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## **Fashionable Stereotypes and Evolving Trends in the United Arab Emirates**

### **Abstract**

Abayas, predominantly stereotyped as religious and conservative outfits, have experienced a significant transformation in the last few years in the Middle East, shifting from a plain and demure garment that signified tradition, to a style statement symbolizing grace, elegance and charm. In this study, we examine women's dress practices in the United Arab Emirates in an attempt to investigate how the clash between conventional religious modesty and modernity displays different forms of consumption behavior toward the abaya.

To explore the transformations of the local traditional wear (the abaya) in the UAE, this study used a mix of two forms of qualitative studies: focus groups and in-depth interviews.

This paper focuses on developing a better understanding of the key transformation triggers regarding the globally stereotyped garment- the abaya. Given the importance of abayas in Islamic markets, the research derives the reasons for the local transformation and the change in consumers' perception of abayas. Based on the research findings, this paper coins the term "Fashion Motivator Moment of Truth" that describes the locals' need for change, integration, self-expression and need to stay up-to-date. These motivators are shaping consumers' consumption behavior of abayas, which depending on what social occasion, result in consumers requiring four types of abayas: 1) trendy and comfortable, 2) practical and conservative, 3) trendy and unique and 4) special and premium.

**Keywords:** abaya; Islamic fashion; consumption; stereotype, UAE, culture

## **Introduction**

Nowadays, global retailers selling luxury goods greatly depend on Arab consumers' excessive purchasing power. Additionally, global retailers in particular depend and focus on women in the Arab world, who the industry considers "the world's biggest buyers of high fashion" [42]. These women have progressively become more sophisticated in their needs [40]. Although global marketers are highly aware of this region, they need to understand the Arab culture and the consumers' local preferences in order to better target these markets [34].

The Arab world, which currently includes 21 countries and territories with an overall population of 360 million people, reflects the contrasting pulls of traditional Arab culture and contemporary consumer culture [34]. While all Arab countries have joint traits, it is misrepresentative to suppose that they are homogeneous in relation to their cultural values [36]. Specifically, the Gulf region (the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the State of Kuwait and the State of Qatar) has attracted different people from Western and non-Western cultures, who now comprise the majority of residents in some countries in the Gulf. For instance, in the United Arab Emirates, expatriates surmounted locals by more than eight to one [3] leaving the UAE with only 16% of Emiratis [34].

All of the changes taking place—from the integration of the Gulf into the global economy to the growing existence of multinational corporations in this region and the increasing penetration of media, namely the digital ones—have triggered the proliferation of the Western consumer culture and global consumerism. These changes have led to strong arguments between those supporting

modernity and those stressing the significance of maintaining the local culture and the Arab identity [34]. Consequently, in order to refrain from dissolving their ethnic integration and legitimacy, locals have distinguished themselves by wearing their ethnic garb. Furthermore, with the influences from globalization and Western cultures, the region is adopting new westernized styles and forms of dress and adornment that reflect both women's attractiveness and local traditional values [34].

These changes are predominantly evident in the garment worn in public by women in the Gulf known as abaya. Designers have progressively revitalized the abaya from being perceived as a piece of clothing that veils a woman's beauty from others, to an adorned fashionable piece that boosts the woman's beauty and attractiveness. This is accentuated by the simultaneous shift in communication of beauty, religion and contemporaneousness in the media and advertising [34]. Muslim women, and more specifically Emiratis, are currently drawing on more Western fashion influences that are impacting the way they are wearing their abayas [38].

Although the fashion industry has examined some alterations in the abayas' design, these changes do not undermine the abayas' local and traditional look [34], which local UAE fashion designers still consider a symbol of respect and tradition that women in the UAE should maintain [38]. Accordingly, the lifestyle and daily activities of Arab Muslim consumers can be deceptive as it reveals the image of a stereotyped rather than a fashionable stereotyped consumer. In line with these changes, researchers have focused on the necessity to understand Muslims' consumer behavior in regard to fashion clothing in an era of confluence between modernism and tradition

(e.g., O’Cass *et al.* [31]). This has stimulated a newly emergent Muslim consumer demographic, creating significant and complex opportunities for international fashion brands.

Alternatively, O’Cass *et al.* [31] claimed that, although previous researchers have examined the concept of religiosity in a purchase context (e.g., Lindridge [23] and Moschis and Ong [30]), the marketing literature still lacks the academic investigation of the importance and impact of the reverse process for adopting and consuming the stereotyped outfits, which are now becoming global fashion statements. As fashion analysts predict that the Gulf market will grow even larger in the near future, it is important to understand the dynamics and current shifts in Islamic fashion, built around the abaya in an era of integration between modernism and tradition.

## **Background and Literature Review**

### ***Increasing interest in Islamic fashion***

Muslim women’s clothing is a discernible type of public consumption that has attracted many researchers’ interest. They have undertaken many studies to better understand the different meanings and connotations of the Muslim dress code (the veil and hijab) across different countries and urban areas with Muslim residents, such as Turkey, United Kingdom and Egypt (e.g., Gole [16], Sandıkcı and Ger [33] and Tarlo [39]). In Islam, regarding fashion, society perceives the concept of appeal and attention as opposing the meaning of modesty [33].

Although women’s modest fashion styles express a sense of religiosity, modesty and subsistence, nowadays Gulf consumers embrace brands that depict Western temptation and values, combined

with a sense of personal style [2]. As a result, Gulf consumers are changing their styles and ways of adopting Islamic fashion. Therefore, it is important to highlight the need to better understand the Gulf market and the changes taking place in regard to consumers' adoption of their Islamic fashion—namely, the abaya.

### *The abaya*

By the end of the twentieth century, a general Islamic consumer culture revolving around the consumption of stylish and Islamic clothing had infused the Arab Gulf [3, 15]. The abaya, worn within the Gulf countries, is entrenched in a special local framework and reveals distinct interpretations and connotations from the chador worn in Iran, the abaya worn in Yemen and the purdah worn in South India [35]. This type of clothing remains the practice for Gulf women [11].

The abaya is a black, ankle-length gown that covers the entire body except the hands, feet and face [20]. Women in the Gulf wear the abaya in order to reveal a culturally motivated religiosity. The abaya is a traditional dress code that may reveal a woman's Arabian cultural background as well as her religious beliefs. Women in the Gulf wear it as a way to hide their appealing apparel in public places [1]. At private events that only women attend, Gulf women are allowed to remove the abaya and expose their attractive apparel [20]. In addition to abayas, Gulf women wear the hijab, a large square-shaped cloth designed in different fabrics and colors [1].

The fashion industry designed abayas with slight embellishments in the late 1990s by adding black embroidery, appliques and other sorts of discrete decorations. Later on, designers added major embellishments, such as colored beads, sequins and lace [20]. In the modern Gulf, the abaya and

hijab hold a prevailing symbolic status for women: they indicate devotion to tradition, culture and religion [19]. Although there have been several changes in the design and style of abayas, Al-Qasimi [3] stated that neither “the hegemonic order of Islamic patriarchy” nor the national ideologies have been distorted.

In some Gulf countries, such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, the abaya forms a social obligation to which women are expected to conform as an element of local customs and traditional culture. However, in other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the abaya takes the form of a legal obligation, where a woman is subject to legal action if she is not fully covered by the abaya and hijab [35]. According to Moors [27], in some Arab countries such as the UAE, wearing stylish Islamic clothing became “a form of aesthetic consumption that is only weakly related to [individual] religious convictions” (p. 190), where women “wear their traditional abaya with pride and decorate it with fashionable beads and glitter” [25, p. 147].

The concept of Islamic fashion has been the focus of a small, but emerging group of literature extensively analyzing the appearance of Islamic fashion in different contexts. However, a small number of studies have focused on Islamic fashion’s marketing and consumption context [20]. Given that designers have altered the abaya from a basic, utilitarian piece of clothing to a fashion item that combines the Western fashion industry cycle of seasonal offerings and novel trends [22], it is worth examining how this conflict between modernity and tradition is affecting the locals’ consumption behavior in the UAE.

In this study, we examine women's dress practices in the United Arab Emirates in an attempt to investigate how the clash between conventional religious modesty and modernity displays different forms of consumer behavior toward the abaya. We selected the UAE given that (1) the Emirates is the second largest country in terms of Muslim apparel consumption with consumers spending \$22.5 billion, and (2) that it is planning to become the center of Islamic fashion [10]. Therefore, examining the changes in the needs and wants of Arab consumers in this market is of utmost importance for both academics and marketing practitioners.

### **Research Background and Objectives**

Abayas have experienced a significant transformation in the last few years in the Arabian Gulf area, from being a plain and demure garment that signified tradition to society perceiving it as a style statement symbolizing grace, elegance and charm, both locally and globally. While various studies have examined the concept of abayas, researchers have produced little work on understanding locals' abaya design needs. Although the literature provides important pieces of information regarding the abaya (e.g., Al-Qasimi [3], Belk and Sobh [7], Dorling [12] and Sobh *et al.* [35]), none of them have presented a theoretical rationale of the nature and importance of the change in abaya. Given the importance of this form of traditional wear in the Arab Gulf, still a growing untapped market, it is therefore imperative to provide a better and complete understanding of the current transformations in abayas from a consumer perspective. Based on these gaps in the literature, we undertook this research with the following objectives:

1. To elicit the reasons why transformations in abayas are taking place.



2. To elicit the ways in which these transformations in abayas are shaping consumers' fashion needs.

## Research Methodology

To develop a better understanding of the key transformation triggers of the globally stereotyped abaya, this study conducted a mix of two qualitative methodologies: focus groups and in-depth interviews. We implemented purposive sampling, whereby we selected participants based on the following criteria: Emirati females who are regular abaya wearers and who are current owners and/or recent purchasers of abayas within the last year. We selected the participants for both studies based on the easiness of access and their willingness to take part in the study. We conducted a preliminary study consisting of six focus groups followed by 28 in-depth interviews, exceeding the minimum suggested number of sufficient participants by McCracken [26]. We formed the focus groups' discussions from sets of five respondents in each group. We conducted the research in the United Arab Emirates. The target audience was local Arab Emirati females aged between 18 to 45 years, categorized as follows: 18–22 years old, 23–34 years old and 35–45 years old. We conducted the focus groups and the in-depth interviews in premises that participants could easily access. We repeatedly told respondents that they were allowed to stop the focus group and/or in-depth interview at any time. Table 1 lists details of the sample design.

Table 1 – Sampling Details

2 focus group (18–22 years)
2 focus group (23–34 years)
2 focus group (35–45 years)
9 in-home in-depth interview (18–22 years)
10 in-home in-depth interview (23–34 years)
9 in-home in-depth interview (35–45 years)

As researchers use focus groups to incur in-depth exploration about phenomenon on which little information is known [37], and to generate deeper insights and understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs [29], its use in this study will help to generate more insights on the transformation of abayas. To help participants feel more comfortable with the group setting [21] and to stimulate them to engage in a group discussion, we applied the "ice-breaking" technique [5] whereby we asked participants to come up with a brief introduction about themselves [28] and to tell about a fashion brand that they really like. This was followed by several open-ended questions that ranged from general to specific questions such as: "*What do abayas represent to you as Emirati women?*", "*Why do Emirati women wear abayas?*", "*Do you think that the concept of the abaya changed, and how?*", "*What are the major factors affecting the transformation in abayas if any?*" and "*What are the different forms of abayas that exist?*". These pre-defined set of questions served as the basis for the moderator to open the discussion with the respondents and to probe them in order to solicit their feedback.

To analyze the data that we collected from the focus groups and the in-depth interviews, we implemented an inductive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke [10, p. 79] defined a thematic analysis as "*a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.*" According to Braun and Clarke [10], a thematic analysis is a technique in its own right that provides rich and thorough data accounts. We recorded all the focus groups interviews and then transcribed them for analysis.

Although focus groups present many advantages in terms of obtaining more insights from participants, they might be subject to some social desirability bias or what some scholars call self-presentation. "*Self-presentation designed to gain rewards by influencing an audience is mainly guided by the audience's criteria of favorability and can be conveniently designated as "pleasing*

*the audience*” [6, p. 3] especially when the setting is designed in the form of groups. As focus groups have the tendency to generate desirability bias, we then used projective techniques in the in-depth interviews to cross-check the study’s findings to help individuals unveil their feelings, views and motivations that they usually find hard to share [41]. We used this technique as it permits participants to respond in easier ways that they would find hard to articulate [8, 9]. In addition, this technique helps researchers to analyze research issues from different angles [32] and helps in reducing the level of social desirability bias [13].

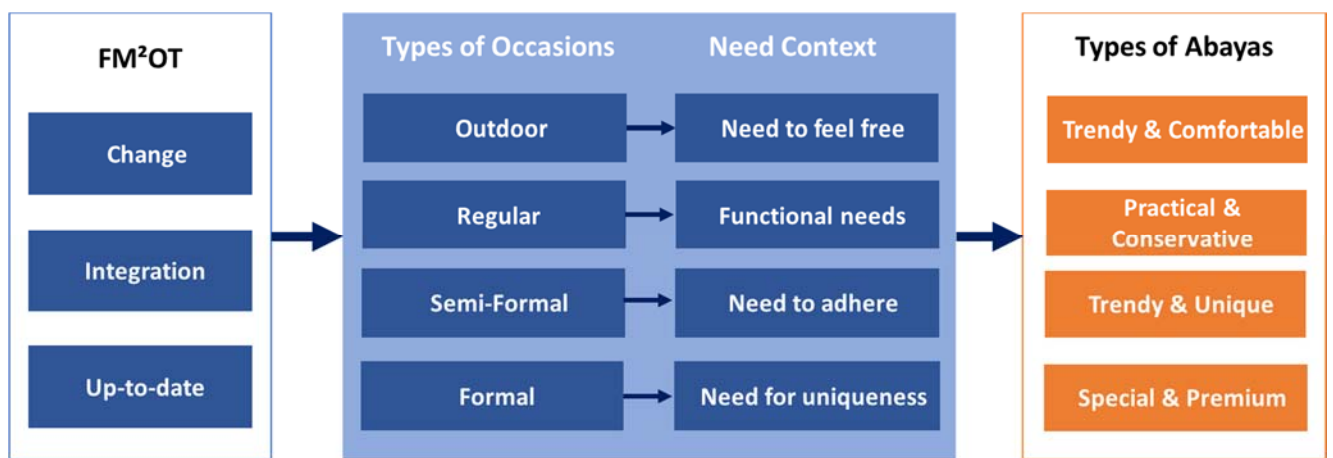
We asked participants in the in-depth interviews to project themselves into an Emirati woman who wears abayas and to respond to the interviewer’s questions. The interviews were based on a set of predefined open-ended questions (e.g. *What are the things that come to your mind when you think of abayas? What does the abaya represent to you? How is the abaya related to heritage and culture? How are abayas related to fashion? How would different occasions affect what abaya you select?*). The interview session lasted about 15 to 20 minutes. We recorded and then transcribed the data. We analyzed the data following the thematic analysis procedure [10] and the constant comparison technique [14].

We met the validity and reliability assumptions of qualitative findings in this study. Researchers consider that reliability is insured in qualitative research when different researchers reach similar findings [8, 9] and when independent measures of the same phenomenon lead to the same research findings [18]. This is achieved through triangulation (cross-checking) which we conducted in this study, whereby we compared the findings from one technique with the findings resulting from a different technique [8, 43]. The use of in-depth interviews and focus groups further affirms the research findings’ reliability. Following the literature recommendations, we analyzed all the data transcripts in this study separately and later discussed them with regards to the emerging themes.

As projective techniques permit participants to reveal their consumer-preferences and behaviors, perhaps more subtly and distinctly than when participants are interviewed through direct questioning techniques [24], the veracity and credibility of the research-findings are strengthened [32, cf. 24, 8].

Figure 1 depicts the overall framework that we propose based on the current research findings.

Figure 1 – Framework



## Research Findings

### *The Transformation of Abayas – A Local Paradigm Shift*

A strong local paradigm shift has happened recently in regards to abayas. While society perceived abayas as typically religious and traditional, nowadays some perceive them as a statement of fashion and self-expression as per the following respondents:

*“They are becoming a more fashionable item in the Gulf region, rather than a religious necessity.”*

*“In the Emirates abayas shifted to be more of a fashion statement than for religious purposes.”*

*“The first thing that comes to my mind when you say abaya is fashion.”*

The research findings pointed to the emergence of a set of motivators (we label them in this paper as “Fashion Motivator Moments of Truth) that describe Arab women’s need for change, self-expression, integration and to stay up-to-date. These motivators, closely integrated with strong emotional associations regarding the abayas, are as follows:

1. *The need for integration (socially and with one’s self):* The participants clearly associated “protection,” “tradition” and “identity” with abayas, showing a bond that is strengthened by a heritage significance. The analysis of focus groups and in-depth interview data indicated that the fashion dimensions revolve mainly around societal norms, leading to strong image consciousness. This entails strong expectations in terms of conduct for women; hence, women seek to keep an image in line with prescribed codes of behavior while still embracing fashion and having their own distinct image. This is due to the integration of Muslim with Western cultures and societies, allowing women to become more fashion conscious [4, 17]. For instance, some respondents stated the following:

*“When I wear something, I do think of whether it is something that will be liked by my husband or parents.”*

*“The abaya is related to our tradition. It is our Arab culture. If you don’t wear it for occasions where everyone is wearing it, you will look odd.”*

*“If I go for a formal outing, I cannot wear a normal abaya or people will say, “Look at what she’s wearing.””*

2. *The need for self-expression:* The interpretation of the findings indicated that participants view fashion as an expression of oneself through the clothes one is wearing. Therefore, they perceived the abaya as a reflection of one’s personality, sense of uniqueness, creativity, reflection of taste, personal style and mood. Other associations, such as

“femininity,” “beauty,” “elegance,” and “art,” showed that abayas strongly reveal a woman’s image.

*“The abaya doesn’t mean that we are oppressed. Contrary to popular belief, it means that we get to design and wear our personalities for the public.”*

*“It is a reflection of your personality and image.”*

Abayas have a fashion image related to the wearer’s strong image. Accordingly, respondents noted that social evaluation stems from what one is wearing, which projects one’s image, tastes and personality, as well as showing an internal feeling:

*“The abaya became the most iconic “piece of clothing” for a woman from the Gulf and living in the Gulf. It’s more of a piece of art right now.”*

*“You have to be up to date, but it should suit your personality, or I would not wear it.”*

*“I am unique, and the abayas and accessories I wear help me show this.”*

3. *The need for change:* Basic need for change is linked to the abayas’ basic functional benefits. For instance, embroidery, colors, crystals, pearls, designs and embellishments are elements that go with abayas to enhance the garment’s functionality and appeal. Respondents also associated “variety,” “all-time,” and “styles and accessories” with versatility and variety that offered the customer a range of choices to shape one’s everyday look. We noticed that women’s perceptions of their abayas were shaped by their larger sense of fashion and their lifestyles. We can explain this by the impact of westernization on Arab culture where locals are embracing modernism combining it with a touch of Islamic tradition to conform with their contemporary lifestyles [4, 17]. Although the specific results differed according to individuals, broad patterns emerged in terms of

fashion and lifestyle, which in turn defined customers' fashion sense, as evidenced by the following respondents:

*“Fashion to me means renewal and development. It is about change in general—change in mood, routine, the customs and traditions-- even a change in my personality and style.”*

*“We females don't have a specific style. What I wear should suit the occasion and it should suit myself. There is fashion for workplace, for informal gatherings or parties. What I wear also helps me show my personality and uniqueness.”*

Participants also indicated that fashion is closely related to freedom and empowerment. It signifies a sense of autonomy driven by the ability to choose and be oneself and select from a wide range of clothing and accessories to look and feel fashionable, thereby providing women with an enhanced sense of control:

*“With my clothes and accessories, I can choose to wear what I want under the abaya.”*

4. *The need to stay up-to-date:* The style of wearing abayas in the Arab Gulf has been mainly influenced by locals' exposure to Western media such as TV, magazines and movies, in addition to their exposure to the advanced dressing style of Sheikha Moza, the Qatari prince's wife [7]. In line with this, this study indicated that women's exposure to fashion shows, social media (e.g. Instagram) and special events had a strong aspirational appeal driven by the depiction of abayas in traditional and emerging media. The current study's findings also revealed that Arab women are also pushing the boundaries in fashion. They are highly fashion conscious with what they wear under the abaya as they use branded items, the latest fashion clothing and accessories. According to Belk and Sobh [7], Arab women are currently wearing their abayas by disposing much make-up and apparel and accessories under them and what they are wearing underneath is a combination of

international designer brands such as Prada, Louis Vuitton and Cartier. The interpretations of this study's findings indicated that local social media, the international fashion houses and international fashion trends are affecting abayas designers. This in turn led to designers diversifying and modifying the abayas' forms, styles and designs.

*"I think it is great to collaborate international fashion with abayas as it may give the woman something to be proud of and beautiful to wear rather than a "must" or "forced" rule by religion."*

*"The international fashion houses are inspiring abaya designers in terms of trends, styles, textures, quality and more."*

*"Local tailors are incorporating famous brand designs into the abayas for abayas to stand out more."*

### ***Fashionable Stereotypes: The effect of the local paradigm shift in abayas on consumers' fashion needs***

In line with the previous discussion showing that abayas today are experiencing a paradigm shift in the Arab world, driven mainly by the set of identified motivators, this study's findings further derive the effect of that change in perceiving consumers' fashion needs. The findings show that Arab women are driven by occasion and mood, whereby they have a strong need to dress as per the need of the occasion. Their dress reflects the mood and tempo of the occasion—whether being practical, creating an impression, being friendly or providing inner comfort:

*"I have abayas divided for regular wear, special wear and different occasions."*

*"I have a special abaya for every occasion, like for work a more classical abaya. When I hang out with my friends [my abaya] is classical yet chic."*

While the fashion moment of truth motivators have shaped the new forms of abayas, we found that they the occasion factor moderated them. Accordingly, our findings suggest that when locals are



faced with different occasions, the outcome in terms of selecting the abaya is different. On that basis, four different forms of abayas have emerged:

1. *Trendy and comfortable abayas*: Individuals who adopt those abayas are generally seeking outdoor occasions with some activity along with loved ones such as 1) shopping with family and friends, 2) mall visits, coffee shop visits with friends or 3) going to the beach or parks. Our findings indicated that individuals who mainly run those activities do it with a close circle of family and friends known as their intimate group. Therefore, no restrictions or societal pressure are imposed on those individuals given that they are in proximity to loved ones. Thus, the fear of being negatively evaluated is absent which means that individuals will feel the freedom of being themselves and expressing themselves freely. Given this, they will feel the need to dress in a way that can sustain one's mobility, feeling comfortable and relaxed. At the same time, the social nature of the occasion is a chance to express one's sense of fashion and trendiness. Given those needs, individuals tend to select the abaya with the designs and patterns which are either black or light in colors. The cut should be simple and folds with designs that reflect elegance and simplicity with a modern touch. The abaya may have some embroidery on one side or on the sleeves (such as threads and/or beads). Fabric use should be simpler with tone on tone. The texture of the fabric can be combined with lace, chiffon and velvet.

*“The regular occasion abaya should be simple and comfortable. I would wear light colors. Sleeves and veils should be designed, shoulders and back are crystal.”*

*“When we go to the souk, we wear a simple abaya without any accessories or embroidery though it should have some good design. Under the abaya I can wear pants and a blouse.”*

*“We feel it's comfortable. No need to dress up to go to a mall. You could go out wearing pajamas under the abayas and no one would know.”*

2. *Practical and conservative abayas*: Individuals who adopt such abayas are generally seeking regular occasions such as going to work, going to college, outings with one's husband, visiting one's parents or parents-in-law or going out for a walk. This study's findings revealed that individuals who mainly run those activities look for product comfort and functionality such as the need for comfort when sitting and/or working for long hours. For such occasions, individuals will feel the need for abayas that enable them to feel relaxed and comfortable for a long period of time, yet seek simple and practical pieces with a touch of modesty in order not to garner much attention. To satisfy those needs, individuals tend to select mainly plain black or dark colored abayas. Some individuals may choose abayas with lighter colors with a single shade on the black material in order to differentiate it from other abayas. This type of abaya should have minimal embroideries and should be thick. Although there is a high need for it to be comfortable while sitting, designers must create this type of abaya in a way that is not open thus revealing what is worn behind it. Finally, this type of abaya should be made of wrinkle-free material.

*“Going to my parents’ house, then I will directly think of pants, T-shirts and such things. If I am with my in-laws I will be more conservative and not wear something open.”*

*“At work, I wear pants and I prefer to wear a normal abaya and veil.”*

*“It should be black and conservative with a touch of nice nude colors, silky fabric - simple, not really fancy but not a cheap material.”*

3. *Trendy and unique abayas*: Individuals who adopt such abayas are generally seeking semi-formal occasions where one needs to keep an image with a relatively larger group such as women gatherings, meeting with the extended family or spending a weekend with other people. This study's findings indicated that individuals who mainly seek the semi-formal

occasions are interested in abayas that satisfy their need to adhere to implicit social norms, respectfulness, socialization and openness. In addition, they have the need to keep up by competing with other women while still feeling comfortable in what they are wearing. Individuals attending such occasions will be looking for abayas that will help them integrate with other people while at the same time revealing the individual's sense of uniqueness. Accordingly, the types of abayas that women wear to such occasions should enable the individual to express one's sense of style, uniqueness, grace and femininity. Given the need for the semi-formal occasions, women seek abayas with a unique touch to attract the attention of others without being too formal, heavy or intricate. Therefore, the abaya should be open to show the garment inside. It also should be made of combined colors, not necessarily black, with a focus on design such as a variety of prints. In addition, for such occasions, women seek moderate embroidery with different cuts and folds and a variety or combination in materials such as the use of lace, silk and velvet – enabling them to stand out.

*“When we gather with friends, I wear fashionable clothes. I like to wear special clothes [that are] fashionable. We wear short dresses and backless dresses.”*

*“When I am with my friends I mostly wear my abaya that has a belt on it, and has some gold on it. This looks good and is comfortable also.”*

*“For a abaya to be unique, the material might be fancier and will include the latest trend.”*

4. *Special and premium abayas:* Individuals who adopt such abayas are generally seeking formal occasions in the presence of a larger number of people such as weddings, engagement parties, birthdays, Eid or other religious celebrations, visiting a newborn child and graduation parties. This study's results indicated that individuals who mainly seek abayas for formal occasions have a strong need to attract others' attention and to stand out

from the crowd by being unique and visible. In addition, the type of abaya one selects should reflect the occasion's celebratory nature. To participate in formal occasions, women seek abayas that have embellishments and are eye catching. The abayas are supposed to be decorated with crystals, pearls, beads or lace. In addition, the embroidery should be made of silver or gold threads. The material/fabric should be richer in terms of the quantity while the quality should be high. The embroidery should be designed in a way not to overshadow the dress beneath. As for the abaya with intricate embroidery, women perceive it as a stand-alone piece to wear to formal occasions without taking it off to show another dress.

*“Weddings are always the gatherings of abayas; the best abayas are at weddings. When we go to weddings it's not for checking the bride, instead the abayas.”*

*“On special occasions, you should wear luxurious abayas, it is prestigious. You are going to visit people who are very professional and brand users, so you should wear the luxurious clothes you have”.*

*“Crystals for weddings, holidays and happy events.”*

## **Conclusion and Future Research**

This exploratory study provides insights into a better understanding of the key transformation triggers of the globally stereotyped garment-the abaya. We examined the abayas' global trends alongside the triggers that are causing these transformations to take place. The current research findings indicated that the abaya is part of one's larger style quotient and complements one's overall look. Furthermore, the research showed that abayas offer women the choice of doubling its use as a dress in itself, moving further away from its original stereotype perception as solely a religious wear:

*“Abayas are better now and they are like dresses... Before people used to remove the abaya to show their dress but now you can show your dress without removing your abaya.”*

Through an in-depth examination of Emirati consumers' views and perception toward fashion and abayas, this study has further developed the understanding on abaya trends and their subsequent paradigm shifts. The research has shown that a major transformation has taken place in the perception of fashion and, accordingly, abayas, which society initially considered as religious garments. Through this, a set of fashion motivators emerged from the study describing Muslim women's need for change, integration, self-expression and need to stay up-to-date that this paper grouped under what we coined as the "fashion motivator moment of truth". These motivators are shaping consumers' consumption behavior of abayas, which based on the differences in the social occasions, are affecting the context of consumers' need resulting in four different forms of abayas: 1) trendy and comfortable, 2) practical and conservative, 3) trendy and unique and 4) special and premium.

These major findings fill a literature gap in regard to the trends taking shape in the Gulf region given the lifestyle of Muslim consumers that global brands and retailers are influencing. The study results also provide some implications for marketing practitioners. The examined perceptions of the transformation of abayas provide global as well as local brands and retailers with directions to take from marketing, communication and design perspectives. This study's findings offer a deeper understanding of the most important attributes that abaya wearers consider at the point of purchasing and in relation to different types of occasions. Thus, this study facilitates the understanding of the factors behind adopting various types of abayas and provides valuable occasional segmentation insights to marketers and manufacturers on how to segment their markets while offering the right type of abaya.

Although the findings of this research are encouraging, there are a number of limitations. Given that the purpose of focus groups and in-depth interviews is to expand knowledge on specific concepts, we cannot generalize the study's results beyond the specified examined groups given the small number of respondents. Consequently, the study's contributions just touch the surface, and a vast deal of empirical work prevails, calling on future research to generate empirical tests to explore the generalizability of these research findings. We conducted this study only within the United Arab Emirates market. Future research can expand this study's scope by examining other Gulf countries as well.

*On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.*

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