



# Muslim perceptions of beauty in Indonesia and Malaysia

Neil Gains

Warc Exclusive

Institute on Asian Consumer Insight, February 2016



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Author(s): **Neil Gains**  
Source: **Warc Exclusive**  
Issue: **Institute on Asian Consumer Insight, February 2016**

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## **Muslim perceptions of beauty in Indonesia and Malaysia**

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ACI

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

Much has been written about the modernization of Muslim values when it comes to women and how they present themselves. But many of these perspectives interpret these cultural shifts through the lens of Western values.

Brands that want to market to Muslim women must understand and adapt to local cultural context beyond the more obvious labels and superficial symbols. Women in both countries embrace fashion and beauty products, though in different ways to their Western counterparts. So what is the truth about modern Muslim women in South East Asia and how they feel about beauty?

In a recent study of Muslim women and beauty in Indonesia and Malaysia, researchers from 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.

### Indonesian take: 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. 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.

### Malaysian take: a greater need for confidence?

For Malaysian women, beauty is related to many of the same goals as those described by Indonesians, 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 of a 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 aspect 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 the relationship with their husband. Accordingly, they are more likely than Indonesian women to choose imagery reflecting the need for intimacy. This reveals a greater insecurity about this key relationship and a greater dependence on one person for many Malaysian Muslim women.

### Beauty as nature intended vs beauty for status

The most striking difference between Malaysian and Indonesian women is that Malaysian Muslims feel a much greater need to "boost" their beauty across more situations. They expect to have to wear cosmetics, accessories and fashion items in order to be noticed and respected by their peers in many more social contexts.

Indonesian Muslims talk much more about natural beauty, and the need to look after your body. They see cosmetics as an enhancement required more for special occasions, especially when attending social events with their husbands. The Bahasa term for cosmetics, "dandan" which literally translates as "grooming", reflects this difference, focusing on those things that are added to natural beauty.

The difference between temporary and permanent changes was raised in both countries, reflecting that halal cosmetic changes can be washed away for prayers, while more permanent ones cannot. Most participants would never countenance

cosmetic surgery, unlike many North Asian women, and even hair coloring and nail varnish are considered quite risqué. In both countries inner beauty was considered equally or more important than outer beauty.



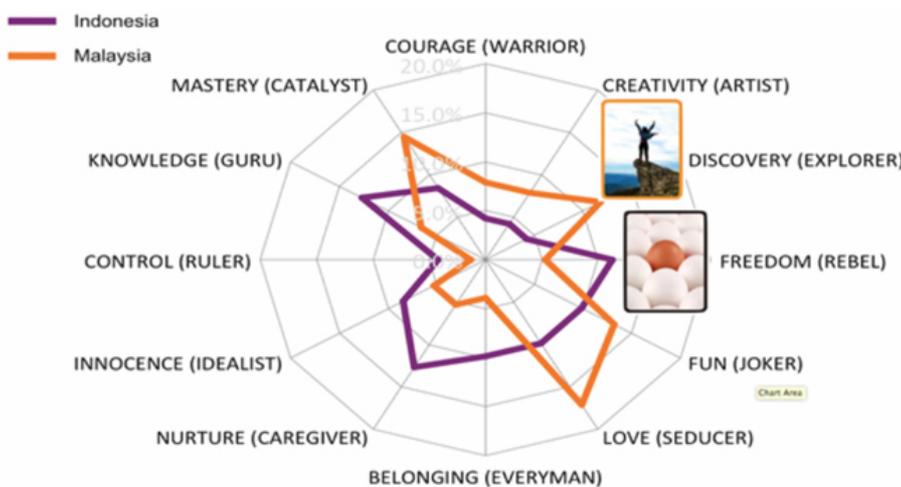
### Community vs family: A different culture of belonging

Indonesian women talk much more about having a sense of belonging to a wider community than those in Malaysia. For many, religion provides this comfort and connection. Elizabeth Pisani, journalist and author writes in her book "Indonesia, Etc", "it (religion) 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 rather than a wider religious group. This is true even of single Malay women, who often talk about the future as it relates to their future relationships, e.g. "when I have a husband", especially when referring to what beauty means to them in more intimate contexts. Malay women make a greater distinction between in-home and out-of-home appearance, and are likely to differentiate between the two.

### Understanding cultural differences between Malaysian and Indonesian Muslim women

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 style of Islam and Islamic law in shaping individual beliefs.



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Although Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world at around 87% of the population, it is also one of the most open and liberal 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 (the official philosophical foundation of Indonesia) 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, though just 60% of the population practice 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. More conservative Muslim views also hold sway over non-Muslim Malaysians in many parts of society.

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 to be echoed in the way in which Indonesian and Malaysian women understand beauty, and also the concept of womanhood, in relation to their own personal goals and life situation.

For brands, a one size fits all brand strategy simply cannot apply to Muslim women in different parts of the region.

### **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 still lagging behind local beauty and wellness 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. Based on the findings of this research, we believe this is the wrong positioning for Malaysia and even more so in Indonesia.

A common thread across both markets is a latent ambiguity towards more sexual portrayals of beauty. Surprisingly, Malaysian Muslims are more tolerant of sexual imagery and some use it to express their desire for a slimmer body - the major concern of this population (Malaysia has the highest prevalence of obesity of any Asian country). In contrast, sexual imagery is censored in Indonesia, is less available and consequently, Indonesian women are considerably less comfortable with it.

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 is not to say that Muslim women reject such images or perceive them as negative but rather 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, during leisure time, the need to feel relaxed and comfortable, and in relationships, 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 can be an important part of a Muslim woman's identity, it is only one symbol of being a Muslim woman

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in modern South East Asia.

Here are five overall take-outs for those who want to market beauty brands in Indonesia and Malaysia:

- Beauty is about art as well as science
- Beauty should be less serious and more fun
- Beauty is not just about "me"
- Beauty can be sexy, but keep it subtle
- Beauty can be enhanced, but what lies beneath also matters

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## About the Author

Dr Neil Gains is an ACI Fellow and the owner and founder of TapestryWorks. He is an expert on human and cultural psychology, the author of Brand esSense and a pioneer of sensory branding and the application of emotions in branding. Neil set up TapestryWorks in 2010 to help clients to decode people and culture to weave richer connections from brand strategy through to in-store activation.

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Warc Ltd.  
85 Newman Street, London, United Kingdom, W1T 3EU  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7467 8100, Fax: +(0)20 7467 8101

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