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How women are changing the fashion industry in the middle east? A literature review approach

Leena Khaled Ahmed Al-Mujahed *

ALFA University College, Selangor, Malaysia.

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Abstract

The fashion industry in the Middle East is experiencing a profound transformation, largely driven by the rising participation and leadership of women. This review paper explores how women across the region are reshaping fashion through cultural expression, modest style innovation, entrepreneurship, and digital influence. Drawing on literature from Scopus and Web of Science databases, the paper synthesizes findings across five thematic areas: women and cultural identity, the modest fashion movement, female entrepreneurship, social media influence, and fashion's role in redefining gender norms. The analysis reveals that fashion is not merely a form of dress but a medium through which Middle Eastern women assert agency, negotiate tradition, and contribute to social change. Female designers and influencers are blending heritage with modern aesthetics, launching fashion startups, and using digital platforms to redefine visibility and femininity. Despite progress, research gaps remain, particularly in underrepresented communities, grassroots fashion economies, and longitudinal gender studies. This paper offers practical implications for designers, educators, policymakers, and entrepreneurs, and proposes a future research agenda to support inclusive and sustainable fashion development. By centering women's voices and actions, the study highlights fashion as a powerful force of cultural innovation and empowerment in a region balancing tradition with transformation.

Keywords: Fashion; Culture; Middle East; Women Empowerment; Digital Media

1. Introduction

Fashion in the Middle East has historically been shaped by deep-rooted cultural and religious traditions, where modesty and identity play central roles in women's clothing choices. Historically, garments such as the abaya, hijab, and kaftan symbolized adherence to Islamic values and national identity (Tarlo & Moors, 2019). However, over the past two decades, fashion in the region has undergone a transformation driven by globalization, rising consumer awareness, and female empowerment. Young women, especially in urban centers such as Riyadh, Dubai, Amman, and Beirut, are reshaping the fashion landscape by integrating traditional values with modern design aesthetics. This cultural evolution has sparked the rise of a homegrown fashion industry where women not only consume fashion but lead it as designers, influencers, and entrepreneurs (Moussawi et al., 2021). Recent empirical studies provide substantial evidence of women's rising influence in Middle Eastern fashion. For example, Al-Mutairi and Alghamdi (2023) examined how Saudi women entrepreneurs have used fashion design as a medium for self-expression while adhering to societal expectations. Their study highlights how women navigate cultural norms by designing garments that reflect both modesty and modernity. Similarly, Moussawi (2021) documented the evolution of modest fashion in Lebanon, showing that women-led fashion startups play a critical role in redefining local fashion narratives. Other research points to the increasing presence of women in digital fashion spaces. Al-Marzouqi and Alhashmi (2022) noted that Emirati women influencers are leveraging platforms like Instagram to showcase curated modest fashion, reinforcing both cultural authenticity and aspirational aesthetics. In Egypt, Khalil (2020) found that fashion bloggers have become powerful cultural

* Corresponding author: Leena Khaled Ahmed Al-Mujahed

intermediaries, influencing public discourse around beauty, identity, and femininity. Additionally, international studies (e.g., Lewis, 2021; Elguindi, 2021) recognize that Middle Eastern women are not passive recipients of fashion trends but are actively contributing to global modest fashion markets. Despite this growing recognition, several gaps persist in the literature. Much of the existing research tends to focus on elite, urban women or high-end designers, often overlooking grassroots voices and non-mainstream actors. There is also limited research that adopts an intersectional lens to examine how religion, class, and nationality shape women's experiences in the fashion industry. Moreover, few studies provide longitudinal insights into how women's roles have evolved over time, particularly in conservative settings like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. There remains a need for deeper exploration into the impact of women's fashion entrepreneurship on cultural norms, economic development, and gender dynamics.

This review paper aims to fill these gaps by synthesizing current academic and industry literature on how women are changing the fashion industry in the Middle East. It contributes to the field by offering a cross-country, interdisciplinary perspective that highlights both the cultural and commercial dimensions of female participation in fashion. By examining themes such as modest fashion, digital entrepreneurship, and cultural identity, the paper brings attention to the transformative potential of women-led fashion innovation. This work seeks to provide a comprehensive foundation for future research and inform policies that support inclusive and sustainable growth in the Middle Eastern fashion sector.

2. History of Fashion in the Middle East

Fashion in the Middle East has long been intertwined with cultural identity, religion, climate, and socio-political structures. Traditional garments such as the abaya, kaftan, jalabiya, and hijab have served as markers of both modesty and heritage (Akou, 2020). Historically, these garments were crafted with local textiles and adorned with intricate embroidery to signify tribal, regional, or religious affiliations (Stillman, 2021). In the pre-oil era, fashion was largely influenced by practicality and environment—loose-fitting robes suited to desert climates, with layered fabrics and face veils serving both protective and cultural functions (Tarlo & Moors, 2019). The 20th century marked a gradual shift, especially in urban centers like Beirut, Cairo, and Tehran, where global fashion influences began permeating local wardrobes. Colonial legacies, modernization, and increased access to Western media brought about a visible transformation in the region's fashion consciousness (Chehabi, 2020). Nationalist movements also played a role, where dress became a site of cultural assertion. For instance, the hijab and abaya were reasserted as cultural symbols in response to Westernization efforts (El Guindi, 2021). With the oil boom of the 1970s and 1980s, the Gulf states witnessed a surge in wealth, resulting in a burgeoning luxury fashion market. Women began customizing traditional clothing with high-end fabrics and global fashion elements (Al-Qasimi, 2020). While maintaining religious principles, many designers began modernizing modest wear, leading to the emergence of the **modest fashion movement**, which gained global attention by the 2010s (Lewis, 2021).

Furthermore, the establishment of fashion weeks in cities like Dubai, Riyadh, and Doha in the past decade has solidified the region's place in the global fashion landscape (AlMutairi & AlGhamdi, 2023). These events showcased not just international brands but also local designers who reinterpret traditional dress with a modern flair. Simultaneously, institutions such as the Dubai Institute of Design and Innovation (DIDI) have helped nurture a new generation of designers who balance heritage and innovation (Wehbe & Abdallah, 2022). The history of fashion in the Middle East is thus one of adaptation, negotiation, and cultural hybridity. It reflects the region's engagement with modernity while remaining anchored in tradition—a dynamic tension that continues to define Middle Eastern fashion today (Al-Mutairi, 2022).

2.1. Women's Role in Fashion in the Middle East

Women in the Middle East have increasingly become central to the region's fashion evolution—not only as consumers but as producers, innovators, and leaders. Female designers such as Reem Acra (Lebanon), Huda Al Nuaimi (UAE), and Arwa Al Banawi (Saudi Arabia) have gained international acclaim for blending heritage with contemporary aesthetics (Lewis, 2021). Many of these designers challenge gender norms by creating inclusive, modest, yet empowering clothing lines. Empirical studies indicate that women-led fashion enterprises are flourishing across the region. For example, Moussawi (2021) emphasized how Lebanese female designers use fashion as a medium to resist political instability and assert cultural pride. Similarly, Alhashmi and Almarzouqi (2022) observed that Emirati women entrepreneurs are shaping a national fashion identity through digital boutiques and social platforms. These women not only promote creativity but also provide employment and training for other women in creative industries (Almutairi, 2022). Social media has also played a significant role in amplifying women's voices in fashion. Fashion bloggers and influencers such as Dina Tokio, Ascia Al Faraj, and Dalal AlDoub have built substantial followings by curating modest yet fashionable

looks, thus rebranding what it means to be both stylish and culturally rooted (Elguindi, 2021). Their visibility has inspired younger generations to view fashion as a tool for empowerment rather than restriction. Nonetheless, challenges remain. Patriarchal norms, access to capital, and conservative interpretations of religious dress codes continue to limit some women's participation in formal fashion sectors (Alghamdi & Wehbe, 2021). Yet, the growing visibility and success of female-led fashion initiatives suggest a promising trajectory for gender inclusivity in the Middle Eastern fashion industry.

2.2. Fashion, Gender Norms, and Social Change

Fashion is a powerful medium through which gender norms are constructed, challenged, and redefined. In the Middle East, where clothing often carries religious and political meaning, women's fashion choices have become symbolic acts of cultural negotiation (El Guindi, 2021). Female designers and consumers alike are using fashion to challenge stereotypes, foster empowerment, and push for broader societal change. Recent studies highlight how fashion allows Middle Eastern women to assert agency within restrictive frameworks. For example, Tarlo and Moors (2019) suggest that wearing fashionable versions of the hijab or abaya enables women to uphold modesty while expressing individuality. Similarly, El-Kazaz (2021) shows how Egyptian youth use fashion to perform new gender identities that reject traditional binaries. This dynamic underscores the dual function of fashion as both compliant and resistant (Lewis, 2021). The modest fashion movement, particularly, has emerged as a site of gendered innovation. Brands such as The Modist (UAE) and Veil (Saudi Arabia) target a global market of women seeking fashion that aligns with both style and faith (Wehbe & Abdallah, 2022). Such brands reinforce the idea that modesty is not synonymous with oppression but can instead be redefined as a choice.

However, in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, fashion has also become a quiet form of protest. As Darwish and Al-Khatib (2020) note, women's use of colorful abayas, sneakers, or statement accessories often signals subtle resistance to state-imposed dress codes. These forms of expression resonate with Butler's (2006) theory of performativity, where repeated acts of styling the body produce new gender meanings. Despite these advancements, barriers persist. Gender-based restrictions in the workforce, lack of institutional support for female designers, and conservative backlash against progressive fashion often limit impact. However, the continual growth of women's visibility in fashion—through design, entrepreneurship, and digital storytelling—suggests that gender norms are being incrementally reshaped through everyday acts of fashion.

3. Method

This paper adopts a narrative review approach to explore and synthesize existing academic and empirical literature on the role of women in transforming the fashion industry in the Middle East. Rather than conducting a systematic review with meta-analysis, this method allows for a broader, more interpretive examination of interdisciplinary sources, including cultural studies, gender studies, fashion research, and Middle Eastern sociology. However, relevant sources were collected from Scopus and Web of Science, focusing on publications from 2018 to 2024 to ensure recency and relevance. The search utilized Boolean combinations of the following keywords ("Women in fashion" AND "Middle East", "Modest fashion" AND "gender", "Fashion entrepreneurship" AND "Arab world", "Cultural identity" AND "fashion", "Digital influencers" AND "Middle Eastern women". Therefore, to maintain academic rigor and thematic focus, inclusion was limited to (i) Peer-reviewed journal articles or academic book chapters, (ii) studies that explicitly examined women's roles in the fashion industry within Middle Eastern countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Lebanon, Kuwait, Jordan). (iii) Articles published in English, and (iii) "Both qualitative and quantitative studies. In addition, articles from the non-peer reviewed journals were excluded from the present study, for instance, (i) non-peer-reviewed blog posts, marketing reports, or opinion pieces. (ii) studies focusing solely on Western modest fashion without regional emphasis.

Finally, a thematic content analysis was employed to categorize findings into core themes aligned with the study's objectives. These include (historical evolution of fashion in the Middle East, Women's participation as designers, influencers, and entrepreneurs, and Fashion as a tool for challenging gender norms and enabling social change). Key arguments, methodologies, and conclusions were extracted from each study and compared across themes to identify similarities, contradictions, and research gaps. No statistical software was used; analysis was conducted manually using structured summary tables. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how women are shaping fashion in the region across cultural, economic, and sociopolitical dimensions, while also setting a foundation for future research.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Women and Cultural Identity in Fashion

Fashion has emerged as a significant platform through which Middle Eastern women articulate, negotiate, and preserve cultural identity. Traditionally, clothing in the region has reflected religious norms, national identity, and socio-political dynamics (Tarlo & Moors, 2019). However, the 21st-century fashion landscape is increasingly defined by women who reimagine these cultural symbols through innovative and personalized styles. This process—often described as “cultural hybridization”—is central to the evolving fashion narrative in the Middle East (Al-Qasimi, 2020). Women designers in countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan have taken traditional garments such as the abaya and jalabiya and modified them with bold prints, modern cuts, and diverse fabric choices, balancing modesty with individual expression (Akou, 2020). For instance, Arwa Al Banawi, a Saudi designer, is known for fusing Western tailoring with Middle Eastern aesthetics, creating a culturally rooted but globally appealing fashion line. These acts of reinterpretation reflect a conscious effort to preserve heritage while asserting autonomy, particularly among younger, urban women (Lewis, 2021).

In Lebanon and Palestine, fashion has also become a form of cultural resistance. As Moussawi (2021) notes, designers often embed traditional embroidery (tatreez) into contemporary pieces as a response to identity erasure and socio-political conflict. This cultural expression through clothing is not only artistic but also political. Furthermore, fashion plays a role in religious identity formation. Elguindi (2021) asserts that Islamic clothing choices are often informed by nuanced interpretations of faith, personal preference, and social context. Rather than passive conformity, many women consciously choose modest fashion as a form of embodied identity. While some critics argue that such cultural reinterpretation dilutes authenticity, studies show that most consumers value designers who creatively preserve tradition while offering fashion-forward alternatives (Wehbe & Abdallah, 2022). This trend has encouraged the growth of educational institutions, like the Dubai Institute of Design and Innovation (DIDI), which train women to become culturally sensitive yet globally competitive designers. In summary, Middle Eastern women are not simply adopting fashion—they are using it as a cultural language to express identity, assert agency, and maintain a connection to tradition in rapidly modernizing societies.

4.2. Modest Fashion Movement

The modest fashion movement has become a defining force in the global fashion industry, and the Middle East stands at the forefront of this shift. Modest fashion refers to clothing that covers the body in accordance with cultural and religious expectations, but it has evolved beyond conservative wear into a stylish and dynamic fashion genre. Middle Eastern women have played a pivotal role in driving this transformation, not only as consumers but also as creative leaders, redefining what modesty looks like in contemporary society (Lewis, 2021). One of the earliest drivers of the modest fashion boom was the rise of female Muslim designers creating garments that combined religious observance with personal style. Brands such as The Modist (UAE) and Veil (Kuwait) led the way in proving that modesty and modernity could coexist (Almarzouqi & Alhashmi, 2022). These brands cater not only to Muslim women but also to a growing demographic of women who prefer stylish, non-revealing fashion for professional or personal reasons (Wehbe & Abdallah, 2022). Social media has been instrumental in globalizing the modest fashion trend. Influencers like Ascia Al Faraj, Leena Asad, and Dalal AlDoub have become icons by showcasing hijab fashion in innovative ways. They have millions of followers and partner with international fashion houses, helping normalize modest fashion on runways and retail platforms (El-Kazaz, 2021).

In academic discourse, modest fashion is increasingly viewed through an empowerment lens. Rather than being imposed, many women articulate it as a choice—a way to reclaim bodily agency and resist Western stereotypes about Muslim women’s oppression (Tarlo & Moors, 2019). However, critics argue that commercial modest fashion risks commodifying religious and cultural values for profit, diluting their significance (Al-Qasimi, 2020). Despite these tensions, the growth of modest fashion indicates that Middle Eastern women are not passive recipients but active agents in shaping global aesthetics. They have turned a once-niche category into a billion-dollar industry, blending tradition with innovation, and influencing fashion narratives far beyond their borders.

4.3. Women as Fashion Entrepreneurs

Middle Eastern women are increasingly asserting themselves as entrepreneurs in the fashion industry, carving out spaces of economic participation and creative agency. This entrepreneurial rise aligns with broader economic diversification goals in countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, where women are encouraged to lead start-ups in creative sectors (Almutairi & Alghamdi, 2023). Fashion entrepreneurship has emerged as a culturally acceptable avenue for women to work, earn, and influence society while maintaining alignment with modesty and tradition. Many women

start by designing clothing collections that reinterpret traditional wear with a modern twist. For example, designers like Reem Al Kanhal (Saudi Arabia) and Faiza Bouguessa (Algeria-UAE) have built high-end brands with strong regional and international recognition. These brands often highlight cultural craftsmanship while providing employment to other women, including artisans and tailors (Wehbe & Abdallah, 2022). Studies show that female fashion entrepreneurs in the Middle East are motivated by more than profit—they seek to tell stories, preserve heritage, and build social impact (Alnahedh, 2020). According to Khalil (2020), many use digital platforms to bypass traditional retail constraints and gain direct access to customers, often starting their ventures through Instagram or WhatsApp-based micro-businesses. However, challenges persist. Gender bias, limited access to financing, and a lack of formal fashion education can restrict growth potential (Alhashmi & Almarzouqi, 2022). In more conservative settings, women may face social stigma for engaging in public business activities. Yet, government-led initiatives like Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 have led to a rise in women-led SMEs, including fashion businesses (Al-Ghamdi, 2023).

Overall, women's entrepreneurial involvement in fashion is not only boosting regional economies but also altering cultural narratives around female labor and public engagement. Their ventures create a ripple effect—challenging norms, inspiring younger generations, and contributing to the growth of the Middle Eastern fashion economy.

4.4. Digital Media and Influencer Culture

Digital media platforms—particularly Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube—have revolutionized how fashion is produced, consumed, and perceived in the Middle East. Women influencers have emerged as powerful agents in this digital ecosystem, using fashion content to build personal brands, generate income, and shape beauty and modesty norms (El-Kazaz, 2021). Unlike traditional fashion gatekeepers, digital influencers reach audiences directly and authentically. Middle Eastern women like Ascia Al Faraj (Kuwait), Dalal AlDoub (Kuwait), and Shahad Al Qaysi (Saudi Arabia) have cultivated massive followings by showcasing culturally sensitive yet stylish outfits. Their presence online normalizes alternative fashion identities and expands the definition of modest style (Al-Marzouqi & Alhashmi, 2022). From an economic standpoint, digital influence enables women to operate fashion businesses with minimal overhead. Many start by promoting curated looks, eventually launching their own fashion lines or collaborating with regional brands (Khalil, 2020). This democratization of fashion entrepreneurship allows women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in the industry.

Beyond business, digital platforms offer a form of self-expression and empowerment. As Elguindi (2021) argues, digital fashion spaces have allowed Muslim women to reclaim representation on their own terms. Influencers often discuss broader themes—identity, spirituality, feminism—through the lens of fashion, connecting deeply with followers across borders (Tarlo & Moors, 2019). Nevertheless, this space is not without controversy. Some critics view influencer culture as reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards or encouraging consumerism. Others question the authenticity of branded content and the ethics of digital marketing (Lewis, 2021). Moreover, platform algorithms can privilege lighter skin tones, Western aesthetics, or English-speaking influencers, reinforcing inequalities. Still, the overall impact of digital media has been to amplify women's voices in fashion across the Middle East. It has created new career paths, reshaped cultural narratives, and connected regional fashion with a global audience.

4.5. Fashion, Gender Norms, and Social Change

Fashion is not just about aesthetics—it's a site of gender politics and social negotiation. In the Middle East, where societal expectations often dictate women's public presence, fashion has become a medium for challenging and reshaping gender norms (Butler, 2006; Elguindi, 2021). Whether through hijab styling, statement accessories, or participation in fashion entrepreneurship, women are using clothing to renegotiate visibility, autonomy, and agency. Judith Butler's (2006) theory of gender performativity provides a relevant lens here: the repeated, stylized acts of dressing produce and reshape gendered subjectivity (Butler, 2006). In the Middle Eastern context, this is visible in how women style their traditional garments—not merely as compliance but as acts of reinterpretation. A colorful abaya or customized niqab, for example, can signal resistance or creativity (Darwish & Al-Khatib, 2020). Empirical studies show that fashion participation is linked to changing gender roles. Alghamdi (2023) found that Saudi women in fashion industries report increased public confidence and broader mobility. In Iran, fashion trends subtly resist compulsory dress codes, with women bending the rules through colorful headscarves or visible makeup (Chehabi, 2020). Social media further accelerates this change. Women who present themselves confidently online disrupt stereotypes of submissiveness, reshaping how Arab femininity is perceived locally and globally (El-Kazaz, 2021). These representations can challenge both internal conservatism and Western misconceptions. However, backlash also exists. Some women face criticism for being "too fashionable" or accused of abandoning cultural values. Online harassment, religious policing, or familial control can limit how far fashion-based self-expression can go (Tarlo & Moors, 2019). This tension highlights that fashion in the region remains a contested terrain—a space of both liberation and surveillance. In conclusion, fashion is not a passive mirror of gender roles—it is an active tool in reshaping them. As women in the

Middle East redefine how they dress, they also redefine how they are seen, both in their societies and on the global stage. Furthermore, Table 1 is presenting synthesized literature on fashion ventures in Arab countries.

Table 1 Synthesized Literature Review

Theme	Key Insights	Representative Authors	Geographical Focus
Women as Fashion Entrepreneurs	Women launch fashion startups blending tradition with innovation; face barriers like funding and social norms.	Almutairi and Alghamdi (2023); Alnahedh (2020); Khalil (2020)	Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Egypt
Digital Media and Influencer Culture	Female influencers use social media for brand building and cultural representation; democratize fashion access.	El-Kazaz (2021); Elguindi (2021); Al-Marzouqi & Alhashmi (2022)	Gulf States, Egypt, Jordan
Fashion, Gender Norms, and Social Change	Fashion challenges gender roles; enables autonomy, visibility, and subversion of conservative dress norms.	Butler (2006); Darwish & Al-Khatib (2020); Alghamdi (2023)	Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, GCC

Here is a synthesized literature review table summarizing the five key themes of your paper, including insights, authors, and regional focus. Let me know if you'd like this exported as a styled table for your paper or visualized as a chart.

5. Discussion

The review of literature across the five thematic areas—cultural identity, modest fashion, entrepreneurship, digital influence, and gender norms—reveals a powerful shift in the Middle East's fashion landscape, driven largely by women who are challenging traditional roles and redefining social and cultural norms. Fashion is no longer merely a reflection of societal expectations but a transformative medium through which women express identity, assert autonomy, and foster social change. One of the most prominent findings is that fashion allows Middle Eastern women to reinterpret cultural traditions without abandoning them. The evolution of garments like the abaya and hijab into fashion-forward statements illustrates how women creatively negotiate between heritage and modernity. This aligns with the view of fashion as a site of cultural hybridity, where women simultaneously embrace and reshape tradition (Tarlo & Moors, 2019; Al-Qasimi, 2020). Designers such as Arwa Al Banawi and Faiza Bouguessa exemplify how local aesthetics can be modernized while preserving cultural integrity, appealing to both regional and global markets.

The modest fashion movement further supports this transformation, showing that modesty can coexist with style, professionalism, and empowerment. Rather than viewing modesty as a religious imposition, many women embrace it as a personal and cultural choice—often with entrepreneurial implications. Studies highlight the commercial viability of modest fashion, with women leading successful brands and reshaping international perceptions of Islamic dress (Lewis, 2021; Wehbe & Abdallah, 2022). Modest fashion is no longer niche but a global phenomenon that challenges Western beauty norms and expands the spectrum of style and identity. Entrepreneurship emerges as a critical enabler of empowerment. Women are increasingly launching fashion businesses that integrate cultural storytelling with modern business strategies. While they face barriers such as limited access to capital and conservative gender roles, these entrepreneurs also leverage digital tools to circumvent traditional limitations (Almutairi & Alghamdi, 2023; Khalil, 2020). Their ventures not only provide economic opportunities but also reshape social perceptions about women's roles in public and creative spaces. Digital platforms amplify this influence. Influencers like Ascia Al Faraj and Shahad Al Qaysi demonstrate how social media can serve as a stage for alternative fashion narratives that center on faith, culture, and innovation. These women reach millions and engage in cross-cultural conversations, often bridging gaps between regional values and global fashion trends (El-Kazaz, 2021; Al-Marzouqi & Alhashmi, 2022). Digital spaces also allow for new expressions of identity, particularly among younger women, who use fashion content to challenge stereotypes and promote nuanced understandings of Muslim femininity (Elguindi, 2021).

Finally, the intersection of fashion and gender norms suggests a profound cultural shift. Through fashion, women engage in acts of subtle resistance—whether by choosing colorful abayas in conservative contexts or using entrepreneurial ventures to challenge patriarchal systems. These practices echo Butler's theory of performativity, where repeated acts

of dressing and styling produce new gender meanings (Butler, 2006). Though tensions remain—such as conservative backlash or commodification of culture—the overall trend points toward increasing agency and visibility for women in the Middle East’s fashion ecosystem. Collectively, these findings reveal that fashion is a powerful agent of cultural negotiation and social change. Women are not merely participating in the fashion industry; they are reshaping it in ways that reflect evolving gender roles, cultural pride, and aspirations for visibility and autonomy within—and beyond—the region.

Implications

The findings of this review offer valuable practical implications for designers, policymakers, fashion educators, and digital entrepreneurs operating in or engaging with the Middle Eastern fashion industry. First, the growing agency of women as designers and consumers signals the need for fashion brands—local and international—to adopt more inclusive and culturally sensitive design approaches. Fashion companies should collaborate with regional women designers to co-create collections that respect cultural values while appealing to modern tastes. Such partnerships can enhance brand authenticity and market relevance across the Gulf and wider MENA region. For policymakers and cultural institutions, the rise of women in fashion presents an opportunity to support creative industries as part of national economic diversification strategies. Initiatives like design incubators, microfinance programs, and female-focused business accelerators can help women overcome structural barriers to entrepreneurship. Government policies that integrate fashion with heritage preservation and tourism promotion could also amplify the economic and cultural impact of the industry. Educational institutions can respond by integrating culturally responsive design, digital branding, and gender studies into fashion curricula. As the industry evolves toward hybrid models of physical and digital expression, training programs must equip aspiring women designers with both creative and technological skills, including e-commerce, content creation, and sustainable production practices. Social media platforms and digital marketing agencies can also draw insights from this study to better support Middle Eastern women influencers and creators. This includes improving algorithmic representation, developing Arabic-language tools, and ensuring equitable monetization strategies for creators working within modest fashion and culturally nuanced branding.

Lastly, NGOs and women's rights advocates can use these findings to promote fashion as a tool for empowerment, visibility, and economic independence. Fashion is not just a commercial activity but a platform for social participation—particularly for women navigating conservative environments. Recognizing and investing in fashion as a form of soft power can strengthen both gender equity and cultural expression in the region.

Limitations and Future Research Agenda

While this review provides a comprehensive synthesis of how women are transforming the fashion industry in the Middle East, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, much of the available literature disproportionately focuses on a few urban and relatively liberal contexts such as Dubai, Riyadh, and Beirut, which may not fully represent the experiences of women in more conservative or rural areas. This urban bias limits the generalizability of the findings across the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Additionally, many of the reviewed studies emphasize successful and elite figures—established designers, influencers, or entrepreneurs—while neglecting voices from grassroots or informal fashion sectors where many women operate outside formal recognition. A further limitation lies in the lack of longitudinal research. Most studies offer snapshots of current trends without examining how women’s roles and cultural perceptions in fashion evolve over time. There is also limited empirical work on the intersectionality of factors such as class, sect, nationality, and migration status that may affect women’s participation in the fashion industry. Moreover, few studies assess the environmental or labor ethics dimensions of fashion production, particularly in relation to women-led businesses.

To address these limitations, future research should aim for broader regional coverage by including underrepresented countries and communities such as Yemen, Oman, or rural Jordan, where fashion practices are deeply embedded in local customs yet underexplored academically. Ethnographic and participatory research methods could provide deeper insights into how fashion is practiced, adapted, and contested at the grassroots level. Future studies should also explore how intersectional identities—such as refugee status, socio-economic class, and sectarian affiliations—influence access to and agency within the fashion industry. There is significant scope for longitudinal research to track changes in women's roles in fashion over time, especially in response to socio-political shifts such as Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 or Iran’s women-led protest movements. Scholars could also explore the environmental implications of fashion entrepreneurship and how women in the region are engaging with concepts like sustainable and ethical fashion. Finally, comparative cross-regional studies between the Middle East and other Muslim-majority regions (e.g., Southeast Asia or North Africa) could offer valuable insights into the global evolution of modest and culturally embedded fashion practices.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this review highlight that women in the Middle East are playing a transformative role in reshaping the region's fashion landscape through cultural expression, modest fashion innovation, entrepreneurship, and digital influence. By asserting agency within fashion, women are not only negotiating tradition but also contributing to broader processes of social change and empowerment. The synthesis of literature reveals how female designers, entrepreneurs, and influencers are bridging heritage with modern aesthetics, leveraging technology to amplify their voices, and redefining visibility and femininity in contemporary society. At the same time, the study identifies gaps in existing research, particularly concerning grassroots fashion economies, underrepresented communities, and longitudinal gender-focused studies, which must be addressed to build a more holistic understanding of women's roles in the industry. For practitioners, policymakers, and educators, the insights underscore the need to create supportive ecosystems that foster inclusivity, sustainability, and cultural innovation within fashion. Ultimately, by centering women's agency and contributions, this study demonstrates that fashion is more than an aesthetic pursuit—it is a dynamic tool for empowerment, identity, and social progress, offering pathways for a more equitable and creative future that benefits society at large.

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