Identity construction and negotiation of a hijab-wearing Malay-Muslim Korean Pop Fan

NURSYAHEEDAH MUHAMMAD ISA
[0000-0002-0634-217X]
Centre for Applied Linguistics
University of Warwick
Coventry, United Kingdom
nursyaheedah.Muhammad-Isa@warwick.ac.uk

SOPHIE REISSNER-ROUBICEK
Centre for Applied Linguistics
University of Warwick
Coventry, United Kingdom
Sophie.reissner-roubicek@warwick.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The rise of Western and non-Western entertainment in Malaysia has faced resistance from Islamic conservatives who view foreign pop culture as a negative influence. Malay-Muslim fans of Korean pop, particularly women who wear hijabs, have been subject to extreme criticism, labelled as "cheap" or "obsessed," and shamed as idol-worshippers. While previous studies have explored the influences of K-pop, there is a gap in research concerning the experience of K-pop's predominantly female fanbase, especially regarding their religious identity. Notably, there is a need to understand how young Malay-Muslim women who wear hijabs balance their religious beliefs with their love for Korean pop culture. In this paper, I share the preliminary findings from my pilot study, which seeks to address the research gap by exploring how these fans reconcile the conflict between their religious and fan identities. It includes examples from an in-depth interview I conducted with a fan, to demonstrate how two of the identity principles proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005) were employed in the analysis. These principles are in line with a social constructionist perspective on identity, which sees identities as co-constructed in interaction or to simply put as 'talked into being'. The insights gained from this discourse analysis reflect the complex interplay of identity construction and negotiation involving self and other-positionings that include the rejection or validation of certain fan behaviours, as well as active engagement in balancing the fan identity and the religious identity. Additionally, the application of Bucholtz and Hall (2005) identity principles to the analysis of religious and fan discourses demonstrate the applicability and relevance of the principles in diverse contexts further enriching the broader scholarly discourse on identity and culture.

Keywords: Identity construction, religious identity, fan identity, K-pop, Malay-Muslim women

INTRODUCTION

The rising popularity in Malaysia of foreign entertainment with western and non-western origins, such as Korean pop music (K-pop), has consistently been vilified and met with resistance from Islamic conservatives who consider foreign popular culture to be a negative influence (Ferrarese, 2021), a force of corruption (Park, 2021) and damaging to the moral system and behaviour of the Malay, especially the local youth (Halim, 2007). The Korean wave has been criticised as a form of cultural imperialism that deteriorates not only Islamic beliefs and Malay culture, but also Malaysian national identity (Ahmad Asrani and Lee, 2016). The Korean wave is a collective term that is widely used to refer to the prominent growth of Korean culture and most notably Korean popular culture such as music (K-pop), and dramas (K-drama) (Kim, 2005). K-pop has been observed to have little resemblance to traditional Korean music (Kim, 2020), and is considered a westernised (albeit with its own nuances), industry-driven music genre targeted at global audiences (Kim, 2017; Romano, 2018).

The majority of K-pop's vast global fanbase is female (Spatichia & Otolorin, 2017), and in the Muslim-majority Malaysia, both all-male and all-female chart-topping K-pop acts have caused a stir among Islamic conservatives (Ferrarese, 2021), due respectively to double-entendres in their song lyrics, sexy dance moves and revealing attire. From the perspective of the conservatives, Malay women's engagement with modernity through globalised media consumption contradicts with Islamic moral and religious values as there is "a huge cultural and value gap between Islamic beliefs and global contents of K-pop" (Yoon, 2019, p.3). The term *bukan Islam* (literally "not Islamic") is commonly used in Malaysian contemporary society to criticise Malay-Muslim women who embrace and engage in foreign cultural products and activities that conflict with Islamic beliefs and values (Md Syed & Kwon, (2019).

Moreover, hijab-wearing Malay fans have regularly been condemned for their engagement in K-pop fan activities. They have been accused of having "no dignity", "no religion" and being an "embarrassment", according to media reports (e.g., *Malaysiakini,* 2015a, 2015b; *Mstar,* 2015; *The Straits Times*, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). Attempts to make them feel unworthy of their faith, along with even more extreme labelling of female Muslim fans, have been reported in a range of studies, for example: "cheap", "immature", "delusional", "obsessed", and even "evil" (Abdul Rahman, 2015; Bauwens-Sugimoto, 2017; Spatichia & Otolorin, 2017; Chow, 2018; Khalid & Wok, 2020).

These reactions confirm that this is not simply a conflict with religious beliefs and values but, is a threat to those values and thus, to cultural identity. Political as well as religious authorities in Malaysia fear that the images of transnational modernity depicted through foreign cultural products such as K-pop will result in the erosion of religious and local cultural identity that, importantly, defines Malay female identity (Md Syed, 2011; Md Syed & Kwon, 2019). This explains why Malay-Muslim women, especially those who engage with foreign cultural products, are constantly under the spotlight and far more likely than their male counterparts to become the target for criticism related to concerns about maintaining Islamic values and Islamic religious identity (Md Syed & Kwon, 2019).

In light of this criticism, investigating the ways which young female Muslims negotiate the influence of K-pop fandom on their religious identity is clearly a worthwhile research goal. So far, however, it has apparently not been addressed, reflecting the general scarcity of studies addressing the impact of the one-way cultural flow of the Korean wave on its mostly female transnational fans (Md Syed & Kwon, 2019). As such, any developments in research on how

hijab-wearing fans construct, negotiate, and reconcile their religious identity and their fan identity have also been lacking. The specific gap filled by the present study concerns how young hijab-wearing Malay-Muslim fans construct, negotiate and reconcile their religious identities and their identities as fans of a popular culture that from a religious perspective is morally dubious and viewed as conflicting with their values and beliefs in Islam.

Furthermore, Malaysia remains an under-researched site for exploring religious identity from a social constructionist perspective (Abdul Fatah, 2019), let alone for research focusing on the discursive construction and negotiation of religious and fan identities. Hence, there is a need to study this phenomenon beyond the existing dominant perspectives and discourses to contribute towards a more nuanced and substantive understanding of the intricacies and complexities of the ways which hijab-wearing Malay-Muslim K-pop fans construct and negotiate these identities. This can be explored within the one-to-one context of semi-structured, in-depth research interviews.

The theoretical foundation of the study will be explained in the methodology section along with the analytical framework of identity principles. The literature review focuses on a range of empirical studies that are closest the topic of my research.

LITERATURE REVEW

K-pop continues to exhibit exponential growth as a popular music genre with a global reach. The genre has been playing a crucial role in the evolution of Korean wave for the past few decades (Jung, 2015). Despite K-pop being a "powerful site for ideological struggles by … contesting what it means to be a Muslim" (Mulya, 2021, p. 2), to the best of my knowledge, no previous studies, within the context of Malaysia, have investigated how fans of K-pop construct and negotiate their religious and fan identities, which are viewed as contradictory (Mulya, 2021). In this regard, the concept of moderation (wasatiyyah), defined as refraining from excessive or extreme behaviors (Ahmad, 2011), assumes significance in understanding the construction and negotiation of participants' conflicting identities. To date, within the context of Malaysia, two studies on K-pop and its female fans have been conducted. Khalid and Wok (2020) investigated the influences of the Korean wave among young adult Malay Muslim women in Malaysia using the cultivation theory of communication framework – a framework employed for analysing effects of media and cultural adoption (Gerbner, 1969). Findings showed that the Korean wave positively and negatively impacted the daily lives of participants. Khalid and Wok (2020), however, did not focus on fans as their sample included "those who have been 'exposed' to the Korean wave" (p. 375). This broad generalisation impedes the attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the effect of the Korean wave on the Malay-Muslim female populace. Furthermore, despite investigating the impact of the Korean wave from the Islamic perspective, the study did not attempt to specifically investigate the participants' construction and negotiation of their Muslim identity despite embracing a cultural phenomenon that is deemed to conflict with their beliefs and values as Muslims.

Mohd Jenol and Ahmad Pazil (2020), on the other hand, sought to understand the wellbeing and meaning ascribed by eight K-pop fans through an examination of their experiences, lifestyles, views, values, and feelings of being fans of K-pop. To do so, their study employed several concepts within the sociological field and fan studies, which included para-social relationships between fans and fan objects, identity and social identity, as well as the concept

of meaning and participatory culture. Findings from participant observations and semi-structured interviews revealed that participants carried and ascribed special meaning to being fans which transcends from being a mere fan of a music genre such as K-pop. Although these authors investigated female fans of K-pop, their focus was not on the participants' identity construction and negotiation of their fan identities and religious identities. To fill this literature gap, this paper explores the ways which one of the young hijab-wearing Malay-Muslim K-pop fan constructs and negotiates her religious and fan identities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach to facilitate the understanding of how individuals convey their experiences and the meanings they ascribe to these experiences (Merriam, 2014). Approaches to qualitative research are guided by the interpretivist paradigm, which perceives reality as subjective, fluid and socially constructed (Heracleous, 2004; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Discourse analysis is a method that fits within the interpretivist paradigm, and the analytical framework adopted for the discourse analysis draws on Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) identity principles.

The theoretical foundation of this social constructionist perspective on identity, according to Schnurr (2013) among others, is that identity is dynamic, not static; multiple, not single; and co-constructed discursively in interaction. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) explain it as a sociocultural phenomenon that emerges in interaction, and which is highly intersubjective. The relevance of their identity principles framework hinges on its emphasis on the details and intricacies of language in conjunction to the workings of culture and society, and their definition of identity as "the social positioning of self and other" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 586) is deliberate in its broadness and open-endedness. Of the five sociolinguistic principles (emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality, and partialness), I will draw on the positionality and indexicality principles in the analysis.

The positionality principle challenges the long-standing notion that identity is simply a grouping of wide-ranging social categories - a notion employed in the quantitative social sciences in which macro identity categories (social class, age, and gender) are correlated with social behaviour. Recent sociocultural linguistic works have rather focused on examining the micro-level aspects of identity as it is constructed from moment to moment in interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Schnurr (2013) summarises the principle aptly as a view on identities as complex constructions which incorporate macro and micro-level categories, roles, and positions. This principle is relevant as it will aid in exploring (i) how the identities of a young hijab-wearing Malay-Muslim K-pop fan are differently constructed and negotiated, (ii) how she positions herself as a Muslim and as a fan of K-pop and evaluates others in doing so, and (iii) how she navigates her own identity in terms of being a "good" or "bad" Muslim K-pop fan.

The indexicality principle outlines the various linguistic means through which identity is discursively produced, both explicitly through the use of "overt mention of identity categories and labels" and implicitly in a number of ways, including "implicatures and presuppositions regarding one's own or others" identity position; displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk" (which would apply to the interactional context of the interview between myself and the participant), "as well as interactional footings and participant roles"

and also through "the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 594). Furthermore, particular kinds of identities are associated with the stances that are taken by participants, and those stances are what is indexed by particular features of their talk: in this sense, the indexical process is indirect (Ochs, 1993). An utterance that indexes a moderate stance, for example, would in turn be associated with a "good" Muslim fan identity.

DATA COLLECTION

This current study draws on a preliminary pilot study with one participant conducted with the purpose of assisting in the planning of a larger research project (Muhammad Isa, 2025) involving twenty-three (23) research participants which includes refining the interview questions as well as research methods and procedures as part of improving its overall viability. The data consists of a one-to-one, semi-structured interview with one participant who was identified through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a sampling technique widely used in qualitative inquiry that involves pre-selecting participant with particular characteristics that meet the pre-set criteria (Morse, 2004). I followed Mohd Jenol and Ahmad Pazil (2020) in regard to the participant inclusion criteria for participant sampling – K-pop fans who not only self-identify as fans but who are actively involved in fan activities of one kind or another.

The participant chosen for this pilot study is a young hijab-wearing Malay-Muslim who self-identifies herself as a K-pop fan. She is a student in her late 20s, studying at a higher education institution in the United Kingdom, and has been a fan of the genre ever since her elder sister introduced her to K-pop in primary school. The interview was conducted in English because it is the language she naturally gravitated towards at the start while considering whether she would choose to be interviewed in English or Malay. There were also occasional instances of exclamations uttered in Arabic, which will be relevant to the analysis and discussion.

The interview was conducted online via Microsoft Teams video. It lasted for 90 minutes and was audio recorded. The data was manually transcribed and coded using the qualitative research tool NVivo, and the transcription was fully pseudonymised, including any names of people, places, or institutions that could potentially identify the participant indirectly, as well as a pseudonym, Maisarah, assigned to the participant herself.

ANALYSIS

In this section I will present two short extracts from the interview. For context, elsewhere in her interview, Maisarah explained that although she has never encountered it personally, she is very much aware of the backlash and discrimination faced by hijab-wearing Malay-Muslim fans of K-pop coming from the public and the Islamic authorities.

In Extract 1, Maisarah responds to my question about whether she considers herself a typical Malay-Muslim fan of K-pop.

Extract 1
MAISARAH: 1 I think I am not… a typical Muslim K-pop fan um because of the fact that I don't…

2 I don't um, dance to K-pop, like I don't dance generally, so I think- because I think I

3 got attracted to K-pop for their lyrics and their arts of writing and expressing meaning

4   by way of songs, so I am not a typical fan I guess, because a typical fan of K-pop
     actually
5   um is more attracted to the dances and to the image of K-pop um, so like- so I don't
6   think I'm a typical K-pop fan actually.

In this extract, Maisarah explicitly positions herself as a non-typical fan, the first time reflecting my question through her use of the label "Muslim" in the utterance "not a typical Muslim K-pop fan (line 1), which foregrounds her religious identity. She does this neither the second time ("so I am not a typical fan I guess"), in line 4, nor the third time ("so I don't think I'm a typical K-pop fan actually") in lines 5-6. The evidence for these conclusions is that while she herself does not "dance to K-pop", or even "dance in general" (line 58), a typical fan would be "more attracted to the dances and to the image of K-pop" (line 5). Thus, she is not only distancing herself from prevalent stereotypes or expectations associated with being a fan of K-pop but also implicitly rejecting typical fans' preferences regarding what attracts them to K-pop. Instead, what attracted her to K-pop was "their lyrics and their arts of writing and expressing meaning by way of songs" (lines 3-4), which indexes a more aesthetic stance and thus a non-typical fan identity, which is validated implicitly through this positioning. Through her rejection of specific behaviours and preferences associated with typical K-pop fandom, she negotiates her fan identity by setting up boundaries around her personal expression of fandom.

Towards the end of the interview, Maisarah talked at some length about what kind of fan behaviours, in her opinion, would make a K-pop fan a bad Muslim. I asked her to elaborate on what being a "good" Muslim K-pop fan means to her, which she does in Extract 2 below.

Extract 2

MAISARAH: 1   mmm ماشاءالله (*MashaAllah*) I would- I hope to be the good one because um
             2   again I'm practising to be someone that practises um… … um like um being
             3   moderate in everything right, so that's why um I refrain from over liking
             4   something or being too fanatic in something, like I said there is a spectrum of
             5   liking- of liking someone or like being a fan, and I will- I am making sure that
             6   I don't exceed limits that I put for myself, so- so- so- I would relate to being
             7   hopefully being a good Muslim K-pop fan and try not to إن شاء الله نعوذ بالله نعوذ بالله
             8   من ذلك (*InshaAllah Nauzubillahiminzalik*) be- be like prioritising the temptations
             9   over- over- my faith.

In line 1, Maisarah constructs her religious identity as a Muslim implicitly through her use of Arabic phrases ماشاءالله (*MashaAllah* – in English: "as Allah wills it") as well as إن شاء الله نعوذ بالله نعوذ بالله من ذلك (*InshaAllah Nauzubillahiminzalik* – in English: "We seek refuge from Allah from that matter") (lines 7-8). In this, she negotiates her religious and fan identities through integrating these Arabic phrases in her talk. This practice is known as code-mixing (Lawson & Sachdev, 2004) and it indexes the speaker's orientation to specific identities. Malay-Muslims such as Maisarah are mostly bilingual or multilingual speakers of Malay and English as their first and second languages respectively, and commonly use certain Arabic phrases in their everyday speech. In line 2, Maisarah constructs her religious identity explicitly through asserting that she is "practising to be someone… moderate in everything right" in which the word "practicing" indexes a humble stance. This is further elaborated with the explanation "I refrain from over liking something or being too fanatic in something" (lines 3-4) that she offers to justify her

previous assertion, and which indexes a balanced stance. These stances are associated with a "good" Muslim fan identity. She also constructs this identity implicitly by positioning herself on what she calls "a spectrum of liking- of liking someone or like being a fan" (lines 4-5), which indicates a conscious effort on her part to distance herself from the extreme behaviours often associated with fandom. Her understanding of diverse fan practices implied in this utterance contributes to situating her activities and preferences within an acceptable range of fan behaviours, and not constraining herself to a singular fan identity.

In line 6, "I don't exceed limits that I put for myself", Maisarah constructs a "good" Muslim fan identity through indexing a moderate, self-regulating stance that again invokes her chosen boundaries. These self-imposed limits further index a proactive approach to constructing a self-defined fan identity within the context of her religious beliefs, which she associates with "hopefully being a good Muslim K-pop fan" (line 7). In articulating that she tries "not to be- be like prioritising the temptations over- over- my faith" (lines 7-9), she reflects the identity struggle inherent in resisting the attractions of fandom and aligning her fan practices with her religious commitment. Also, in lines 7-8 she inserts the Arabic phrase من بالله نعوذ بالله نعوذ الله شاء إن ذلك (*InshaAllah Nauzubillahiminzalik* – in English: "We seek refuge from Allah from that matter") which is often uttered as plea for help in keeping away from anything considered to be harmful or wrong from the Islamic point of view. This further demonstrates her reliance on Allah to provide her with the protection from the "temptations" (line 8) of K-pop fandom. Maisarah simultaneously implies through uttering the Arabic phrases the harmfulness of K-pop from which she needs to seek spiritual protection, namely its reputed negative influence and the negative stereotypes associated with it, which further reflects her identity struggle. The false starts "so- so- so-" (line 6) and "over- over-" (line 9), and the lengthy pause in line 2 all reflect the sensitivity she has on this particular topic.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings firstly demonstrate the ways which Maisarah constructs the identity of a good Muslim. The concept of moderation is in line with the teachings of Islam, and is referred to as *Wasatiyyah* (Ahmad, 2011) by Muslim scholars. The term derives from the trilateral Arabic word *wa sa ta* (Ushama, 2014) and carries various meanings such as just, moderate, excellent, and professional. More accurately, *wasatiyyah* means something that is good and positioned between two extremes, which it balances without ignoring any of the rulings of *maqasid al-shari'ah* (objectives of Islamic law) (Biplob & Abdullah, 2021). Invoking the concept of moderation is also Maisarah's way of negotiating and balancing her religious and fan identities.

According to Muslim religious thinkers and Quranic scholars, moderation in Islam is not solely confined to partial implementations and enforcement of Islamic religious teachings, rulings, or systems, but is a comprehensive concept based on the most germane aspects of Islamic theology. Two sets of sacred Islamic texts, the Scripture (*Quran*) and Prophetic Traditions (*Hadith*) (Munson, 1988) are applied by Muslims at individual, group, or national levels. The concept of moderation is referred to in the Scripture in relation to creed, acts of devotion, confession, legal rulings, commanding good and forbidding evil, struggle in the cause of God, human relations and morality, acquisition of wealth and its expenditure, consumption, and accountability of the soul and its passion (Ushama, 2014). Maisarah can be seen as adhering to the concept of moderation in Islam to regulate her association with and liking of K-pop. In

keeping with the Islamic teaching and illustrating her awareness and understanding towards the concept of moderation, she negotiates between her identity as a K-pop fan and her religious identity, which she discursively prioritises. In addition, by constructing the identity of a good, moderate Muslim, she is also constructing the identity of a non-typical fan of K-pop. In doing so, she is challenging the stereotypes often associated with K-pop fans, reflecting the diversity and individualised nature of fandom as opposed to conformity with a homogeneous image. This challenges the conventional view of fans as overly obsessive and suggests a more nuanced understanding of fan practice. Findings also show Maisarah's agency in her engagement with K-pop fandom where she defines her participation on her own terms, resisting certain stereotypical behaviors that are often associated with K-pop fandom. The two extracts above exemplify the idea of fans as active interpreters who negotiate their identities within fan communities (Booth, 2018).

Maisarah negotiates her fan identity by rejecting the notion of being a "typical" K-pop fan which she draws on related stereotypes of being "too fanatic" and "over-liking" fan-ish objects which K-pop fans, are often subjected to. Stanfill (2013) refers to this stereotype as an intra-fandom stereotype; as Gerrard (2021) explains, stereotypes not only circulate externally to fandoms but also within fandoms. This is a way of maintaining boundaries by designating other fans who demonstrate stereotypical, excessive fan behaviour (e.g. "over liking" and "being too fanatic") as controversial and deviant, but more importantly, positions these fans as the "Other", as in Maisarah's interview (see Williams & Ho, 2016 for a further discussion on deviant K-pop fan identities). This implicit positioning of these stereotyped fans as the "Other" distances Maisarah from the stigmatising associations with fan objects (Kozinets, 2001; Herrmann, 2008). According to Jenkins (1992) and Hills (2002), over excessive consumption is the mildest form of stereotype and although consumption is culturally standard, fans violate its normativity through overindulgence, in addition to overvaluing and overestimating the importance of their fandom and fan objects (Jenkins, 1992; Jensen, 1992; Lewis, 2001; Sandvoss, 2005). Gerrard (2021) makes the point that fans often do not challenge these socially devalued meanings and stereotypes assigned to fandom, they "merely apply them to other fans" (p. 128).

Researchers exploring language use in society (e.g., Fishman, 1989; Omoniyi, 2006) and in the construction of religious, ethnic, national and other identities (e.g., Al-Sahafi & Barkhuizen, 2008; Feuer, 2008; Safran, 2008) argue for the deep interconnections and a tie between language and religion; for example, the link that ties Arabic to Muslims (Al-Sahafi & Barkhuizen, 2008). Jaspal & Coyle (2010) further concur that the use of certain languages signifies affiliation to (or alienation from) one's respective religious or ethnic groups. By interspersing her responses with Arabic phrases, Maisarah foregrounds her religious identity while simultaneously constructing her fan identity as unthreatening to her religion. Interviews by their nature are socially constituted communicative events whereas meaning, is co-constructed by the participant and the researcher, often informed by their individual backgrounds and cultural norms. The code-mixing of Arabic phrases in Extract 2 by Maisarah invokes our common and shared knowledge originating from our shared religious (and cultural) background. By drawing on this shared knowledge, Maisarah positions herself as someone who has something in common with me, the researcher. In this sense, she co-constructs our identities in terms of our interactionally specific participant roles as well as indexing them through "linguistic structures" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 585). The act of code-mixing can function as an indicator of in-group affiliation in the context of multilingual communication, reflecting a shared sense of identity within diverse settings (Lawson & Sachdev, 2004).

While this study offers valuable insights into the experiences of hijab-wearing Malay-Muslim female K-pop fans, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. Firstly, the investigation of identity construction and negotiation was primarily focused on the experiences of one individual fan, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings to a broader population. By relying solely on the experiences and behaviors of one participant, the study's findings may not fully capture the complexity and variability of broader phenomena. Future research endeavors could seek to address these limitations by incorporating larger and more diverse samples, thus enhancing the robustness and applicability of the findings, an endeavor which the main study (Muhammad Isa, 2025) aim to take on. Overall, the two extracts reveal the dynamic processes of identity construction and negotiation wherein Maisarah, a hijab-wearing Malay-Muslim K-pop fan, actively positions herself, rejects certain fan behaviours, and engages in balancing her religious identity with her fan identity in the specific context of an in-depth interview with a researcher whose background and interests she shares.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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