Hallyu and Strategic Interpretation of Malaysian Modernity among Young Malay Women[*]

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Abstract ————————————————————————————————

The growing popularity of South Korean popular culture, known as *Hallyu* (Korean Wave), among young Malay women since the early 2000s has become the latest focus of debate and discussion with respect to its impact on the development of modernity in Malaysia. In this context, there has been little qualitative inquiry into how *Hallyu* influences the development of modernity among its female supporters. Through in-depth interviews with 10 young female *Hallyu* fans in Malaysia, this study examines how increased transcultural competence through *Hallyu* shapes the construction and manifestation of modern femininity among Malay women. Findings show that young Malay women use strategies of negotiation in their interpretation of Malaysian modernity and transcultural influences, which allow them to not only strengthen their identity as Muslim women but also actively engage in the development of modern femininity. From these findings, the study suggests that *Hallyu*, as a mediated cultural force, may alter the implications of cultural globalization in Malaysia.

Key words ————————————————————————————————

    Malaysian modernity, *Hallyu*, modern femininity, Malay women, *Tudung*

Introduction

In Malaysia, popular culture is an important element in the context of everyday

life. The establishment of the government-owned national television broadcasting station in 1963 pioneered the process of producing popular culture texts that complemented government efforts in developing and modernizing the country. Along with privatization policies implemented in a range of government sectors to boost economic growth, the introduction of private broadcasting stations was the first step in the materialization of profit-driven broadcast entertainment in Malaysia (Badarudin, 1997). Starting from the emergence of TV3 in 1983, it has successfully changed the country's broadcasting landscape, whose primary mission was to deliver government messages regarding the country's development and the process of modernization.

In particular, the government's adoption of the Look East Policy in 1982 has allowed popular content from Asian countries to be widely aired on local television (Wahab, 2006). Launched by former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohammad, the Look East Policy has been an important Malaysian foreign policy initiative, embodying the country's aim of becoming an industrialized country by emulating the economic success and work culture of East Asian countries, particularly Japan, whilst moving away from western dominance (Amarthalingam, 2018). During the 1990s, this policy then led to the rise of an "Asian values" discourse, which attributes Asian success to Asian cultural values (in contrast with "Western values"). Along with the growing maturity in dialogue on the Look East Policy and Asian values, Prime Minister Mahathir launched "Vision 2020" in 1991, a new national development plan, which contains a national aspiration to become a fully developed nation in Malaysia's own way.

This national vision has exerted enormous influence over various fields, including popular culture. In a country whose population is over 60 percent Muslim, popular content imported from the West was criticized for damaging the moral system and behavior of the Malay, especially among local youth (Halim, 2007; Lin & Tong, 2008). Non-Western popular culture, in contrast, has been regarded by the government as being more appropriate and consistent with the national vision of achieving national modernity as well as having similarities with Malay society in terms of cultural and social backgrounds (Syed, 2011). In the 1990s and early 2000s, the government began to take active steps by encouraging private television stations to import more popular content from non-Western countries in order to create a balance with the inflow of American-dominated Western-cultural texts (John, Damis, & Chelvi, 2003). This move has had a profound effect on the inflow of popular cultural texts from non-Western countries, including Japan, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and South

Korea (Korea, hereafter). Various forms of popular cultural content, including television shows, movies, music, documentaries, and reality television shows from these countries, have successfully crossed borders and received positive and encouraging feedback in Malaysia (John et al., 2003).

By the late 2000s, popular culture from Korea known as *Hallyu* (Korean Wave) had risen as a new trend within Korean cultural content in Malaysia. In its initial stages, *Hallyu* was closely connected with Malay women through their enthusiastic response to Korean soap operas that were broadcast on most local television stations. With the widespread use of social media such as *Twitter*, *Facebook,* and *YouTube*, *Hallyu* products became a popular choice among younger generations (Azizan, 2012).

While solidifying its influence as popular culture on a regional scale, however, *Hallyu* has also become the target of recent criticisms due to its intricate relation-ship with its female fans in Southeast Asia (Khoo, 2014). In the predominantly Muslim society of Malaysia, for example, the active participation of young women in their activities as fans of *Hallyu* have increasingly become an important topic of public discourse. Some of the female fans' un-Islamic behavior and appearance has attracted major attention and criticism from Islamic authorities and commun-ity organizations. In addition, two recent incidents have attracted widespread pub-lic outrage and harsh condemnation in relation to the impact of *Hallyu* on women in Malaysia. The first incident occurred in January 2015 when members of a popu-lar Korean boy band named B1A4 hugged and kissed three *tudung* (headscarf)-clad Malay girls on stage during their live concert (Malay Mail, 2015). The other in-cident happened in December 2017 when a veiled Malay woman joined candle-light vigils in memory of the late Kim Jong-Hyun, a singer from a famous Korean boy band, despite the fact that praying for a non-Muslim is forbidden in Islamic teachings (Free Malaysia Today, 2017). The state Mufti of Malaysia, religious bod-ies, and non-governmental organizations deemed the acts as degrading to the dig-nity of Malay women in terms of religious morality and social identity. Malay neti-zens also criticized the behavior of the women as disrespectful and damaging to their religion and families. Such incidents have contributed to the focus on *Hallyu* as the latest platform for debate and discussion regarding adherence to Malay cus-toms and Islamic values among younger generations—the key elements of the Malaysian development policy known as Malaysian modernity, as detailed in the following section (Azizan, 2015).

The controversy surrounding *Hallyu* is in fact a growing phenomenon. Along with the continued popularity of *Hallyu* in Asia, discourses about a (potential) re-

jection of and resistance and animosity toward a one-way flow of cultural content or cultural imperialism have been raised by a number of studies (Ainslie, Lipura, & Lim, 2017; Chen, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2012). Scholars such as Appadurai (1996) argue that the West, particularly the United States, no longer plays a major role in the context of cultural imperialism because of the active flow of transnational cultural texts in an increasingly globally connected world of mass media, migration, and tourism.

Nevertheless, there has been little qualitative inquiry into the actual impacts that the one-way cultural flow of *Hallyu* has on its transnational supporters, especially the women who are overwhelmingly the majority of *Hallyu* fans. Acknowledging this gap in research, this study explores how increased transcultural competence through *Hallyu* influences the construction and manifestation of modern femininity among young female *Hallyu* fans in Malaysia using in-depth interviews with Malay women. Providing qualitative insights into the impact of *Hallyu* on the individual level of female transnational *Hallyu* supporters, the findings will extend and strengthen previous research on how *Hallyu* as a transnational cultural flow affects the negotiation of consumer culture and modernity among their fans across different cultural backgrounds (Jeong, Lee, & Lee, 2017; Otmazgin & Lyan, 2014; Yang, 2012).

Literature review

Hallyu as a Transnational Cultural Flow

Hallyu refers to the rising popularity of Korean popular culture since the 1990s. It started with the export of a few television dramas that gained popularity in China before spreading across Asia and, eventually, the world. Its immense and unique global success has been regarded as a major cultural phenomenon and has received much academic attention in recent decades. Scholars have identified various contributing factors, most commonly associated with theories of cultural proximity, cultural hybridity, and the globalization of the Internet and social media (Ariffin, Bakar, & Yusof, 2018; Cho, 2010; Lin & Tong, 2008; Suh, Cho, & Kwon, 2006; Yang, 2012).

The concept of cultural proximity was first used by Joseph Straubhaar (1991) to explain media production preferences across national boundaries. His concept of cultural proximity explains that people are more likely to choose media products from their own culture and in their own language or from those with similar cultural representations. Using this concept, scholars have explained that *Hallyu* has

gained popularity because its content is compatible with cultures in other Asian countries due to shared traditional socio-cultural values, including Confucian ethics (Suh et al., 2006; Yang, 2012). In countries that are not traditionally founded on Confucian views, such as Malaysia, studies also find that regional and cultural closeness (Jackson, 2017; Kim, 2014) or the hybridity of *Hallyu* content, with globalized and modern styles and contents based on traditional Confucianism (Lee, 2005; Lin & Tong, 2008; Shim, 2006), plays an important role.

It is also well known that the globalization of the Internet and social media such as *Facebook*, *YouTube*, and *Twitter* since the mid-2000s has facilitated worldwide access to and acceptance of *Hallyu* content (Ariffin et al., 2018; Jin & Yoon, 2014). Many young people have emerged, not only as consumers of *Hallyu* but as contributors to and creators of *Hallyu* fan culture. Using the Internet and social media as a new avenue for their expression and engagement, they are actively involved in various *Hallyu* fan activities, embracing the new participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). They frequently participate in *Hallyu* fan meeting events and live concerts, keep photos of *Hallyu* stars, and produce and distribute the latest information about *Hallyu* content through social media (Jin, 2018; Utusan Malaysia, 2009).

The Concept of Malaysian Modernity and Modern Femininity

The construction of modern femininity in Malaysia is closely related to the concept of modernity (Mouser, 2007). Some key ideas of modernity can be seen through various national projects such as New Economic Policy (NEP) and Vision 2020 launched by Prime Minister Mahathir and represented a unique and alternative path to modernity. In contrast to the concept of Western modernity, which is prominently associated with contemporary values breaking away from tradition, Malaysian modernity is linked to the past as it embraces developments not only in the economy and technology but most importantly in moral values (Furlow, 2009). The government led by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) began to emphasize Malay customs and Islamic values as effective tools to regulate Malay society and to foster a sense of loyalty and obedience to the government (Frisk, 2009).

The emergence of Islamic revivalist movements in the early 1980s has also given a new dimension to Malaysian modernity and contributed to the formation of a modern female identity in Malaysia (Othman, 1998, 2006). The government saw such movements as one of the most effective ways to promote the participation of Malay women in the project of Malaysian modernity. For this reason, the *tudung*

has been re-introduced as a symbol of a new modernity as well as support for Islamic revival (Hochel, 2013). The concept of private space, such as home and family, has been reinvigorated through the field of *jihad* (a struggle or effort for the betterment of oneself) (Ong, 1990a). In this sense, the role of mothers has been highly valued for ensuring the well-being of the family, providing the best education for children and preserving the moral system within the Malay community. Stivens (1998a) argues that community campaigns such as *Happy Families*, *My Home My Heaven*, and *Family First—Bring Your Heart Home* are merely government propaganda used to encourage Malay women to stay home and take care of their children and families. Women have been required to have a distinctive feminine nature and exhibit gender-specific domestic features, such as politeness and courtesy in public spaces and appropriateness in dressing and speaking. Women are trained to be gentle, polite, hygienic, and noble, with the goal of becoming devout and responsible wives and mothers (Omar, 1994). In this regard, Muslim femininity has been an important tool to explain what is perceived as suitable practice for Malay women in both the private and public spheres (Healey, 1994).

Malay women's behavior and their moral compass are based on the Islamic concepts of honor and shame (Omar, 1994). In the group-oriented Muslim culture, public recognition is an important factor utilized by individuals to judge one's behavior while to have honor and shame is a collective duty imposed on every member of the group, whether it be within a family, community, or country (Dumitrescu, 2005). Women are required to have a stronger sense of shame than males because they are "like wild animals" (Peletz, 1994, p. 150). Women who are unmarried and underage are considered particularly immature as they still lack life experience. These women are continuously monitored to enhance their dignity and self-esteem through the concept of shame, which is nurtured and reinforced from childhood, either through informal education at home or through religion, to ensure the preservation of the family's honor and self-dignity (Healey, 1994; Omar, 1994; Ong, 1990a, 1990b). The use of force and pressure in the maintenance and expansion of the Muslim community has been compatible with Islamic revivalist movements since the late 1980s (Anwar, 1987). In addition, the globalization of gender roles that allows women to compete with men for access to technology, education, and employment has further complicated social expectations for Malay women (Gray, 2010; Mouser, 2007). Malay women are more likely than men to become a target of criticism in regard to maintaining Islamic identity and values (Healey, 1994; Stivens, 1998a, 1998b).

Behaviors contradictory to Islamic values and thus creating a sense of shame in

the community, such as not wearing the *tudung*, have attracted negative criticism from the public and Muslim authorities (Hochel, 2013; Ong, 1990a; Stivens, 1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2006). For example, a number of Malay women were summoned and fined in the state of Kelantan for wearing non-Sharia-compliant attire in public spaces (Azhar & Habibu, 2014). Malay girls working in a modern industrial environment as factory workers were seen as threats to the Malay moral order that restricts women's access to public spaces and public life (Ong, 1987, 1990a, 1990b; Shamsul, 1997). As Muslims, parents often found themselves conflicted because of the tensions between their obligation to raise their daughters as upright Muslim women and their desire to allow them to work in factories to earn extra income for the family. Concerns as to the release of young Malay women into the public domain centered around issues of moral impropriety derived from increased freedom of movement as well as economic independence. The new leisure-time activities that these young women indulged in, such as going to the cinemas, shopping, displaying interest in fashion, and wearing Western clothes and make-up, were criticized as an improper use of their time and money. These female factory workers were called *Minah Karan* (electric girl) and easily stereotyped as wasteful and morally flippant (Ackerman, 1991; Ong, 1987). Malay women entering into interracial relationships are also castigated as *bukan Melayu* (not Malay) (Ong, 1990a). In addition, the term *bukan Islam* (not Muslim) is regularly used in contemporary society to criticize Malay women who refuse to obey Islamic values. For example, the *tudung*-clad Malay women involved in the candlelight vigil for the dead pop star or the hug event for K-pop fans were condemned by social media users as *bukan Islam* for their shameless behavior (The Rakyat Post, 2015; Yunus, 2018).

　　In this context, the representation of modernity in *Hallyu* content has supported the aspirations and rhetoric of Malaysian modernity. Beginning with *Winter Sonata*, the popularity of Korean soap operas in the country led to positive acclaim from the public audience, particularly among Malay women (John et al., 2003). Gathering momentum, the popularity of *Hallyu* expanded to various cultural genres (Azizan, 2015) and consequently sparked a new popular culture phenomenon in the country. Traditional Korean food, such as *kimchi,* became popular menu items in local restaurants. In addition, Korean car manufacturers such as Kia and Hyundai were increasingly preferred due to their trendy and popular designs. With regard to tourism, Nami Island and Seoul in Korea became preferred tourist locations for Malaysians. Concerts performed by K-pop artists such as Rain also received a warm welcome and were attended by thousands of fans (Utusan Malaysia,

2009). In addition, the brave and independent image of women and their liberated lifestyles depicted in Korean soap operas and popular Korean films has inspired many Malay women, despite such portrayals being based temporarily on their popular imagination (Ang, 1985). In addition, *Hallyu* has popularized a consumer culture among Malaysian women, promoting their consumption of Korean (cultural) products (Ainslie et al., 2017; Lin & Tong, 2008). In this way, *Hallyu* has been regarded as a female genre in the Malaysian context (Ainslie, 2017).

Methodology

Interviewing

The study used semi-structured in-depth interviews as the main data collection instrument; they were based on an interview guide developed to probe respondents' perceptions and experiences pertaining to (i) the *Hallyu* phenomenon, (ii) exposure to Korean culture, and (iii) Islamic practices and values, including the *tudung*. This method is the most effective and appropriate to explore the study subjects' own experiences and perspectives on the topic of study, with optimum use of interview time (Jamshed, 2014). It must be noted, however, that the feedback from respondents did not focus on their insights and experiences relating to Korea and *Hallyu* only, but sought to extract information relating to various issues that fell within the context of Malaysian modernity. The feedback from the respondents therefore signified the "diversity of experience" (Wilson, 2004, p. 18) that may exist in a society with reference to one single phenomenon.

Each interview was conducted for about two hours in the company of the interviewee's female friends to create a casual atmosphere for the informants. While an interview guide was used to direct the conversation toward the research topics, interview questions were as open-ended as possible to encourage the respondents to communicate their opinions and/or feelings in their own words. Interviews were conducted between March and May 2018 at a time convenient to each interviewee. Interviews were conducted in a special room at the university campus to ensure privacy and less interference during the interviews, which is especially important when interviewing women (Anderson & Jack, 1991). All interviews were conducted and audio-recorded in informal Malay language but transcribed verbatim in Malay and later translated into English with the participants' permission. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for each interview participant during the analysis and presentation of interview data, and that data were accessed only by the researcher.

Sampling and Recruitment

Interview participants were selected through purposive and snowballing sampling techniques (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) in order to focus upon young female *Hallyu* fans. Potential interviewees were selected from among female university students living in Malaysia who had been to Korea as exchange students, in the belief that such experience potentially signifies a high appreciation of *Hallyu*. Their personal experiences with and direct exposure to Korean culture as exchange students were expected to offer a better chance to engage in transcultural competence and thus provide the researcher with an advantage in better identifying the genuine impact of *Hallyu* on its supporters.

Potential interview participants were identified and approached using the researcher's academic network within the university. Several students agreed to participate in the study and then introduced other potential interviewees. Recruitment of interview participants took place at the University of Malaya. This was chosen because of its strategic location in Kuala Lumpur, which is central to the flow of popular culture and the birthplace of modern trends, especially among the Malay youth. Additionally, the university was the main location for Islamic movements in the 1980s and 1990s. It has also pioneered the Look East Policy program with efforts to set up the Japan Matriculation center and the introduction of various study programs on East Asia, including Korea and China.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). For this, all interview transcripts were carefully read and reread to capture commonly recurring themes (patterns, stories) across the women's accounts of their perceptions and experiences. While being read, interview data were coded, accompanied by writing notes on the text. Through this method, a long list of initial codes (ideas) relating to potentially interesting findings was generated, as well as brief summaries of the interviewees' thoughts and experiences and relevant segments of verbatim text. The initial codes were then categorized and collated into potential themes, which were later combined to form major themes and sub-themes. Themes were reviewed and refined to avoid omitting important information in the data.

Despite the small sample size, their feedback was very consistent and insightful on the topic to the extent of indicating data saturation in terms of the research themes that could be derived from casual discussions (Lee, Woo, & Mackenzie,

2002; Mason, 2010).

Findings

The study participants were 10 female university students, aged between 21 and 24, who had been in Korea for more than six months as exchange students. They all wore the *tudung* as a part of their clothing. They were born and raised in different parts of Malaysia before moving to Kuala Lumpur for their tertiary education and included second year to final year students. All of them were very familiar with *Hallyu* culture content through local broadcast media as well as social media such as *YouTube*, *Facebook,* and *Twitter*.

From the analysis of interview data, three key themes were identified: (i) reconstruction of the concepts of honor and shame; (ii) changing and multiple meanings of the *tudung*; and (iii) multiple presentations of the modern self.

Adherence to and Reconstruction of the Concepts of Honor and Shame

In a Muslim culture where people's lives are greatly controlled by concepts of honor and shame, young women (as well as men) are not free to act as they want but have a duty to preserve the honor of their family and community. They are constantly asked what is honorable and shameful (Mansoor, 2015). During the interview, many women in this study also talked about their efforts to uphold their Malay and Islamic values and standards in terms of attire, diet, and socializing, both in Malaysia and in their time in Korea as exchange students. Ramona (23) and Tiara (23), for example, explained they had to cook at home or eat seafood while they were in Korea as it was very difficult to find halal food in Korea. Their concern regarding the *halal* concept should be understood in the context of honor and shame. This is because *halal* is not just about food but honesty toward and compliance with Islamic values. Eating *halal* food therefore symbolizes an honor, while failing to comply is considered unacceptable as it will bring shame not only within the circle of Muslim friends in Korea but in their relationship with God.

Many other comments made by Malay women in this study also revealed how much they embraced the concept of shame in various aspects of life and carried it into the modern world. For example, speaking about the incidents involving *Hallyu* stars hugging *tudung*-clad Malay women, some women employed the concept of shame, saying that daily application of the sense of shame would help women maintain their honor when dealing with foreign culture such as *Hallyu*. For in-

stance, Amalina (23) explained that it was excessive interest in and obsession with K-pop idols that usually led some women to behave outside the moral standards of the Islamic faith and lose their sense of shame.

Some women saw the controversies concerning *Hallyu* and *tudung*-clad Malay women from a different perspective. For example, Mimi (24) expressed strong disapproval toward the irresponsible attitude of third parties who were involved in spreading the video through social media and further embarrassing the Malay women involved in the incident. Mimi considered these acts as indirectly contrary to the moral system of Islamic-based Malay society. She said:

> This incident should not have gone viral. And I don't think it should have been taken seriously either. It just makes those involved more embarrassed and shameful. Honestly speaking, I think you can see this hugging behavior everywhere in public, and yet nobody makes it viral—and, some of the behavior is even worse than that depicted in the incidents (Mimi, 24).

Mimi's comment above implies that shame or shameful behavior is indeed a complicated concept in Muslim culture; it is not merely generated from the wrongful conduct of an individual in a public space but is largely connected with the disapproval of others.

Not bound by the traditional concept of shame, however, there were also many other women who had their own way of interpreting and applying the concept of shame in response to the *Hallyu* incidents. These women did not accept the view that those incidents were challenges to the honor of Malay women as claimed by religious authorities and media. They saw those as isolated incidents, not a social phenomenon requiring widespread public attention and criticism. Apart from the unfamiliarity of Korean celebrities with Islamic values and local Malay culture, Mona asserted that those *Hallyu* incidents were attributed to the lack of self-regulation or discipline among young Malay women, a common characteristic of young people. She explained:

> I read about the news of Korean male celebrities hugging Malay girls on social media. To me, they are just a bunch of kids. I guess this is very common when you meet your idol for the first time. You will get too excited and not be able to control your emotions. Well, like I said, they are teenagers and we cannot completely blame them for this matter. And I

guess the Korean celebrities are also unfamiliar with our culture and Islam. I don't have any problem with men and women sitting next to each other in live concerts as long as they behave properly (Mona, 23).

Objecting to some Islamic traditions such as prohibiting the mixing of genders in public, another respondent, Ramona, claimed that Malay women were so fixated with the concept of shame that it actually formed an obstacle to their aspirations to become better people in real life. She asserted that the concept of shame should be approached and understood within the context:

I think the concept of shame depends on the right time and context. Otherwise, you will be always be wrong in one way or the other. For example, if you want to talk in public, you don't have to feel embarrassed or ashamed of yourself. You must be firm and say whatever you want. Why should we need to be ashamed of speaking about something appropriately when we are not violating Islamic values like kissing in public areas? (Ramona, 23).

The importance of context was repeatedly emphasized during the interviews with other women, often as an attempt to strategically resist and deconstruct the patriarchal imperatives in their lives. For example, Fatin said:

Every woman needs to have at least a little shame. But you should not be too embarrassed to talk to people. When you talk about shame, it should be situated in its context and background. A woman like me needs to retain image and honor. In our conservative society, we need to think carefully before we decide to do something (Fatin, 23).

In the same vein, some women argued that the Mufti's conservative approach to those incidents was not effective as it only contributed to maintaining its image as a patriarchal hegemony. Against the decision of the Mufti, Anita seemed confident enough to challenge the authorities and their premature interference in the incident:

In this case I blame the *Mufti*. You cannot make this thing go viral. To deal with this issue, I think it is better to use a proper channel. Why do you need to openly criticize the women by simply saying that this in-

cident is not compliant with *syariah* [Islamic religious law]? What else
have you done? Stop shaming these girls. I think there should a more
proper way to handle these young women (Anita, 25).

In an effort to interpret the *Hallyu*-related controversy, Malay women in this
study used Malay customs and Islamic values to re-examine and renegotiate the
concept of shame. However, they were very critical toward gender-biased inter-
pretations, especially in terms of the Malay moral system. While the interviewees
demonstrated a strategic non-compliance approach, they also maintained a rational
view in respect to their dignity and identity.

What I learnt from Korean society is that we need to speak out and
voice our opinions about whatever we think it is right to speak. We
need to be very confident in decision making (Nana, 22).

Increased exposure to *Hallyu* may have resulted in positive perceptions about
Korea and its products among young Malay women. As highlighted by Ang
(1985), the important aspect of gendered popular culture is the pleasure of recog-
nition whereby audience deriving pleasure from their ability to recognise points of
reference and express their proficiency of interpretation. For many women in this
study, *Hallyu* may therefore have shaped and become a stable part of [the] lifestyles
and outlooks of these women.

Changing and Multiple Meanings of the Tudung

Since its return to Malaysian society in the 1980s, the *tudung* has been an im-
portant component of the Islamic dress code for women. Of the 10 women inter-
viewed all were wearing their *tudung* at the time of the interviews. They continued
to wear it even when experiencing anti-Islamic attitudes while they were in Korea
as exchange students, implying the influential role of the *tudung* in connecting and
strengthening their identity as Muslims. There was no clear rejection of this sym-
bol of Muslim identity among these young women.

Comments from many women in this study suggest that their use of the *tudung*
was how the women expressed their inner convictions regarding their beliefs. For
these women, the *tudung* was an indication of honor as a Muslim. They said that
the decision to wear the *tudung* was more of their own accord rather than a result
of family or peer pressure, as explained by Anita:

> No one encouraged me to wear the *tudung*. I started wearing it when I was twelve. Mom never asked me to wear it. But I guess I decided to wear it after I realized that I had just reached puberty. In fact, most of my friends in school wear the *tudung* (Anita, 24).

Other women, however, felt varying levels of social and religious-based pressure to wear the *tudung*. Some had experienced considerable pressure to wear the *tudung* from their families. Amalina (24), for example, said wearing the *tudung* was her mother's decision but that she had grown accustomed to it later on. Despite their conformity to the practice of wearing the *tudung*, some women emphasized that its use was not specifically because of Islam. Most respondents claimed that they wore it not just for religious reasons, but for various social, cultural, and personal reasons. The *tudung* seemed to contribute positive values as a fashion item not necessarily associated with Muslim identity. Mimi (25) explained:

> I have decided to wear the *tudung* recently. However, I don't wear the *tudung* all the time. For me, the *tudung* is very personal and depends on your preference. But now it is considered nothing more than fashion. For example, I see people wearing the *tudung* but their clothes are very tight and don't comply with Islamic beliefs. This is not the Islamic image that we want. Personally, I believe that the *tudung* is not a true symbol of Islam anymore. Not as it was before (Mimi, 25).

Many women agreed that the *tudung*, as a symbol, had changed in its meaning and taken on different forms. They felt that it no longer functioned as an effective barrier to deter women from acting against the social standards of the Malay community. The *tudung* instead became an intertemporal choice for some Malay women, their transition to a wider society and its progressive attitudes undermining the initial custom-compliant reasons for wearing the *tudung*. Mona explained:

> It [*tudung*] became very controversial because I can see Malay women who cover themselves with the *tudung* going to nightclubs to socialize. So I think, while you might cover your body as instructed by Islamic teaching, at the end of the day it will never justify and define your inner personality. We hear a lot of stories and watch viral videos in which *tudung*-clad Malay women get involved in a lot of bad behaviors. Some

schoolgirls wear the *tudung* temporarily only at school and will take it off once they reach home. So, I can say that not all women wear the *tudung* and cover their bodies sincerely. For me, wearing the *tudung* as part of your attire is a personal choice. You can't force women to wear it if they are not willing (Mona, 23).

The above and many other comments by the women suggest that the use of the *tudung* does not necessarily symbolize the creation of a new modernity or religious compliance in Malaysia. Instead, it supports the notion that the meaning of the *tudung* in modern Malaysia is significantly dependent on the context and environment in which it is observed (Hochel, 2013). For this reason, some women suggested that the use of the *tudung* must be understood in a wider context. They articulated that individual choices not to wear the *tudung* can be justified by differences in circumstances. For example, Tiara asserted:

If we follow Islam, we have to wear the *tudung*. If you refuse to do it, then do not be bothered. I guess everything must be based on your own will. I see some people who, despite not wearing the *tudung*, behave much better in terms of their attitude and politeness. For me, the *tudung* does not tell the whole of you. So the *tudung* and behavior are two different sets of things. As long as one makes an effort to cover *aurat* [private parts]*,* then it should be fine (Tiara, 23).

Rather than centralizing controversies around a religious-based discussion, Malay women and their traditional roles in society were more often the targets of criticism by society in general. This was also understood to be central to the controversy over the negative effects of *Hallyu* on Malay women. Nana (22) criticized the fact that contemporary Malay society was still dominated by bias and stereotypes imposed on women:

This is the stereotype that Malaysians have of Malay women. If *tudung*-clad Malay girls are hugged by Korean men, everyone is against it. However, surprisingly, they will pretend to hear and see nothing if the same act is demonstrated in a local television drama. I think this is not fair at all. I can see many local celebrities nowadays dress inappropriately and even act outside their code of behavior and I am very surprised when nobody makes any comment (Nana, 22).

In Malaysia, *Hallyu* incidents involving *tudung*-clad women, although invoking harsh public and media condemnation, have provided an important avenue for many young Malay women to challenge and reshape the tradition of wearing the *tudung*. Young Malay women in this study did not necessarily perceive the *tudung* as a symbol of religion or oppression and were able to negotiate changes in its meaning and shape their own gender identities.

Presentation of Modern Self

In this study, interviews with the women confirm Slimbach's (2005) notion that personal experience as an exchange student can intensify transcultural competence in the globalized era. Clearly evident in the women's answers was their proximity to Korean values, which was considered by the women to be compatible with Islamic practices. For example, Ramona and Nana spoke highly of the Korean tradition of showing respect to elders.

Interviews also revealed a growing tendency among young Malay women to improve their appearance using cosmetic enhancements, contrary to the orthodox image of Muslim women (focusing on being modest). While remaining critical of the westernized attire in Korea, most women in the study willingly and quickly adopted makeup as an essential part of their daily grooming, often as a result of the influence of Korean culture. The women felt empowered by such a change rather than being shrouded in shame. Tiara said:

> I always give priority to my self-appearance. You see, almost all Korean girls that I met were very beautiful. They knew how to apply cosmetics and do make-up. Most of us who joined this exchange program lacked make-up skills. When I arrived there and started to mix around, I began to realize how important it was to wear good-quality cosmetics. For me this is for self-confidence. If I don't wear any makeup, I always feel that I am ugly, and I don't have the confidence to go out (Tiara, 23).

With the consensus highlighting its positive effects on their confidence and self-esteem, many women actively engaged in the process of negotiating the meanings of makeup within the Islamic context. Makeup was then described as an important tool for empowerment. One explained:

> I am proud that I have been able to improve my makeup skills. I think

makeup and cosmetics boost your confidence. For example, if we go to a
job interview, the first thing that interviewers will see is your appearance.
It is important to look proper, neat, and pleasant (Nana, 22).

Women's claim to self-empowerment through their own choice to wear
make-up seems to be consistent with the notion of the so-called "lipstick femi-
nism," which justifies women's empowerment through conforming to traditionally
feminine behaviors including the use of make-up (Lehrman, 1998). In an Islamic
context where a woman's beauty is for her spouse and marital relationship, the use
of makeup may represent ways in which these young women exhibit agency or
control over their lives (Rudd & Lennon, 2000). Their active engagement with
Hallyu seemed to have provided an opportunity for the women to frame their
choices in their search for self-identity—a concept that has been traditionally shap-
ed by an Islamic-based moral system. *Hallyu* represented an important avenue for
promoting transcultural understanding of modern femininity among its female
supporters in Malaysia.

Conclusion

In this study, findings suggest that the idea of Malaysian modernity, which has
shaped the modern identity of Malay women over the last few decades, has also
been faced with some challenges and compromises. For example, women's deci-
sions to wear the *tudung* as part of their social attire in this study was often a per-
sonal choice, not necessarily related to the level of devotion and adherence to
Islam, as shown in Hochel's study (2013). Submitting to an ideal image of a
Muslim woman (by wearing the *tudung*) while also embracing the portrayal of a
confident and beautiful modern woman (as depicted by Korean women in *Hallyu*
content), young Malay women in this study presented flexible and multiple mean-
ings of "Muslim femininity." These changes suggest the intricacy of Malaysian
modernity—the ideal that the country pursues, which incorporates Malay custom,
Islamic values, and globalization.

In the context of such complex notions of Malaysian modernity, young Malay
women in this study demonstrated the use of certain strategic interpretations, not
only to maintain their identity as Muslim women but also to fluidly engage with
the process of creating a modern form of femininity through the consumption of
Hallyu. Contrary to growing public concerns about the negative impacts of *Hallyu*
on Malay traditional cultural values and beliefs, this study finds that *Hallyu* has led

young Malay women to adopt a more active gender role, redefining their identity as modern Muslim women. These women co-opted their cultural resources, the government's discourse, and everyday experience to develop strategic interpretations in their consumption of Korean popular cultural texts with minimal intervention from the state. Women's comments emphasized that their interpretation of modern Muslim femininity was not just socio-culturally driven but personal. This finding is in line with previous studies that had found that female transnational supporters of *Hallyu* play a role as cultural mediators between Korean and local cultural norms (Jeong et al., 2017; Otmazgin & Lyan, 2014). As observed by Lin and Tong (2008), *Hallyu* content can be an important tool for the imagination and negotiation of modern femininity for women in Southeast Asian countries. Increased transcultural competence among *Hallyu* fans thus reinforces *Hallyu's* symbolic power in its influence on their perceptions, attitudes, and evaluation of local cultural norms.

By initiating and influencing negotiation and reconstruction between Islamic tradition and modernity, it can be argued that *Hallyu* functions as a mediated cultural force, which may alter the implications of cultural globalization in Malaysia. Growing intercultural competence through access to and acceptance of *Hallyu* content has enabled Malay women to enjoy more freedom in adopting many aspects of modern femininity into their daily lives. In addition, their increasing participation in economic, political, and social life has not only improved their quality of life but also allowed for the development of personal identity.

The rights and dignity of Malay women should be accorded fair and equal treatment, such that it is protected from the influence of patriarchal ideology. The narratives provided by young Malay women in this study also indicate that their attitudes are more grounded, complex, and involve active mobilization of their own perspective on cultural resources regarding particular issues such as self-appearance and un-Islamic behavior. The practice of strategic interpretations among Malay women in this study show that they are capable of rationally evaluating and analyzing discourse on Islam and Malay customs as well as negotiating and renegotiating these elements in the context of recent issues surrounding *Hallyu*.

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