

# Unveiling The Secret Stories: Conservative Female Blogosphere in Turkey

**Melike Aslı Sim**

phd student in design, technology and society  
koç university  
melikeasli@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

*This article examines the conservative fashion blogosphere in Turkey from a gendered perspective, focusing on how blogging reshapes conservative women's cultural environment and how these women negotiate disclosure, privacy and modesty in an age of extreme self-display. Presenting the findings from the content analysis of 27 fashion blogs in Turkey, the study reveals that home remains to be the "proper place" for conservative women but online interaction extends their private sphere to the public realm. Creating their own fashion styles as well as their own definitions of Islam, bloggers use their blogs as an advice-giving tool and a brand-making platform that in turn provides employment opportunities. Given its integration into the neoliberal economic system through a conservative framework, Turkey and its female blogosphere constitutes a good starting point to investigate the complicated articulation of Islamization with the global market system.*

**keywords:** *fashion blogs, privacy, veiling, publicity, Islam, content analysis*

## Résumé

### Révélér les histoires secrètes : la blogosphère conservatrice de femmes en Turquie

*Cet article examine la blogosphère de la mode conservatrice en Turquie d'un point de vue de genre, en se concentrant sur la façon dont les blogs réorganisent l'environnement culturel des femmes conservatrices et comment ces femmes gèrent la divulgation, la vie privée et la pudeur à une époque d'autodéclaration extrême. En présentant les résultats de l'analyse du contenu de 27 blogs de mode en Turquie, l'étude révèle que "l'endroit convenable" pour les femmes conservatrices est toujours la maison. Toutefois, l'interaction en ligne étend leur domaine privé au domaine public. En créant leurs propres styles de mode ainsi que leurs propres définitions de l'islam, les blogueurs utilisent leurs blogs comme un outil de conseil et une plate-forme de marque qui, à son tour, offre des possibilités d'emploi. Compte tenu de son intégration dans le système économique néolibéral à travers un cadre conservateur, la Turquie et sa blogosphère féminine constituent un bon point de départ pour étudier l'articulation complexe de l'islamisation avec le système du marché mondial.*

**mots-clés :** *blog de mode, vie privée, voile, publicité, islam, analyse de contenu*

## Öz

### Gizli Hikâyelerin Örtüsünü Kaldırmak: Türkiye'de Muhafazakâr Kadın Blogları

*Bu makale, Türkiye'deki muhafazakâr moda blog dünyasını, blog yazmanın muhafazakâr kadınların kültürel dünyasını yeniden şekillendirmesini ve günümüz gösteri çağında bu kadınların kendilerini açığa çıkarma, mahremiyet ve tevazu konularını nasıl tartıştıklarını, toplumsal cinsiyet perspektifinden inceliyor. Türkiye'deki 27 muhafazakâr moda blogunu, içerik analizi yöntemiyle inceleyen çalışma, kadın blog yazarlarının bu platformdaki aktivitelerini ve muhafazakâr kimliklerini İslam'ın şartlarına göre nasıl müzakere ettiğini araştırıyor. Sonuçlar gösteriyor ki; ev muhafazakâr kadınlar için "uygun alan" olarak kalırken, çevrimiçi etkileşim özel alanın sınırlarını genişleterek onu kamusal alana dönüştürüyor. Kendi moda stillerini yaratırken, İslam'ı da kendilerine göre tanımlayan Türkiye'nin muhafazakâr kadın blog yazarları bloglarını, hem bir tavsiye paylaşımı mekanizması hem de markalaşma platformu olarak kullanıyor. Muhafazakâr bir çerçevede neoliberal ekonomik sisteme entegre olan Türkiye ve onun kadın blog dünyası, global pazar sistemine karmaşık bir şekilde eklenilen İslamlaşma sürecini araştırmak için iyi bir başlangıç noktası oluşturuyor.*

**anahtar sözcükler:** *moda blogları, mahremiyet, tesettür, tanınma, İslam, içerik analizi*

## **Introduction**

The infrastructure of Web 2.0 has enabled Internet users to interact and collaborate with each other, allowing social media to become one of the most powerful tools with a major impact on our communication styles, socialization and self-formation processes. Serving as a platform where “self” is made and remade, Web 2.0 stands as a medium for women to wriggle out their gender roles and negotiate patriarchal hegemony. Specifically, blogs appear as a reflexive medium for women to interact and communicate with each other, and also provide the digital spaces through which they reflect on their status in the society (Zareie, 2013). The blogosphere offers Muslim women a wide range of possibilities to discuss social norms and hierarchies, and at times challenge authorities in their countries. As is well known, social media played a significant role in the Arab Spring in Middle East in late 2010, enabling uprisings to have an autonomous communicative capacity away from power structures (Castells, 2012). Thus, thanks to social media’s affordances regarding leadership and empowerment (Radsch and Khamis, 2013), Arab women redefined their activism, empowerment and resistance through social media and the Western world was introduced to “a new image of women in the Middle East: women who are courageous, independent, and technologically savvy” (Eltantawy, 2013, p. 765). Similarly, despite death threats, female bloggers in Afghanistan resisted patriarchal attitudes by posting about prostitution, poverty and their causes.

Despite the effective use of blogs by non-Western women, studies of social media have remained decidedly Eurocentric, where Middle Eastern women are depicted as “oppressed”, silenced and in need of Western intervention. As argued by Nahed Eltantawy, “the traditional image of the Middle Eastern woman that has long dominated Western media is one of an oppressed and exoticized creature, controlled by men and religion” (2013, p. 765). Veiling has also intensified the stereotypical image of Muslim women who needed to be liberated from their patriarchal roots. The veiling of Muslim women regarding its symbolic meaning has remained a controversial debate in the West (Gabriel and Hannan, 2011). Mahreen Kasana targets the Orientalist view that dominates the Western scholarship: “A political reality surfaced and became uncomfortably obvious. Nonwhite voices, particularly Muslim and female, were treated and received as anthropological projects but rarely as sources of personal musings, in comparison to the kind of treatment White female bloggers received” (2014, p. 237).

Albeit the persistence of such Orientalist depictions, Muslim women participate actively in blogging scene, and yet, research on the presence and representation of Muslim women on social media within non-Western contexts such as Turkey is limited. The rooted dichotomy between Islam and secularism, neoliberal economic restructuring via conservatism, and the patriarchal nature of the country, make Turkey a unique example. As feminist scholars indicate,

patriarchy is embedded in the laws, state institutions and social norms of Turkey, affecting women's self-formation in private, socio-economic and political life (Kandiyoti, 1991; Kogacioglu, 2004). There are many determining factors of women's economic empowerment including, the welfare state policies in Turkey, family-oriented care regime- based on the patriarchal male breadwinner model (Ilkkaracan, 2012; Kılıç, 2008) and the confinement of women to traditional gender roles (Dedeoğlu, 2012). Blogs provide a scope for an enormous variety of expressions within a simple, restricted format and women's use of blogs may result with job opportunities. In terms of conservative women's blogging practices, specifically fashion blogging, led women to collaborate with the veiling fashion industry and create their own brands giving them the opportunity to participate in the labor market. Yet, the relationship between the rising phenomenon of blogging and how it may affect women's self-formation in patriarchal societies remains to be a vague issue that deserves further attention with particular focus on digital media and feminist theory.

Deploying content analysis as the main method, the study casts light on the fashion blogging practices of conservative women in Turkey, as well as their motivations and expectations behind such practices. The fashion blogosphere is a fertile ground for exploring the blogging activities of these women as it represents the tastes of the conservative Turkish women, their own definitions of Islam and relationship with veiling fashion. Thus, this analysis explores Islamic/secular, modern/traditional and pleasure/exploitation dichotomies by digging into the visual terrain. The content analysis was conducted on a sample of blog posts published in Blogger.com, Wordpress.com or personal websites by "conservative" female bloggers in Turkey. The blogs were chosen randomly by searching keywords such as; "Islamic fashion", "modest fashion", "Islamic blogger", "tesettür fashion", "conservative fashion" in Google. The term "conservative" here refers to female Muslim bloggers, who practice their religion according to Islamic rules and codes and wear headscarf or veil. The term "conservative" is chosen as it implies a restrained style, favoring Islamic views and values, being a productive term to define women who are bound by Islamic principles and who are specifically veiled. Given that not all Muslim women are necessarily veiled and there are various forms of veiling in different spatialities, other alternatives such as "Muslim female blogosphere" or "Islamic female blogosphere" were not preferred, since neither would sufficiently define the bloggers concerned here. New veiling fashion comes with a new *habitus* based on the rising Islamic bourgeoisie and the contemporary modern, urban character of Islamic dress is different than the traditional veiling that are also at times in dispute. As Göle claims, "Islamic public visibilities are not implicitly embodied in Muslim *habitus* but they mark a break with traditions" (2002, p. 188). Although the study encompasses the bloggers with an Islamic lifestyle and ethical understanding, they differ in their self-reflections in online environments but usually preserve their conservative identities. Thus, apart from symbolic

and ideological distinctions terms like “*Islamic, traditional, Muslim*” convey, “conservative”, as an operational term, is used to define and distinguish veiled fashion bloggers among all other fashion bloggers.

Drawing on the emerging work on the role of new communication technologies in generating socio-political changes in non-Western societies (Eltantawy, 2013; Zareie, 2013), this paper investigates how these bloggers, through their media making practices, negotiate their conservative identities in relation to the tenets of Islam and how Islam’s principles interact within the realm of Web 2.0. By tenets of Islam, I understand a principle, belief, or doctrine generally held to be true by members of the religion and referred to Islamic sources of guidance, the Qur’an, Sunnah<sup>1</sup> and scholarly rulings (Boulanouar, 2006). At the same time, these are operational definitions in that being conservative is shaped relationally and through material practices within the everyday, and in this case, blogging. It is this very fluid and contested nature of what it means to be conservative that I aim to uncover through this study. Given the scarcity of content analysis on blogging from a gendered perspective within non-Western settings, this research is an important contribution that examines the narratives and disclosure practices of Muslim female bloggers as they navigate a conservative domestic sphere and a mediatised global culture. Specifically, this study seeks to understand what motivates these women to blog about fashion, consumption and child-rearing and what role their conservative politics and class distinction have to play in their digital identity formation. As far as their practices within social media are concerned, the conditions of this performance – state politics, rising Islamic bourgeoisie, and the articulation of neoliberalism with Islam – present a complicated picture with respect to how blogging can be understood in the context of Turkey.

Therefore, section one reviews the literature on women’s social media participation and specifically fashion blogging. Section two concentrates on the veiling and veiling fashion, examining the socio-political situation in Turkey based on Islam/secularism dichotomy and construction of the “new Muslim woman” image in Turkey. Section three explains the methodology of this study illustrating the details of the content analysis conducted. Section four presents the findings, discussing issues such as private life, self-branding and publicity, commercial tendencies and relationship with Islam. Finally, concluding remarks are presented.

### **Blogging as a Trend and Fashion Blogging**

In the ongoing debates between Western and non-Western scholars about the role of social media in women’s lives in patriarchal societies, it is widely expected that “social media could be an empowering tool for women, enhancing their participation in several facets of their lives, including the legal,

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1 The recorded sayings and behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad.

economic, political and social aspects” (Arab Social Media Report 2011, p. 9). Given the important role of social media and blogging during the Arab Spring, women’s involvement in the public sphere as activists has been realized via the affordances of digital media. While claims regarding historical ruptures stemming from technology might be misleading, the traditional portrayal of Middle Eastern women also started to partly change thanks to the opportunities of digital media and specifically blogging.

New media, based on computer usage and interaction, made user-generated content available along with the rise of social media websites. Scholars such as Henry Jenkins (2006) have emphasized the co-creativity aspects of social media where fans are empowered by being involved in cultural production<sup>2</sup>. Social media platforms have materially broadened the access and ease of production, inviting users to co-create content and value (Jenkins, 2006; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Fashion blogs are subsets of blogs that cover the fashion industry, clothing, and personal style. Parallel to the rise of weblogs and the effect of new media, fashion blogging has grown increasingly. As of July 2010, slightly more than 2 million bloggers were classified as being “with an industry of fashion” (Rocamora, 2011, p. 409).

Scholars have examined fashion blogging from a variety of perspectives. In her qualitative study, Tara Chittenden (2010) uses fashion to examine the identity construction process of ten teenage female bloggers, while Minh-ha Pham (2011) evaluates the political limits and possibilities of fashion-themed blogs. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2011) draws attention to “self-disclosure” in the context of a post-feminist era wherein young women are encouraged to use social media to brand themselves. Specifically, fashion blogosphere stands as a critical platform where user participation becomes a particular form of labor for promoting fashion products. Along these lines, Alice E. Marwick argues that bloggers constitute the promoters of neoliberal capitalism as enabling self-actualization through entrepreneurial fashion blogging where cultural labor turns into a capitalist business practice (2013b). Women turn to digital media to “be social”. By foregrounding their creative aspirations above all, bloggers are able to reconcile internal motivations with expected demands of audiences and advertisers.

Adam Arvidsson’s research points to “‘socially recognized self-realization’ as participants’ primary motivation for online social production” in which people

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2 Scholars have criticized Jenkins for his tendency to overstate the creativity of users and neglect processes of exploitation. For instance, Christian Fuchs (2014) draws attention to extraction of surplus value within spaces such as Facebook and Google. Similarly, Mark Andrejevic (2011) argues that user participation in social network sites is a form of exploitation and alienation since users’ time and energies have been utilized as an unpaid form of work. However, this pleasure vs. exploitation discourse is not the particular focus of this study.

collaborate, both for achieving pleasure and also peer recognition (2008, p. 332). As Mark Deuze (2007, p. 77) suggests, "people seem to be increasingly willing to participate voluntarily in the media making process to achieve what can be called a networked reputation". This situation is also closely related to what Marwick calls "micro-celebrities" - a term used to address being famous within a niche group, either via self promotion or through the recognition of others (2013a). She describes "micro-celebrity" as a fan-based self-presentation technique adopted within social media to gain publicity and attention. Thus, dressing up for their audience, achieving self-realization and publicity becomes one of the main concerns of fashion bloggers' online social production on a personal level.

### **Reconfiguration of Veil in a Neoliberal Islamic Context and New Muslim Women in Turkey**

Given the rise of the veiling fashion industry locally and globally, Islamic fashion is one of the most explored topics in Western and non-Western contexts and has become a topic of interest for various sorts of disciplines from fashion studies to sociology and anthropology. Focusing on Britain, North America, and Turkey, Reina Lewis (2015) examines Muslim fashion opposing the suggestion that being a Muslim is incompatible with Western modernity and analyzes the ways young Muslim women negotiate their cultural identities using fashion. Gabriel and Hannan (2011) target the ill-informed thoughts upon veiling as a symbol of cultural backwardness in the West and propose new ways of looking at the issue, including more empathy, less subjectivity and careful examination of the motivations of veiled Muslim women. Based on the Qur'an, the meaning behind veiling has also been explored by Elif Deniz, who reported that "this bodily practice is not only affected by religious orders but started to be managed under a variety of pressures coming from the modern life circumstances, especially the rising veiling fashion phenomenon in the last decades" (2014, p. 247). Veiling and covered dress have often been discussed in instrumentalist terms, as women cover "for acquiring freedom and movement" or "as a form of identity politics" (Tarlo and Moors, 2013, p. 5). By veiling, the body of the woman is produced as a site of religious stratification as well as cultivating the distinctions between piety and class (Gökarıksel and Secor, 2013). Post-colonial scholar Saba Mahmood (2005) underlines the necessity to look from the perspectives of women who are covered, asserting that there is a religious motivation behind this covering.

Much has been written about the veiling fashion industry in Turkey in relation to Islam and capitalism (Gökarıksel and Secor, 2009; 2012), modernity and civilization (Göle, 1996) and how it is connected to neoliberal policies experienced in Turkey (Gökarıksel and Mitchell, 2005; Kılıçbay and Binark, 2002). For instance, Cihan Tuğal argues that "although neoliberalism was imposed from above and resisted from below, it came to be embraced in Turkey in the name of Islam and democracy" (2012, p.23). Many scholars conducted research

on the social and political implications of headscarf which has been a debated issue since the formation of the Turkish Republic based on secularist principles (Sayan-Cengiz, 2016; Özcan, 2015).

The relationship between veiling and the fashion industry in Turkey has deepened within the context of neoliberal economic restructuring, the subjection of the veil to new regulations, and the resurgence of Islamic identities worldwide (Gökarıksel and Secor, 2009). According to Gökarıksel and Secor (2009) veil is regarded as traditional while fashion is identified with modernity and they may seem incompatible with each other. However, with an increasing diversity of brands and ever-changing styles, veiling-fashion has been on the rise in Turkey. As they state, "veiling is undertaken in relation to the moral code of Islam, but fashion, as consumption works as part of an ever-shifting economy of taste and distinction" (2012, p. 847). So, practitioners of veiling fashion try to negotiate their cultural identity between Islam and aesthetics, politics, and pleasures of their socio-spatial environments (Gökarıksel and Secor, 2012).

According to Deniz, "from 1980's to 2000's, the practice of veiling has constantly gained new meanings because of Islamist social and political mobilization, engagement with global market economy, fusion of neoliberalism and Islamism" (2014, p. 242). The rise of neoliberal politics and conservatism under the AKP rule has caused a growth in the veiling<sup>3</sup> fashion industry in Turkey. Foreign capital investment as well as Islamic enterprises were encouraged. Based on Gökarıksel and Secor's (2010) survey, 200 veiling-fashion firms in Turkey have been in operation within the context of a burgeoning Islamic market. Along with the party politics, the visibility of veiled women who dress up modestly has risen and a new form of dressing called *Tesettür* (originally means a cover or curtain in Arabic) has become popular among the new Islamic bourgeoisie women. With the rise of conservative parties in politics after 1980s led this new rich Islamic class grow in urban areas which also brought the development of new *tesettür* firms using the term to market their products. "Tekbir" (saying *Allahu ekber* which means Allah is the one and only) is the foremost and largest veiling-fashion company both in Turkey and in the world.

Being a controversial issue, "female headscarf has been an iconic and multilayered symbol of the struggle between the secularists and Islamists over Turkey's democratization and whether the headscarf is a symbol of religious freedom or the oppression of women" (Özcan, 2015, p. 699). Wearing headscarves in public institutions were banned in 1980s with the purpose of not damaging the "modern" image of a secular, democratic Turkey. According to Gökarıksel and Mitchell, the reason was that "for them veiling is a practice

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3 Veiling here refers to various forms of head coverings adopted by Muslim women, including headscarf, hijab, not full-face veils, known as niqab or burqa since they are not very common in Turkey.



not only of 'dark and distant lands' but also of the 'dark and distant (Ottoman) past', when Muslim women's veiling was the norm" (2005, p. 147). As F. Sayan Cengiz points out "headscarf has come to represent portrayals of society as polarized between two sections: Islamic and secular", and this is problematic since "the headscarf gets to be loaded with essential connotations: women with headscarves are attributed a fixed and reified identity, marked as being representatives of one lifestyle pitted against the other" (Sayan-Cengiz, 2016, p. 3). However, claiming the bodily presence of the veiled woman as the sole determinant of the transformation of modern public sphere in Turkey, Göle (1996) differentiates between the headscarf and veil. Accordingly, headscarf remains in traditional sphere being inherited from generation to generation, while veil is possessed as a modern symbol of transformation from traditional spheres to modern spheres, thus, as a result of criticism to modernity, new veiling reflects the otherness of Islam against West (Göle, 1996).

The rise of the AKP as the governing party transformed these dynamics. The Kemalist state is being transformed and Turkey has undergone neoliberal and conservative changes. While legally lifting the headscarf ban in Turkish universities, the AKP also kept politically targeting women's bodies by intervening in women's rights in issues like abortion, number of kids etc. Marriage and family life, especially motherhood is being promoted<sup>4</sup>.

Yıldız Atasoy states that "under the specific conditions of Turkey, changes in the Kemalist state are transforming the old modalities of public space organized for state dominated ways of life, including religion and private space has long been crafted for the home, family, and faith" (2009, p. 18-19). Aiming to reconfigure society through a neoliberal-discursive synthesis (Atasoy, 2009), AKP's "the return to 'Islamic roots' approach was an essential element in the ideological quest for the inclusion of Islam in the neoliberal market and the religious legitimacy of capitalist development itself" (Moudouros, 2014, p. 4).

Statistics prove an increase in headscarved women's images in newspapers between 2002-2012, when the "ideal woman image for conservative middle and upper classes is redefined" (Özcan, 2015, p. 701). While conservative programmes and commercials in pro-government TV channels support the veiling fashion industry, specifically, Emine Erdoğan has also been the topic of many newspapers and "her fashion choices became the focus of two-page spreads and interviews" (Özcan, 2015, p. 706). Backed by the support of political and social environment, the digital era witnesses more women creating their own styles.

4 President Erdoğan's statement in the opening ceremony of KADEM's (Women and Democracy Foundation) new building that "a woman is a half woman if she rejects motherhood" is an example of such interventions (Erdoğan June 5, 2016). Additionally, state incentives will be given to those who are married before the age of 27 (*T.C. Resmi Gazete*, 14 December 2015).

The ideal image of a secular woman was a modern, unveiled one who needed to be liberated from her patriarchal ties while AKP's "ideal woman" image (Özcan, 2015) is modern, urban, veiled, tasteful, educated and mother. Currently, a new Muslim bourgeoisie appears with a new *habitus* as the veiling fashion industry grows with their clothing and consumer life styles reflecting these women's social positions in terms of class (Bourdieu, 1984). In an open economy regime under 'moderate Islamic' AKP government, the 'conservative Muslim bourgeoisie' adapted to the economic circumstances (Buğra and Savaşkan, 2014). The 1980s relatively modest headscarf style has been replaced by today's colorful, shiny, diverse head coverings and leggings, jeans and tunics. The new Muslim woman is defined as fashionable, "increasingly savvy about creating her own style, who wants to catch the eye, and who is often able and willing to pay the price has entered into the public imagination" (Gökarksel and Secor, 2009, p. 14). Thus, veiling-fashion is involved in constructing new ideas about femininity, taste, social status and distinction (Saktanber, 2002; Secor, 2002). According to Göle, "the new veiling represents the public and collective affirmation of women who are searching for recognition of their Muslim identity through its expression-that is, through Islamism" (1996, p. 23). Producers and consumers of veiling fashion construct new Muslim subjectivities where conservative women who were once pushed to the periphery have now become part of the mainstream culture with the advent of neoliberalism and conservatism that Turkey faces.

As supporters or members of veiling fashion industry in Turkey, conservative bloggers use blogs as an advice-giving tool or a brand-making platform where they can show their works, exchange their views with their audience and gain publicity. They interact and collaborate with each other, unite and form informal groupings, turn their hobbies into job opportunities promoting their own or other brands. A mutual collaboration between brands and fashion bloggers continues by attending to blogger events, fashion shows or award ceremonies. Branding and advertising becomes an indispensable part of fashion blogging as this mutual relationship is reinforced.

Modesty is an important tenet of Islam and sometimes this notion can be challenged by the secret stories narrated in blog posts. Through these stories and visuals shared, blogs appear as platforms where private and public spheres are blended and blogging reshapes conservative women's cultural environment, presenting opportunities particularly in urban patriarchal societies. As patriarchy is embedded in private and public realms through gendered socialization processes, public/private space is not neutral as defined by social relations of inclusion and exclusion (Göle, 2002). In this regard, "public Islam needs to redefine and recreate the borders of the interior, intimate, illicit gendered space (*mahrem*)" (Göle, 2002, p. 188). New codes of performances are already in process in online environments where women discuss about various issues like marriage, sexuality and employment (Piela, 2012). "In the online discussions,

women do not contest the public/private binary itself; however, they argue against static understandings of it which define women's functions in society in a very traditional (or 'cultural') way (Piela, 2012, p. 142). Thus, private/public distinction is blurred in digital spaces and reshaping the borders of the public sphere, blogs appear as reflexive tools which women use for socializing, self-formation or publicity in the digital world. Furthermore, being part of a celebrity culture at a certain level constitutes the negotiation of a conservative community structure with the contemporary display culture. Therefore, it is useful to investigate the tensions between private and public spheres to see how conservative female bloggers in Turkey present themselves in their blogs and how they reflect on, represent, construct and reproduce their identities as individuals, content creators, and members of an online community.

## Methodology

Focusing on variables such as *blog topic*, *blog posts*, *blog titles* in terms of identifying the key narratives, I have conducted a quantitative content analysis of 27 fashion blogs. The data obtained was then used for a qualitative analysis of the texts posted. Although blog posts may contain photos or other multimedia content, the analysis is limited to the textual material. The 27 blogs from which data were collected belong to amateur or highly professional and popular blog writers, who are all veiled Muslim women living in Turkey. The blogs examined in this study are fashion blogs and bloggers are self-defined fashion bloggers. The content of their blogs are concerned with veiling fashion. Nineteen blogs use Blogger.com as their main interface while two bloggers' interface is Wordpress.com. Six bloggers have their own websites.

The sample of this study was drawn between the years 2013-2016. All samples were obtained by using the random selection website Random.org. All blog posts of each blog and all the paragraphs in each post were numbered separately. For every blog, five blog posts from each year were chosen randomly by a given random generator. As a result, a total of 949 units were collected. The title, the lead paragraph and a randomly selected paragraph of each blog entry were analyzed as separate units of analyses. Titles of the blog entries and the paragraphs were analyzed separately from each other and treated as two distinct data sets.

While selecting the blogs, demographic data like gender and age of bloggers were also considered. Accordingly, young (22-29)<sup>5</sup>, veiled women who write personal blogs and define themselves as "fashion bloggers" were chosen. The location of the bloggers ranged from metropolitan cities like Istanbul to more conservative cities like Konya.

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5 Only nine out of twenty-seven bloggers mention their ages.

The aim of this content analysis was to code paragraphs from blogs in terms of the personal information revealed in the blog posts, and of their relationship with the tenets of Islam, as well as to understand the main motivations behind the blogging activity. For these purposes, items were coded into six main categories with respect to blog post and unit characteristics, including self, product-brand info, private life, relationship with bloggers and readers, and morals. The coders were asked to decode 41 categories, containing origin and type of the unit, blogger characteristics, personal information and family relations, occupation and education levels, religious beliefs, fashion styles, interests, emotions, relations with the audience and other bloggers, relations with the companies, sponsors, cultural preferences, gender issues, etc. References to brand names, advertisements, fashion styles, private information, relationship with the husband and children, leisure and consumption activities, cultural preferences, opinions about social issues, morals and Islamic values were coded under subtypes.

Two independent coders coded the blog posts. While the first coder coded all the units and was the primary coder of the content, to ensure a level of consistency in coding, the second coder analyzed a random sample of 95 units about 10% percent of the entire sample. Krippendorff's Alpha was calculated to measure the inter-coder reliability, or the level of agreement between the coders. The alpha coefficients ranged from 0,7161 to 1. The reliability is accepted when the alpha is greater than 0.7, and all measures were completed after the second training reaching a high level of reliability on all variables.

As this study is limited to a text-based analysis, further research is necessary on evaluating the visuals posted by the conservative fashion bloggers. Multimedia content has gained more popularity along with the rise of applications like Instagram and Snapchat. The advent of technology provides bloggers the opportunity to synchronize their all data by only using smart phones. Future research would definitely benefit from findings of visual expressions of communities of style. Furthermore, this study is based on a content analysis where units are randomly chosen. An ethnographic study, with in-depth interviews, would be an asset in order to understand the motivations behind female blogging activities.

### **Findings – Unveiling the Stories**

The content analysis reveals that the average Turkish-language blog is single-authored, covering different issues such as veiling fashion and personal events in the blogger's life. Blog infrastructures are open for comments and blogs contain relatively few links (only 44 out of 949). As an interface, most bloggers prefer Blogger.com for its user-friendly infrastructure. 10% of the units come from press releases or sponsors and the rest of the units are blogger's personal entries. In terms of the contents of the blog posts, 10% of the units give advice or recommendations mainly on clothing styles or fashion, while 15%

of them are advertisements of fashion products. The rest of the blog posts are journal or diary type texts and express opinions of the bloggers mostly about fashion and other daily routines.

### **Private Life**

One blogger gives an excuse to her audience why she neglected her blog lately: *"Sorry for not being here for a long time, but you know, I am a mother now."* Generally written by young females, personal fashion blogs are primarily based on personal experiences on style and fashion. However, when it comes to "motherhood", the findings reveal that as soon as they become mothers, their attitudes switch towards motherly issues and blogs start being neglected as motherhood comes with extra domestic labor. As a social construction, motherhood is seen as something to be proud of and worth mentioning. Thus, sometimes this results with the neglect of the blog's fashion content and bloggers start talking about their experiences as mothers.

The results show that 8% of the units give reference specifically to motherhood experiences, 11% of them to marriage and family life, and 5% of them to their own children. Encouraged in Islam, marriage is seen "as the 'completion' of every human being as well as an act that protects modesty" (Boulanouar 2006, p. 136). As the current state policies define women's roles primarily within the boundaries of the family, the content of the blogs reveal that this role is fulfilled. Yet, men as breadwinners (Kılıç, 2008) are socially expected to satisfy and comfort both their wives and mothers. This is shown in an advertisement: *"Buy this jewellery, get one free! Make your mother happy too."*

If their post is about motherhood or pregnancy, bloggers openly share private information as stated in a post accompanied by a visual of her blood coming from her back: *"This is my blood, I recommend you to try hacamat<sup>6</sup> if you are pregnant. Such a relief!"* Blogs include as private information as cycles of menstruation, breastfeeding, physical body changes and shape, or details regarding pregnancy. There is also a tendency to feel to be "the best mother" since the results reveal many criticisms of other mothers for hiring a nanny, using birth control or for not breastfeeding, thus turning motherhood into a rivalry platform. One blogger criticises a mother because she eats her dinner while the nanny is taking care of the child in a restaurant: *"Is this motherhood? I confuse which one is the mother."*

Bloggers sometimes share secret stories, including their relationship with the father and childhood memories. One blogger commemorates her father, sharing a photo of them building lego mosques when she was a child. This

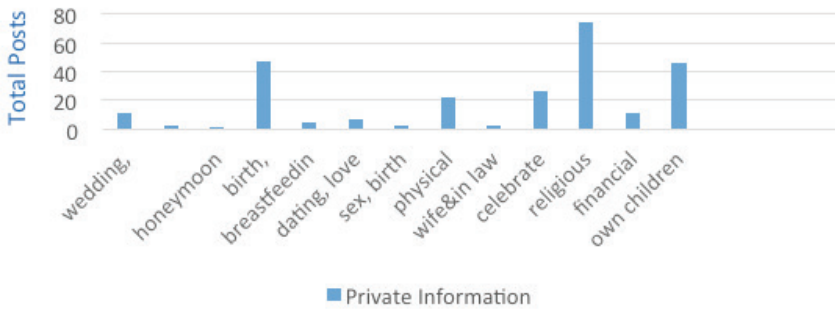
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6 A ritual of relieving from pain via the heated cups on your back (cupping).

memory reveals that religion is learned and practiced in the family, which in turn is shaped by the society we are raised in.

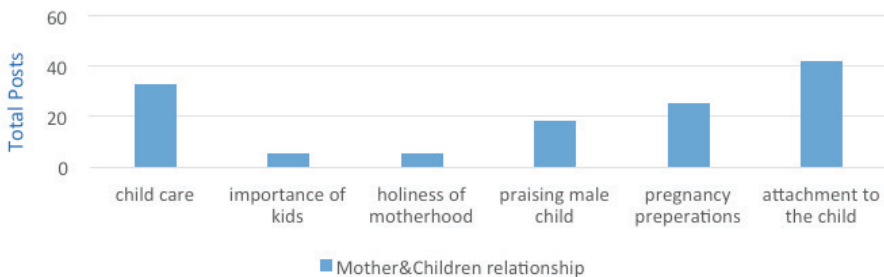
As shown in *Figure 1* below, in terms of the private information given, religious beliefs are those referenced most (8%), followed by references to giving birth or perperality (5%).

**Figure 1.** Private Information



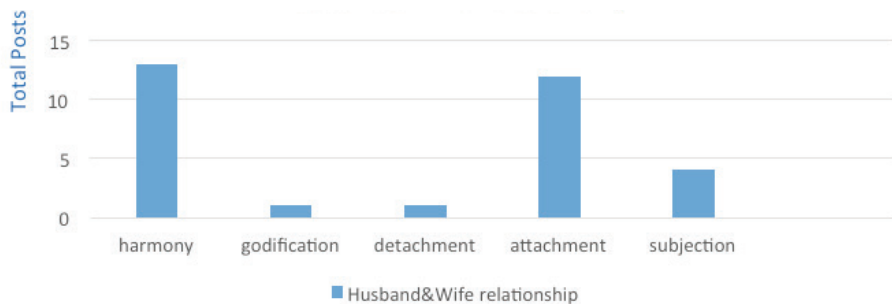
When it comes to relationship between mother and children, praising the male child is the 4<sup>th</sup> important category with 2% of the units (*Figure 2*). Even though 2% is a negligible proportion, none of the units praise the female child. One blogger reads a news report about a baby boy thrown to the garbage as soon as he was born and comments: “*Ohh, how did they throw the baby away although he was a boy?*” The gender of the child is specifically mentioned with a sense of regret. Said consciously or not, this is a sign of how patriarchy is embedded in the social life.

**Figure 2.** Mother&Child Relationship



Based on the statistics for private information given above, a sub-category for relationship between husband and wife was formed. Accordingly, modern conservative women of Turkey seem to be attached to their husbands and live in harmony with them. As one blogger states: *"I wanted to share my clothes here with you and my husband took these beautiful photos of me as usual."* This post shows that while she is the content-writer, her husband acts as the photographer for her blog. However, there is hardly any full subjection to the husband and no godification of him in overall blog posts as in other patriarchal societies. One and only example of full subjection to the husband appears as: *"I take my daughter and go out with the permission of my husband of course."* Since declaration of this harmony and attachment shows itself only in 1,5% of the units (Figure 3), blogosphere serves as a platform for women to act individually. 5% of the units mention food consumption and travel activities and they are mostly done with husbands or family. However, blogger events appear as one of the independently participated events with a 2% reference in the units.

**Figure 3.** Husband&Wife Relationship



Beyond the topics of fashion and consumption, fashion blogs mention other topics such as hobbies and interests. These account for 10% of total blog posts. 4% of the hobbies are do-it-yourself (DIY) activities, 3% is home and decoration, 3% is recipes and cooking and less than 1% is concerned with courses or workshops they attended. Housework is taken for granted as one of the bloggers ask: *"What is your favourite housework girls? Mine is ironing"*. Additionally, there are only 6 units referring to sports activities. At most 2% of the units make reference to the cultural preferences. Units do not mention cinema or theater and only two units refer to concerts or music choices. As few as three units refer to favourite movies or book choices, eleven units refer to the favourite authors, four units mention museum or cultural heritage tours, two of them being mosques.

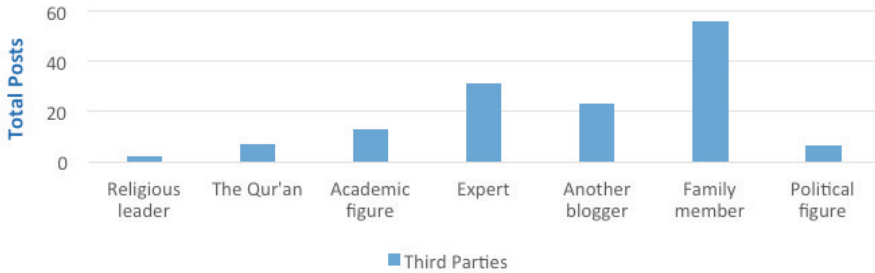
**Figure 4.** Third Parties

Figure 4 shows the references given to the third parties. Despite being conservative blogs, they rarely give references to the holy book of Islam, Qur'an, or religious leaders. This is partly because they are fashion blogs and related more with the fashion industry. The most referenced third party is the family members, which seem to comply with the cultural conservatism surrounding Turkey.

### ***Self-branding and Publicity***

Out of twenty-seven blog titles, twelve contain the real names of the bloggers. Almost 50% of the bloggers give self-reference in the main titles of their blogs and in 7% of the units they give reference to their first names. There is an increasing tendency for using first names in blog titles and this is an important strategy for publicity. Repeating one's name several times in various platforms contributes to self-branding.

While only 1% of the units give reference to bloggers' education, 5% of the units mention a profession or occupation. Only six blog posts mention university education and only one blogger writes bilingually, in Turkish and English.

As for the relationship between the audience and the blogger, the findings indicate that 18% of the units mention the feedbacks of the followers or reply their questions directly. Only a few of the bloggers have closed their comment sections so that they can talk freely. Taking feedbacks and replying to their audiences is important for the peer-recognition and publicity. Being a micro-celebrity requires a treatment to the followers like valued fans (Marwick, 2013a). Maintaining a "networked reputation" also lets future employment opportunities to emerge, which stand as a common factor in motivating social production. These data justify Deuze's (2007) notion of "networked reputation" as it does not only come from voluntary act of creating labor for society, but also



from defining one's self to him/herself via autobiographical self-expression and communal interaction.

Bloggers do not necessarily target a specifically chosen audience like veiled women or members of a Muslim society. 9% of the units specifically target a Muslim community or people who are familiar with Islam whereas the rest of the units do not mention a specific audience. Nevertheless, they usually assume that the reader is conservative, believing that non-conservative and non-veiled women would not read their blogs. Although they do not specifically address the conservative community, they believe the audience is them. This is mostly evident in the posts related to conservative swimwears called *haşema*<sup>7</sup> and holiday resorts. In these blog posts, there are direct warnings to those who wear *haşema*: "If you don't want to be judged and be comfortable, don't go there!" or "Don't worry in this reserved place there are more of us who wear *haşema*!" Thus, there is a tendency to bond with those who think alike and create a "safe" space for each other, along with a feeling of discrimination and marginalization within the society.

### **Commercial Tendencies**

By promoting their own or other brands, bloggers commercialize their blogs by sharing advertisements, press releases or promotions. Word of mouth becomes one of the main tools of companies producing scarves, headscarves, haute couture dresses and cosmetics.

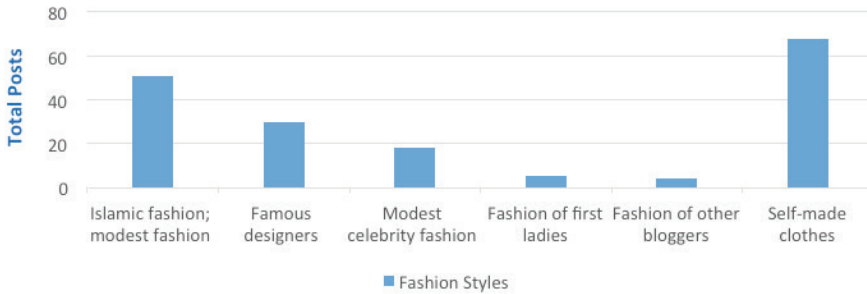
Despite preparing highly personalized blogs, bloggers also comment on and back up veiling fashion industry. 28% of the units mention brand names; 5,5% of them are self-brands. 16% of the units contain press releases or advertisements. 1% of the units make a reference to lotteries giving presents from national or multinational brands. Regarding the free merchandise donated to bloggers, the results show that 5% of the units give reference to sponsorships and 1% of the units talk about gifts or promotions. Conservative bloggers rarely accept gifts or even if they do, they don't mention it too often.

Despite the general tendency of addressing high society, there is hardly any reports of wealth. 3% of the units give reference to very famous brands like Gucci, Dolce&Gabbana and Vakko. As shown in *Figure 5*, self-made clothes, i.e. those produced by bloggers themselves, are referenced most and fashion bloggers mostly blog about their own products. Capable of sewing and designing their own clothes, they start selling them at some point, looking forward to future employment opportunities. Among the fashion styles mentioned, self-made clothes are followed by Islamic and modest fashion styles. Famous designers are referenced when bloggers are in search of a new trend to adapt their own

7 A special-clothed loose full body swimsuit which covers the whole body from head to toe.

veiling fashion style. By incorporating global styles that do not belong to Islamic ones, conservative female bloggers try to balance their new style between the global and local, secular and Islamic, modern and traditional.

**Figure 5.** Fashion Styles



### ***Fashion as Modernity, Veiling as Tradition***

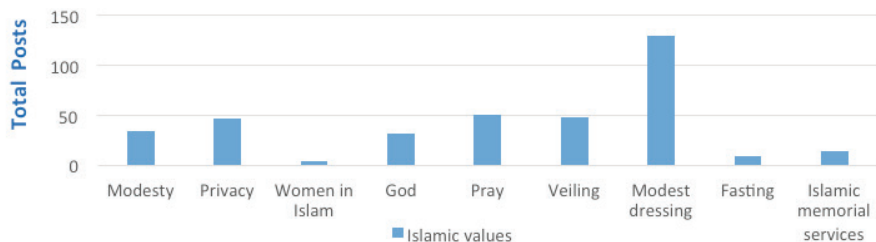
Gökarıksel and Secor state that veiling fashion might seem contradictory with Islam, emphasizing that “veiling, with its powerful set of religious, cultural and political references, and fashion, an unmoored system of self-referential change associated with capitalism, modernity and a particular kind of consumer subject” (2009, p. 7). Therefore, the tension in veiling fashion lies between the veil’s function as modest dress according to Islam and its excess of signification in terms of distinction, status, and aesthetics (Gökarıksel and Secor, 2009).

Being the central object of Islamic fashion, the headscarf is “the key to both piety and the fashionable wardrobe, a desirable commodity that women describe collecting in the dozens, changing with the seasons, and constantly eyeing in stores and on other women” (Gökarıksel and Secor, 2012, p. 852). Currently, many women follow veiling fashion and veil in a variety of ways. These ways include certain accessories like bonnet, faux bun and pin, which at the same time pose a utilitarian approach as well as aesthetic concerns. These accessories are also criticized for being tempting and seductive and not compatible with the notion of modesty (Gökarıksel and Secor, 2012). This way, women are sometimes stuck between their pleasures and their faith due to these conflicting demands. Although consuming excessive products is not welcomed in Islamic belief, women are tempted to buy various types of headscarves and seduced by the idea of shopping. This study proves that a highly visible new Islamic culture of consumption has arisen, along with distinct tastes, including an Islamic fashion industry too.

Traditional and fundamentalist approaches of Islam ignore present world, believing in the next realm of existence. However, most of the bloggers follow the newest fashion trends, trying to adapt the high-fashion styles to modest dressing. Although their worldly desires seem to contradict the basic idea of Islam, women have their own understandings and interpretations of Islam. Thus, we might speak about women's agency to develop new definitions.

One blogger mentions in her blog post: *"I became veiled after I got married and now I am more careful about my behaviours. I try to avoid yelling, getting angry, talking too much and sitting improperly."* Accordingly, a veiled woman is expected to be more "polite" and "calm." However, there is a slight inconsistency in such behaviour in the overall blog posts. Although coarse talk, is not welcomed in Islamic framework, and Muslim woman is expected to be mild and sweet-natured, it turns out that there are 2% of the units containing severe anger and coarse talk, and 4% of them underestimate or humiliate other views. Being veiled is something to be publicly protected and that is why one blogger gets very angry and harshly criticizes the woman who said to her about her veil: *"You are beautiful, don't close it"*. One more example for coarse talk was fetishism of the political leader and humiliating those who are against him by using words *"heretic pigs"*. Another statement used words like *"sh\*\*\*y"* and *"f\*\*\*"* in relation to the social responsibility efforts of a multinational corporation (Google.com), for not believing what they do since they are foreigners.

**Figure 6.** Islamic Values



"O Prophet! Say to your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers that they let down upon them their over-garments; this will be more proper, that they may be known, and thus they will not be given trouble; and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful." (Qur'an 33:59)

Modest dressing is the most referenced Islamic value with 15% among overall blog posts (Figure 6). Defined as: "freedom from conceit or vanity, and also propriety in dress, speech, or conduct", as reported in the verse above, modesty is central to religion of Islam. Apart from Western paradigm, Islam views public sphere as "company of strangers" rather than "outside the home"

(Boulanouar, 2006, p. 138). Dressing decently means not only covering the body but beautifying the appearance as well. In the face of modern women who exhibit their femininity by the care they give to their bodies and clothes, Muslim women conceal their femininity behind veiling and thus present the “sacred body” against the “aesthetic” one (Göle, 1996, p. 130). There is a sexuality culture in Turkey that objectifies women’s public bodies in a particular way and as Sehliskoğlu (2015) argues, new veiled women are signifiers of changing sexuality culture and the very fact that we find them uncanny is a reflection of this change.

## **Conclusion**

This research focuses on how conservative women in Turkey locate and represent their self-consciousness in the fashion blogosphere. Taking into account the socio-political situation and rising dichotomy between Islamic and secular ways of life in the current Turkey, the study is based on a text-based content analysis of 27 blogs. While the study explores conservative fashion blogging in Turkey and its relationship with the tenets of Islam, it also reveals the motivations of the female bloggers and how they negotiate disclosure and conservative identity in an age of extreme self-display.

Under the complexity and dynamics of the dichotomy between Islam and secularism in Turkey, women’s bodies are once again becoming a political target for disciplinary purposes. This is reflected in the daily lives of women in such a patriarchal society, where norms and traditions along with the gender roles are inherited and transmitted. This research fills a gap in addressing blogging practices of conservative women in Turkey’s blogosphere. Factors that shape conservative female blogger practices and the material formation of identities in this process are researched. The study reveals the spaces within which women seek “self-realization,” “self-formation” and “publicity” in the digital world, particularly, through the practice of blogging in the increasingly male-dominant culture of Turkey.

Conservative fashion bloggers use blogosphere as a platform where they can reveal information about themselves, reflect on their daily lives and share their own styles. Redefining veiling fashion in Turkey, they aspire to become a part of a global fashion industry, giving guidance to their followers and set the trends for veiling fashion.

The interaction formed among bloggers and their readers enable bloggers to extend their public sphere. Home, formerly regarded as the private sphere, is being opened very broadly and intimately to the outer world. There is a tendency to believe that they are read by those who think alike, so they feel comfortable as if there is no one from unveiled community. Cyber space becomes their public space and it is not considered outside home since bloggers write mostly from home, and address the female audience.

As feminist scholars pointed out, construction of womanhood has been an important dimension of differentiation between religious and secular groups in Turkey for over a century (Kandiyoti, 1991; Özdalga, 1998). One differentiation between these groups is gender equality, the other is self versus family orientation of women, and the last but not least is the proper place for women, inside or outside the home (Durakbaşı, 1998; İlyasoğlu, 1994). Based on the blogs' content analysis, it is underlined that home is still where women should be. If they want to work this would be part-time or home based work, so that they can take care of their children and family and do the housework. The attachments to the child and motherhood experiences become the topics shared most commonly even in fashion blogs. Although bloggers are more free in online environment, where they can wriggle out their domestic roles, they still show the signs of patriarchal practices which are settled not only in societal level but also in their thoughts. In this respect, the preceding analysis makes it clear that technologically determinist readings of blogging with respect to women's emancipation from traditional gender roles in general have failed. While women do find more space to negotiate the tensions between neoliberal consumption and Islam, traditional gender roles are far from challenged.

The analysis also reveals that there is hardly any unified veiling style in Turkey. Conservative women of Turkey create their own fashion styles as well as their own definitions of Islam. Female beauty is important and most of the bloggers specifically focus on beautifying themselves via use of cosmetics or diversifying their clothing and veiling styles. Attempting to adapt global fashion styles to their own clothing styles reveals the collapse of neoliberal desires with Islam's command of modesty. Blogs are far from being spaces of passive consumption. They are also platforms where women turn into entrepreneurs who are capable of sewing, designing and ultimately marketing their own clothes by way of drawing on digital affordances. The target customer profile ranges from the First Lady Emine Erdoğan to TV actresses and their followers. As the targeted customer belongs to the high society, the materials used for sewing and designing ranged from real silk, kashmir to taffeta. The "Islamic bourgeoisie", risen out of the neoliberal and conservative transformation of the country after the 1980s, "has generated a demand for goods and spaces that mark a new islamically accented performance of taste and distinction" (Gökarkınel and Secor, 2012, p. 851). Being a part of the new Islamic bourgeoisie, conservative fashion blogosphere represents a segment of urban society which is transformed into a vehicle for the nation's values and culture as the accumulation of wealth is legitimized through Islam (Moudouros, 2014).

Therefore, conservative female fashion blogger appears as the young, urban female who has an average education, and her own local brand, and generally is a housewife who simultaneously works from home or part-time. She is a care-taking mother and an advisor. She dresses well, classy and elegantly, and also sets the trends of the local veiling fashion. However, in terms of cultural

preferences, she hardly ever talks about going to the cinema or theater, concerts or museums. Contrarily, blogger events, fashion weeks and brand gatherings are those participated independently where they smile to the cameras and give interviews. Both at the individual and societal level, these women feel more comfortable and strong due to the contemporary modern Muslim woman image which brings new tastes and new *habitus* with itself. Thus, different forms of cultural consumption incur as a result of new tastes of the rising Islamic bourgeoisie class. Celebrity culture is something to be fond of as the blogosphere creates what Marwick (2013a) calls "micro-celebrities."

This study adds to the literature on representation of self and self-branding techniques in cyberspace (Marwick, 2013a; Eltantawy, 2013; Banet-Weiser, 2011). Conservative fashion bloggers redefine veiling fashion through the blogosphere. Benefiting from their religious stands, they create their own brands in which they interpret both Islam and veiling fashion and find the opportunity to gain recognition. There is a mutual relationship between the conservative bloggers and veiling fashion industry, where bloggers enjoy from the efforts they give voluntarily, in the hope that they can create their own brands in the future. Thus, the labor practiced in these blogs is "hope labor" (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013), which will be analyzed in an upcoming study.

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