'modest' clothes from normal clothes??? Also I will be interested to know who's made your clothes, the fabric material used and how much you've paid the garment workers that's produced this 'modest collection'.

12:10 AM · Sep 29, 2020 

 11   Share this Tweet

## APPENDIX D

Dear X,

I'm sending you this email as [explanation how I found participant]. My name is Charlotte Smallenbroek, a Dutch Master's student from the Erasmus University in Rotterdam (Master in Media and Business) and I am writing my Master's thesis about Modest Fashion from a media and business perspective. Recently I got the opportunity to organize a Modest Fashion Masterclass for students and I'm completely fascinated by everything around this topic.

I am now sending you this message to ask if you might be able to help me with my Master's thesis – as I am doing a qualitative study and I need modest fashion enthusiasts (entrepreneurs/experts/bloggers) such as you to conduct interviews with (via Zoom/Teams). It will only take up  $\pm$  45-60 minutes and we can do it anytime that suits you best. Since you have a lot of experience in researching/doing business in the modest fashion topic, you would be a perfect participant for my master research.

We will basically talk about the modest fashion sector, your experiences and perspectives regarding it, the role of (social) media and I would like to know your perspective on the modest fashion campaigns of mainstream fashion brands.

It would mean a lot to me if you can help me, so I can fill up the academic research gap of the inspiring modest fashion market!

I really hope to hear you from you!

Warm regards, Charlotte

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Dear X,

My name is Charlotte Smallenbroek, a Dutch Master's student from the Erasmus University in Rotterdam (Master in Media and Business) and I am writing my Master's thesis about Modest Fashion from a media and business perspective. Recently I got the opportunity to organize a Modest Fashion Masterclass for students and I'm completely fascinated by everything around this topic.

When I did my research in modest fashion, I encountered you on the Instagram page of 'X'/the book of Hafsa Lodi! I am now sending you this message to ask if you might be able to help me with my Master's thesis - as I am doing a qualitative study and I need modest fashion enthusiasts (entrepreneurs/experts/bloggers) such as you to conduct interviews with (via Zoom/Teams)! It will only take  $\pm$  45-60 minutes and we can do it anytime that suits you best.

It would mean a lot to me if you can help me, so I can fill up the academic research gap of the inspiring modest fashion market!

I really hope to hear you from you!

Warm regards,

Charlotte