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Fusion Muslim Chic Hits Europe's Streets

By Alexandra Steigrad

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PARIS/ROTTERDAM - Clad in skinny jeans, wrap dresses and carefully sculpted headscarves, a generation of young Muslim women is making its mark on Europe's urban street culture, and influencing mainstream fashion.

The daughters of migrants to Europe from Turkey or the Maghreb, these girls say they are as conscious of style as of Islamic dress codes -- and want to fuse contemporary chic with elements of their religious and ethnic background.

"H&M and all the French stores have taken our fashion," said Mahika, a 24-year-old from Paris. She sees Muslim influences in the current trend of wearing dresses over jeans, and layering sweaters and tops.

Shopping for clothes has become simpler, she said: young Muslim women are now able to dress entirely from mainstream outlets if they choose.

Many of her peers agree, although a Hennes & Mauritz spokeswoman said Muslim fashion has not specifically inspired their collections.

"I find it very easy to dress. You find all kinds of things in town. It is about combinations and it has got easier since you see the influence of our fashion in general fashion," said 20-year-old Bushra Sayed, a student from Rotterdam.

"I am a Muslim but I am also a person who is interested in fashion and I want to combine all these things," she adds.

Bushra wears a dark brown scarf wrapped tightly around her head and neck, a dark blue shirt, a figure-hugging grey tweed waistcoat and matching knee-length skirt over jeans.

Bushra's look is a world away from the black voluminous robes and long scarves worn by more traditional Muslim women, which completely hide the contours of the body.

"For me it is important to cover my body, except the hands, feet and face. And within that I can wear whatever I want, but it should not be too tight and short," she said.

"My mother, friends, and relatives are very enthusiastic and I did not have to fight at all for my own style."

MUSLIM GLOSSY

Bushra is among five women to put together MSLM, a new glossy fashion magazine in Dutch, French and English, aimed at style-conscious young Muslims offering tips, for example on new ways of covering the hair -- with baseball caps, hoods or chunky knitted scarves.

The title of the English, Dutch and French language magazine -- which the women call a "zero issue" or one-off for now -- is a play on the Dutch word for female Muslim, Moslima, and the clothing sizes medium-small-large-medium.

"An increasing group of young women is exploring the boundaries of being veiled and seductive... they compensate the veil with figure-hugging apparel, expressive make-up and higher heels," Dutch stylist Isis Vandragter told the magazine.

The women have also organized a fashion exhibition in Rotterdam alongside the magazine, displaying outfits made by Dutch designers with Islamic dress codes in mind.

One dummy in the exhibition wears a black halter-neck dress, while its back, arms and legs are concealed by a black-lace cat suit worn beneath.

"I see Muslim girls dress in very tight-fitting clothes these days so I thought 'why not make a cat suit?'," smiled Dutch designer Mada van Gaans.

Also on show are jeans by Italian clothing maker Al Quds, designed specifically for Muslims, with a baggy cut and multiple pockets, making it easier to kneel for prayer and store watches, rings or other jewellery when performing ablutions.

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"It's not just Muslims who are buying our jeans now. It's a good fashion product, first of all. That means the spectrum of our audience is growing," brand manager Susanna Cavalli said in a telephone interview from Italy.

WIDER INFLUENCE?

The women behind MSLM and the show believe European Muslim street style might even one day influence women in the Middle East -- but not yet.

"There are Turkish girls here who wear these scarves which are just so out there and striking -- but they don't wear them when they go home," said Natasa Heydra, of MSLM.

In fact, the number of young women at the clothing fair of an annual conference of French Muslims in Paris shows interest in fashion trends from the Middle East and in traditional dress is still very high.

"It's both to help women dress according to Islam's rules, and also to meet a demand," said Asmaa Buhallut on the aim of the clothing show.

In [France](#), a country which fiercely upholds its secular identity and which banned the veil in schools, there are not so many Muslim designers, she added: brands and designers from abroad use the event to reach the French Muslim public.

The array of bright colored clothing on display also gives women a source of inspiration.

"What's trendy are bright, vibrant colors, light fabrics, and in general, ensembles, mostly pants," said 18-year-old Nassima, of Tunisian origin.

Stallholder Ouslghozi Jkrom, selling traditional dresses and inexpensive veils, agreed.

"Popular styles this year have beadwork and the color is orange," she said. "Really, anything flashy."

(Additional reporting by Alexandra Hudson and Rachel Sanderson)

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