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Islamic Dress Codes and Character Formation in Higher Education: A Sequential Mixed-Methods Study at a Muhammadiyah University

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Abstract

This study examines how Islamic dress codes are perceived to relate to character formation among university students at Muhammadiyah University of Palangka Raya (UMPR). Employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, the research integrates survey data from 150 students with institutional records, semi-structured interviews with lecturers, administrators, and parents, focus group discussions, and field observations. Quantitative analysis indicates statistically observable associations between self-reported dress code adherence and students perceived discipline, responsibility, and participation in campus activities. Qualitative findings further reveal that Islamic attire is commonly interpreted by students and institutional actors as a marker of religious identity and moral self-regulation, while also being contested through peer dynamics and global fashion influences. Guided by Social Identity Theory and Moral Development Theory, the study interprets Islamic dress as a symbolic and pedagogical practice that may support the internalization of behavioral norms within a faith-based university context. However, the findings are limited to perceived impacts and correlational patterns within a single institutional setting and do not establish causal relationships. This study contributes to ongoing debates on the role of religious regulation in higher education by highlighting the contextual conditions under which dress codes may intersect with character-related dispositions, while underscoring the need for longitudinal and comparative research across diverse educational environments.

Keywords: Islamic dress code, character education, discipline, student behavior

INTRODUCTION

Character education has increasingly been positioned as a central concern of contemporary educational discourse, particularly in response to growing anxieties about moral disengagement, social fragmentation, and declining civic responsibility among young adults. As Khodijah & Surawan (2025) argue, education is no longer expected merely to transmit cognitive knowledge but to actively shape values, attitudes, and ethical dispositions aligned with broader social responsibilities. In Indonesia, this normative expectation has been institutionalized through national education policies that foreground character education as a foundational pillar of educational outcomes. Accordingly, higher education institutions are tasked not only with producing academically competent graduates but also with cultivating individuals who demonstrate ethical integrity and social awareness (Surawan et al., 2022; Monalisa et al., 2022; Norhidayah et al., 2023).

Despite this policy emphasis, much of the empirical scholarship on character education remains disproportionately concentrated on primary and secondary schooling, where moral habit formation is assumed to be more malleable. The university context, where students experience greater autonomy, exposure to plural value systems, and intensified identity negotiation, has received comparatively limited analytical attention. This gap is consequential, as higher education represents a critical transitional space in which young adults actively reconstruct moral commitments, negotiate institutional authority, and redefine personal identities. Character education at this level therefore cannot be assumed to operate through the same mechanisms as in earlier educational stages; rather, it requires closer scrutiny of how values are negotiated, resisted, or selectively internalized within more complex social environments.

Within Islamic higher education institutions, particularly Muhammadiyah universities, the integration of religious values into academic life is often presented as an inseparable component of holistic education. Ainissyifa, (2014) conceptualizes external religious practices, such as dress, as pedagogical instruments designed to reinforce internal virtues including modesty, humility, and discipline. Similarly, Bonirin et al., (2025) frame Islamic dress codes as mechanisms for cultivating a moral climate rather than merely enforcing institutional regulation. At Muhammadiyah University of Palangka Raya (UMPR), this normative orientation is institutionalized through dress policies that require female students to wear the hijab and encourage male students to adopt modest attire. Anshari et al., (2022) suggest that such policies function dually as tools of behavioral regulation and as means of fostering self-respect, responsibility, and religious identity.

However, the assumption that external religious regulation naturally translates into internalized moral character remains theoretically contested. While institutional narratives often frame Islamic clothing as an extension of *tarbiyah*, a holistic educational process integrating knowledge, faith, and ethics, empirical studies increasingly demonstrate that religious dress can be experienced in divergent and even contradictory ways. Franceschelli & O'Brien (2014), for instance, show that religious attire among Muslim youth may function simultaneously as personal conviction, social obligation, or symbolic resistance, depending on contextual and relational dynamics. In this sense, clothing cannot be analytically reduced to a straightforward instrument of moral formation, but must instead be examined as a socially mediated practice whose

meanings are negotiated across institutional, peer, and cultural domains.

This complexity is further amplified in the Indonesian context, where generational change, digital media, and peer networks significantly shape the interpretation of Islamic symbols. Muljadji et al., (2017) highlight how Islamic clothing has become entangled with processes of commodification and identity performance, particularly among urban Muslim youth exposed to globalized fashion cultures. University students, who possess greater autonomy than school-aged learners, often navigate multiple and sometimes competing understandings of modesty, ranging from empowerment and self-expression to perceived institutional coercion. Lecturers and educational actors are therefore positioned not merely as enforcers of norms, but as mediators who must adapt pedagogical strategies to increasingly diverse student interpretations (Mazrur et al., 2022; Khasanah et al., 2025).

The expansion of digital culture further destabilizes conventional assumptions about religious dress and character formation. Social media platforms actively circulate global fashion aesthetics, including the rise of "hijab fashion," which simultaneously enables creative religious expression and raises concerns about the commodification of piety. Franceschelli & O'Brien (2014) observe that young Muslims often inhabit hybrid identities, negotiating religious expectations alongside modern cultural aspirations. Within such environments, the risk emerges that Islamic dress codes function primarily as forms of *symbolic compliance*, outward conformity without substantive moral internalization, rather than as vehicles for ethical development. Yet, despite this tension, empirical research has rarely examined how students themselves interpret and negotiate these dynamics within institutional settings of higher education.

The multicultural and multi-religious context of Palangka Raya introduces an additional layer of analytical complexity. As a plural social environment, Central Kalimantan presents conditions in which religious regulation must coexist with broader norms of inclusivity and intergroup sensitivity. Mazaya & Ainissyifa (2018) caution that rigid enforcement of religious practices in multicultural contexts may risk alienation if not carefully framed within dialogical and inclusive educational goals. Maideja et al. (2023) similarly argue that moral practices in higher education are most effective when students are engaged as reflective agents rather than passive recipients of institutional authority. While UMPR has implemented multiple strategies, curricular integration, role modeling, reflective dialogue, and community engagement, to support its dress code policy, the extent to which these measures facilitate genuine value internalization rather than surface-level compliance remains empirically underexplored.

Existing studies frequently emphasize the positive moral outcomes of Islamic dress practices, often framing hijab and modest attire as inherently empowering and character-building (Anshari et al., 2022). argument that Islamic clothing, when connected to values, strengthens self-awareness and ethical identity. However, such accounts tend to privilege institutional perspectives and normative expectations, while offering limited engagement with critical questions regarding agency, resistance, and differential student experiences. Notably absent from much of the literature is a systematic examination of how Islamic dress codes operate at the intersection of discipline, identity, and moral development within higher education, particularly in comparison to secular or non-

Islamic institutional contexts where character education is pursued without explicit religious regulation

Against this backdrop, the present study addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining how Islamic dress codes are perceived, negotiated, and internalized by university students within a faith-based higher education institution. Rather than assuming a direct or causal relationship between dress regulation and character formation, this study interrogates the conditions under which Islamic clothing may function as a meaningful pedagogical practice, as well as the social tensions that complicate its moral efficacy. By employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, the research seeks to move beyond normative assertions and contribute empirically grounded insights into the ongoing debate between symbolic compliance and value internalization in character education. In doing so, this study positions UMPR not merely as a local case, but as an analytical site for understanding broader questions about religious regulation, moral formation, and student agency in contemporary higher education.

METHODS

This study employs a mixed-methods approach using a sequential explanatory design to examine how Islamic dress codes are associated with character-related dispositions among students at Muhammadiyah University of Palangka Raya (UMPR). The quantitative phase involved a cross-sectional survey administered to 150 undergraduate students from various faculties and study programs, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation. The survey instrument was developed by the researchers based on recurring constructs in the character education literature, such as discipline, responsibility, and religious identity, commonly discussed in prior studies (Surawan et al., 2022; Monalisa et al., 2022; Norhidayah et al., 2023). Responses were measured using Likert-type scales to capture students' self-reported perceptions of dress code adherence and its perceived influence on behavior. As the instrument was designed for contextual relevance rather than psychometric generalization, formal validity and reliability testing were not conducted, constituting a methodological limitation of the study. Quantitative analysis was therefore limited to descriptive statistics and correlational observations, without inferential testing or statistical controls for variables such as gender, faculty affiliation, or socio-cultural background, and does not support causal inference (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

To complement and contextualize the survey findings, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 lecturers and 5 university administrators, as well as interviews with 30 parents or guardians of surveyed students, selected purposively based on their institutional roles and involvement in student supervision. Focus group discussions were conducted with selected student participants to explore shared experiences and negotiated meanings of Islamic dress within academic, organizational, and peer contexts. In addition, direct observations of dress code compliance across classrooms, libraries, and student activity spaces were undertaken to provide situational context for reported behaviors (Miles et al., 2014). All interviews and discussions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically through an iterative coding process, beginning with inductive codes such as discipline, responsibility, religious identity, and peer influence, which were subsequently grouped into broader analytical themes. Interpretation was guided by Social Identity Theory and Moral Development

Theory to examine how dress practices intersect with belonging, norm internalization, and moral self-regulation.

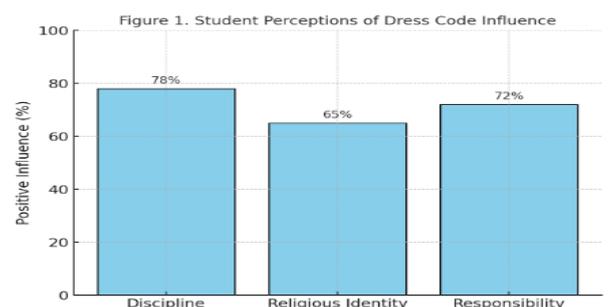
Methodological triangulation across surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, and institutional records was employed to enhance credibility and reduce single-source bias (Baumann & Krskova, 2016). Nevertheless, several limitations remain. The study relies primarily on self-reported perceptions rather than direct measures of behavioral change, employs a non-validated survey instrument, and is confined to a single faith-based university context, limiting broader generalizability (Alifuddin, 2014). Moreover, the researchers' partial institutional proximity to the research setting, while facilitating contextual understanding, also raises the possibility of conformity bias among participants operating within a normative religious environment. These limitations are acknowledged, and the findings are interpreted as contextually grounded insights into perceived associations between Islamic dress codes and character-related dispositions, rather than as evidence of causal impact.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Student Perceptions of Islamic Dress Code

The survey involving 150 students at Muhammadiyah University of Palangka Raya (UMPR) reveals that a majority of respondents perceive Islamic dress codes as positively associated with aspects of character such as discipline, religious identity, and responsibility. As depicted in Figure 1, these perceptions are not evenly distributed but cluster around three dominant dimensions, with discipline receiving the highest level of endorsement, followed by religious identity and responsibility. The figure visually demonstrates that students tend to interpret dress code compliance primarily through its behavioral implications, while moral and identity-related meanings emerge as secondary but still salient dimensions. Importantly, the figure represents students' self-reported perceptions rather than objective behavioral change, indicating how the dress code is understood and experienced within the institutional context rather than establishing direct causal effects.

Figure 1. Student Perceptions of Dress Code influence



As shown in Figure 1, 78% of students associate adherence to the Islamic dress code with improved discipline, while 72% link it to a heightened sense of responsibility, and 65% to strengthened religious identity. The distribution suggests that students primarily interpret dress code compliance through its behavioral and regulatory implications, with identity-related meanings emerging as a secondary dimension. Qualitative accounts indicate that modest dress—such as the hijab for women and neat attire for men—is often experienced not merely as institutional compliance, but as a routinized practice shaping punctuality, neatness, and everyday conduct in academic and organizational settings.

Nevertheless, the figure reflects self-reported perceptions rather than independently verified behavioral change, and therefore should be interpreted as indicating perceived associations within the institutional context, not as evidence of direct or causal effects of the dress code on student character.

Qualitative data partially support these perceptions. A lecturer noted that students who consistently follow the dress code *“are usually more punctual and attentive in class”* (Lecturer, Interview 2), while an administrator emphasized that modest dress reflects *“inner discipline and responsibility”* (Administrator, Interview 1). Parents similarly observed that dress practices adopted at university often continued at home, noting that *“since my daughter joined UMPR and wore the hijab regularly, she now applies the same values at home”* (Parent, Interview 1). At the same time, several students acknowledged that their initial compliance was driven by obligation or social expectation, suggesting that observed discipline may, in some cases, reflect strategic conformity rather than fully internalized character development.

Regarding identity, 65% of respondents perceived Islamic attire as strengthening their religious identity within UMPR’s multicultural campus environment (Figure 1). Female students frequently framed the hijab as an identity marker and a source of confidence, stating *“wearing the hijab makes me feel recognized as a Muslim student and gives me confidence”* (Female Student, FGD 1), while male students associated modest dress with professionalism and moral commitment, explaining that *“dressing neatly is not only about following rules, but about showing respect and responsibility”* (Male Student, FGD 3). These perceptions align with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), which emphasizes the role of visible symbols in fostering belonging. Nevertheless, observational data and FGDs also revealed boundary effects, as students tended to cluster socially according to levels of dress compliance, and strictly compliant students occasionally experienced subtle stereotyping. These counter-narratives complicate interpretations of Islamic dress as uniformly empowering.

Responsibility was likewise perceived as associated with dress compliance, with 72% of respondents reporting stronger accountability in academic and social activities (Figure 1). Educators and parents often interpreted this consistency as evidence of moral maturity extending beyond campus life,

resonating with Lickona’s (1992) holistic model of character education and supported by parental testimonies (Butler et al., 2020; Taufik, 2022). However, given the faith-based institutional context, such evaluations may reflect normative expectations, raising the possibility of conformity bias in both student self-reports and adult interpretations.

Self-discipline emerged as a central theme, consistent with Kottawatta (2025), who emphasizes self-regulation as a core component of character education. Lecturers and a counselling teacher described a “domino effect,” whereby discipline in clothing extended to broader conduct such as timeliness and respectful behavior, supporting interpretations of self-regulated learning (Cikara et al., 2022). Students’ reflections further illustrate a gradual shift from rule-based compliance toward personal reflection, as one student explained: *“at first I followed the rules, but over time I started to see it as part of my responsibility”*, resonating with Kohlberg’s moral development framework as discussed by Bandura (2014) and Huang (1993). Nonetheless, this trajectory was not universal, as some students continued to negotiate dress practices situationally under peer influence.

Analytically, the relationship between dress code adherence and positive behavior remains ambiguous. While disciplined and active students were often described as more compliant, it is equally plausible that students who are already motivated or socially integrated are more inclined to follow dress regulations, indicating potential reverse causality. Without longitudinal data or statistical controls, the direction of influence cannot be conclusively determined.

Overall, Figure 1 illustrates that student perceptions of Islamic dress codes at UMPR are characterized by affirmation as well as negotiation and tension. For some students, modest dress supports discipline, identity, and responsibility; for others, it represents a site of ongoing negotiation shaped by peer dynamics, institutional norms, and personal agency. Rather than functioning as a unidirectional instrument of character formation, Islamic dress at UMPR emerges as a contested educational practice whose meanings and effects are socially and contextually produced. To further clarify how quantitative patterns converge with, but are also complicated by, qualitative accounts, Table 1. presents a synthesis of survey findings and interview data, highlighting both reinforcing narratives and areas of ambiguity.

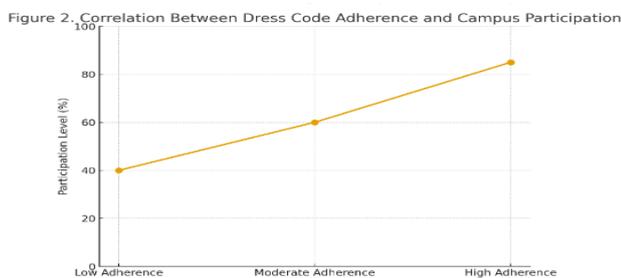
Table 1. Convergence and Tension between Quantitative Survey Results and Qualitative Accounts

Dimension	Quantitative Findings	Supporting Qualitative Evidence	Ambiguities/Counter-Narratives
Discipline	78% perceived improved discipline	<i>“Students who consistently follow the dress code are usually more punctual...”</i> (Lecturer, Interview 2)	Some students reported compliance driven by obligation rather than conviction
Religious Identity	65% reported strengthened identity	<i>“The hijab makes me feel recognized as a Muslim student”</i> (Female Student, FGD 1)	Social clustering and subtle stereotyping of strictly compliant students
Responsibility	72% perceived higher responsibility	<i>“Modest dress reflects inner discipline and responsibility”</i> (Administrator, Interview 1)	Adult interpretations may reflect normative expectations
Participation	High compliance, 85% participation	<i>“It motivates me to be active in organizations”</i> (Female Student, FGD 1)	Possible reverse causality: active students more likely to comply

Dress Code Compliance and Student Participation in Campus Activities

The quantitative data indicate a patterned relationship between students' compliance with the Islamic dress code and their participation in academic, religious, and social activities at Muhammadiyah University of Palangka Raya (UMPR). As illustrated in Figure 2, participation rates increase progressively across levels of dress code adherence, with students reporting low compliance showing markedly lower involvement in campus activities, while those with moderate and high compliance demonstrate substantially higher participation. This visual pattern suggests a positive association between visible adherence to Islamic dress norms and students' engagement in collective academic and social life. However, the figure should be interpreted as indicating a perceived and correlational relationship, rather than a causal effect, as higher participation may also reflect pre-existing motivation, religiosity, or institutional alignment among more active students.

Figure 2. Correlation Between Dress Code Adherence and Campus Participation



As illustrated in Figure 2, students reporting low levels of dress code adherence show approximately 40% participation in campus activities, compared to 60% among those with moderate adherence and 85% among highly compliant students. This gradient pattern indicates a systematic association between reported dress code compliance and engagement in academic, religious, and social activities at Muhammadiyah University of Palangka Raya (UMPR). Importantly, the pattern depicted reflects a correlational relationship based on self-reported and administrative data and does not establish causal directionality. Table 2 complements Figure 2 by summarizing participation patterns across levels of dress code compliance and offering an interpretive framework for understanding this association.

Table 2. Levels of Dress Code Compliance and Participation

Dress Code Compliance	Participation Rate (%)	Interpretive Note
Low	40%	Possible marginalization or selective disengagement
Moderate	60%	Transitional compliance and partial integration
High	85%	Strong identification, but possible reverse causality

Taken together, Figure 2 and Table 2 suggest a patterned relationship between dress code adherence and campus participation. However, this relationship should be interpreted cautiously as a perceived association rather than a causal effect. The data allow for the possibility of reverse causality, whereby

students who are already more socially engaged, religiously committed, or institutionally aligned are more inclined to comply with institutional dress regulations. In addition, both compliance and participation may be shaped by unobserved factors such as motivation, peer networks, or faculty affiliation. Consequently, dress code adherence cannot be positioned as a direct driver of participation but should instead be understood as part of a broader social and cultural configuration shaping student behaviour within the institutional context.

From the perspective of Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977), compliance with the Islamic dress code may be understood as a learned practice reinforced through modelling and social feedback. Students who consistently display visual conformity to dress norms often receive symbolic recognition within the campus environment, which may strengthen their willingness to engage in collective academic and organizational activities. Interview data support this interpretation. One male student noted, *“When I started wearing neat and modest clothing consistently, I felt more comfortable joining religious discussions and student meetings.”* Similarly, a female student stated, *“The hijab makes me feel part of the community. It motivates me to be active, not only in class but also in organizations and campus events.”* These narratives suggest that visible religious markers function as psychosocial mediators, facilitating confidence and access to participatory spaces.

At the same time, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) provides insight into how dress code compliance operates as a symbolic marker of group belonging. High levels of adherence signal alignment with UMPR's religious and institutional identity, potentially motivating students to participate in activities that reproduce and reinforce shared norms. Conversely, students with lower compliance may experience weaker integration into the dominant identity framework, which can limit their engagement in campus initiatives. In this sense, Islamic dress functions not only as a symbol of identity but also as a boundary-making mechanism within the university's social structure.

This interpretation is reinforced by educator testimonies and observational data. One lecturer remarked, *“We often see students behaving better after getting used to wearing polite clothes. It's as if the clothes become a reminder to keep behaving in accordance with religious teachings.”* Observations similarly revealed that students who complied with the dress code tended to demonstrate greater respect and cooperation in everyday interactions, supporting Firdaus and Suwendi's (2025) argument that consistent practices of modesty contribute to social harmony. These findings also resonate with Shuai's (2023) reading of Lickona (1992), which emphasizes that moral values are most effectively internalized through repeated enactment across formal and informal contexts.

Nevertheless, the qualitative data also reveal ambiguous and contradictory dynamics. Interviews with homeroom teachers and parents highlight the mediating role of peer influence in shaping compliance. A teacher observed that students sometimes loosen their adherence due to fear of appearing “too rigid,” while a parent noted that her child began to relax dress standards to avoid social exclusion. Field observations during informal campus interactions further confirmed the presence of peer-based clustering according to attitudes toward the dress code, with limited interaction across groups. Light-hearted yet stigmatizing remarks directed at highly

compliant students suggest that adherence can be reframed as a social burden rather than a value-driven choice.

These findings align with Martela et al. (2021) and Gamage et al. (2021), who argue that individuals often adjust their behaviour to group norms to secure social acceptance, even when such adjustments conflict with personal convictions. In this context, Islamic dress compliance emerges as a negotiated practice shaped by identity affirmation, peer regulation, and social risk. From a character education perspective, the findings support Lickona's (1992) assertion that repeated moral practices can cultivate ethical habits. At the same time, they invite a more critical reading of dress codes as instruments operating within relations of power and normalization. At UMPR, the Islamic dress code can be understood both as a pedagogical tool and as a mechanism of bodily regulation, capable of fostering discipline and responsibility while simultaneously raising questions about individual autonomy and symbolic conformity.

Consistent with Ngobeni et al. (2023), the long-term contribution of dress codes to character formation depends largely on whether students internalize the underlying values rather than merely performing compliance. The findings therefore suggest that the effectiveness of Islamic dress codes as a character education strategy is contingent and socially mediated. Dialogical approaches, reflective forums, and longitudinal monitoring, as recommended by Kearney et al. (2022), may be necessary to ensure that dress code adherence functions as ethical learning rather than as a purely normative or disciplinary practice.

The Role of Islamic Dress in Character Education

The implementation of Islamic dress at Muhammadiyah University of Palangka Raya (UMPR) is associated with students' perceptions of discipline, responsibility, politeness, and religious identity. However, rather than positioning these findings as evidence of a direct causal impact of institutional policy, this study conceptualizes them as perceived associations embedded within specific social, cultural, and organizational contexts. The integration of quantitative patterns with qualitative narratives reveals not only affirming tendencies but also ambiguous, negotiated, and at times contradictory experiences that complicate a purely policy-confirming interpretation.

a. Islamic Dress, Discipline, and the Limits of Causality

Empirical data suggest a positive correlation between compliance with Islamic attire and students' self-reported discipline and responsibility. Educators observed that students who consistently adhere to the dress code tend to be more punctual, orderly, and attentive to institutional regulations. Such observations resonate with Lickona's (1992) theory that character is cultivated through habitual moral practice, and are supported by previous studies (Khotimah & Inayati, 2023; Muttaqin et al., 2024; Mazaya & Ainissyifa, 2018).

At the same time, the data do not allow for a definitive conclusion regarding directionality. It remains plausible that students who already possess higher levels of discipline, religiosity, or organizational engagement are more inclined to comply with dress regulations. In this sense, dress code adherence may function less as a formative mechanism and more as a symbolic indicator of pre-existing dispositions. This potential reverse causality underscores the need to interpret the relationship between Islamic dress and character development as relational rather than deterministic.

b. Identity Formation, Symbolic Compliance, and Normalization

Student narratives indicate that Islamic attire is widely perceived as a marker of religious identity and moral self-representation. Several students described wearing Islamic clothing as a reminder to regulate their behaviour because they felt they were "representing Islam." This perception aligns with conceptualizations of religious identity as the integration of belief, conduct, and self-understanding (Husniah et al., 2025), and with studies emphasizing dress as a symbolic and pedagogical medium (Fakhrurroji & Rojiati, 2017; Uddin & Riaz, 2021; Alkouatli, 2018; Riaz & Khan, 2022).

However, these narratives also point to a normalizing dimension of Islamic dress. By rendering religiosity visible and routinized, the dress code implicitly establishes a dominant moral aesthetic against which students evaluate themselves and others. While many students experience this as empowering, the findings also suggest that compliance may at times reflect symbolic conformity rather than deep value internalization, particularly in environments where deviation risks social visibility. In the context of globalization and digital culture (Zaid et al., 2022), Islamic dress thus operates at the intersection of agency and normalization, identity affirmation and subtle social regulation.

c. Social Tension, Counter-Narratives, and Moral Negotiation

Importantly, the data reveal that Islamic dress at UMPR is not experienced uniformly as positive or unproblematic. Several students reported tensions arising from peer pressure and contemporary fashion norms, particularly in non-campus settings. Feelings of being perceived as "outdated" or "too rigid" illustrate that compliance can carry social costs. These counter-narratives challenge a purely affirmative reading of the dress policy and highlight how religious norms are continuously negotiated rather than passively internalized.

Consistent with Narvaez and Lapsley (2008), such tensions may function as sites of moral learning, where students confront competing value systems and must actively reflect on their commitments. Yet they also raise ethical questions: to what extent does institutional regulation of appearance place the burden of moral representation on students' bodies? And how far can dress-based discipline be framed as character education without encroaching upon individual autonomy? These questions point to the dual role of Islamic dress as both an educational medium and a mechanism of social control.

d. Institutional Environment, Power, and Internalization

The UMPR environment plays a crucial role in mediating how dress regulations are interpreted and enacted. Faculty and administrators emphasize collaboration among lecturers, students, and parents to sustain value internalization (Khasanah et al., 2025), reflecting the whole-school approach to character education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Empirical studies (Dwiyani et al., 2023; Lovat et al., 2021) similarly stress the importance of coherence between policy, pedagogy, and practice.

Nevertheless, consistency can also function as a disciplinary infrastructure that normalizes certain forms of religiosity while marginalizing others. While many students voluntarily adopt the dress code, observational data suggest that conformity is also shaped by peer surveillance and institutional expectations. As

Narvaez and Lapsley (2008) caution, value internalization rooted primarily in external regulation risks producing compliance without critical moral agency. Thus, the effectiveness of Islamic dress as character education depends on whether it is accompanied by reflective dialogue that allows students to question, interpret, and meaningfully appropriate the values it symbolizes.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Islamic dress at UMPR operates as a multifunctional social practice: it supports discipline, reinforces religious identity, and fosters communal belonging, while simultaneously participating in processes of normalization, bodily discipline, and moral regulation. The relationship between dress code adherence and character development should therefore be understood not as causal impact but as a contextually mediated association, shaped by identity, peer dynamics, institutional power, and individual agency. This nuanced interpretation moves beyond policy confirmation toward a more critical understanding of how religious norms function within higher education.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Islamic dress code at Muhammadiyah University of Palangka Raya (UMPR) appears to function as more than a formal regulatory requirement, yet its role as a medium of character education should be interpreted cautiously. The findings indicate perceived associations between dress code compliance and discipline, responsibility, religious identity, and student participation; however, these associations do not establish causal impact. Through the lens of Social Identity Theory, Islamic dress operates as a visible marker of belonging that may facilitate alignment with institutional values, while Moral Development Theory helps explain how practices initially driven by external regulation can, for some students, evolve into internalized responsibility. At the same time, the study reveals ambivalence and negotiation in students' experiences, shaped by peer influence, global fashion trends, and varying degrees of personal conviction.

From an epistemological perspective, the findings are context-specific and grounded in self-reported perceptions within a single faith-based university, limiting their generalizability to other institutional, cultural, or religious settings. Ethically, the results invite reflection on the dual character of dress codes as both pedagogical tools and mechanisms of normative regulation that shape bodily discipline, visibility, and acceptable expressions of identity. While supportive roles played by lecturers, administrators, and parents appear to mediate the internalization of values, the risk of symbolic or performative compliance remains, particularly in highly normative environments.

Rather than presenting Islamic dress codes as a universally effective or inherently positive strategy, this study positions them as a contested educational practice whose outcomes depend on context, dialogue, and student agency. Accordingly, future research should adopt more critical and longitudinal designs to examine how such practices influence students beyond graduation, to disentangle perceived association from causal impact, and to compare faith-based and non-religious institutions across different cultural settings. Such an agenda would deepen understanding of how religious and cultural regulations intersect with power, autonomy, and ethical formation in contemporary higher education.

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