



Modest Swimwear, Religiosity and Aging: Apparel and Physical Activity for Women Throughout the Life Course

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Abstract

Swim-related activity is one of the most recommended forms of physical activity for older adults, increasing the importance of access to swimming and water sports throughout the life course. This study examined eight online forums addressing topics related to religious-based modesty and moral judgements about different types of swimwear, such as the bikini or the burqini. Online discussion forums dedicated to modest dress for women with religious or faith-based modesty preferences are often called "modesty blogs." These blogs have grown in popularity and influence on social media, and one of the most controversial topics discussed is the notion of a woman's choice in swimwear as a moral indicator. This article analyzes the ways in which these blogs serve as informal sites of knowledge production and sites of religious interpretation. These forums reveal insights about physical activity and the sense of belonging regarding modesty within a moralized domain. The review of these modesty blogs resulted in examples of (1) modest swimwear as empowering for religious women throughout the life course, (2) conflicting modesty narratives, and (3) modesty as a way to avoid shame and uphold middle-class values. Apparel-related barriers to physical activity, including swimwear and water sport, have the potential to negatively impact the health and well-being of religious women and their families throughout the life course.

***Keywords:** Swimwear; Modesty; Aging; Religion; Morality; Social Media*

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Introduction

Swimming is a form of exercise, a leisure activity, a competitive aquatic sport and, in some circumstances, a lifesaving survival skill. Swimming is frequently suggested as an ideal form of exercise for older adults; however, older adults rarely achieve the recommended amount of physical activity per week (Elsawy and Higgins 2010). The clothing and apparel items people who self-identify as women wear while engaging in swimming or swim-related activity (also known as swimwear, swimsuits, bathing suits, or swim costumes) have been the subject of controversy regardless of the amount of skin exposed or the religious affiliations associated with them. Modest swimwear blogs, online modesty discussion forums, and photo-sharing websites focused on swimwear options for women with religious-based modesty preferences represent a growing network of communities where ideas are shared and debated; these comprise the network of “online modesty discourse” (Lewis 2015).

One might be tempted to dismiss or overlook the significance of online forums, especially those focused on fashion, clothing, and apparel; however, online forums are capable of functioning as sites of knowledge production, influencing the opinions and health-related behaviors of both their participants and readers (Kuchinskaya and Parker 2018). Modesty blogging is a form of “female-led religious interpretation, and knowledge transmission” (Lewis 2013). Current online forums addressing modesty and swimwear range from interpreting a woman’s choice in swimwear as part of an individual’s modesty journey, a factor in social or religious acceptance, or an indicator of one’s moral status. These forums lead those who study life-course issues surrounding health, culture, and identity to question the decision-making processes that constitute moral, modest, or acceptable active wear, specifically swimwear, and how these processes are negotiated. In this article, I present my analysis of these modesty forums after describing the historical background and the challenges religious women face when engaging in swimming or water sports and outlining my methodology. In the analysis of my findings, I focus on whether modesty requirements serve as barriers or facilitators to achieving adequate amounts of physical activity for women throughout the life course and highlight opportunities for religious women to have greater access to swimming and water sports.

Moral Status and Swimwear Selection

Historically, swimwear has inspired debates about female morality at the individual and societal levels. Morality is the way people ‘ought to act’ under given circumstances according to a presumed “objective moral charter,” defining all that is right and good (Shweder and Menon 2014, 362). The styles of swimwear serving as the ‘bookends’ of controversy are the bikini for exposing too much skin and the burqini (also known as burkini) for too much coverage. Bikinis have been criticized as immodest and morally corrupting to society (Balogun 2019; Booth 2001; Heffernan 2018). Bikinis are a two-piece style of swimwear resembling a set of bra and panties that expose the navel and were introduced in France

during the late 1940s (Charleston 2004). Bikinis were initially controversial but grew in acceptance in the United States during the post-World War II economic boom, particularly as more people were exposed to European fashion trends through travel and because private backyard swimming pools became more affordable (Hunt-Hurst and Scarborough 2013).

The burqini was created by a Lebanese designer living in Australia at the request of a lifeguard association that needed swimwear for Muslim female lifeguards (Akou 2013; Serhan 2016). This full-coverage swimsuit is associated with Muslim women and consists of swim leggings, a long-sleeved, high-neck top, and a swim hijab [a head covering worn by some Muslim women]. The burqini was controversial in many settings when it made its debut, and burqinis have received criticism for being culturally ‘corrupting’ in Western countries such as in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand (Akou 2013; Jung 2016). Burqinis were not controversial for being too revealing, but rather because they, along with veils or hijabs, were perceived as symbols of religious affiliation in public spaces (Nielson 2020; Sommier 2017). Wearing the hijab or other concealing clothing has been harshly criticized in the West as a form of invisibility. However, in Muslim-minority countries, it has had the opposite effect—specifically, it promotes a type of hyper-visibility often used to represent foreign otherness or behavior “somehow alien or different” (Tarlo 2010, 9-10). The ultra-modest burqini was not well-received in some Western countries and even resulted in attacks and harassment of women wearing them on French beaches. Some attackers attempted to label those wearing a burqini as Islamist extremists, and a burqini ban was subsequently issued on several beaches in France (Jung 2016; Serhan 2016; Sommier 2017). The ban was eventually overturned, but the damage was done in terms of harming the already tenuous sense of belonging felt by many French Muslims, both immigrants and native French citizens (Nielson 2020). The backlash was also swift for France, as much of the Western world condemned the burqini ban and attributed it as evidence of the weakening of French liberalism: “The theme of French decline was also conveyed through the parallel made between France today and conservatives from the past, for instance those who first opposed the bikini” (Sommier 2017). Some public beaches and swimming pools in the United States attempted to ban burqinis for being unhygienic (Abdelaziz 2019). These obstacles politicize the attempts that Muslim women make to engage in water sports and may also complicate family outings, as mothers, grandmothers, or other female family members are prevented from accompanying young children into the water.

Conflict between the underlying values people claim to embrace and the ethical practices in which they engage is referred to in the literature as a “moral breakdown,” according to social theorist and anthropologist Jarrett Zigon (2008). A prime example of this is consumer demand for corporate social responsibility in clothing manufacturing and environmental stewardship versus the demand for inexpensive, disposable apparel that follows the latest trends (Pandit et al. 2021). This opposition seems to surround and influence modern consumer decision-making, including those seeking modest apparel. In the Western world, there is a moral imperative to be health-seeking (White et al. 1995). However, the lack of access to modest swimwear or modest athletic apparel complicates the pursuit of health for modest women. This imperative can be especially taxing on older women due to covert ageism, as visible signs of aging are interpreted as a personal failure and may thereby incentivize covering up regardless of religious background. According to cultural gerontologist Julia Twigg, “Failure to look fit, toned and slim...becomes a new sign of moral laxity, evidence of failure to exert proper discipline over the body” (2013, 42). Beyond the moral breakdown, a growing number of anthropological studies dedicated to the concept of moral development have been conducted in recent years (e.g., Cassaniti and Hickman 2014; Csordas 2013; Mattingly and Throop 2018). Scholars such as anthropologist Nancy Eberhardt (2014) argue that the concepts of personhood and agency are essential to making sense of the moral decision-making in diverse cultural contexts. This moral complexity is crucial for illuminating

the issues navigated by women with religious-based modesty preferences as they participate in physical activity, especially swimming or water sports due to the apparel required for these activities.

Swimming as Exercise, Relaxation, and Self-Care

Technological advancements have changed the ways in which people engage with swimming and other water sports. For example, the development of elastic yarn in the 1930s led to the creation of stretch fabrics and body-contoured swimsuits (Edwards 2020). More recently, sun-proof fabric and protective aquatic clothing for surfers, called rash-guards, have been developed. These have been adopted by the modest-swimwear community and incorporated into designs for people looking for more coverage, protection from ultraviolet sunlight, or chafing for various water sports (Gambichler et al. 2001; Gies 1994). The ability to swim serves as a kind of gateway to many types of water sports and leisure activities, including boating, fishing, kayaking, canoeing, surfing, paddle boarding and water aerobics, among others. All these activities require some level of confidence or familiarity with conducting oneself in the water in order to be performed safely. Swimming is frequently recommended as a form of exercise, especially for older adults due to the minimal amount of weight-bearing required (Alkatan et al. 2016; Nualnim et al. 2012; Tanaka 2009), which can alleviate stress on the joints. The importance of swimming and water sports to older adults highlights the need to eliminate barriers that could prevent or complicate attempts by women with religious-based modesty preferences from fully engaging in water sports as a form of physical activity or self-care.

Beaches and poolside public spaces can be sites of unwelcome scrutiny for women in Western societies generally, subjecting them to corporeal surveillance, societal pressure to cover their bodies as they age, or to select and wear apparel items that offer increasingly more coverage; this may result in a type of “cultural exile” and marginalization from the youthful feminine ideal (Twigg 2013, 41-43). Several communities in places such as Australia, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Brooklyn, New York, have attempted to provide accommodations at public pools by offering women-only swim hours to accommodate Muslim and Orthodox Jewish women who are more comfortable swimming while shielded from the male gaze (Christian Science Monitor 2016; Lenneis et. al. 2021; Marinescu et al. 2013; Pardy 2011; Rosenberg 2016) These accommodations have generated mixed results. For example, in Denmark, some Muslim women reported that participating in women-only swim sessions offered them opportunities for self-care and a safe space where they could exercise and relax out of view from men and not feel judged by non-Muslims (Lenneis et al. 2021). However, gender-segregated swimming hours have also resulted in a debate over whether the practice was empowering or regressive for women in Sweden while, in Brooklyn, it resulted in a lawsuit for a civil-rights violation based on religious intrusion into public spaces (Christian Science Monitor 2016; Rosenberg 2016).

Such conflicts illustrate the need for a deeper understanding among members of the swim and water sports community regarding the reasons that religious women select modest swimwear. This study examined online discussion forums about modest active apparel as sites of moral consensus-building and information-sharing regarding water-related physical activity for women with religious-based modesty preferences. These forums inspire contemplation of numerous issues related to women’s opportunities and abilities to engage in the social, physical, and health-seeking behaviors that require donning a swimsuit throughout the life course.

Methods and Analysis

This study analyzed online forums addressing topics related to religious-based modesty and moral judgements about different types of swimwear. All data were collected on publicly available social-media platforms that feature health and fitness forums and discussion threads for women interested in

maintaining certain standards of modesty. These forums, referred to as ‘modesty blogs,’ were examined over the course of six months, i.e., from January to June 2021. During this time, I reviewed eight forums, including blogs and vlogs [video web logs], both with and without public commentary and discussion. The goal was to explore the content and questions posted, the responses received, as well as the images and opinions publicly expressed on the topic of modesty and swimwear on social-media platforms. No participants were recruited or interviewed for this study as their online comments were available to the public. The authors, creators, or hosts of certain online forums are identified, however, since they have specifically created content to be viewed by the public. The real names and social-media handles of respondents to the blogs and forums are not included to safeguard their privacy as much as possible. In addition, I have combined or aggregated multiple quotes from the same commenter in order to protect the privacy of the individual (Bond et al. 2013). The Institutional Review Board status for this project is exempt according to the author’s home institution.

Eligibility for the forums included the following criteria: open access to the public; no interaction by me, the researcher, with the participants in the forum; no membership requirement; no purchase of featured items required; and no confidentiality clause. Discussion forums had to feature posts or photographs dedicated to beachwear, summer active wear, bathing suits, or swimsuits, and the observance of religious modesty standards. Blog or forum posts and discussion threads that met these criteria were captured as a form of purposeful sampling. Posts were reviewed and categorized following a qualitative, thematic approach. Analysis was conducted on the captured posts with a modified Grounded Theory technique, constructing categories to represent the concepts as they were identified (Charmaz 2014). The goal of the analysis was to examine the relationship between modesty-protecting athletic apparel, specifically swimwear, and health-seeking behavior among women from religious backgrounds, and then, to create a set of codes or descriptive terms and a code dictionary, which linked the terms with a working definition. I refined this coding dictionary over repeated readings of the forum transcripts until it could be applied across all the samples collected. I then used the refined codes to interpret the behavior, thoughts, and opinions expressed on the modesty-blog forums.

The coding analysis revealed several apparel-related barriers to swimming and water sports for women with religious-based modesty requirements and preferences. After reviewing the eight modesty swim blogs/vlogs forums, I determined that there are many interpretations of and conflicting narratives that constitute ‘modest’ swimwear among women with religious-based modesty preferences. There are also a wide range of rationales or motivations for blogging about and showcasing modest swimwear and lifestyles. Posts were primarily based on the religious perspectives of Muslim, Orthodox Jewish, and evangelical Christian women, and the majority of the creators of these forums were involved in the design, manufacture, or modeling of modest apparel. Others were social-media influencers of modest lifestyles, who typically receive free merchandise for featuring the items on their platforms. One such example is Leena Asad, who uses her *With Love, Leena* platform to represent modest dress from a Muslim-American perspective (2019). Leena shares with viewers on YouTube and Instagram where to purchase items and how to style them to meet religious modesty requirements. The assumption is that the viewer is already interested in modest fashions, and she does not attempt to ‘convert’ viewers to a modest lifestyle. Leena evaluates apparel items based on appearance, function, and practicality. In the forums I analyzed, the rationales for posting about modest swimwear were all presented within a religious context but ranged from female empowerment and personal dignity to recognizing and avoiding negative consequences associated with immodest behavior and appearance. In the following sections, I focus on the most prominent themes and include excerpts from the blogs or vlogs. The first category to be explored here focuses on content that portrays modest swimwear as empowering and dignifying for women.

Revealing Dignity: Modesty as a Form of Empowerment

A digital printing company called Spoonflower allows designers to create and print their own fabrics and sell their designs on its website, promoting sustainability and positive environmental change for the textile industry (Spoonflower 2021). The website hosts a blog meant to inspire consumers interested in creating their own apparel, crafts, and artwork. At the time of my study, the *Spoonflower* blog featured a British Muslim woman with her own social-media presence in the crafting community. She goes by the name Rumana and is a medical doctor who also hosts her own blog, *The Little Pomegranate*, on sewing and crafting. Her modest swim dress and swim turban were well-received on the Spoonflower site. She started off by sharing why designing and sewing her own modest swimwear was important to her:

There are so many reasons why someone might want more coverage from their swimsuit—religious reasons (like me), personal comfort (some people just prefer to cover up more) or even sun protection for sensitive skin. There’s been a rise of ready-to-wear versions, from the standard (and in my opinion awfully named) ‘burqini’ made up of trousers and a long top, loose one-piece wet-suit style ones, to more fashionable three-piece affairs with detachable wrap-around skirts. While there are some great companies out there, a lot of what’s available is decidedly frumpy and dull. I wanted something lush and tropical, something that screams ‘holiday!’ (Spoonflower 2019)

Rumana acknowledged resisting religious discrimination and harassment in the United Kingdom and Europe as her motivation for this particular creation:

I know everyone says this, but being able to sew my own swimwear has been a real game-changer. As a Muslim, hijab-wearing woman, I’ve often felt self-conscious and stared at on the beach—even more so in parts of Europe where there is backlash against ‘burqini’-style swimsuits (some cities are even banning them). I’ve tried to not let things like that stop me—I’ve gone swimming in oceans, snorkeling amongst coral reefs and even had kite-surfing lessons in my old swimsuits, but I’m always aware of myself and how I look. But this swimsuit really has changed that. With its unashamedly bright and bold print it has given me the confidence to step out onto the sand with my head held a little bit higher, *because everyone deserves to feel fabulous in their swimwear, right?* [italics original] (Spoonflower 2019)

The bright palm print on the swimsuit mentioned in Rumana’s post presents an open rejection to self-consciousness, anxiety, religious, or political stigma. Featured on a fabric and crafting forum, most of the comments posted by the public had to do with asking for details on the pattern or the fabric used or offering praise for the swimsuit. Based on these comments from the forum’s readers, the post did not seem to generate controversy, and some of the comments referenced their status as a fan of Rumana’s personal blog.

Regine Monavar Omid Tessone hosts the *Aqua Modesta* blog, and she designs modest swimwear targeted toward Orthodox Jewish women in the United States (Blog Aquamodesta 2019). Tessone’s modesty narrative reveals that both her own adherence to modest dress and her decision to design modest active wear were intertwined with the growth of her religious and spiritual identity:

Designing was something I absolutely loved doing and now that I was growing more observant I needed something modest to wear while swimming. I realized dressing half naked was no longer a solution but a problem for me. By studying the Torah and performing mitzvot, I now

had the knowledge that was required to make that change. The desire was there and therefore the solution would surely come my way. I saw myself swimming in the ocean in this swim dress night after night in my dreams. That was the beginning of the idea of Aqua Modesta modest swimwear. The planning, the research, the follow up was all with super divine intervention. (Blog Aquamodesta 2019)

Based on information posted on the blog, Tessone developed her passion for modest dress as an adult and it evolved along with her deepening religious beliefs. These experiences inspired her career in designing modest swimwear and exercise apparel. This *Aqua Modesta* excerpt, along with the *Spoonflower* excerpts above, showcase examples of how women are using social media to share their experiences of feeling empowered to engage in swimming, express religious beliefs, and use design skills and training to assist other women in their modesty journeys. Both women created opportunities to share their designs and beliefs with wider online audiences, contributing to the network of women interested in modest dress.

Blessed Is She is an online Christian community and blog based in the United States that refers to itself as a sisterhood. The site features approximately 40 content contributors who discuss issues based on their own lived experiences as women of faith. While not devoted exclusively to swimwear, the blog features a particular post about modesty, modest dress, and swimwear that dignifies or honors the bodies of women who have experienced pregnancy, childbirth, trauma, illness, and loss. The author featured in this blog post shared a deeply personal narrative about what modest swim apparel means to her and how she has been challenged to uphold her commitment to modest dress:

Modesty is a virtue that I have struggled with for the majority of my life. I still struggle with it! I've always loved fashion, and our [American] culture is not one that encourages the beauty of modesty. I have allowed myself to get lured into purchasing and wearing immodest clothing. I have also worn certain pieces of clothing out of vanity. Modesty, like most of the [Biblical] virtues, doesn't come easily for me and is something that I must constantly strive for. Through prayer and a desire for true, authentic beauty, my love and desire for modesty has grown. There is such freedom and joy found within modesty!

Over the past few years, through nursing school, wedding planning, pregnancy, postpartum, and a recent diagnosis of Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, my body has changed quite a bit. I want a swimsuit that I feel comfortable and confident in, and one that upholds my dignity as a woman through its modest and beautiful features. I want to wear a suit that pays tribute to all that my body has gone through. Not one that puts my body on display or draws attention to certain parts that our culture says are the most attractive. (Blessed Is She 2019)

The narrative post above provides insight into the motivations of some Christian women to adopt a lifestyle and apparel that goes against the mainstream culture, which typically promotes an unattainable standard of beauty. The author described her personal struggles with remaining committed to modest clothing, concluding that—ultimately—the rewards of doing so outnumber the challenges because modest clothing, including swimwear, dignifies her body and all that it has endured. For her, a sense of empowerment came from making wardrobe choices, specifically swimwear, that concealed more of her body. In her case, bodily concealment was not enacted out of shame but rather out of self-respect. Having access to modest swimwear for purchase was essential for her, as she did not sew her own clothing or own a design studio as in the previous examples. However, conflicting narratives can complicate the overall goal of supporting religious women in swimming and water sports.

Modest swimsuit designer Jessica Rey provides a clear example of the conflicting narratives within the modesty movement. Rey's video post about the evolution of the swimsuit and her critique of the motivations behind the creation of the bikini went viral in the United States. Her video, originally posted on *Q Media, Ideas for the Common Good* (The Evolution of the Swimsuit 2013), has been reposted in several other Christian modest swimsuit and lifestyle blogs that encourage women and girls to adopt modest dress. The take-away line from Rey's video is: "Modesty is not about covering our bodies because they are bad. Modesty is not about hiding ourselves. Modesty is about revealing our dignity."

The video generated hundreds of responses, but much of the controversy surrounded references to neuroscience research claiming that images of immodestly dressed females alter male brains in ways that are harmful and objectifying to women:

Brain scans revealed that when men are shown pictures of scantily clad women, the region of the brain associated with tools, such as screwdrivers and hammers, lit up. Some men showed zero brain activity in the medial pre-frontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that lights up when one ponders another person's thoughts, feelings and intentions. Researchers found this shocking because they almost never see this part of the brain shut down in this way. A Princeton Professor said, 'It's as if they are reacting to these women as if they are not fully human.' (The Evolution of the Swimsuit 2013)

The comments posted were divided between readers who celebrated this discussion as evidence of female apparel choice being responsible for objectification and those who disapproved of making women shoulder the consequences of a male behavioral shortcoming. An examination of the neuroscience studies mentioned in the blog post is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth noting that women have historically faced objectification regardless of wardrobe (Bartky 2015; Moradi and Huang 2008). In general, Rey is critical of the bikini, and she promotes the message that modest swimwear is about the dignity of women and girls.

For those who have already decided to accept the challenge of finding modest swimwear, the blog hosted by *Cleo Madison* provides photos, descriptions, and sourcing information for modest swim options, showcasing a wide variety of interpretations for what is considered modest (Cleo Madison 2020). Featured swimsuits include two-piece designs with more coverage than a typical bikini, traditional maillot one-piece suits, swim leggings with rash-guard shirts, and full-coverage burqinis complete with a swim hijab. The blog's overall message of modesty as dignity and empowerment is complicated by the following observation about swim leggings: "These are leggings you wear while swimming! You'll see surfers wearing them, but they're not alone. Some women, like Aimee, wear them when they feel terrible and miserable about themselves after having a baby. Instead, swim leggings helped her enjoy playing in the water" (Cleo Madison 2020).

This citation refers to a fitness blogger who goes by the name Aimee; she posted enthusiastically about swim leggings when she first discovered them. However, the overall tone of the post takes an unexpected turn with the statement about swim leggings working well for women who "feel terrible and miserable about themselves" (Cleo Madison 2020). This is perhaps a mild critique of the swim-apparel industry for making women feel this way, or perhaps it was meant as a comedic take on the fitness blogger's rejection of traditional swimsuits. Whatever the case, the overall positive messaging is lost when a blog suggests that post-baby bodies need to be dressed 'more' modestly than others because they do not fit the societal standard of beauty. This conflict in messaging is promoted by modest swim

blogs that focus on the perceived negative consequences of ‘immodest living,’ which I discuss in the next section.

Concealing for the Sake of Sin, Shame, and Social Class

Homeschooling Teen is a blog geared toward a specific audience of adolescent and young-adult Christians located in the US (2009). The overall tone of the modesty-related posts appears persuasive in nature, not disguising the fact that the creators are trying to convince women and girls to dress modestly, including with swimwear. As with some other sites mentioned earlier, the fear of corrupting boys’ thoughts is deployed to encourage modest dress at the pool or beach:

The Bible says that ‘women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control’ (1 Tim. 2:9 ESV). Would you go out in public wearing only your underwear? I know I’d sure feel embarrassed and self-conscious! And yet people wear swimsuits that cover less [than] their underwear does! It makes no sense why it’s okay to wear revealing garments at a pool or the beach when they would not be considered appropriate in other places. Most modern bathing suits also pose a problem for guys when they see you in them. Jesus said that anyone who looks at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery already in his heart (Matt. 5:28). Young Christian men shouldn’t have to walk around with their eyes pointed down at the ground just to stay pure in their thoughts. So modest swim apparel is not only appreciated by girls who wish to honor God with their bodies, but also by guys who wish to honor God with their minds. (Homeschooling Teen 2009)

These passages communicate a vastly different message than the sites mentioned before concerning the dignity of modesty. In the above excerpt, covering the body is a way for girls to honor God, yet the need for girls to honor God with their minds was not mentioned. One final plea was made for girls and young women: “Girls, if you can’t find a modest swimsuit, then don’t swim. Avoid the beach or wear shorts and short sleeves. Purity is really that important” (Homeschooling Teen 2009). This interpretation of religious morality serves as a reminder of the crucial role that access to modest swim apparel plays for women and girls in some Christian communities in the US.

Access to modest swimwear can potentially turn a barrier into a facilitator when it comes to engaging in water sports and other forms of water-based social participation. The following blog excerpts from *The Great Swimwear Debate* (Emily Wilson 2015) addressed social class and the perceived decline of middle-class women safeguarding standards of appropriate appearance and conduct:

If wearing a small bikini was not seen as comparable to underwear in the eyes of some people before...this new swing of bikini fashion has confirmed it. These suits you see here are underwear you wear outside. And to the point of class...wearing your underwear outside is not classy. It is not classy to show your booty to everyone you pass by on the beach or at the pool—18 year old and 80 year old men alike. It is not and never will be classy to put a picture of your backside on your Instagram in a bikini. Wearing a swimsuit that covers a few square inches and reveals nearly your entire body to the general public says sadly and loudly. . . ‘I am an object to be looked at. Here is nearly every inch of me for all the world to see.’

On the surface, this poster seems to embrace the modesty-as-dignity message discussed above, yet the focus of social class—and behaving in a way that is ‘classy,’ presumably conforming to middle-to-upper class norms—directs the reader toward a narrower scope of acceptable standards. This poster suggests

that middle-class standards should be upheld by avoiding the behaviors described, such as exposing too much skin, for example, and excluding or disassociating with those who refuse to do so.

The message of concealing or covering the body to avoid objectification is consistent throughout several of the Christian forums based in the United States; however, the responsibility for objectification varies considerably, as I discuss in the final example about the “Decline of Decency” from a blog called *Girl Defined* (2015):

The bikini has single-handedly destroyed the moral compass of the average woman today. The bikini has warped almost every woman’s view on modesty and decency. When a woman is told that it’s completely normal and appropriate to uncover 90% of her body, she is being taught that nakedness is totally normal. And here’s the biggest problem of all. The bikini has lowered the “modesty” bar so severely that very little is now considered inappropriate. The bikini has initiated a moral domino effect that will eventually lead to mainstream cultural nudity. Sadly, the bikini is a clear sign that America is moving away from God’s Word. The bikini has totally destroyed our view of modesty. We’re now one step behind Europe.

In this example, the poster yields a substantial amount of power to the bikini by claiming that this particular style of swimwear has undermined mainstream secular standards of morality. As the post continues, the poster connects the argument to religious morality by explaining how communities of faith are in peril due to the corrupting power of “a few measly pieces of triangular fabric” (*Girl Defined* 2015). In the following blog comment, the responsibility extends beyond passivity, such as being looked upon by others lustfully:

So here’s another obvious question. Should you, as a Christian girl, wear the bikini? Well, it all depends on your *worldview*. If you’re a practicing Christian, your worldview and beliefs should be built on Biblical principles. Your moral compass should align with God’s Word. You should have a solid understanding of God’s purpose for giving you clothes in the first place and you should act on that understanding. Your clothing should reflect your desire to honor God with your body. Your clothes should reflect the purity and holiness of your Savior. Your clothing should display humility rather than pride. Your clothes should reveal your need for a Savior. (*Girl Defined* 2015)

According to this poster, the responsibility of women of faith is to actively pursue purity when it comes to clothing, including swimwear. The overall tone of the blogs in this section emphasizes the negative consequences of not concealing the body, which include being viewed by others as ‘low-class,’ failing to uphold social class norms, corrupting the thoughts of boys and men, failing to honor God with one’s body, losing ‘purity,’ and having no moral compass. These blogs did not have much to offer women who already practice modest dress, and instead, were focused on converting readers to adopt modest dress. Finally, in the next section, I discuss my interpretation of these findings and provide some concluding perspectives.

Discussion and Conclusion

My analysis of eight modesty forums has identified aspects of the cultural and religious significance of modest swimwear—both as a means of female empowerment and personal dignity and as a means to avoid negative spiritual and societal consequences while engaging in swim-related physical activity. However, the conflicting narratives within these modesty forums threaten to confuse the overall mission of promoting swim-related fitness for modestly dressed women—and may ultimately serve as

a way of policing women's bodies. The motivations behind these forums fell into two main categories: those that offered support and inspiration to women who have already adopted a modest-dress lifestyle [supportive modesty forums] and those that sought to convert women and especially girls to a modest-dress lifestyle [conversion modesty forums]. In these contexts, modesty forums can facilitate access to swimming and water sports by helping women strategize what to wear in the water and navigate potential apparel-related issues, such as maintaining the necessary coverage while in view of others. Forums such as Rumana's *The Little Pomegranate* and *Spoonflower, With Love*, Leena, *Aqua Modesta*, Cleo Madison, and *Blessed Is She* are all examples of supportive sites that provide helpful advice and 'tips' on meeting certain life challenges while honoring the requirements of religious-based modesty.

However, the swimwear-related narratives from the *Evolution of Swimwear* video, the *Homeschool Teen, Girl Defined*, and *The Great Swimwear Debate* are examples of attempts to convert women to these points of view and to build a stronger modesty movement. Examples of this second category all came from evangelical Christian forums, which may be a reflection of the relatively small sample size in this study, or a reflection of the historical moment that the Christian modesty movement is currently experiencing in the United States. When compared to Muslim and Orthodox Jewish traditions, guidelines for modest dress among Christian women have not been as clearly established, so it is possible that forums advocating for this lifestyle are more plentiful than those that support women who already dress modestly for religious reasons.

On the surface, it appears that both of these approaches—the supportive and the conversion-themed forums—work towards achieving the same goal. Still, the conflicting narratives threaten to create confusion and distract from the overall mission of raising awareness about modest swimwear and safeguarding opportunities for women who want to wear a swimsuit without violating certain standards of modesty. Conflicting narratives within the modesty movement—including the clash between those who embrace athletic modest dress as empowering for women and girls versus athletic modesty as a dutiful way to prevent the corruption of men and boys—may ultimately undermine the helpful and meaningful contributions of these forums. While few of these forums address aging directly, they exist within a larger context of culturally established norms around the negative portrayal of aging women and women who are not physically fit (Twigg 2010; White et al. 1995). Attempts to engage in swimming or water sports are risky for many women regardless of age, due to the ever-present and paradoxical surveillance of female bodies and the threat that they will be sanctioned for being immodest or inadequately disciplined, i.e., failing to exert proper discipline over the body as exemplified by a toned physique.

Women's swimwear has become what anthropologists Julia Cassaniti and Jacob Hickman call a "moralized domain," or an aspect of the social world where behaviors are given different moral weight (2014). Navigating these moral concerns should be deployed in a way that is careful not to discourage women who prioritize modesty from engaging in swim-related activity, especially older women who may already experience swimming pools and beaches as areas of bodily surveillance. Objections to modest swimwear have also been viewed as a 'proxy' for anti-immigration rhetoric and threaten the sense of belonging for Muslim women (Nielson 2020). Muslim women living in Western countries participate in all aspects of society, including sports, and there is no religious prohibition against engaging in physical activity as long as modesty requirements are met (Tarlo 2010). Access to modest swimwear facilitates two aspects of the moral quest: modesty required by one's faith community and health-seeking behavior that may be called for by society-at-large (White et al 1995). It is worth noting that context is crucial for understanding these opinions and the moral-decision-making involved, especially the need to "untangle" societal norms from the work of social media agents of influence (Eberhardt 2014).

Since swimming is so highly prioritized as an activity in which people can engage throughout the life course, there should be a greater level of awareness at swimming facilities and water parks, etc. regarding modest-apparel requirements and other considerations for religious-based modesty. These considerations might include women-only swim hours and easing restrictions for head coverings in the water, such as swim turbans and swim hijabs. If young women with religious-based modesty preferences are discouraged or prevented from engaging in swim-related physical activity, it becomes difficult to imagine that they will engage in these activities as they age. This type of discouragement, and not the modesty requirement itself, thereby becomes the barrier to physical activity that has the potential to deny religious women a lifetime of engagement in water sports. As a consequence, this barrier may negatively impact women's sense of belonging, health, and wellbeing.

This study provides a unique overview of some of the attitudes and opinions of women regarding their religious-based modesty preferences and how some women may navigate issues surrounding how to dress for swimming and water sports throughout the life course. These findings may be useful to researchers interested in further exploring the role of modest apparel in physical activity among members of this population. The limitations of this study are associated with the chosen methodology and small sample size. Specific limitations include the lack of recruited participants, observed phenomena, and interviews or questionnaire data, as all data were collected from open social-media forums. Language was an additional limitation, as only forums written in English were reviewed. The 'closed' or restricted social-media forums that are available only to community members, subscribers, or followers of the blogger/influencer were not accessed for this study; they may have contained alternative interpretations or deeper insights into the issues presented here. The sample of eight online forums was not exhaustive but did enable an initial exploration of modest-swimwear blogs and an introduction to the shared culture and growing network of online modesty blogs. Further research involving participatory, first-hand data is necessary to delve deeper into the barriers and facilitators for women with religious-based modesty preferences as they seek opportunities to engage in water sports and swim-related physical activity throughout the life course and especially in older age.

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