

## **The Feeling of Beauty: Is the beauty myth universal or do local truths prevail?**

### **The beauty every woman desires?**

Much has been written about the rise of hijabers and the modernisation of Muslim values. Many such perspectives interpret cultural changes through the lens of Western values, so what is the truth about modern Muslim women in South East Asia and what they feel about beauty?

In a recent study of Muslim women and beauty in Indonesia and Malaysia, researchers from TapestryWorks, ABN Impact and Zest Research Consultancy talked face-to-face with Indonesian and Malaysian women about “the beauty that they desire for themselves”.

The women were aged from 18 to 35 and at different life stages (single and married; working, students and housewives). Half of them wore the hijab (known as the tudong in Malaysia) and half did not.

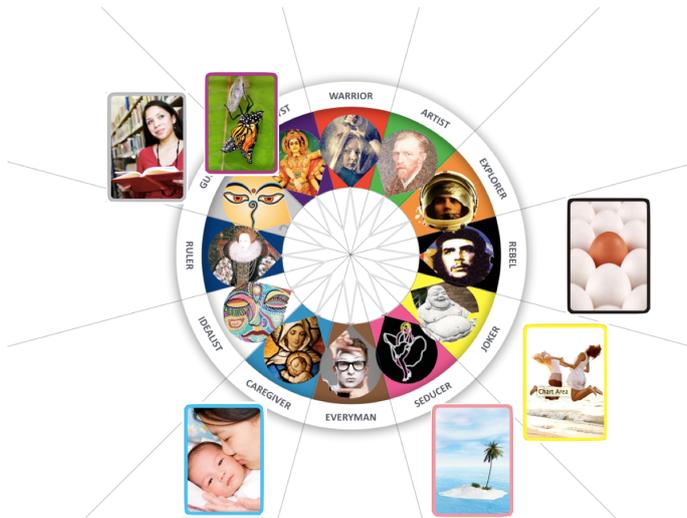
### **A framework for understanding emotional goals**

The discussions were designed to provide rich insights into the emotional goals of Muslim women in both countries. Participants were asked to do some homework before coming, finding images that helped them to express “the beauty that I desire for myself”. The first part of each discussion reviewed these images and the different associations with each image.

The second part of the interview focused on understanding participant’s emotional goals using TapestryWorks’ proprietary StoryWorks framework and Visual Think cards, based around 12 core human goals and the positive and negative emotions triggered by them.

Participants were asked to select 3-5 images that best reflected “the beauty that I desire for myself” and share stories about each image. Although everyone had a choice of 96 cards, there was a striking consistency in many of the images chosen demonstrating the ability of the approach to help people express their true feelings using an implicit and intuitive task.

## Naturally smart and rebellious?



For Indonesian women, the feeling of beauty is associated with the goal of feeling confident and smart and the desire to feel authentic (to yourself, to others and to your beliefs). Although these goals often conflict, they also represent different personas of individual beauty relating to different times, places and social situations.

The most frequently chosen individual image was that of a golden egg standing out in a box of plain eggs and representing the desire to be different. This image represents the desire to stand out, but not too much.

The most popular emotional goal is that of Knowledge, often represented by an image of a girl reading a book in a library (well read rather than a smart brat). Other goals chosen were associated with the need for confidence, for fun and play and for intimacy.

Indonesian Muslim women also place importance on the need to nurture beauty. Hijab wearers in particular associated the idea of nurture with family life while non-wearers more often associated this with the desire for a beautiful home. Both groups saw beauty in very natural terms, linked to ideas of health and wellness and not just beauty products.

## A greater need for confidence?



For Malaysian women, the feeling of beauty has many of the same goals as for Indonesian, including the desire for confidence and the need to feel free and be comfortable with their own beauty. However, Malaysian Muslims selected slightly different images. In particular, many Malay women chose an image of an individual standing on top of a mountain, perhaps reflecting a greater need for individuality and less need to belong to a group.

Malaysian women focus very strongly on the importance of confidence, and talk about the desire for a little magic in their relationships. Women who are working mention the competitive edge of beauty and the desire to be looked up to by work mates and those around them. This is reflected in a reliance on accessories in everyday dress.

For all women, especially housewives, the focus is much more on the home and on the relationship with their husband. They are more likely than Indonesian women to choose imagery reflecting the need for intimacy. This reflects a greater insecurity about this key relationship and a greater dependence on one person.

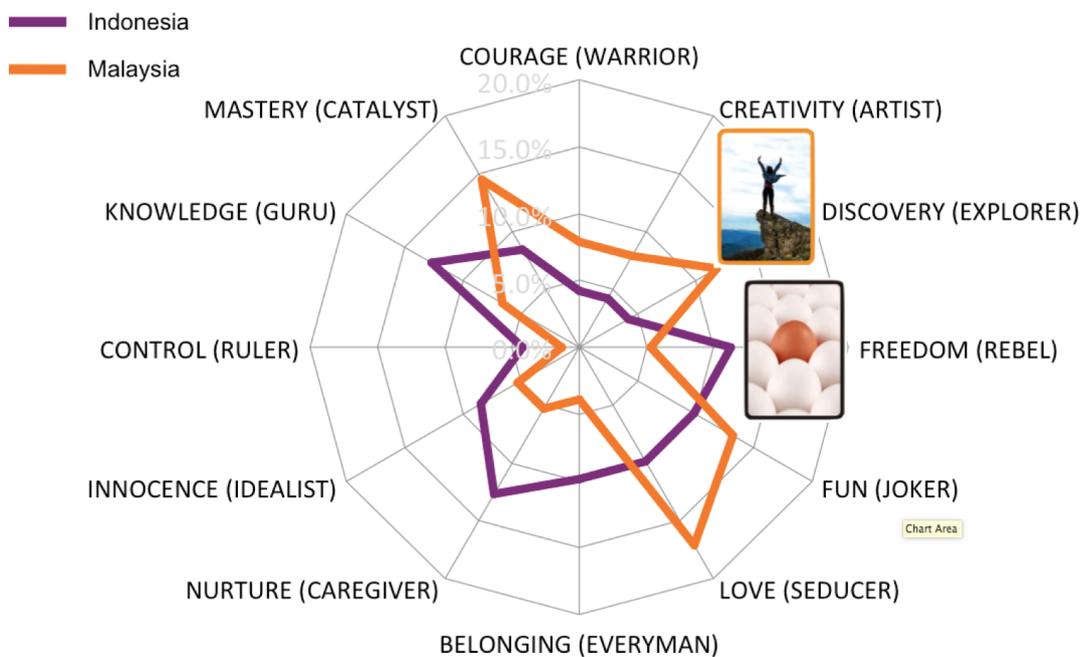


## The culture of belonging

Indonesian women talk much more about having a sense of belonging to a community than those in Malaysia. They see less difference between in-home and out-of-home appearance except for special occasions and religion provides comfort and connection. Elizabeth Pisani writes, “it is a visible badge of identity which suits the need to clump together, so very pronounced in clannish Indonesia”.

For Malaysian women the need to belong is more focused on their relationship with their husband. This is true even of single Malay women, who often talk about “when I have a husband”, especially when talking about beauty in more intimate contexts. Therefore Malay women make a greater distinction between in-home and out-of-home appearance.

It is important to understand the history of the religious, social and legal environments of the two countries. They share much in common, including a large part of their official languages, but there are differences in the place of Islam and Islamic law in shaping individual beliefs.



## The context of beauty

Although Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world at around 87% of the population, it is also one of the most open Muslim countries. Indonesia's tolerance is based on a constitutional framework introduced in 1945, partly to resolve conflicts between Muslims, Christians and nationalists. The *pancasila* places great importance on the freedom to practice other religions as well as ideals like humanity and social justice.

By contrast, Islam is the official religion of Malaysia, with 60% of the population practicing it. Islam is enshrined in the legal framework of the country and has jurisdiction over marriage and divorce for Muslims. A Pew Research study in 2013 found that Malaysia has some of the strictest views of any Muslim country.

For example, only 8% of Malaysian Muslims agree that a wife should have the right to divorce her husband (men and women) compared with 32% in Indonesia. Likewise, only 36% of Malaysian Muslims agree that sons and daughters should have equal inheritance rights compared with 76% of those in Indonesia. Clearly the cultural and legal norms of a society influence individual views of roles and responsibilities, and this appears true of how Indonesian and Malaysian women see beauty in relation to their own personal goals and life situation.

## Universal beauty myth or local truths?

Although many international brands have caught on to the importance of local context, especially in terms of the wearing of the hijab, many are behind local brands in connecting with the emotional tone of local culture.

Much international advertising reflects a notion of beauty as a science rather than an art and as serious rather than playful. This is unlikely to work in Malaysia and especially in Indonesia based on the findings of this research.

A common thread across both markets is the ambiguity of more sexual portrayals of beauty. Malay Muslims are more tolerant of sexual imagery and some use it to express their desire for a slimmer body shape, which is the biggest concern among them (Malaysia has the highest prevalence of obesity of any Asian country). Sexual imagery is censored in Indonesia, less available and perhaps less comfortable for women.

However, both Indonesian and Malaysian women view the “Barbie doll” image of beauty as relevant and appropriate when they are with their husbands, but emphatically inappropriate in many other contexts. That’s not to say that Muslim women reject such images or see them as bad. It’s just that such images are not relevant to how they see themselves and their role in society.

## The feeling of beauty

To summarize, for Muslim women beauty is all about success and happiness. In the workplace, that means feeling confident and authoritative, in leisure time that means the need to feel relaxed and comfortable, and in relationships that means the need to feel sexy and appreciated.

Wearing the hijab is considered to enhance beauty in both countries, even for those who do not currently wear one. Although this is an important part of women’s identity, it is only one symbol of being a Muslim woman in modern South East Asia.

Brands that want to market to Muslim women must understand and adapt to local cultural context beyond the more obvious labels and superficial symbols. Here are five overall take-outs for those who want to market beauty brands in Indonesia and Malaysia:

1. Beauty is about art as well as science
2. Beauty should be less serious and more fun
3. Beauty is not just about “me”
4. Beauty can be sexy, but be careful when
5. Beauty can be enhanced, but what is underneath matters

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*This is the seventh in TapestryWorks' series of case studies and white papers. TapestryWorks decodes people and culture to build consistent meaning into brand experiences. We help build culture sense for brands.*