

THE RHETORICS OF THE HIJAB: FASHIONING AN IDENTITY IN THE AMERICAN
SOUTH

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Dedication

For my late grandmother Ishrat Sultana Ahmed, affectionately known as Lala, who embodied what it means to be a strong, educated Muslim woman.

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Abstract

The hijab is a head covering worn by many Muslim women. Even though it can be reduced to a mere piece of cloth, the hijab is a contested form of expression that holds a lot of meaning for both Muslims and non-Muslims. To non-Muslims, the hijab can be viewed as anything from oppression to a label to designate an “other.” For some Muslims, the hijab may be viewed as a means of Muslim women representing Islam. Western media is ultimately to blame for perpetuating anti-Muslim rhetoric which fuels Islamophobia and contributes to the hypervisibility of the hijab. Some Muslims at the same time expect perfection from Muslim women to abide by the hijab to represent Islam but often neglect the cultural factors that influence their beliefs. For Muslim women, embodying a religion can come with criticism from both Muslims and non-Muslims if they do not abide by certain standards to wear or not wear the hijab and counter Islamophobic rhetoric. This study seeks to uncover the rhetoric from both Muslims and non-Muslims that perpetuate the standards Muslim women are forced to conform to when it comes to wearing or not wearing the hijab, specifically in the American South, using Knoxville, Tennessee as the primary location. By offering a review of the current conversation surrounding the hijab, this study moves forward by conducting phenomenological interviews with Muslim women with varying relationships with the hijab to uncover the cultural, religious, and environmental reasons that influence them to wear or not wear the hijab. The findings of this study emphasize that Muslim women choose to wear and even not wear the hijab for religious reasons rather than cultural reasons. At the same time, the choice to wear the hijab or not is directly correlated to anti-Islam rhetoric from the media and location.

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Chapter 1: Introduction:

This thesis investigates the nuances of navigating the American South as a Muslim woman in relation to the hijab. The hijab is a headscarf worn by many Muslim women and has become synonymous with being Muslim, thus personifying Islam through its female adherents. A Muslim woman who wears the hijab often identifies herself as a “hijabi.” The hijab can also be defined in the behavioral sense as principles followed by all Muslims to exhibit modesty and morality. In recent years, the hijab has become a topic of contention. For example, there have been several hijab bans enacted across Europe. According to a 2010 report by the Pew Research Center titled “Widespread Support For Banning Full Islamic Veil in Western Europe”, 82% of French citizens surveyed approved of banning the hijab in public spaces. The majority of German, Spanish, and British participants also agreed on banning the hijab (Pew Research Center). As a result, full-faced hijabs, also known as Niqabs or Burkas, were effectively banned in France on April 11, 2011 (BBC). At the same time, countries like Iran continue to enforce mandatory hijab laws. According to a 2024 report by Amnesty International, a new compulsory veiling law called the “Law on Protecting the Family through the Promotion of the Culture of Chastity and hijab” was introduced in Iran. This law outlines punishments, including fines, imprisonment, and flogging against women for not complying with the state-sanctioned veiling laws (Iran: New compulsory veiling law). Despite being a mere piece of cloth, the hijab has found itself contested in the middle of various binaries: East and West, male and female, and liberation and oppression.

While most research primarily focuses on Muslims broadly, Muslim women are usually misunderstood. Assumptions based on media and propaganda often label all Muslim women, turning them into a monolith. These stereotypes are harmful and further perpetuate the idea that a

Muslim woman needs to look a certain way. Whether covered head to toe in a Burka or wearing a miniskirt, Muslim women have always presented themselves in a diverse fashion.

In the United States specifically, Muslim women have found themselves amid these assumptions and debates. Almost twenty-five years after the 9/11 attacks, Islamophobia still remains rampant. The negative associations with Muslims as a result of harmful reporting have demonized the hijab in the process. Hate crimes are not unheard of, especially targeting Muslim women who bear the burden of representing Islam so visually. Across the United States, there has been an increase in Muslim residents, and, thus, more curiosity about Islam. According to the Pew Research Center, the population of Muslims has increased to “3.45 million Muslims of all ages living in the U.S. in 2017, and that Muslims made up about 1.1% of the total U.S. population” (Mohamed). In the same vein, there has also been more confusion and even hatred toward Muslims. The U.S. Department of Justice reports that in 2023, 17% of hate crimes in Tennessee were religiously motivated, alongside 54.7% of hate crimes being racially motivated (U.S. Department of Justice). In 2024, during the protests against the Gaza war on U.S. campuses, a Knoxville woman was arrested for peacefully protesting, and officers photographed her mugshot without her hijab. These images were publicly available, and the Knox County Sheriff’s Department defended their stance on photographing hijab wearing detainees without their hijabs (CAIR). The woman responded with a federal lawsuit and ultimately won \$71,500 for her case against Knox County (Salvemini). Instances like these are why this study focuses on Muslim women living in the Bible Belt, specifically in Knoxville, Tennessee. A city with a church on every street corner, Knoxville is a unique location because, like the Muslim women interviewed in this study, many of the residents of Knoxville also follow a religion, albeit a different Abrahamic religion. Nonetheless, studying how Muslim women in Knoxville grew up

is important to understanding how their environment and cultures have influenced their relationship with the hijab.

In order to investigate how different cultural and religious rhetorics have influenced Muslim women and their relationship with the hijab, phenomenological interviews focused on the life histories of these women are crucial to humanizing a marginalized group often perceived as a monolith. These personal histories presented by these women will shed light on the unique ways in which culture, religion, and environment intersect in the ways they present themselves. Whether that is through wearing the hijab, taking off the hijab, or never wearing the hijab, these women's voices will be amplified in this study.

Investigating the rhetoric influencing their decisions is crucial to understanding just how complex the hijab is not only as a religious garment but also as a political and social identifier. The historical and religious context of the hijab is necessary to provide adequate background information that can delve into why modern Muslim women have various opinions about the hijab. Analyzing the language used by the media to describe Muslims and the hijab is also necessary to fully understand the relationship of the hijab to these women.

Overall, the goals of this research are to not only uplift the voices of Muslim women but also visualize and highlight how religious and cultural rhetoric play a role in the presentation of Muslim women. The specific location of this research study in Knoxville, Tennessee, also provides a unique perspective of Muslims from a relatively smaller American city. Ultimately, this study presents a unique case combining the effects of religious and cultural rhetorics on the rhetorics of embodiment and location.

Background/Positionality:

It is no secret that of all clothing articles, the hijab is the most contested. In the same vein, it is the most misunderstood. After living my whole life in Knoxville, Tennessee, I decided to wear the hijab. It was November of 2021, and I was in my junior year of my undergraduate career at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Growing up, I knew Knoxville was full of accepting people who wouldn't look twice at a hijabi— someone who wears the hijab— exploring Market Square, or crossing a busy intersection. At the same time, I understood that my hometown included people who would villainize me if they saw me in a hijab. As I contemplated wrapping the black cotton fabric around my head that day, I knew that the way I would be perceived would change overnight. Navigating life as a somewhat ethnically ambiguous Muslim girl in the Southeastern United States was a matter of conforming to norms that would allow me to blend into the crowd. This might include styling my hair in a certain manner or wearing clothing that won't draw attention to me. However, wearing a hijab would automatically out me as a Muslim without me having to say a word.

When I began to wear the hijab, many concerns were raised by my family. Growing up, I was discouraged from wearing the hijab and only permitted to wear it during the five daily Islamic prayers or in religious settings, such as Islamic Sunday school. At age nine, I figured that if I was supposed to wear the hijab at Sunday school, then it would be okay to wear it at public school. Clad in my baby pink hijab, I confidently walked into my third-grade classroom, where my teacher complimented me. This hijab was special to me, it had been a gift from my relatives. I had lost this hijab once before, until my best friend from Sunday school miraculously found it in the mosque's prayer room. Essentially, it felt like fate to find the hijab again. However, when I sat down, I was immediately the subject of curiosity for some of my classmates. "What's that

thing on your head?” or “Why are you wearing that?” are some of the questions I remember being asked. Perhaps it was a joke, as it was the third grade, but my seatmate thought it would be funny to pull off my hijab. Before I knew it, her fingers clasped the front part of my hijab above my forehead and swooped off the hijab in one motion. The next day, I showed up to class without my pink hijab. I’m sure many students laughed at me that day, but that incident has stuck with me. I have never spoken of this experience until now for fear that my parents were right to not let me wear the hijab.

I don’t remember much else from that day, but as I reflect upon that experience, I wonder if Islamophobia was that deeply rooted in children in the South in 2010. It had been almost a decade since the 9/11 attacks, and according to the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, “Between 2000 and 2009, though the overall number of reported hate crime incidents decreased by over 18 percent, the percentage of hate crime incidents directed towards Muslims increased by over 500 percent” (Crawford et al.). Mainstream media perpetuated the idea that Islam was an evil, hateful religion and that female adherents could easily be identified by the hijab. Even though children were usually watching cartoons or playing with toys during those days, their parents were consuming this rhetoric against Muslims. Therefore, it was inevitable that children would be exposed to rhetoric against Muslims, including hijabis, at some point.

When I decided to wear the hijab at age twenty-one, over a decade after I tried wearing it in public for the first time, my parents still held these same fears and tried dissuading me. Growing up as Muslims in the United States starting in the 1970s-1980s, they witnessed the instant villainization of Muslims during the aftermath of 9/11, so they understood that hateful people lived among us, despite two decades passing since the terrorist attacks. At this point, however, I wanted to wear the hijab solely for religious reasons, no matter my geographical

location or culture dictating how I present myself. Essentially, I felt empowered by the rights my religion had granted me and wanted to represent a misunderstood religion through my character and very being. The day I stepped out of the house in the hijab, life felt right, and I finally achieved a sense of identity. I received many expressions of support from the Muslim girls around me, and my classmates didn't bat an eye. One remarked that I was doing a great job at representing the university when I stacked a beanie with the Power T on top of my hijab one day. That same day, an older white gentleman at the grocery store joked in his thick Southern accent that I was the most bundled-up person in the freezing weather. Wearing the hijab was less scary than what I was taught. Even though I replaced the baby pink hijab for an edgier black one, I believe the hijab found me once again, the same way my friend found it for me over a decade ago.

However, I still found myself on the brunt of criticism. Last Ramadan was a particularly rough time for me, and it took a toll on my spirituality. My relationship with my hijab was not spared. During this time, I had a Muslim man around my age accuse me of wearing an "improper hijab" unprovoked. He determined that how I wore my hijab was inappropriate because a sliver of my neck was showing, which I had been unaware of. Needless to say, I have never felt so spiritually hurt, especially after spending years working up the courage to wear the hijab in the first place. This man proceeded to tell me that "good" Muslim women would make sure their necks were covered and that many of them would opt to wear dresses instead of jeans. As I held back tears, I wondered what rhetoric empowered Muslim men like him to give unsolicited advice about the hijab to Muslim women, especially since it is known that the hijab is worn by women only. After speaking to him, I felt as though I had to remove my hijab because I was not living

up to a standard imposed upon me. Despite the spiritual and emotional distress, I persisted and held onto the hijab after reflecting upon the reasons I wore it in the first place.

I understand that my hijab story is pretty different from many other Muslim women. I am privileged to live in a country where I can express my freedom of religion with the law on my side. At the same time, I am lucky to have been able to make this choice for myself. After wearing the hijab for three years now, I have come to realize that while this garment supports my sense of identity, it also comes with lots of criticism from Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Some Muslims believe that the hijab should be worn in a certain manner to even be considered a hijab in the first place, while some non-Muslims simply associate the hijab with the media's perception of Islam.

When one envisions what a Muslim woman looks like, they often conjure similar images of women covered head to toe with a hijab donned as the identifying marker. Some may describe their envisioned Muslim women as oppressed, while others associate them with religious piety and even liberation. Due to these assumptions, embodying the entire religion of Islam is a massive feat that many hijabi women can relate to. From the harmful rhetoric against Islam and Muslims by the media to the judgment present in their communities, a huge burden is placed upon Muslim women to represent or not represent their religion. What many Muslim men and non-Muslims do not understand is that a variety of factors, such as religiosity, culture, and location, play a huge role in determining how a Muslim woman chooses to present herself.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of the research study is to investigate how cultural and religious influences impact Muslim women to wear the hijab or not. This study takes place in East Tennessee, so location is also influential to the study, amidst the different cultural backgrounds of American

Muslims. Investigating these intersecting identities can shed light on how the hijab is defined by Muslim women compared to the definitions of Muslim men, non-Muslims, and the media. By interviewing Muslim women directly, the cultural and religious influences are more likely to be illuminated. While Muslims are being studied more in academia, the voices of Muslim women are often underrepresented in comparison to men, who are often viewed as the spokespeople for Islam. Muslim women tend to be spoken over by some non-Muslims, who cannot truly illustrate the experiences of Muslim women as outsiders. This issue presents itself as a gap in research among studying solely Muslim women. Essentially, this study aims to create a project for Muslim women by Muslim women. By utilizing my positionality as a member of the Muslim Community of Knoxville and as a Muslim woman in general, my understanding of the study population allows a more intimate and transparent glimpse into their beliefs. One of the main objectives of this study is to define which beliefs are cultural versus religious. Analyzing the responses and stories of Muslim women compared to religious doctrine can provide a link to where these behaviors originate. Studying these influences can also shed light on how American Muslim women navigate a world where their identities are questioned, politicized, and policed.

Research Questions:

This study requires several research questions serving as a guide. The first research question is “How do Muslim women in the American South choose to present themselves amidst religious, cultural, and geographical rhetorics?” When it comes to wearing the hijab or not, there are multiple intersecting influences at play in the form of rhetoric. Religious beliefs, cultural values, and geographical location all convey certain beliefs and standards about the hijab and are perpetuated by adherents and participants of these factors. Therefore, acknowledging these

factors in my research question will specifically allow me to investigate the varying degrees of influence of these factors in relation to Muslim women and their relationship to the hijab.

Another guiding research question asks, “In what ways are Muslim women supported to wear the hijab?” This question seeks to examine how Muslim women are supported and accommodated within their communities and beyond. In the context of the American South, Muslim women are a minority, and studying the factors that are in place to encourage them to wear the hijab is essential to understanding how Muslim women maintain their identity. At the same time, asking “In what ways are Muslim women discouraged from wearing the hijab” is also crucial to understanding why these women might want to distance themselves from presenting as Muslim.

Importance of the Study

Studies on Muslim populations are fairly recent, with newfound curiosity towards this population being a motivating factor. However, Muslim women are often underrepresented in these studies in general. Historically, Muslim women have been undermined in the media and within their own communities. The topic of the hijab has also become a topic of contention amidst policies enacted in various countries. As mentioned before, some countries have banned the hijab, while others force women to wear it (Pew Research Center) (Amnesty International). This topic is often debated without having Muslim women at the center of the conversation. Usually, non-Muslims and Muslim men are the perpetrators of these rulings; the results of these debates and policies always affect Muslim women to a degree.

While there have been similar studies performed in order to investigate the views of Muslim women and their relationship with the hijab, these studies have mainly been used in other contexts. Sociological studies have investigated societal reasons for the lack of Muslim

women's representation (Karaman). My study is going to be performed in the context of English rhetoric, specifically focusing on the intersection of religious and cultural rhetorics. This perspective is unique because I will focus on the effects of the language used by the media and lawmakers to forge a connection between Muslim women and their views on the hijab. I will also analyze the effects of the rhetoric used by Muslim communities in the context of Muslim women and the hijab. My study seeks to uplift the voices of Muslim women by focusing on their perspectives amidst the debate about the way they should dress. Specifically focusing on Muslim women in East Tennessee is a small start to investigating a now global issue. The findings presented in this study can be compared to how location and other cultural and linguistic differences affect Muslim women and their relationship to the hijab.

Chapter Overview:

Since the goal of this thesis is to study the effects of the rhetoric used by Muslim communities and Western media on Muslim women in Knoxville, Tennessee, and their relationship with the hijab, I present a literature review in Chapter 2 that aims to highlight the background context and current conversation surrounding Islamophobia and the politicization of the hijab. It also discusses how the hijab is viewed in Muslim communities and how the hijab correlates with identity. Positive representation of Muslims in media is also elaborated on, as well as noting similar studies to mine. Clarifying the role of Muslim women in Knoxville, Tennessee, is also important to this study since this is the central location where the study takes place. Finally, it is noteworthy to discuss the context of the hijab in rhetoric and cultural rhetorics.

Chapter three introduces the methods and methodologies of this study. By citing the qualitative methods of other scholars and researchers, this study can utilize these techniques

when it comes to collecting and analyzing the data. This chapter also explains the significance of the categorization of the participants and recruitment. This section details the theoretical frameworks and analytic frameworks that will be used in the study. Chapter three also presents the results section, which details profiles of the participants and offers explanations of their categorization for this study. Many Muslim women can fit into one of four categories based on their experiences wearing the hijab: Women who have worn the hijab for the majority of their lives, women who recently started wearing the hijab, women who previously wore the hijab and have since removed it, and women who have never worn the hijab. Offering the reasoning behind the participants' placement in their respective categories is crucial for clarifying how they navigate their experiences.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the stories and overall discussion of the participants who never wore the hijab. Two of the participants, Seema and Halima, share their stories about how they navigate life as Muslim women who do not wear the hijab. This chapter features their in-depth reflections and meaning-making of not wearing the hijab as they discuss religious, cultural, and environmental factors that made them decide not to wear the hijab. After their stories are told and analyzed, the discussion of their combined results will feature how their experiences tie in with specific codes.

Chapter 5 follows the same structure as Chapter 4, except it is dedicated to showcasing the stories of Muslim women who have recently put on the hijab. The two participants in this section are Sara and Emmy, who both started wearing the hijab recently. Like the previous chapters, their in-depth reflections and meaning-making of navigating life in Knoxville, Tennessee, are analyzed as they navigate the religious, cultural, and environmental rhetoric

present as they came to wear the hijab. After their stories are told and analyzed, the discussion of their combined results will feature how their experiences tie in with specific codes.

Like the two previous chapters, Chapter 6 outlines the stories of Muslim women who took off the hijab. Selena, Attiya, and Marwa's stories and experiences are highlighted through their meaning-making of the hijab as they transitioned from visibly Muslim to not. This chapter discusses how rhetoric in the context of religion, culture, and environment influenced them to remove their hijabs. After their stories are told and analyzed, the discussion of their combined results will feature how their experiences tie in with specific codes.

Chapter 7 is dedicated to the participants who have worn the hijab for the majority of their lives. In this section, the stories of three participants are told. Rania, Layla, and Zara's stories are outlined and analyzed before the commonalities between them are coded into their respective categories in the discussion portion of the chapter. This chapter discusses how rhetoric in the context of religion, culture, and environment influenced them to keep wearing their hijabs

Chapter 8 discusses the emergence of a new category of participants whose hijab journeys did not fit into the previously established categories. Instead, the decision to create a new category for Dania and Fatima is discussed before delving into their stories. Like in the other chapters, Dania and Fatima's choices to present and not present themselves as visibly Muslim are analyzed and coded within the broader context of religion, culture, and environment

Chapter 9 presents the final chapter that draws together the meaning of hijab from all the participants and makes conclusions about how rhetoric from various scopes can influence Muslim women and their outward presentation. Similarities and differences between the participants' results are discussed alongside how their experiences either reflected or countered

previous research. This chapter is also a place where discussion about the answers to the research questions is discussed alongside future implications and further study.

Finally, the Works Cited section features the sources referenced in this study. The appendices include literature relevant to the creation of this study, such as the approved consent form and interview protocol.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to understand the context of this study, it is essential to understand the definitions of Islamophobia, how the hijab came to be politicized, and how the hijab is viewed in Muslim communities. These three categories influence one another in the context of the hijab in modern society. To do this, I define Islamophobia through the findings of other studies centered around the role the media plays in perpetuating Islamophobia. Then, I delve into how Islamophobia has contributed to the hijab becoming a politicized object through policy-level decisions made by governments toward other Muslims by targeting the most visible Muslims first. Afterwards, I discuss the state of the hijab amongst Muslim communities, including mandatory hijab laws in Muslim countries and the interpretations of the hijab by Muslims themselves.

In the next phase of this literature review, I emphasize the importance of identity and the hijab. This is demonstrated through examining studies that looked at how Muslim women make meaning of their identities through the hijab. At the same time, I reference studies that define the hijab as an identifier. Exploring the difference between identity making and embodying an identifier is necessary to examine how Muslim women grapple with identity in general and what role cultural and religious rhetoric plays in this process. After investigating identity, looking at recent forms of positive Muslim representation is important to juxtapose against the Islamophobic rhetoric that is all too common. Rhetorically analyzing these forms of media is important to define what a positive representation of Muslims looks like.

Before fully delving into the study, examining similar studies is critical to acknowledge the current conversation in this field and to investigate the similarities and differences across their conclusions. Understanding that different studies have different approaches when it comes

to studying Muslim women is important when distinguishing the results of this study from previous studies. In the same realm, investigating similar studies on Muslim women done in Knoxville, Tennessee, is pertinent to adding to the existing research done on this population. While these other studies have different approaches, such as examining the hijab in Knoxville through a sociological lens or navigating the question of nationality, my study can build upon these findings by examining the rhetoric that influences the presentation of Muslim women.

Lastly, since this study is heavily focused on the hijab as a rhetorical object amid Islamophobic, cultural, and religious rhetoric, an explanation of embodied rhetoric is necessary. Defining embodiment and the hijab's place in this concept further illustrates the idea that the hijab serves a rhetorical purpose that can vary depending on the context and situation.

Defining Islamophobia:

In a post-9/11 world, Muslims have found themselves demonized by the West. Oftentimes, they are framed as barbaric, with their religious beliefs accused of being incompatible with Western values. This phenomenon is referred to as Islamophobia. In his book *Islamophobia in the West: Measuring and Explaining Individual Attitudes*, author Marc Helbling argues that researchers should strive to define Islamophobia before delving into the details of the phenomenon. He refers to Erik Bleich's (2011) definition of Islamophobia, which is "indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims" (Helbling 6). Bleich further elaborates on this definition in his and A. Maurits van der Veen's book *Covering Muslims: American Newspapers in Comparative Perspective*. They write, "Islamophobia thus involves anger, fear, hatred, or suspicion of Islam and Muslims as a whole" (Bleich and van der Veen 3). This definition accurately reflects the consequences Muslims face at the hands of Islamophobic rhetoric. The negative attitudes and emotions Bleich is referring to emanate from

hateful rhetoric directed at Muslims and Islam. Helbling further elaborates, “What finally distinguishes Islamophobia from other similar concepts is that, in the case of Islamophobia, indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions are directed at Islam or Muslims – not just at outgroups in general” (Helbling 7). This definition argues that Islamophobia is a unique concept despite having parallels with other forms of hate, such as xenophobia. Therefore, rhetorics that are Islamophobic are aimed at directly harming Islam and Muslims.

Western media has perpetuated this definition of Islamophobia, which has led to the demonization of Muslims. Oftentimes, headlines surrounding the topic of Muslims or Islam invoke tones of negativity, intentional or not. Rhetorically, portraying Muslims in a negative light through tone has led to increased incidents of Islamophobia. Bleich and van der Veen’s book *Covering Muslims: American Newspapers in Comparative Perspective* analyzes 48,283 newspaper articles written between 1996 and 2016 and assesses the tone and linguistics of the 256,963 articles that directly mention Muslims or Islam. The word “hijab” was one of the terms included in their search. Bleich and Van Der Veen compared these numerous articles to how Catholics, Jews, Hindus, African Americans, Latinos, Mormons, and atheists were reported. The study also compared news articles written in Anglophone countries as well as Asian and African countries, thus totaling 1.6 million articles (Bleich and Van Der Veen 11-12). After analyzing the tone of the articles with computer-assisted coding, the authors ultimately found that “The *average* Muslim article is more negative than over 84% of our *entire* representative sample of American newspaper articles” (Bleich and Van Der Veen 13). Factors such as word choice contribute to the negative tone surrounding Muslims. Some of the titles of articles the authors chose to examine in this study include “The Russian was made to believe by undercover agents that the radioactive material was to be delivered to a Muslim organization” and “Moderski also

has had business relationships with Shamsud-din Ali, the Muslim cleric and friend of Mayor Street who was convicted last year on racketeering and related charges, and given a seven-year jail sentence” (Bleich and Van Der Veen 13). Volatile diction and the inclusion of Muslims in crimes are rhetorical moves made by Western media outlets to garner a negative image of Muslims. While the authors acknowledged that global events that involve Muslims can lead to negative rhetorics seeping into news article titles, they ultimately found that “...articles about Muslims that are not set exclusively abroad, that make no mention of violence or extremism, and that are published in broadsheets rather than tabloids are still negative” (Bleich and Van Der Veen 14). The results of this study are necessary for understanding the references to Western media made by the participants. Since my study examines how Muslim women in the South represent themselves through the effects of the rhetoric from non-Muslim sources, such as Western media, Bleich and van der Veen’s work is an important means of reference to prove the real-life effects of this harmful reporting.

At the same time however, it is important to denote that Islamophobia is not a recent phenomenon. Historically, there has been prejudice against Muslims, with some arguing its manifestation occurring between various time periods. In George Archer’s thesis, “Hidden aspects of Muslim and Christian relations in the crusader states,” the author outlines the manifestation of Islamophobia during the crusades between the ninth and twelfth centuries by examining eyewitness testimonies from both Christian and Muslim sources. In his thesis, Archer specifically examines excerpts resulting from Pope Urban II urging Christians to engage in battle with Muslims. These excerpts depict Muslims as a foreign race, further othering them as they described them to be brutal enemies against Christians despite many authors never having met a Muslim. Archer specifically found from these accounts that the rhetoric of medieval Christians

against Muslims is Islamophobic. He writes,

Each of these men tells of an impossibly grotesque enemy. Christian sensibilities would all be specifically offended by this enemy, whether they are “Persians,” “Turks,” or the minions of the Antichrist himself. They are blasphemous, greedy, sadistic, and satanic in ways that are strikingly similar in style to the worst exaggerations and stereotypes of anti-Semitism. (Archer 15).

Even though many Christians of this time had never met a Muslim, the agenda against Muslims was spread to garner support for the Crusades. Othering an entire religion was a rhetorical tool used to further conquest. Even though these events took place a millennia ago, the lasting effects of the Islamophobia manifested during the Crusades linger into the modern era.

Muhammad Tariq and Zafar Iqbal argue in their study “From Islamophobia to Neo-Islamophobia: A New Style of Governance in the West” that Islamophobia commonly seen in the past is different from modern Islamophobia, which they call neo-Islamophobia. They claim modern anti-Islam politicians rely on neo-Islamophobia to perpetuate anti-Islam rhetoric in the modern era through means like Bleich and Van Der Veen by analyzing news and opinion pieces through a Discourse-Historical-Approach. In their study, like Archer’s, they argue the foundations of Islamophobia emerged as early as the spread of Islam amongst the Byzantine Empire, where the religion was viewed as a threat and consequently led to events such as the crusades and European scholarship. They write, “It was the fear of Islam, more than any other single factor, that, according to Bernard Lewis, led to the beginnings of Arabic scholarship in Europe, a discipline that centuries later was named ‘Orientalism,’ which is now renamed ‘Islamophobia’” (Tariq and Iqbal 10). This line of thought argues that orientalism was the precursor to Islamophobia, which ultimately led to the securitization of Muslims, resulting in the

neo-Islamophobia phenomenon Tariq and Iqbal argue.

In that same light, Edward Said's foundational text *Orientalism* gave rise to discussions about the portrayal of the East by the West amidst a post-colonial world. He describes, "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient— dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). This definition and Said's subsequent analysis is applicable to Islamophobia. In the same way medieval Christians othered Muslims, colonial powers used religious differences as a means of othering colonized people, which in turn justified waging war and conquering them.

This connection to colonialism is important when discussing how the term Islamophobia manifested. In Damir Skenderovic and Christina Späti's article "From Orientalism to Islamophobia: Reflections, Confirmations, and Reservations," the authors examine the connections between Orientalism and the rise of Islamophobia. They found that the term Islamophobia was used as early as French colonialism in Africa, where authors "Maurice Delafosse or Alain Quellien released publications in 1910 that urged the French colonial administration to avoid taking a hostile and prejudicial position toward the religion of Islam—a position they referred to as 'Islamophobie,'" (134). However, it was not until contemporary times that the usage of the word Islamophobia became almost vernacular. Skenderovic and Späti refer to the 1997 publication of the Runnymede Trust Report titled "Islamophobia a Challenge For Us All." This document, written by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, popularized Islamophobia as a term as it outlined policy level changes various institutions can follow to acknowledge and challenge growing Islamophobia in Britain. The authors write "The

word 'Islamophobia' has been coined because there is a new reality which needs naming: anti-Muslim prejudice has grown so considerably and so rapidly in recent years that a new item in the vocabulary is needed so that it can be identified and acted against" (Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia 4). Even though this report was written before 9/11, the exigence for this report implies that Islamophobia was on the rise in Western countries like Britain in the years leading up to the attacks. The authors go as far as discussing the Islamophobic rhetoric present during the Crusades to show Islamophobia was present as early as medieval times. Essentially, the writing of this report indicates that Islamophobia had become an apparent enough problem in Britain that it was necessary to educate citizens about the implications of this phenomenon.

The Politicization of the Hijab and Its Effects

While Bleich and Van Der Veen were looking at articles that mentioned Islam or Muslims in a broader sense, their findings still apply when concerning Muslim women and their relationship to the hijab. Their definition of Islamophobia makes it necessary to understand the following effects of Islamophobic rhetoric perpetuated by the Western media on a policy level. Hilal Elver's book *The Headscarf Controversy: Secularism and Freedom of Religion* explores the wake of some Western governments proclaiming secularism as a guise to ban the hijab. In Chapter Six, she discusses how France was the first European country to forefront the issue of banning the hijab. She describes "...the headscarf controversy became an important political problem and a legal issue that eventually led, in 2004, to the adoption of a law that banned ostentatious religious symbols from public middle and high schools" (Elver 111). This law emphasized that secularism was the main reason for banning the hijab, despite the growing

Islamophobic rhetoric from French media since decolonization (Elver 111). The implementation of laws such as the one passed in France contributed to negative headlines regarding Muslim women globally. Later, Elver discusses in Chapter Eight that the hijab is viewed negatively in the United States, and the media perpetuates these beliefs. She writes,

An ultraconservative media that has the support of a highly receptive political constituency bombards the American public by constantly emphasizing the difference between the Western and Islamic worlds. The discourse often centers on the status of women in Islam—veiling practices, sex discrimination, segregation between men and women, arranged marriages, and cruel and inhumane punishment, especially for adultery” (Elver 158).

This rhetoric is used to other Muslims, and since Muslim women who wear the hijab are visibly Muslim, this discourse affects them the most.

Therefore, headlines such as “Quebec minister for women stands by belief that hijabs are oppressive,” (Authier) “Newly minted minister for status of women calls hijab oppressive,” and “French ban of abaya robes in schools draws applause, criticism” reinforce the belief that the clothing of Muslim women is swarmed by negativity. The wording of these articles that conflates the hijab to oppression, whether intentionally or not, is a rhetorical move that indicates the clothing of Muslim women is associated with and garners policies strong enough to be outright banned. The rhetorical moves these articles utilize, such as demonizing language, have dire consequences.

As a result of these negative rhetorics, other headlines emerge, reporting violence against Muslim women. Some of these instances include “A Kentucky jail made a Muslim woman remove her hijab and televised her strip search in its lobby, lawsuit alleges,” “Police

investigating attack of Muslim woman at Minneapolis gas station,” and “Disturbing, viral video shows man harass Muslim woman wearing hijab at airport” (Ebrahimji) (Mitchell) (Steinbuch). Essentially, the rhetoric behind the policies listed above has detrimental consequences against Muslim women, especially those who are visibly Muslim by wearing the hijab. Hiding behind the notion of secularism abets responsibility for attacks such as these. At the same time, the rhetoric of the media demonizes Muslims and the hijab enough to motivate the perpetrators of these attacks.

While this study aims to illuminate the perceptions and experiences of Muslim women in regards to the hijab, other studies have sought to define the challenges Muslim women face with the hijab. In the dissertation *The Perspective of Muslim American Women in the United States Challenges and Obstacles of Wearing the hijab*, Noha Ireiqat, Ed. D. argues that “Ignorance of Islam, stereotyping, fear, and misconceptions shown through the media all increased the discrimination against Muslim women especially those who wore the hijab” (4). Her argument reaffirms the consequences of ignorance as mentioned in the previous headlines. Even though Ireiqat’s study was published in 2014, the exigencies of her project and mine are the same. While some progress has been made to humanize Muslim women, both of our studies remain important to further humanize Muslim women. My study differs in that I try to recognize what rhetoric is causing these challenges in the first place. She ultimately concludes that “...there was an increase in diversity of culture, ethnicity, and race in the United States, which in turn required the importance of integrating tolerance programs in the media and multicultural education throughout the country” (Ireiqat 89). Her conclusion aligns with the exigencies of this study; as I write this, many programs involved with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have been

revoked by the second Trump administration. These rollbacks and the aftermath may once again highlight why the integration of tolerance programs is necessary in the United States.

These pieces of literature are important to this study in particular because they present themselves as the backdrop to the various choices Muslim women in the South make to wear the hijab or not. These headlines present the real consequences of Islamophobic rhetoric on Muslim women wearing the hijab. Even though many of these instances did not occur in the Southeastern United States, the rhetoric behind the politicization of the hijab is still alive across the Western world, as Bleich and van der Veen found. Understanding the role secularism plays in the rhetoric of politicizing the hijab is also important to my study because this study takes place in the United States, a secular country. While there have not been any hijab bans in the United States, the ultraconservative media Elver describes pushes for policy-level changes and even violence towards Muslims, especially women wearing the hijab. As Ireiqat concluded, tolerance programs can be implemented to fight Islamophobia and its consequences, yet in today's political climate, the implementation of this solution seems bleak. These considerations are crucial to understanding the experiences of my participants who have experienced violence as a result of this rhetoric.

The Hijab in Muslim Communities

Negative rhetorics do not only stem from Western, non-Muslim discourse. Within Muslim communities, hijab-wearing Muslim women also face backlash due to the negative rhetoric surrounding what some Muslims deem as improper hijab. The Quran describes the command of the hijab for women as, "Say to the believing women that they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste)...and not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their khumur over their bosoms..." to after the command

that men lower their gazes (Quran 24:31). To many, khumur is defined as a head covering in this context. Muslims across cultures have differing definitions of the hijab. In countries such as Saudi Arabia, black abayas and face coverings are common garments that are paired with the hijab. In South Asia, Muslim women often wear two-piece outfits called Salwar Kameez that feature a loose cloth called a dupatta, which can be wrapped around the wearer's head in a similar fashion to the hijab. American and other Western Muslim women often wear their hijabs with traditional Western wear like jeans.

Types of Islamic Veils

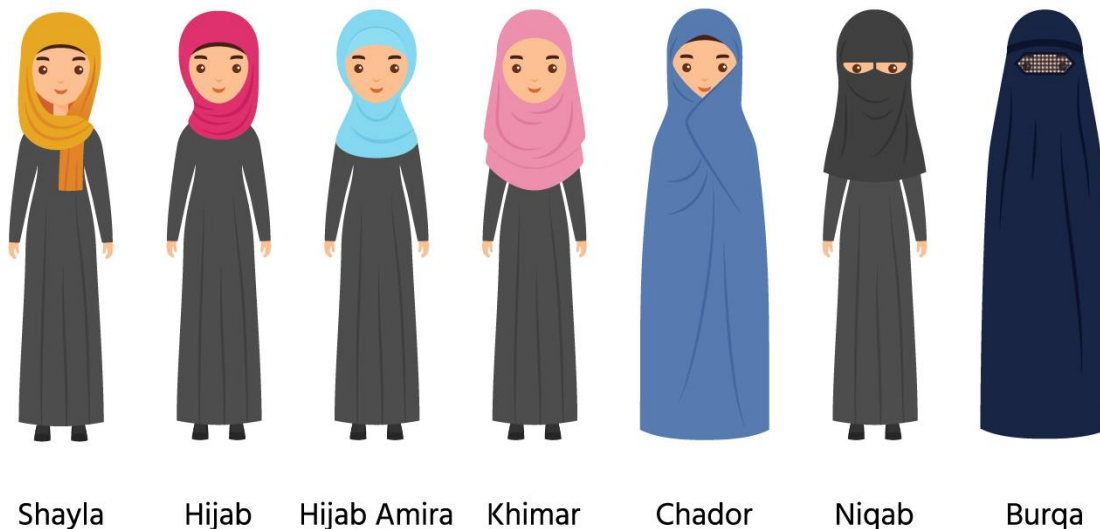


Figure 1: Types of Islamic Veils via Istizada.com

No matter the culture, Muslim women who wear the hijab usually adhere to Quranic modesty standards to a degree. However, popular websites such as Islam Question and Answer (islamqa.info/en) perpetuate certain standards surrounding the proper way to wear the hijab based on the research of Islamic scholars. The author, Sheikh Muhammed Salih Al-Munajjid, declares that a Muslim woman can wear whatever she pleases as long as her clothing follows Islamic standards. They list these requirements as:

1. The hijab must cover her entire body

2. It should be thick enough to conceal what is underneath it
3. It should be loose-fitting, not tight
4. It should not be so attractive as to call men's attention to it
5. It should not be perfumed
6. It should not be a dress of fame and vanity (i.e., it shouldn't be extravagant or excessively opulent)
7. It should not resemble the dress of men
8. It should not resemble the dress of kaafir women
9. It should not be adorned with any crosses or pictures of animate beings (Sheikh Muhammed Salih Al-Munajjid)

This list is pretty standard across the Islamic world when it comes to wearing the hijab.

However, these standards vary by country and culture, since the rhetorics of place and culture intersect with those of embodiment.



Figure 2: Salwar Kameez with Dupatta. The woman on the right is wearing her dupatta as a hijab, while the other women drape their dupattas over their bodies

At the same time, social media, such as online forums, perpetuate specific interpretations of the hijab yet utilize harmful language to demonize Muslim women who do not appear to

follow certain specific guidelines of the hijab. For example, a quick Google search can lead aspiring hijabis to websites such as Islam Practice, which displays an article titled “Correct hijab”. Like many other forums seeking to spread *dawah*, or the invitation for people to learn more about Islam, the author, whose pseudonym is Ideal Muslim, is anonymous and thus lacks ethos, yet is advising people as if they were a qualified Imam. The article includes a graphic of an illustrated Muslim woman with her body split across the middle. On the left side, she is wearing a hijab long enough to cover her chest and a long black abaya, which is essentially a long-sleeved loose maxi dress. On the right side, she is wearing a shorter hijab with a form-fitting bright pink tunic and leggings. The caption in the image says, “Dress to please Allah, not his creation. Dear Sisters, hijab is so much more than just COVERING your HAIR. It also means to cover your modesty. Have pity on the brother, don’t be a trial for them” (Ideal Muslim).

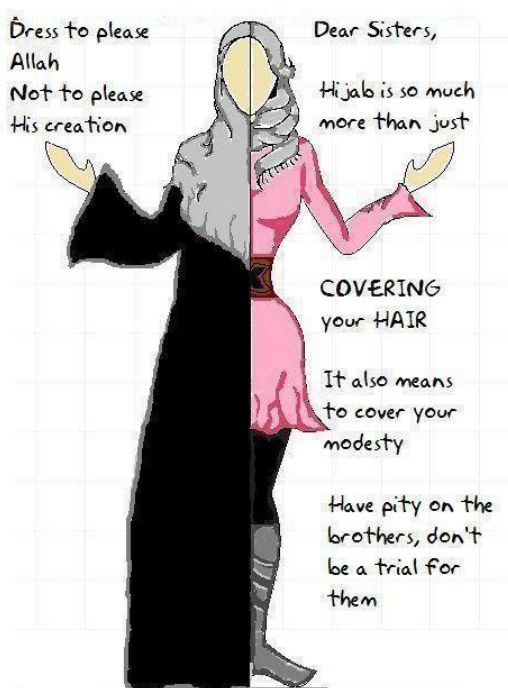


Figure 3: “Correct hijab” via islampractice.wordpress.com

Rhetorically, the visual serves to compare women, with one side showing ideal Muslim

women and the other showing sinful Muslim women. The woman on the left side is portrayed as virtuous and modest, while the woman on the right side is portrayed as a temptress, as the illustrator urges Muslim women who dress like this to think about how they will distract Muslim men. The rhetorical moves in this instance are graphics and comparative language used to deliberately put down Muslim women who do not follow one interpretation of the hijab. Instead, Muslim women wearing black abayas and long hijabs are idealized. The implications of rulings such as these contribute to the myth that Muslim women are a monolith.

Instances such as these are common across Muslim communities online and offline. Equating virtue to a specific interpretation and presentation of the hijab perpetuates the idea that women who do not conform to certain standards of the hijab are sinners. As a result, these Muslim women face criticism from the Muslim community since there is an implication that they should be the representatives of Islam. If they do not wear the hijab “correctly,” some Muslims assume they are disrespecting Islam. The consequences these Muslim women face can include judgment, ostracization, harsh criticism under the guise of advising, and in some cases, physical punishments. Based on Bleich and Van Der Veen’s research about news articles, headlines regarding the results of the negative rhetoric within Muslim communities are negative and rampant. For example, the death of Mahsa Jina Amini in September 2022 resulted in headlines such as “Iranian woman ‘beaten’ by police for ‘improper hijab’ dies after coma: State media” (Fazeli). Like the examples mentioned previously, the negative rhetoric present against Muslim women who do not don a certain interpretation of the proper hijab has detrimental consequences. Amini’s dress on the day she was killed could have resembled the right side of the illustration, which portrayed a “sinful woman”; these rhetorics were used to justify her killing by Iran’s morality police. In response, Iranian women against the Islamic Republic have utilized their

bodies as a means of protest. In a speculated act of protest, a woman known as Ahoo Daryaei bravely stripped off her clothing down to her undergarments to protest forced hijab in Tehran in 2024 (Howard). She was promptly arrested, but released by Iranian authorities who deemed her mentally ill. Whatever the case, choosing to display her body against a regime that polices women's dress with forced hijab is a daring feat that seeks to challenge authority and promote bodily autonomy. According to Lawrence J. Prelli in his book *Rhetorics of Display*, he argues that displays are “rhetorically manifested through enacted demonstrations” (14). This woman's display of her bare body in a country where women's bodies are politicized seeks to create a demonstration against policies that oppress Iranian women. Despite her protests, her whereabouts remain unknown. Yet through her rhetorically crafted demonstration, which emphasized the embodiment of Iranian women separate from the hijab, more people in Iran and beyond are aware and fighting against the harmful rhetoric perpetuated by the Iranian government when it comes to forced hijab.

While these harmful rhetorics fuel oppressive governments abroad, they also fuel violence against Muslim women and girls in the West. In October 2023, the headline “Kingwood teen allegedly beat, choked by own mother for not wearing hijab in social media post” appeared in the news (Newberry). The harmful rhetoric among Muslim communities conflating the hijab with virtue results in violence. While many Muslims view the command of the hijab as divine, some perpetuate harmful interpretations to pit Muslim women against one another and, as a result, become enforcers of violence.

Essentially, this background research shows that Muslim women are suffocated by negative rhetoric from the Western media and Muslim communities alike. These negative rhetorics result in oppressive and outright violent policies implemented against Muslim women's

bodily autonomy. Both hijab bans and mandatory hijab laws squash a sense of identity among Muslim women. For hijabis specifically, being forced to conform to an idealized version of Muslim women and constantly being viewed as oppressed by the West further erases their individuality; they cannot live up to the standards within their community while the outgroup simply views their choice of modesty as oppression. In the same vein, Muslim women who do not wear the hijab face similar criticism for choosing not to wear the garment in the first place. Others are outright disregarded, with Muslims and non-Muslims not holding non-hijabis to the same standard as hijabis since they do not outwardly express their affiliation with Islam. This information is necessary for the study because the rhetoric from Muslims to Muslim women regarding their relationship with the hijab is usually only witnessed by Muslims. This phenomenon is mostly demonstrated through the in-group, while the out-group, non-Muslims, are rarely exposed to this type of rhetoric. When they do witness this rhetoric, it is through the rhetoric of the Western media that is perpetuating the idea that Muslim women are oppressed by this rhetoric and therefore need saving, which in turn, justifies Islamophobia through othering Muslims. The participants in this study discuss their experiences with pressure from the Muslim community to conform to strict interpretations of the hijab and the consequences they faced.

Culture and Religion:

Culture and religion are binaries that are relatively different but also connected. The overlap between the two often blur the lines between where culture starts and religion ends. To clearly outline the difference between these terms, the ideas demonstrated in Mario I. Aguilar's article "Religion as culture or culture as religion? The *status quaestionis* of ritual and performance" are used. He argues, "religion and its study is closely related to culture and its study, however religion as a localised social phenomenon cannot be totally equated with a

localised concept of culture” (Aguilar 234). He further explains that “religion as a social expression and culture as a unifying social factor, can be mediated and analytically understood through ritual as their common expression” (Aguilar 234). By these definitions, rituals are what distinguish religion from culture. For this study, the ritual of wearing the hijab or not is differentiated between broader cultural practices. However, it is important to this study to acknowledge the overlap between culture and religion since they influence one another.

Even though Arab culture may seem like a monolith, the Arab world encompasses the Middle East and North Africa, harboring many unique practices and subcultures. Since Arab culture is strongly linked to Islam, it is important to not generalize Arab culture when it comes to criticizing certain standards imposed upon Muslim women in regard to dress. Oftentimes, many reference the notion of Arab supremacy when it comes strict standards expected of Muslim women’s dress. Though the notion of Arab supremacy has not been thoroughly studied in scholarship, the idea of Arabism reflects the notions of Arab supremacy that assert Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant are seemingly better than Arabs from North Africa and elsewhere. In Heather J. Sharkey’s article “Arab Identity and Ideology in Sudan: The Politics of Language, Ethnicity, and Race,” Sudan is used as an example where Arabism was a nationwide effort during decolonization. Even though Arabism was thought to unite the Sudanese, it instead promoted harmful ideas that asserted Arab supremacy over local languages, cultures, and beliefs. She writes, “These scholars agree that Arabism in Darfur is increasingly *racial* or *racist* in the sense that it assumes a certain hierarchy of peoples, which in turn reflects histories of unequal power relations, and that it is 'reinforced by the intricate patterns of public discourse, power and privilege within the economic, social, and political institutions of the state,'” (Sharkey 27-28). Ultimately, these ideas of Arabism are present not only in Sudan but other Muslim communities.

Even though many Sudanese and North Africans consider themselves Arab, some other Arabs from the Middle East may invalidate that identity due to things like skin color, culture, and dialect. This mindset seeps in when it comes to Islamic standards of dress that are associated with Middle Eastern Arabs.

Identity and the Hijab:

Despite Muslim women facing criticism from the Muslim community, many of the participants in this study believe there is a strong correlation between identity and outward presentation, and this relates directly to the hijab. Rachel Anderson Droogsma's article "Redefining hijab: American Muslim Women's Standpoints on Veiling" for the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* seeks to define the meanings associated with the hijab by interviewing Muslim women in-depth. Droogsma acknowledges the negative rhetoric and perceptions of the hijab by the West before arguing that "The veil, then, may function as an impetus for self-definition within a framework that allows women to be both Muslim and independent" (Droogsma 296). Many Muslim women find pride in their identity, and utilizing the hijab is one of the boldest ways they can communicate their identity through their outward presentation. One outstanding example from Droogsma's study is that hijabis used their outward presentation to enhance their unique identity. She writes, "A few of the women, in fact, enjoy challenging Americans' stereotypical notions of veiled women. Huda, for example, said that she enjoys 'shocking' people by saying or doing certain things that veiled women 'aren't supposed to do,' such as driving her red pickup truck" (Droogsma 303). With this example, Huda finds amusement in showcasing her identity as a Muslim woman who happens to defy stereotypes with her choice of car. While the red pickup truck is not necessarily considered a form of fashion, Huda was still able to use her car as an accessory alongside her Muslim identity, much like how

other Muslim women utilize fashion to express themselves. Ultimately, Droogsma finds, “Thus, hijab serves as an identifier both of one’s membership and of one’s commitment as a Muslim, and this marker seems particularly important to those who are new to the community and those who do not initially appear to be members of the Muslim community” (Droogsma 303). For Muslim women, the hijab serves to outwardly present themselves as followers of Islam and at the same time reinforces a sense of identity and uniqueness through accessorizing.

Similar to Droogsma’s study, researchers Nick Hopkins and Ronni Michelle Greenwood delve into the performance of identity in their research article “hijab, Visibility, and the Performance of Identity” published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*. Conducting semi-structured interviews with young British Muslim women, the researchers sought to gain insight into how the participants relate their visibly Muslim identities and how they perform in relation to nationality and gender. One of the participants expressed similar sentiments about becoming a target for hatred on account of wearing the hijab. She stated feeling secure with her identity, and the researchers found “...the performative communication of her identity to a potentially hostile audience seems psychologically significant because it tests and confirms her self-conceptualisation as a Muslim” (Hopkins and Greenwood 442). Even psychologically, the negative rhetoric surrounding the hijab can strengthen Muslim women’s religious identity.

Notions of hypervisibility are often discussed in the context of the hijab in the West. While one of the main functions of the hijab is to express modesty while drawing attention away from the wearer, the garment itself can be eye-catching in the sense that it visibly identifies the wearer as a Muslim. In Rima Elabdali’s chapter “Embodied Reflexivity: Ethnographic Trouble and the Hypervisibility of the Muslim Body” featured in *Untold Autoethnographic Stories of (In)justice, Teaching, and Scholarship: Textu(r)alities in Applied Linguistics* (in press), she

details her autobiographical account of participating in an ethnographic study at a secular Lebanese Arabic school in the United States as a woman who wears the hijab. Even though she was among other Arabs, Elabdali notes that she worked with a mainly Lebanese Christian population that emphasized secularization in the school. As a Libyan Muslim woman who wears the hijab, Elabdali felt as though her identity was infringing upon the secular values of the school, based on how she was unwelcome and surveilled at the school as she conducted her ethnographic study. This led her to remove her hijab when working at the school in order to make herself less visible. She writes, “My headscarf was bound to render my presence in the school hypervisible, provoke fears of institutional vulnerability and racialization, and mobilize discourses of secularism” (Elabdali 26). While this account specifically occurred at an Arabic speaking school in the West, Elabdali’s feelings of hypervisibility reflect a broader phenomenon experienced by Muslim women who wear the hijab in the West. Like the Arabic speaking school, notions of secularism are emphasized in American society. Since the hijab is not widely worn across the United States, Muslim women who wear the hijab experience life as hypervisible beings.

This notion of hypervisibility is strongly associated with the hijab serving as a symbol. Salam Al-Mahadin discusses the semiotics of the hijab in his article “The Social Semiotics of the hijab: Negotiating the Body Politics of Veiled Women for the *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*. She argues that “The hijab does not tuck the woman away but displays her to the open gaze while keeping her under wraps, similar to a boxed and wrapped gift that can never be ripped open but tantalizes/traumatizes the viewer with its unapproachability. The hijab tantalizes because it forces the body to the forefront nudging it forward, making the gaze pay attention to its hiddenness” (Al-Mahadin 5). This description of the hijab in the context of the West explains

how the presence of a veiled woman can elicit discomfort and curiosity among non-Muslims. In a sense, the hijab is almost like a paradox to non-Muslims: why hide behind a cloth while demanding to be seen? She goes on to elaborate that the hijab “is simultaneously a transcendental sign and an empty one. Transcendental because once it is there, it takes precedence over any other sign, a supra-signifier under which every other sign slides. And precisely because it is transcendental, it is void of meaning but the ones imposed by the gaze” (Al-Mahadin 5). Essentially, there is meaning ascribed to the hijab by its wearer, alongside another meaning imposed upon it by outsiders. As a visual identifier muddled by various rhetoric empowering or demonizing it, the hijab is a garment with many layers of meaning from various angles.

With that being said, Elabdali concludes that non-Muslims projected their negative views of the hijab onto her based on the negative rhetoric surrounding the hijab. She writes, “Therefore, the emotions of discomfort experienced by Muslim women in different spaces in the West are related to the hypervisibility of Muslim bodies, which is constructed in relation to other bodies that are neutralized and afforded the privilege of being the unmarked norm” (Elabdali 32). The notions of hypervisibility contradict some of the standards by which the hijab is defined, such as not being attractive to call attention (Al-Munajjid). Therefore, Muslim women in the West are placed at an impasse. It is clear that Muslim women are being bombarded with negative rhetoric from both inside the Muslim community and outside by non-Muslims and the media alike. These generalizations put Muslim women into a paradoxical situation. On one hand, she is supposed to be covered as much as possible, but not be immodest as to draw attention to herself. On the other hand, her choice to cover herself may be interpreted as oppression or the symbolic imposition of her religious beliefs onto society, resulting in ostracization and even violence. Essentially, a

Muslim woman cannot define herself at the expense of others. These sources outlining identity and the hijab demonstrate why this study was conducted. The hypervisible nature of the hijab in the American South draws various forms of interest and criticism. At the same time, the hijab can also illustrate identities rooted in empowerment and the ability to represent the participants' culture and religion. Understanding this context makes interviewing Muslim women directly, no matter their relationship with the hijab, to define themselves amidst clashing rhetorics against them.

Positive Representation in Media

Despite many negative perceptions of Muslim women in the media, there have been considerable efforts made by Muslim women to portray themselves in a positive light. For example, rapper Mona Haydar debuted with her song “hijabi (Wrap My hijab)” on March 27, 2017. The music video features a visibly pregnant Haydar alongside a crew of hijabis from various ethnicities who are wearing their hijabs in diverse manners. The lyrics are outright empowering, expressing the visibility and unity of hijab wearing women. For example, the chorus “All around the world. Love women every shading, be so liberated, All around the world, Love women every shading, power run deep, So even if you hate it, I still wrap my hijab, Wrap my hijab, Wrap my hijab, Wrap, wrap my hijab” (Haydar and Olaniran). Here, Haydar explicitly addresses Islamophobic people, expressing that she and other women feel liberated and empowered by their hijabs and that they will wear the garment regardless of the hatred they face. In terms of representation, Haydar’s song and accompanying music video positively humanize Muslim women and challenge the idea that Muslim women are a monolith. Haydar and the women in the music video are seen wearing colorful clothing and dancing, thus portraying Muslim women as expressive and outgoing, therefore challenging the negative rhetoric against

them perpetuated by mainstream media. At the same time, these women also challenge the paradoxical situation that Muslim women face against non-Muslims and Muslims alike. They embrace their hypervisibility as Muslim women wearing the hijab while squashing the rhetoric of the “Ideal Muslim Woman” maintained by the Muslim community. Expressing their pride as Muslims allows them to redefine Muslim women as bold, colorful, and liberated.

Another recent piece of positive Muslim representation is the Hulu original show *Muslim Matchmaker* (2025). This series is hosted by two hijab-wearing Muslim women named Hoda and Yasmin, who work as matchmakers and hope to create successful romantic relationships between Muslims. Both hosts are expressive and bold, wearing lots of colorful clothing in congruence with their hijabs. Both hosts present themselves as enthusiastic and friendly while also asserting their expertise in the matchmaking industry. Since Islamic doctrine dictates specific rules about courting, such as no premarital sex, Hoda and Yasmin successfully navigate matchmaking while staying true to Islamic values in a fun, lighthearted manner. The participants of the show also reflect the diversity among Muslims, with some women wearing the hijab and others not. The participants came from a vast array of fields, including music, law, social work, and engineering. Choosing a diverse set of Muslims for the show was a rhetorical move to squash the stereotypes against Muslims, as these participants practiced their faith while maintaining their individuality. As a Hulu original show, *Muslim Matchmaker* (2025) can reach not only their target audience of young Muslims but also a wider audience of non-Muslims who are curious about Muslim marital customs. Learning these Islamic values from two hijabi women who present themselves as confident and knowledgeable counters the negative rhetoric of Muslim women perpetuated by some Muslims that they are meek and submissive. Hoda, Yasmin, and the participants of the show also redefine Muslim women as humans with opinions and preferences like everyone else

while still embracing their Muslim identity. While Haydar seems to embrace hypervisibility as a hijab wearing Muslim woman, the hosts of the show are arguably presenting Muslim women as just visible instead of hypervisible. The hijab seamlessly plays a role in the show while also being normalized by the hosts and the participants. Even the female participants who did not wear the hijab were easily embedded into the show without emphasizing their lack of the hijab. Instead, all members of the show were connected through their shared religion of Islam rather than their visual presentation. These examples of positive Muslim representation by women are slowly but surely challenging Islamophobic rhetoric as well as the negativity from Muslim communities. These two forms of media are important to this study since they prove that Muslim women can thrive on their terms despite the harmful rhetoric they encounter from all angles.

Muslim Women in Knoxville

A similar study to mine was conducted a few years prior in 2018, coincidentally also at the University of Tennessee. Nuray Karaman's doctoral dissertation, titled "Experiences of Muslim Female Students in Knoxville: At the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Religion," presents similar research questions. She asks, "(2) How does the intersection of religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, citizenship, and gender affect the identity formation of Muslim female university students in U.S.? (3) What are Muslim female students' opinions, reactions, and coping strategies towards negative stereotypes about Muslim women and Islam in U.S.?" (Karaman iv). After interviewing her participants, she concluded that "all Muslim females felt responsible for challenging the stereotypes, but their strategies for challenging the stereotypes changed based on the intersection of their racial, religious, and nationality/citizenship status" (Karaman 140). She specifically found that hijab wearing Muslim women felt the need to squash negative stereotypes of Muslims through their actions (Karaman 140). Ultimately, her study

demonstrates that Muslim women in Knoxville feel the need to represent Islam through their actions as a result of negative stereotypes. While both of our studies are investigating the identity of Muslim women in the United States amidst negative stereotypes, Karaman's study is investigated through a sociological lens with a heavy emphasis on intersectionality. In contrast, my investigation primarily focuses on the rhetoric used by Muslims and non-Muslims that specifically influences Muslim women and their relationship to the hijab. Using Karaman's study as a backdrop, some of the sociological factors I would not have considered are addressed, such as the role of intersecting identities when it comes to representing Islam in Knoxville. Therefore, I can confidently continue my research into the effect of negative rhetoric on Muslim women while comparing Karaman's findings to mine. The inclusion of Karaman's findings may offer a glimpse into how Muslim women's attitudes in Knoxville have changed since 2018.

Another study conducted at the University of Tennessee is a dissertation by Bushra Mohammad Malaibari titled "'/Entee Min Faine/? [Where are you from?]'": The Rhetoric of Nationality of Muslim Women in the American Southeast." While her dissertation mainly focuses on how Muslim women situate their sense of nationality in the Southeast, both of our studies have similar purposes. We both seek to uplift the voices of Muslim women. She writes, "I argue that there is a need to hear Muslim women because our experiences cannot be expressed by other parties. If the assumption is present that Muslim women are subjugated, then it is imperative to offer them the chance to express their thoughts and ideas. Women are integral members of society who are involved in constructing social, cultural, and political environments" (Malaibari 4). Considering both of our subjects are Muslim women in the Southeast, I believe that almost ten years later, it is even more imperative that the voices of Muslim women are heard and illuminated. Malaibari's study was published in 2016, and the present political climate

reflects the decisions that influenced the rhetoric toward Muslims during the period. For example, after spewing hateful rhetoric against Muslims and immigrants, President Donald Trump issued Executive Order 13769 in 2017. This act was known as Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, which was nicknamed the “Muslim Ban” by the President and supporters. This act effectively banned people from six majority Muslim countries from entering the United States, despite many of these people being refugees from conflicts supported by the United States. This example directly reflects the negative rhetoric against Muslims on a policy level, and it is crucial to investigate how this rhetoric impacts Muslim women who spent their formative years subjected to it.

Her study ultimately seeks to answer questions surrounding how Muslim women in the American Southeast navigate nationality through religion and gender and the ways they visualize their identity. What stands out about Malaibari’s approach to answering her research questions is her case study methodology. Her small sample size of five Muslim women allows her to deeply analyze the ways these women articulate nationality concerning their gender and religion. Three different phases of data collection were used to gather data, including a questionnaire, a photograph collection, and an interview. After analyzing the data, she ultimately finds that, “While they shared pictures of their lives, they created singular representations that focused on themes like people, religion, and gender articulated with their own style of language” (Malaibari 197). It is worth noting that while Malaibari sought to examine how these Muslim women explore their interpretation of a broad concept like nationality, they all presented unique results. The use of photographs helped to visualize these differences, such as some participants grappling with the question of identity through their hijab collection or another participant displaying items of cultural significance. Malaibari’s study does a fantastic job of individualizing Muslim women,

who, as mentioned before, are often presented as a monolith.

Hijab in the Context of Rhetoric

Despite being a few years older than my study, these studies have demonstrated the ongoing exploration of Muslim women's relationship to the hijab and support my claim that Muslim women consistently engage with negative rhetoric about them in the form of stereotypes. In the previous studies, I have noticed that Malaibari and Karaman's participants included hijabis and non-hijabis alike. Even though my study heavily focuses on the hijab, I do not want to limit my study to only hijabis. The inclusion of non-hijabis in Karaman's research allowed her to further investigate the intersectional factors the hijab would have otherwise hidden when it came to countering negative stereotypes of Muslim women. Therefore, I believe the inclusion of Muslim women, regardless of their relationship with the hijab, is necessary to uncover how rhetoric from various angles affects all Muslim women. At the same time, it is important to clarify that hijabis bear the brunt of embodying Islam. In chapter 1 of *Bodies of Knowledge: Embodied Rhetorics in Theory and Practice*, A. Abby Knoblauch and Marie E. Moeller assert that "...embodiment emphasizes the reciprocal nature of being, the interconnectedness of lives and objects" (8). As an object worn by a person, the hijab connects the person's livelihood to Islam, in turn connecting them to the rhetoric for and against Islam. At the same time, non-hijab wearing Muslim women do not bear this burden and navigate the world embodying Islam. Instead, their embodiment in the West is represented through other factors such as race or ethnicity. While these factors also affect the embodiment of hijabis, non-hijabis are still going to be othered through different demographic factors. At the same time, non-hijabis are also questioned by Muslims and non-Muslims alike for not conforming to the idealized image of a

Muslim woman. These distinctions are why the purpose of this study is to display the views of all Muslim women regardless of their presentation.

Overall, this literature review demonstrates that there is a decent amount of research that has been done on Muslims. By starting this study with a clear definition of Islamophobia and background research into the negative rhetoric against Muslims from Western media, policies such as hijab bans or enforcement can be better understood to explain the current state of the hijab as a political object. Understanding the rhetoric of Muslim communities online and offline is also crucial to understanding why some Muslims impose such strict definitions of hijab onto Muslim women and the detrimental consequences of doing so. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that Muslim women aim to redefine themselves against negative rhetoric from both Muslims and non-Muslims through their identity and presence by embodying Islam or not. The current conversation about Muslim women in Knoxville also contributes to the idea that Muslim women are crafting identities for themselves despite the negative rhetoric and stereotypes they face. With this work in mind, my study aims to continue the conversation in a new age where fascist ideologies are on the rise globally. Even though my study is situated in Knoxville, Tennessee, my goal is to illuminate the voices of Muslim women living in politically conservative areas in the geographic South, where the rhetoric mentioned above often challenges them. By listening to how Muslim women in Knoxville choose to present themselves, the rhetoric influencing their choices can be revealed, thus demonstrating the extent to which factors such as location, culture, and religion play in their decisions. To do this, outlining the methods and methodologies of collecting and analyzing relevant data is necessary.

Chapter 3: Methods and Methodology

Method

After understanding the nature of the current conversation of the rhetorics of the hijab, establishing my methods and methodology for this study is the next step. Since this study aims to uplift Muslim women, research questions such as “How do Muslim women in the American South choose to present themselves amidst religious, cultural, and geographical rhetorics?” are used to guide the methodology for this study. Other questions, such as “In what ways are Muslim women supported to wear the hijab” and the inverse, can also uncover the true reasons why Muslim women present themselves the way they do.

To achieve this, establishing the nature of this study as a qualitative study is necessary to finding these answers in a manner that can generate data rooted in life histories through phenomenological interviewing. Once the data is collected, it will be analyzed through the concepts established in cultural rhetorics and thematic analysis. The overarching theoretical perspective is rooted in many frameworks supporting qualitative research, such as interpretivism, specifically through labeling theory and symbolic interactionism, and feminist epistemology. Utilizing these methodologies together can better achieve the purpose of this study, which is to investigate how cultural and religious influences impact Muslim women to wear the hijab or not.

Cultural Rhetoric

A bulk of this research draws inspiration from concepts discussed in cultural rhetoric. As discussed in “Towards a Cultural Rhetorics Methodology: Making Research Matter With Multi-Generational Women from the Little Transverse Bay Band” by Andrea M. Riley Mukavetz, “A cultural rhetorics orientation is to enact a set of respectful and responsible practices to form and

sustain relationships with cultural communities and their shared beliefs and practices including texts, materials, and ideas” (109). This includes developing a methodology that centers the subjects and their shared beliefs. I strive to follow Mukavetz’s ideas to emphasize how Muslim women make meaning of the hijab while being surrounded by their religion, culture, and location. Specifically, this methodology is particularly useful when constraining my subjects to a certain area, Knoxville, Tennessee, which can illuminate specific ways meaning is made of the hijab in this context. This correlates with the idea that cultural rhetorics “...focuses on how a specific community makes meaning and negotiates systems of communication to disseminate knowledge” (Mukavetz 10). Drawing upon these ideas adds more nuance and livelihood when depicting the stories of the participants to relate to the broader conversation of how various rhetorics influence them to present or not present as visibly Muslim. At the same time, the cultural rhetorics methodology is a strategic way to orient myself in the context of my research participants as a fellow Muslim woman. As Mukavetz describes, story can be a methodology and theory (10). By allowing myself as the researcher, who is also a part of the group being studied, giving my participants the option to tell their stories with the hijab is crucial for forming adequate data for scholarship while allowing the community being studied to maintain control of their stories.

These ideas are further emphasized and reflected in “Our Story Begins Here” by Malea Powell et al. Powell and the other authors seek to define and introduce the idea of cultural rhetorics, which emphasizes that scholarship has been affected by colonial practices and that it is the responsibility of researchers to decolonize these elements of research. In the play, the character Jenn expands on these ideas and says, “The manner in which we engage, orient in relation to, or produce scholarship matters. We must be mindful that research methodologies are

not value-free tools. Our practices, including our research methodologies, are imbued with ideological and epistemological beliefs and values that have material effects in the world” (Powell et al. 11). Drawing upon these notions, it is important for myself as a researcher to not fall into the trap of portraying my participants by the very rhetoric they are fighting against. Even though culture is a powerful force, I make a conscious effort to uplift my participants’ voices while not demonizing their cultures, many of which have also been affected by colonization. Having a cultural rhetorics methodology guiding this study is crucial to telling the stories of Muslim women in Knoxville in a humanizing way and to not reinforce colonial rhetoric that they are oppressed or in need of saving.

Analytic Framework

For this study, I employ the use of thematic analysis when interpreting data. In Johnny Saldaña’s chapter “An Introduction to Themeing the Data” from the collaborative collection *Expanding Approaches to Thematic Analysis*, he describes when thematic analysis is deemed necessary in qualitative studies. For example, he describes two theming approaches: categorical and phenomenological. Categorically theming the data is when “The researcher assigns a categorical theme to each relevant unit of data, then proceeds to assemble the thematic statements into comparable clusters and/or to organize the themes into hierarchical outline formats” (Saldaña et al. 16). On the other hand, phenomenological themes “outline what a phenomenon or concept “is” or “means”—the essences and essentials of a particular lived experience” (Saldaña et al. 16). This study relies on both theming approaches to analyze the data. Categorical themes are helpful when determining specific patterns and details between participants and is therefore used to categorize participants as further described in the selection of participants section. Phenomenological themes are used broadly within this study mainly

through the analysis of responses to the phenomenological questions. Essentially, the participants' lived experiences and their meaning making of those instances are crucial to investigating how Muslim women in Knoxville present themselves.

Theoretical Perspective

A theoretical perspective used in this study is interpretivism. As opposed to positivism, interpretivism is less scientific and rather more humanistic in nature. As Michael Crotty puts it in his book *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*, "The interpretivist approach, to the contrary, *looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world*," (67). While most interpretivist research is ethnographic, the notions of this framework are still applicable to this study. One of the major assertions of this study is to investigate the role of culture in determining the presentation of Muslim women. Applying the interpretivist theoretical framework to the responses of this study shall illuminate the extent culture plays in the presentation and actions of the participants, even if the length of the study is short in comparison to ethnographies. Delving further into interpretivism, the concepts in symbolic interactionism will also be used to analyze the results of this study. Specifically, labelling theory, which "...models itself on the everyday ways in which we categorize people and things" which can be used to understand members of society who are deemed as deviants (Crotty 77). As seen in the literature review, the rhetoric of the media is purposeful when it comes to grouping all Muslims as deviant. In order to truly understand a group that is labeled as deviant, Crotty argues that it is fruitless to study what makes these groups appear as deviant. Instead, he offers symbolic interactionism as a solution to this issue when it comes to researching groups that have been othered. He writes, "Instead, symbolic interactionism directs us to a study of the labelling process itself. Why is it, we should

ask ourselves, that society wants to exclude some members from full and free participation in its life? And what are the mechanisms it uses to do so?” (Crotty 78). This symbolic interactionism approach will be used extensively through this research process; the goal of this study is not to solely analyze the “deviants,” or in this case, Muslim American women, rather it is to investigate what rhetoric in their group and outside their group influences their relationship with the hijab.

Feminist epistemology

Since this study is deeply rooted in uplifting the voices of Muslim women, ideas from feminist epistemology can be an effective theoretical perspective to draw from. In Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook’s book *Beyond Methodology Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, the authors examine and collect the views of feminist researchers to argue the legitimacy of the feminist perspective in research settings. They write that feminist epistemology uses reflection to “...gain insight into the assumptions about gender relations underlying the conduct of inquiry. This is often accomplished by a thorough going review of the research setting and its participants, including an exploration of the investigator’s reactions to doing the research” (Fonow and Cook 2). Essentially, Fonow and Cook argue that the feminist researcher’s reactions to their research are innate, and many take the extra step to consider the role of gender in the results of the study. Drawing upon Fonow and Cook’s work, Crotty writes, “Women are said to have different ways of knowing and will therefore do research in different ways to men” (177). This assertion is applicable to this study because the hijab, as a garment, is deeply rooted in the feminine experience among Muslims. In part one of Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch’s *Feminist Rhetorical Practice: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, the authors argue for the importance of feminist rhetorical practices and how these ideas can illuminate the female rhetors of the past. These ideas align with the notion of feminist

epistemology because the authors believe “...the objective is to develop mechanisms by which listening deeply, reflexively, and multisensibly become standard practice not only in feminist rhetorical scholarship but also in rhetorical studies writ large” (Royster and Kirsch 20). By engaging in feminist rhetorical scholarship in this study, I seek to listen deeply, reflexively, and multisensibly to my participants to further illustrate Royster and Kirsch’s goals of making these behaviors standard for rhetorical studies. These techniques are also very important for analyzing qualitative data that relies mainly on personal experiences and stories from women. They go on to describe how using feminist rhetorical scholarship can lead to strategic contemplation. They write, “Strategic contemplation further suggests that we pay attention to how lived experiences shape our perspectives as researchers and those of our research subjects. We call for greater attention to lived, embodied experience because we consider it to be a powerful yet often-neglected source of insight, inspiration, and passion” (Royster and Kirsch 22). The ideas of strategic contemplation align with the ideas of embodied reflexivity in that they both instruct the researcher to acknowledge how their presence in the research situation can affect the responses of the participants and how their data is interpreted.

This means that Muslim women will have distinct experiences with a visual identifier like the hijab, unlike Muslim men. I, as a Muslim researcher, play a crucial role when it comes to not only meeting my participants but also examining their results. As a Muslim woman, I can intrinsically identify points of contention that other researchers may overlook. Utilizing strategic contemplation and embodied reflexivity is essential to understanding the role gender plays in the ways participants manifest their experiences with religious and cultural rhetoric. This standpoint can also gain insight into the rhetoric used by the media when it comes to the portrayal of Muslim women.

The Study

This study involves in-depth phenomenological interviews with an emphasis on the life history of twelve Muslim women living in Knoxville, Tennessee. The participants were asked about their stories and experiences with the hijab as a Muslim woman in the South and how religious and cultural influences impacted their relationship to the garment. After being recruited and signing the necessary documents, the participants were prompted to take part in an hour-long interview. Necessary follow-up questions were asked within three phases of the phenomenological interview in order to receive clarity and context.

Selection of participants

The scope of the study may sound broad at first glance, but since my purpose is to differentiate and uplift the diversity of Muslim women, I have decided to use categorization as a tool to accomplish this. As a researcher who is a part of the group being studied, I have come to realize many Muslim women can fit into one of four categories based on their experiences wearing the hijab. I name these categories as: Women who have worn the hijab for the majority of their lives, women who recently started wearing the hijab, women who previously wore the hijab and have since removed it, and women who have never worn the hijab. The criteria for these categories are as follows.

These categories served as a guide methodologically for data collection. Drawing upon Karaman's recruitment of participants, I also called upon my previously established relationships with the Muslim community (16). Therefore, some participants were chosen based on their proximity to one of these four categories. As a member of the in-group, Muslim women, I was able to personally invite my participants to the study through advertising this study through interactions at the mosque, Muslim community events, and social media.

Table 1 Four categories of Muslim women in relation to the hijab

Women who have always worn the hijab	Women who recently started wearing the hijab	Women who previously wore the hijab and have since removed it	Women who have never worn the hijab
These women began to wear the hijab as a child/teenager. These women currently wear the hijab and have not removed it at any point.	These women have started wearing the hijab in the past 2-3 years. They previously had not worn the hijab. They started wearing the hijab in adulthood and currently wear it.	These women have worn the hijab at some point in their lives for variable lengths of time. They have ceased wearing the hijab at some point in their lives. Currently, they do not wear the hijab.	These women are familiar with the hijab but have never consistently worn it throughout their lives. They currently do not wear the hijab in their daily lives. They may wear the hijab only during religious services and prayer, but not outside of these activities

From then, I was able to sort the rest of the participants into the four categories. Most of these participants were familiar with me since my family were active participants in the mosque, known collectively as the Muslim Community of Knoxville (MCK), with my grandfather being

one of the founding members. I have also volunteered and worked for the community through programs surrounding the youth. Through my established relationship within the community, I appeared more trusted as a researcher rather than an outsider. Due to my relationship with the community and proximity, I found that selecting participants in the early twenties age range was important since these participants are just entering adulthood and have different experiences compared to the participants in other studies. While these other studies were conducted in the past ten years, my participants were still minors growing up in a post 9/11 world. Within Muslim communities, there is already a sense of distrust toward outsiders. With the passage of the Patriot Act in 2001 following the September 11th attacks, the government was able to “monitor, investigate, detain, and deport Muslims legally in the name of security, without rudimentary due process of the law and in gross violation of their rights” (Wong 165). Therefore, being a member of the in-group was a strategic advantage I held to obtain the trust of my participants. All participants were sent a recruitment email (Appendix A), and once they agreed to move forward, I sent them a consent form (Appendix B). Only after they signed the consent form was the interview scheduled.

Data Gathering Technique: Embodied Reflexivity by Interviewing Through Zoom

As a Muslim woman conducting qualitative research, I draw upon the ideas expressed by Rima Elabdali in her chapter “Embodied Reflexivity: Ethnographic Trouble and the Hypervisibility of the Muslim Body.” Elabdali discusses her experiences wearing the hijab as a researcher, which resulted in becoming hypervisible at the school where she was conducting research. Though it was a primarily Arab school in the United States, most employees were Christian, and Elabdali often felt ostracized and surveilled since her hijab immediately identified her as a Muslim minority. As a result, she removed her hijab while conducting research before

realizing just how embodied research reflexivity is. She argues “...for conceptualizing research reflexivity as an embodied enterprise. My aim here is not to establish a dualistic approach to the discursive vs. material practice of reflexivity, but to recognize how the material is closely intertwined with the discursive in constituting our research experiences” (Elabdali 34). Her assertion is how I aim to position myself as a researcher. As a member of the in-group, I realize I embody the identity of a Muslim woman, especially materially through my hijab. While many of the research participants do wear the hijab, many do not. Oftentimes, it is assumed by both Muslims and non-Muslims that hijab wearing Muslims judge their non-hijabi counterparts. This assertion can sometimes create a divide between hijabis and non-hijabis, as non-hijabis want to avoid being judged by hijabis since the Muslim community tends to put hijabis on a pedestal.

In order to navigate this potential obstacle, I decided to capitalize on the fact that these interviews would be conducted virtually through Zoom. By conducting interviews this way, I allow my participants to keep their cameras on or off. At the same time, I appear on camera unveiled to show how committed I am to keeping the research data secure and confidential while also indirectly communicating the material practice of reflexivity as detailed by Elabdali. Doing so demonstrates a strategically intimate understanding between my research subjects and me; we are the same with and without the veil. Even in Muslim environments, some women can go without seeing their peers’ hair for years due to the presence of Muslim men, who cannot see the hair of women they are not closely related to. By eliminating the presence of Muslim men, some of whom perpetuate the negative rhetoric against Muslim women, my participants and I are free to discuss the issues present in our communities without having to hide literally and figuratively. Allowing my participants to see me without the veil effectively reduces a barrier between us and can offer more nuanced conversations without preconceived notions. This thought process is

based on Elabdali's suggestion that "A practice of embodied reflexivity seeks to factor in the materialism of the research encounter, including the ways that material objects (e.g., headscarf) entangle with socio-political and socio-historical discourses, technologies, affects, and places to position the researcher and research participants" (35). While my removal of my hijab was voluntary compared to Elabdali's pressure to remove it, I believe that the setting of the research and data collection is crucial alongside the materialism present. In a research encounter where both the participant and the researcher feel safe and comfortable, richer data can be acquired, so long as the meanings of material objects are considered.

For this reason, Zoom was chosen as the primary research setting. Zoom was also a reliable software for data collection due to its recording capabilities. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and only the transcripts were relied upon during the coding process, with all participants' identities being confidential through the usage of pseudonyms.

Phenomenological Interviews

The methods used in this study include in-depth phenomenological interviews with an emphasis on life history questions. The inspiration for this method of interviewing derived from chapter two of Irving Seidman's book *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. He defines this method of interviewing as "In this approach interviewers use, primarily, open-ended questions. Their major task is to build upon and explore their participants' responses to those questions. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study" (Seidman 15). Applying Seidman's methods to this study, the questions encouraged the interviewees to elaborate on their experiences of putting on the hijab, wearing the hijab, not wearing the hijab, and even taking it off. Michael Crotty's analysis of phenomenology is also crucial to the

methodology of this study. He writes, “Phenomenology suggests that, if we lay aside, as best we can, the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of them, possibilities for new meaning emerge for us or we witness at least an authentication and enhancement of former meaning” (Crotty 78). Based on this idea, the questions were also framed to extract the interviewees’ perceived meaning during their various stages of wearing or not wearing the hijab. This interview style will encourage participants to make meaning of their experiences with the hijab temporally. Constructing the interviews in this manner will also gain further insight into how Muslim women viewed the cultural and religious rhetorics present in their lives and how they ascribe meaning to their choices leading up to their decision to wear or not wear the hijab. This type of questioning can also delve into how significant place and location are in determining a Muslim woman’s relationship with the hijab. In order to successfully apply Seidman and Crotty’s interpretations of the phenomenological methodology, the interview questions are as follows.

Interview Questions

Since the participants are divided into four different groups, four different interview guides were created based on the participants’ proximity to one of the four categories. The interview is divided into three categories based on Seidman and Crotty’s phenomenological interview methodology. The first main life history question asks the participants how they came to wear or know about the hijab. Follow-up questions include questions about the participants’ cultural, religious, and environmental background, their ages when they interacted with the hijab, and the extent to which their religion and culture influenced their decisions. The second main life history question asks the participants to tell what it was like to wear or not wear the hijab. The follow-up questions included asking about their choice to wear it, stories of their religion and

culture influencing these actions, the reactions of the people around them, and the role their geographical location played. The third and final life history question asks the participants to reflect on the meaning of the hijab. The follow-up questions include how they would have wanted people to react to the decision, their current relationship with their religion, culture, and geographic location, and their current and future relationships with the hijab.

The interview questions are mostly similar across the categories, however, some questions have been reworded to accurately ask the participants about their unique experiences in their respective categories. For example, in the interview guide for women who previously wore the hijab and have since removed it, unique questions such as “When you first took off the hijab, why do you think people reacted the way that they did” are included to gain insight on this specific experience that participants in the other categories cannot answer since they still wear the hijab or have not worn the hijab. All participants were asked questions from one of these four interview guides, and the lengths of their interviews varied between thirty minutes to ninety minutes.

The first interview guide is for women who previously wore the hijab and have since removed it. As mentioned before, the questions are similar to the interview guides for participants in other categories, yet provide questions directly related to their experiences removing the hijab. Doing this acknowledges that these participants inherently have unique experiences after removing the hijab, while also giving room to make meaning of these experiences to investigate which rhetorics have contributed to this decision's effects.

The table on the next page details the interview protocol. Throughout the table, the main life history questions are included alongside the follow-up questions. This guide effectively structures the interview process.

Table 2: Interview Guide for women who previously wore the hijab and have since removed it:

Life History Questions- Main Question: Tell me the story of how you came to wear the hijab.
Follow up questions:
Could you please explain your cultural/ethnic background? To what extent was your cultural background implemented throughout your life?
Could you please explain your religious background? To what extent was your religion implemented throughout your life?
Where did you start wearing the hijab? Can you describe the environment?
How old were you when you started wearing the hijab?
To what extent do you think your cultural background influenced your decision to wear the hijab?
To what extent do you think your religion influenced your decision to wear the hijab?
At what age did you stop wearing the hijab?
How did you feel when you took off the hijab for the first time?
Details of the Experience- Main Question: Tell me what it was like when you wore the hijab.
Follow up Questions:
Are there any specific instances/stories of your culture influencing you and your actions?
Are there any specific instances/stories of your religion influencing you and your actions?
Do you believe that wearing the hijab was fully your choice?
Do you believe you were too young when you started wearing the hijab?
When you stopped wearing the hijab, how did the people around you react?

Table 2: Continued

Do you believe that your cultural background influenced your choice to remove the hijab?
Do you believe that your religious background influenced your choice to remove the hijab?
How has your geographical location influenced your choice to stop wearing the hijab?
Reflection on the Meaning- Main question: What does the hijab mean to you now? What does not wearing the hijab mean to you now?
Follow up Questions:
Back when you wore the hijab, what do you think wearing the hijab meant to you?
When you first took off the hijab, why do you think people reacted the way that they did?
How would you have wanted the people around you to react when you took off your hijab?
What is your current relationship with your cultural background?
What is your current relationship with your religion?
What is your relationship with your current environment?
Would you ever consider wearing the hijab again? Why or why not?

The second interview guide is for women who have worn the hijab for the majority of their lives. The questions are like the questions in the other categories, yet leave room for meaning-making of the experience of wearing the hijab for the majority of their lives.

The following table details the interview protocol in a similar manner to the previous interview guide, yet accounts for the unique experiences of participants in this category.

Table 3: Interview Guide for women who have worn the hijab for the majority of their lives

Life History Questions:
Main Question: Tell me the story of how you came to wear the hijab.
Follow up Questions:
Could you please explain your cultural/ethnic background? To what extent was your cultural background implemented throughout your life?
Could you please explain your religious background? To what extent was your religion implemented throughout your life?
Where did you start wearing the hijab? Can you describe the environment?
How old were you when you started wearing the hijab?
To what extent do you think your cultural background influenced your decision to wear the hijab?
To what extent do you think your religion influenced your decision to wear the hijab?
Are you still wearing the hijab?
Details of the Experience- Main Question: Tell me what it was like when you wore the hijab.
Follow up Questions:
Are there any specific instances/stories of your culture influencing you and your actions?
Are there any specific instances/stories of your religion influencing you and your actions?
Do you believe that wearing the hijab was fully your choice?
Do you believe you were too young when you started wearing the hijab?
How do people around you react to you wearing the hijab?
Do you believe that your cultural background influenced your choice to continue wearing the hijab?

Table 3: Continued

Do you believe that your religious background influenced your choice to continue wearing the hijab?
How has your geographical location influenced your choice to continue wearing the hijab?
Reflection on the Meaning- Main question: What does the hijab mean to you now? What does wearing the hijab mean to you now?
Follow up Questions:
What do you think wearing the hijab means to you?
When you first wore the hijab, why do you think people reacted the way that they did?
How would you have wanted the people around you to react when you started wearing your hijab?
What is your current relationship with your cultural background?
What is your current relationship with your religion?
What is your relationship with your current environment?
Would you ever consider taking off the hijab?
Why will you continue to wear the hijab?

The third interview guide is specifically for women who have recently started wearing the hijab. These questions follow the same format as the previous interview guides, yet have been adjusted to extract the participants' meaning-making of the transition from not wearing the hijab to wearing it.

Table 4: Interview Guide for women who have recently started wearing the hijab

Life History Questions:
Main Question: Tell me the story of how you came to wear the hijab.
Follow up Questions:
Could you please explain your cultural/ethnic background? To what extent was your cultural background implemented throughout your life?
Could you please explain your religious background? To what extent was your religion implemented throughout your life?
Where did you start wearing the hijab? Can you describe the environment?
How old were you when you started wearing the hijab?
To what extent do you think your cultural background influenced your decision to wear the hijab?
To what extent do you think your religion influenced your decision to wear the hijab?
Details of the Experience- Main Question: Tell me what it was like when you wore the hijab.
Follow up Questions:
Are there any specific instances/stories of your culture influencing you and your actions?
Are there any specific instances/stories of your religion influencing you and your actions?
Do you believe that wearing the hijab was fully your choice?
Do you believe you were too young when you started wearing the hijab?

Table 4: Continued

How do people around you react to you wearing the hijab?
Do you believe that your cultural background influenced your choice to continue wearing the hijab?
Do you believe that your religious background influenced your choice to continue wearing the hijab?
How has your geographical location influenced your choice to continue wearing the hijab?
Reflection on the Meaning- Main question: What does the hijab mean to you now? What does not wearing the hijab mean to you now?
Follow up Questions:
What do you think wearing the hijab means to you?
When you first wore the hijab, why do you think people reacted the way that they did?
How would you have wanted the people around you to react when you started wearing your hijab?
What is your current relationship with your cultural background?
What is your current relationship with your religion?
What is your relationship with your current environment?
Would you ever consider taking off the hijab?
Why will you continue to wear the hijab?

Lastly, the final interview guide is for women who have never worn the hijab. These questions are mostly the same as the other questions from the previous interview guides, yet some are reworded to reflect the unique experiences of Muslim women who have navigated life without a hijab.

Table 5: Interview Guide for women who have never worn the hijab

Life History Questions- Main Question: Tell me the story of how you came to know about the hijab
Follow up Questions:
Could you please explain your cultural/ethnic background? To what extent was your cultural background implemented throughout your life?
Could you please explain your religious background? To what extent was your religion implemented throughout your life?
In what situations did you wear the hijab? Can you describe the environment?
How old were you when you started wearing the hijab in these events?
To what extent do you think your cultural background influenced your decision to not wear the hijab?
To what extent do you think your religion influenced your decision to not wear the hijab?
To what extent has your environment influenced your decision not to wear the hijab?
Details of the Experience- Main Question: Tell me what it's like not wearing the hijab
Follow up Questions:
Are there any specific instances/stories of your culture influencing you and your actions?
Are there any specific instances/stories of your religion influencing you and your actions?
Do you believe that not wearing the hijab was fully your choice?
How do people around you react to you not wearing the hijab?

Table 5: Continued

Do you believe that your cultural background influenced your choice to not wear the hijab?
Do you believe that your religious background influenced your choice to not wear the hijab?
How has your geographical location influenced your choice to not wear the hijab?
Reflection on the Meaning- Main question: What does the hijab mean to you now? What does not wearing the hijab mean to you now?
Follow up Questions:
What do you think wearing the hijab means to you?
What does not wearing the hijab mean to you?
As someone who doesn't wear the hijab, why do you think people react the way that they did?
How would you have wanted the people around you to react when you are not wearing the hijab?
How has not wearing the hijab influenced your identity as a Muslim?
What is your current relationship with your cultural background?
What is your current relationship with your religion?
What is your relationship with your current environment?
Would you ever consider wearing the hijab?
Why will you continue not to wear the hijab?

As previously mentioned, these questions are very similar but not exactly the same across categories. They are formulated to gather specific information depending on the category of the Muslim woman participant. The three main questions are deeply phenomenological and are designed to let the participants tell their story uninterrupted in the hopes that they will establish meaning-making to their experiences. The follow-up questions are designed to retrieve more

information about the participants' experiences to further contribute to their meaning-making. This categorization of questions was done to ultimately acknowledge and adapt to the different experiences of participants between each category. While other studies may focus on asking all participants the same questions, this method did not apply to my study since the participants have different relationships to the hijab, hence the categories. For example, asking a participant who has never worn the hijab, "Why will you continue to wear the hijab?" would offer confusion since they have not worn the hijab in the first place. In a study like this, having the same questions for participants is not a one-size-fits-all situation. In order to offer some clarity and find meaning in their different experiences, some questions were reworded for this sake. Therefore, questions such as "why will you continue to wear the hijab" are adjusted to become similar questions such as "why will you continue not to wear the hijab" for women who have not worn the hijab.

For this study to be successful, it is important to consider the differences between Muslim women participants and their relationship with the hijab. By acknowledging these differences, phenomenological questions can be restructured to better accommodate these differences while also leaving room to gather richer and more specific data. At the same time, thematic analysis is important to finding similarities and differences between the stories of the participants. Employing theoretical frameworks like labelling theory and symbolic interactionism can better make sense of the data in relation to the existing research surrounding the choices Muslim women make for themselves to wear the hijab or not. This methodology, overall, can uncover the religious and cultural rhetoric that ultimately influences Muslim women and their relationship to the hijab while also taking factors such as geography and environment into account. The results

of these interviews can better humanize and piece together why Muslim women make these decisions.

Results

This section details the findings of the study as demonstrated through the methods discussed in the last chapter. Before delving into the specific findings and codes, introducing the participants of this study is key to gaining context in why they made the choices they did. Using them as examples, the four categories can be better understood in the grand scheme of things. Outlining their stories and experiences will achieve the purpose of this study by uplifting Muslim women's voices.

In total, twelve participants were involved in this study. The participants, who are all in their twenties, come from a wide array of ethnicities, have lived a majority of their lives in the United States, currently live in the Southeast, and have unique experiences and perceptions regarding their relationship with the hijab. These specific women were chosen due to their various experiences with the hijab and their self-identified interest in this study. For the sake of confidentiality, all participants were given a pseudonym, alongside the omission of any identifying information. The quotations used by the participants have been edited for clarity as well. The participants were organized into their respective categories based on their experiences with the hijab.

This chart includes necessary information about the participants' ethnicities in order to determine how their culture affects their perceptions of the hijab. Most of these participants were born in the United States, and all emphasized that they were raised in the United States and identified with their nationality alongside their ethnic background. It is worth noting that Seema

and Marwa include American in their ethnicity description because they both have one American parent and identify with their mixed heritage.

Table 6: Participants and their information

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Category	Wearing hijab Now?
*Seema	22	Pakistani American	Never wore hijab	No
*Attiya	24	Pakistani	Took off hijab	No
*Selena	24	Palestinian	Took off hijab	No
*Emmy	21	Bangladeshi	Recently put on hijab	Yes
*Layla	23	Egyptian	Wore hijab majority of life	Yes
*Sara	24	Pakistani	Recently put on hijab	Yes
Fatima	22	Egyptian	Women who wore the hijab, took it off, and put it back on	Yes
*Rania	22	Palestinian	Wore hijab majority of life	Yes
Dania	23	Palestinian	Women who wore the hijab, took it off, and put it back on	Yes
*Marwa	20	Jordanian American	Took off hijab	No
*Halima	23	Indian	Never wore hijab	No
*Zara	24	Turkish	Wore hijab majority of life	Yes

An asterisk is included in Fatima and Dania's categorization because, as their interviews progressed, a new category emerged that differentiated their experiences from the other participants. Even though they technically wore the hijab for the majority of their lives, they had removed the hijab during certain periods of their lives. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to place

them in the took off the hijab and wore the hijab for a majority of their lives categories. It is also necessary to note that in their interviews, the participants viewed culture and religion as entirely separate domains, not acknowledging the overlaps mentioned by Aguilar. This seems to be a unique phenomenon among Muslims raised in the West compared to Muslims raised in Muslim countries. The idea that Western culture is inherently un-Islamic seems to allow Western Muslims to differentiate culture from religion, compared to Muslims raised in Muslim majority countries such as Jordanian participants in Al-Mahadin's study, who expressed greater overlap between Islam and the local culture. This in turn allowed the participants of this study to view culture and religion separately, regardless of the rituals both elements embody.

Participant Profiles

The first participant is Seema, a twenty-two-year-old mixed-race Muslim woman. She identifies as half Pakistani and half American. She describes her identity as something complex. She says, "I identify with either culture. But at the same time I don't identify... When you have come from two cultural backgrounds, it's not like you identify with either one. It's kind of like, I just don't identify with anything, at least in my personal experience" (Seema). She remarks that her multicultural background has influenced her relationship with the hijab, opting not to wear it. She believes that the hijab is not explicitly mentioned in the Quran but is rather a cultural practice stemming from Hadith, which are sayings and actions of the Prophet Mohammad that Muslims try to emulate. Instead, Seema emphasizes that a more critical lens should be applied to the Hadith and tries to follow Islam primarily through the Quran.

Attiya is a twenty-four-year-old Muslim woman with a Pakistani background who previously wore the hijab, but has since removed it. She reveals that "My family had started kind of like telling me like we expect you to wear it, and I kind of eased into it, but I would say that

my family did force me to put it on, but I kept it on, and I want to make the distinction that I did enjoy wearing the hijab for a period of time, and I also enjoyed wearing the hijab when I was really really young” (Attiya). Due to this combined cultural and religious entanglement enforced by her family, she developed a complicated relationship with the hijab as she grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee. Eventually, as an adult, she removed the hijab and has been very reflective of the experience in terms of accepting herself as a Muslim woman irrespective of her choice to wear the hijab or not.

Selena is a twenty-four-year-old Muslim woman who was born in Palestine but moved to the United States as an infant. Like some of the other participants in this study, she attended an Islamic school with a culture that encouraged female students to wear the hijab around middle school age. After wearing the hijab primarily in this religious school setting, she eventually eased into wearing the hijab full time as a teenager. She initially thought she was wearing the hijab for the sake of God, but since removing it she has reflected on her motivations. She describes this moment as “Yes, I do believe it was a purely cultural decision I made. I don't believe it was anything religious, I just felt like, because I was already wearing it at school, and some events, it just became like, ‘Oh, yeah, I'll just wear it everywhere.’ But I don't really feel like that’s a religious influence, in my opinion” (Selena). After wearing the hijab for three years, she eventually removed it at the age of nineteen, believing that she was not wearing it for the right reasons.

Emmy is a twenty-one-year-old Muslim woman who hails from Bangladesh but was raised in the United States for the majority of her life. She spent a lot of time in Morristown, Tennessee, a town situated over an hour from Knoxville. When she moved to Knoxville for college, she decided to start wearing the hijab because she believed that this move represented

new beginnings in a more diverse area. She recounts, “But I had a feeling like in college, you can start kind of fresh, and everyone is different. They're more used to seeing different people from different backgrounds, if not the hijab, then at least something different. So it just wouldn't matter by then. So I kind of prepared myself to change and start wearing it once college started, and that coincidentally hit on my 18th birthday. And that's just so like, lucky. That's just kind of how I started wearing it” (Emmy). Emmy has continued to wear the hijab for three years now and is still living in Knoxville.

Twenty-three year old Layla has been wearing the hijab since she entered high school. She has graduated from university while still wearing her hijab. She describes coming to the hijab void of cultural reasons. Rather, she cites her mental health as being a reason to practice Islam more consistently which eventually led her to wearing the hijab. She describes this process as a self-improvement journey and that “the hijab was one of those steps that I wanted to take to just keep going on that self-improvement mindset” (Layla). She believes that since wearing the hijab was her choice, she was able to develop a good relationship with the garment, alongside improving her mental health.

Sara is a twenty-four-year-old Muslim woman with a Pakistani background who recently started to wear the hijab after slowly easing into it by dressing modestly and altering her hair choices. She describes being “attached” to her hair. She says “I would slick my hair back a lot and then do like a bun or a ponytail and that is basically like wearing hijab without like the hijab on top, you know. So then, sometimes I wear hoodies and like bandanas,” (Sara). Becoming modest before wearing the hijab was a key part of Sara’s journey to wearing the Hjiab. She also took the initiative to learn more about Islam by enrolling in a seminary shortly after she made this change to her lifestyle.

Fatima's experience wearing the hijab is rather unique to this study. She initially wore it as a child, took it off as a teenager, and began to wear it again as an adult. She recounts wearing it by choice as a child, but emphasizes that she did not have enough knowledge to truly understand why she wore it. This led her to take the hijab off during high school after seven years of wearing it. Eventually, as an adult, Fatima came to understand the meaning of the hijab in a religious context and therefore felt more qualified to wear the hijab once again. She reflects on this journey and says, "I think like in high school, I kind of got confused and strayed away from it a little bit, and I wanted to have like a more personal relationship with it before you know I wore it, and I was like a visual representation of the religion. So when I put it back on, I felt a lot more confident" (Fatima). For Fatima, it was through learning more about the hijab through her initiative that she eventually came back to wear it.

Rania is a young woman who has worn the hijab for the majority of her life, starting at the age of ten. Growing up, she was taught that the hijab is something that all Muslim women will have to wear eventually and credits positive role models, such as her mother, who have inspired her to wear it. As she grew older, she cites that learning more about the reason women wear the hijab is why she wanted to continue wearing it. She also credits having a supportive Muslim community around her also encouraged her to keep wearing the hijab. She believes religion and awareness of the hijab is "Implemented by my family, by my friends, by everyone around me. No matter what happens, I feel like there's a good community and a good group of people who will always help you go back to the right path or keep reminding you where you actually came from" (Rania). Having positive Muslim people in her life is essential to staying close to Islam and continuing to wear the hijab. However, Rania emphasizes that while her family's beliefs tie culture and religion together, she personally separates the two. She believes

that Islam is the main guiding force in her life, and while she does appreciate the positive aspects of Arab culture, she makes a conscious effort to differentiate it from Islam.

Dania is a twenty-three-year-old American Muslim woman with a Palestinian background. She describes her experience with the hijab as having a lot of ups and downs due to how it was presented to her and how others around her reacted. She describes wearing it around the age of eleven, but removed it as a teenager for a period of time. Eventually, she wore the hijab again after her family's insistence, but found herself removing it again during college. During this time, she learned more about her faith as her husband supported her decision to wear it again. She currently wears the hijab and credits her Palestinian culture's values of resistance and resilience to continue wearing the garment, especially during the aftermath of the October 7th attacks and the ensuing genocide in Gaza. She says, "I actually never really felt that drawn to my culture until all of that happened. And I feel like seeing, you know, just everything everybody was enduring over there. And I'm just like, these people are still persevering. They're still steadfast, and they are still wearing it" (Dania). Here, Dania refers to how Palestinian Muslim women still hold on to wearing the hijab in the middle of a warzone, which motivates her to continue wearing her hijab in solidarity with them.

The youngest participant in this study is twenty-year-old Marwa, who is half Jordanian and half American. Like some of the other participants, she also attended an Islamic school where she was introduced to the hijab. She wore the hijab as a child and into adulthood, but has since taken it off due to feeling unwelcome in Knoxville as a visibly Muslim person. She describes, "I feel like it sort of grounded me, but like I needed to step away from it because I was just being called out in public, like, I had trash thrown at me" (Marwa). Having experienced Islamophobia from a young age, Marwa further began to consider removing the hijab. Concerned

for her safety, she ultimately decided to remove her hijab.

Halima is a twenty-three-year-old Indian-American Muslim woman who has lived in Knoxville during some of her high school years and through her undergraduate and graduate studies. After previously living in South Dakota, she realizes that Knoxville is somewhat more diverse, but is still hesitant to wear the hijab after recent anti-Muslim sentiments from the media. She refers to the aftermath of the October 7th attacks that resulted in Islamophobia perpetuated by the media. She says, “I feel afraid for my life and my family’s life with how Muslims are viewed in the western media.” She believes that being visibly Muslim would make her and her family a target for people with Islamophobic beliefs and therefore chooses not to wear the hijab.

Lastly, Zara is a twenty-four-year-old Muslim woman whose parents immigrated from Turkey to the United States before she was born. Despite her mother not wearing the hijab, Zara was drawn to the hijab at an early age through her enrollment in Islamic school and her hijab-wearing grandmother. She recounts that she tries her best to follow the positive aspects of Turkish culture and has actively countered some cultural norms, such as wearing the hijab after marriage or wearing hijab styles popular amongst Turkish people. However, these decisions have resulted in her feeling othered by Turkish people. She says, “And then when I go to Turkey, and I wear it with my unique style, and they’re like, ‘Oh, you look Syrian’, or ‘you look Arab’, or ‘you look this.’ And I’m like, why is that? Just because I wrap it like this like around my head...And I was kind of side-eyeing them because they’re not hijabis. And they’re like ‘Who are you?’ I was like, ‘I’m Turkish. Thank you for asking’ ...I’m proud of who I am. And so when I say my culture doesn’t influence it as much, not really...I like their outfits. I’m not a fan of the hijab style that they typically wear” (Zara). Due to this type of othering she feels from other Turkish people, Zara ultimately emphasizes that she is wearing the hijab for religious reasons

and that she is free to disagree with elements of her own culture, such as not wearing the hijab in a culturally specific manner. Due to wearing the hijab at such an early age, Zara has encountered both the good and the bad. Despite this, she continues to wear the hijab.

After introducing them, the participants of this study can then be placed into one of the four categories based on their relationship with the hijab. Delving into their stories and how they demonstrate their relationships with the hijab can shed light on how various rhetorics come together to shape individual Muslim women's worldview and choices. As the women told their stories, several key codes emerged.

The first code is identity. Oftentimes, many Muslim women associate the hijab with a sense of identity, especially if they have experience wearing it. The discussions with my participants reflects the meaning of identity Noha Ireiqat found in her study. She found, "The participants agreed that in the United States of America, hijab became the symbol of Muslim identity, where it has gained multiple meanings as being a religious and a social symbol" (Ireiqat 64). Essentially, sentiments that align themselves with the identity code reflect associating meaning to the hijab as an element of the participants' sense of self. For example, a participant could claim that the hijab is a part of their brand and personality by highlighting their self expression through hijabi fashion.

Like Ireiqat found, the religious symbolism held by the hijab also contributes to the participants' identity making. Therefore, the code of representing Islam was also established to differentiate the participants' sense of self from their religious identity. When distinguishing between the identity and representing Islam codes, sentiments expressed by the participants that explicitly associate the hijab with Islam will default to the representing Islam code. For instance, a participant expressing that they are proud to be visibly Muslim and demonstrate Islamic values

through their actions would align with the representing Islam code.

Another broad theme present in all participants' stories is the notion of fear. Fear of being perceived as a Muslim in a hostile environment to the fear of judgment from fellow Muslims were concerns noted by many Muslim women regardless if they wore the hijab or not. This code attempts to not only acknowledge but distinguish the types of fears Muslim women exhibit. The first code within this category is Islamophobia. Even though most of the participants were born right before or after the 9/11 attacks, they have been affected by the results of Western media's anti-Muslim rhetoric that skyrocketed during their lifetimes. Sentiments expressed by the participants that entail details of being prejudiced on account of their religion will be highlighted in the Islamophobia code. Also present in the theme of fear is the code of judgment from other Muslims. This code seeks to highlight how the rhetoric that some Muslims perpetuate have certain interpretations of how a Muslim woman should present herself. Highlighting the participants' experiences of dealing with judgment and criticism from other Muslims specifies this code from the Islamophobia code, which focuses on prejudice from non-Muslims.

Chapter 4: Women who have never worn the hijab

To begin analyzing the results of the study, this chapter focuses on the participants who have never worn the hijab. These participants are familiar with the hijab but have never consistently worn it throughout their lives. This means that they do not wear the hijab in their daily lives, but will wear it during religious services and prayers. Outside of these activities, they navigate the world themselves, without the hijab to immediately label them as Muslims.

Seema and Halima have both never worn the hijab in this sense. They both discuss in their interviews that not wearing the hijab is a unique experience amongst Muslim women and that various factors influence their choice not to wear the hijab.

Seema's Story:

At first glance, Seema is not what Muslims and non-Muslims would describe as a Muslim woman. Her long blonde hair, pale skin, and affinity for workout leggings is akin to what many would describe as the average female American college student. However, throughout the interview, Seema presents herself as a deeply religious Muslim woman and emphasizes that her looks do not make her less of a Muslim than anyone else. Seema says, "I think people make assumptions about me, like, when I don't wear the hijab... I'm blonde, obviously, so like people assume like I'm just like, you know, your typical American, and no one ever assumes I'm like Muslim until they know my name, and then they're like, wait a second!" Here, Seema believes that not wearing the hijab erases her visibility as a Muslim, and it is only through her Arabic name that Americans will identify her as a Muslim. Being half-Pakistani and half-American, she believes her blonde hair symbolizes American-ness, a trait not associated with Muslims.

She begins her story by discussing how she came to know the hijab. Like many other participants, she grew up attending an Islamic school. hijab was introduced to her as an element of the middle school uniform, but its religious meaning was not elaborated. During this time, she immediately noticed that the hijab played a role in the manner female students had to dress. She describes this as, “Once you get into middle school in Islamic school, they expect you to wear it [hijab] because you're going through puberty and whatnot. That's what my specific private Islamic school expected out of us. They don't really explain it to you. They're like ‘women have to wear hijab like after puberty and whatnot, so you're gonna wear the hijab’ and stuff like that. They would have these little lectures in which they would get all the middle school girls together, and be like ‘I saw so and so, showing half her hair!’” For Seema, the hijab served more as a garment female students had to adhere to, or else, they would face consequences through lectures.

I asked Seema to elaborate on what was being said in these lectures. She further describes the teachers equating the hijab to reaching heaven. She says, “I remember them literally saying the hijab is literally your ticket into heaven. You don't wear the hijab, you go to hell. You wear the hijab, you go to heaven. It was really strange to me. It was like they associated hijab with martyr status. And not wearing the hijab with ‘for the streets’ status. So it was definitely something that they emphasized a lot.” This definition of the hijab, which was presented to middle schoolers, directly reflects the rhetoric that associates hijab wearing women as inherently better than women who do not wear the hijab. Young Muslims are exposed to the rhetoric that not wearing the hijab would result in being punished in Hell. Therefore, they can avoid hell altogether with their metaphorical ticket to heaven by wearing the hijab. This rhetoric affected her greatly, and she describes that “It got to the point where I was so fearful. I remember like I'd

wake up sweating in the middle of the night, imagining God as this big, like dark entity, he was this scary entity that was reeling me into hell, and I know that sounds really bad, but I'd have like very vivid, vivid dreams of hell I never dreamed of heaven, everything was about hell. I was very fearful.” As discussed previously, the rhetoric that associates the hijab with righteousness and virtue influences Muslim women on a societal level to wear the hijab. However, through Seema’s story, the rhetoric associating the hijab with virtue affects Muslim girls at the individual level through fear; if they do not wear the hijab, the threat of hell looms over them. For Seema, this manifested itself through nightmares about hell for not wearing the hijab.

When Seema did wear the hijab, she describes wearing it when she participates in religious practices such as prayer or Islamic events. Among the Pakistani side of her family, she discusses that the hijab is usually worn by older women, such as her grandmother. As the topic of culture was brought up, Seema began to discuss how the hijab is manifested in the different cultures around her. She says,

The biggest difference between cultures is how the hijab is worn. The way a Pakistani woman wears a hijab versus the way an Arab woman wears a hijab is completely different, and one is not better than the other, but, like I also often feel like there's this, like Arab superiority, and like ‘Oh, you're not wearing an abaya. You're not wearing the hijab the right way.’ It's like you have to wear an Abaya, and you have to wear [the hijab] Amira style. And that's Arab culture.

Seema brings an important point about Arab superiority present in Muslim communities. Even though Arabs do not constitute the majority of the Muslim population in the world, many non-Arab Muslims feel as though Arabs have a sense of superiority over them by equating Arab culture with Islam. As Seema describes, proper hijab is defined in the Arab sense through

traditional Arab clothing like the Abaya and Amira style of hijab. This cultural rhetoric through dress and the hijab, therefore, harms non-Arab Muslim women, such as Pakistani women who may wear the hijab as a dupatta style. While both of these styles fulfill the modesty guidelines of the hijab as outlined by the Quran and websites like Islam Question and Answer, non-Arab Muslim women face criticism for not abiding by the Arab definition of the hijab. As someone who is not Arab, Seema further felt othered by the Arabs around her for not wearing the hijab according to their definition and culture.

The emphasis on wearing the hijab through fear is something that has stuck with Seema even over a decade after middle school. Attitudes like this encouraged Seema to explore her religion more. Since she describes her early introduction to religion as “institutionalized,” she sought to research Islam on her own terms rather than what was taught to her at school. Most adherents to Islam identify with the Sunni sect, which emphasizes emulating how the Prophet Muhammad lived through interpretations of Hadith. Hadith are compiled sayings of the Islamic prophet and vary in authenticity. Overall, Sunni Muslims follow the Quran and the most authentic Hadiths when it comes to practicing Islam. However, as Seema researched Islam more, she began to identify with a minority sect of Islam whose adherents are known as Quranists. These Muslims emphasize the Quran as the main source of information on how to practice Islam and therefore prioritize the Quran over the Hadith when it comes to religious matters. Seema believes that the expectations of the hijab, as outlined in the literature review, are based solely on Hadiths. She states,

I listen to God's words because that's what God told me to do, and nowhere in the Quran does it say that you have to cover your hair? I will say that it does talk about modesty. But one thing I was very upset about when I found out was that it didn't just talk about

hijab in the sense of [physical] hijab. hijab actually doesn't mean head covering. It means modesty. In a sense, it doesn't just talk about the hijab for women. It talks about the hijab for men. I was like, where were these men's hijab talks? Where were these congregations that we had in middle school?

As outlined by Seema, her Quranist interpretation of the hijab emphasizes hijab in the behavioral sense over the physical. She refers to the Quran verse that is largely attributed by mainstream Muslims as the command for the hijab: “Say to the believing women that they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste)...and not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their khumur over their bosoms...” (Quran 24:31). She believes that this verse emphasizes that Muslim women should behave modestly through chastity and wear modest clothing that covers their private parts. There has been debate among Muslims about the definition of khumur, which many scholars believe means headscarf; other interpretations say otherwise. Seema further elaborates on the context of this verse, such as where it was revealed. Since the Quran was revealed in the Arabian desert, she argues that everyone likely wore a khumur, or headscarf, as a protective garment suitable for surviving the desert climate. Seema and other Quranists argue that since the word hijab is not directly mentioned in this verse, then wearing it is not obligatory for Muslim women. Due to this interpretation, Seema believes that she does not wear the hijab for religious reasons.

At the same time, the Quran commands men to lower their gaze before the verse instructing women to be modest. The verse follows, “Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their chastity. That is purer for them. Surely Allah is All-Aware of what they do” (Quran, 24:30). This verse is referenced by Seema, who relates the erasure of this information to sexism rooted in culture. She says,

The fact that they were always pushing these standards on women that didn't even exist, but were not even pointing out the obvious and evident ones that were already presented to men in the Quran made me realize there was some bias in the way that they were trying to present things, and that most of the stuff they were presenting was likely not truthful information. It was just cultural information that had been brought down for generations that were designed to make women feel inferior, and men feel like nothing applies to them.

This sexist cultural rhetoric by her teachers is yet another example of how Muslims perpetuate the rhetoric that Muslim women need to represent Islam through the hijab in order to be virtuous. Because of this, Seema believes the burden of following Islam was placed on women by men who deliberately misconstrue Islam to avoid accountability. By learning about this as an adult, she describes feeling as though she has “lost trust in the system.” However, relearning Islam at her own pace brought about newfound faith and understanding of the difference between culture and religion. She further blames this rhetoric on Arab culture. She says,

It's like the religion came, and God's word came, and it was perfect. But then, of course, culture is very strong. I don't think it ever left. I feel like culture definitely influences all religions, but it has definitely, like Arab culture, has definitely influenced Islam one hundred percent.

Essentially, Seema believes the absence of Arab culture in Islam would make the religion easier to follow and would clear up many debates among Muslims. The cultural rhetorics present among Muslims often contradict the actual religion of Islam, as Seema pointed out. Rhetoric against Muslim women to abide by certain interpretations of the hijab erases the men's responsibility for the hijab in the behavioral sense. Despite Islam instructing men to lower their

gazes before women, it is culture that ultimately permits men to heighten their gazes toward women to police them.

After discussing how she ultimately fears fellow Muslims when it comes to the topic of the hijab, Seema expresses similar sentiments when it comes to wearing the hijab in the South. She describes fearing for Muslim women who wear the hijab in the South since she believes Islamophobia is still common. She describes the people in Knoxville specifically as “not racist, but not accepting at the same time.” She believes that if she wore the hijab in the South, she would draw more attention to herself. Seema draws upon the paradox discussed earlier how the hijab is a symbol for modesty, yet draws attention to the wearer. She says,

hijab is supposed to be about modesty, but I feel like it's gotten so much attention in the media that you become a source of attention. Like it's contradicting its purpose.

Obviously, it's not the woman's fault, but it's just a very interesting scenario, specifically in the West, in the South, where you're trying not to draw attention to yourself. You're trying to be modest, but you're also drawing attention to yourself, because you're the only one doing it [wearing hijab] if that makes sense.

She goes on to elaborate that this paradox is what drives her away from wearing the hijab. However, she describes Muslim women who wear the hijab in this environment as “brave” and “bold,” which directly counters the idea from both the West and Muslims that Muslim women need to be meek and hidden. Indeed, it is a struggle to navigate the West, especially the South, as a hijabi due to the rhetoric from the media. Seema’s decision not to wear the hijab is also directly influenced by the Islamophobic rhetoric from the media as much as it is by the fear she experienced from Muslims who told her she would go to hell for not wearing one. By foregoing wearing the hijab, Seema feels as though she is protecting herself from hate crimes. Her Quranist

interpretation of the hijab further protects her from the judgment of other Muslims by reaffirming her decision not to wear it.

Even though she does not wear the hijab, Seema believes that the hijab still holds meaning to her. She describes this as, “I get the sense of like security. I don't know how to explain it, but it's like just it feels like protection, like I can't imagine praying without it...So I do get a sense of security from it. So I guess when I take it off, it's kind of cold. It's kind of not as protective.” Despite her earlier sentiments describing the hijab as essentially a target for hatred, she still feels an overwhelming sense of security when wearing it, largely attributed to her faith, such as wearing it while praying. At the same time, she acknowledges that she has a privilege by not wearing the hijab because people do not judge her for her appearance. Without the hijab, she feels like another young woman whose religion isn't visibly apparent. Essentially, this gives her the active choice to reveal a part of her identity on her terms without facing assumptions and judgment first.

After this conversation, Seema then goes on to describe what the hijab means to Muslim men. She brings up the fetishization of hijabi women by Muslim men. She posits, “My theory is, you get more worse attention if you wear the hijab than you don't from Muslim guys, because the way they sexualize women who wear the hijab is disgusting.” I asked her to elaborate on this theory, and she described a popular analogy often used to praise hijabis and villainize non-hijabis. She elaborates, “An uncovered woman is like an uncovered candy bar, or something. They just sexualized the hijab. The hijab was never meant for men. The hijab has nothing to do with men. That's something they came up with on their own. And you know, it's cultural, obviously.” Here, Seema directly correlates the fetishization and sexualization of the hijab with cultural rhetorics that stem from sexism. As she described earlier, the cultural omission in

teaching the male version of the hijab has resulted in the hijab becoming an object of fetishization rather than a religious garment. The rhetoric presented in the candy bar analogy further perpetuates the objectification of women while also outlining the clear pedestal hijabis are placed against non-hijabis.



Figure 4: A visual representation of the objectification of Muslim women

As a non-hijabi herself, Seema describes how she is not viewed as a religious person due to the absence of the hijab around her head. The rhetoric perpetuated by Muslims that associates the hijab with virtue ultimately creates the narrative that hijabis are religious while non-hijabis are not. She describes Muslims who think this way as “superficial.” In another example, she demonstrates the reality that “There are people who wear the hijab, and they party every weekend. There are people who don't wear the hijab and don't party every weekend.” This example demonstrates the idea that the hijab does not automatically make someone a religious Muslim. Instead, it is through practicing values such as modesty that makes someone religious. Therefore, the rhetoric perpetuated by Muslims that hijabis are more religious is flawed. Seema attributes this to culture and believes that some people may be wearing the hijab to prove to other Muslims that they are religious. She says, “When you put on the hijab, people are thinking, like,

you're trying to prove you're religious or something... It would definitely be considered like a showy thing.” Wearing the hijab for the sole purpose of being viewed as religious alludes to the paradox of hijabis being modest yet drawing attention to themselves. People who wear the hijab for other Muslims are likely influenced by the cultural rhetoric that values hijab wearing women over non-hijabis. Wearing the hijab with this intention also upholds the rhetoric that hijabis are more virtuous than non-hijabis, yet the contradiction of wearing a religious garment to appease people rather than God also becomes apparent.

Clearly, Seema holds opinions that are not considered by many Muslims. Her unorthodox beliefs guiding her choice not to wear the hijab is understandably questioned by mainstream Muslims around her. While many Muslims respect her choice, Seema discusses the frustration she feels when her choice is disregarded by other Muslims who try to impose their interpretations of the hijab onto her. She says

Anybody who tells me that I need to wear the hijab just makes me not want to wear it more. It kind of hurts me at this point, do you think I haven't had this conversation with myself? Do you think I'm not aware I'm not wearing the hijab? Obviously, I know I don't wear the hijab. Obviously, I've had this conversation a million times, like, I don't need you to tell me. And you're not going to change my mind at 22 years old.

From these experiences, Seema speaks for many Muslim women who do not wear the hijab. The expectation to change their appearance on account of someone else's interpretation of Islam can come across as hurtful and frustrating. It is also the rhetoric from Muslims that assert hijabis as more virtuous than non-hijabis that enables this entitlement to “save” non-hijabis. As she described earlier, Seema knows that many Muslims legitimately believe you cannot enter heaven

without the hijab. It seems as though hijabis posit themselves as saviors to non-hijabis without truly understanding the harmful rhetoric they are perpetuating.

Seema has also faced the opposite expectations from Muslims. She recounts some Muslim friends telling her they are glad she does not wear the hijab. In one instance, she describes a story in which a Muslim friend encouraged her to wear less clothing. She describes this moment as “And they’re like, ‘Why don't you take that jacket off?...maybe you could just show a little bit more skin, like you don't have to be so conservative.’” She ultimately concludes that regardless of her decision to wear the hijab, she will face criticism either way.

Overall, Seema concludes the interview by saying that the hijab is no longer an article of clothing to her. Rather, it has become a concept to her influencing the way she behaves. She describes this as,

I am using my hijab when I'm talking to you. I'm trying to talk very modestly. When I lower my gaze, I'm wearing my hijab. I'm obeying the rules of modesty, the way I present myself. I feel like hijab is a sense of modesty and understanding that, like you shouldn't be showing off all the time. And that's not as in clothing, it's as in who you are, and it kind of brings you closer back to humility and submission to God.

By emphasizing the hijab as a way of life rather than a physical manifestation of representing Islam, Seema feels closer to her religion. Essentially, she believes that embodying religion is not the only way to practice Islam. Through her behavior, she believes she is fulfilling the concept of the hijab in an authentic manner. When asked about what not wearing the hijab means to her, Seema provided a similar answer. She says,

Not wearing the hijab means that you don't care how you act. You have no relationship with God on how you want to present yourself as a Muslim; you have no contract...You

flaunt yourself in any way. You speak in any way. You stare people down and lust in any way you want. You don't have any specific sense of self. You don't know self-preservation, don't know how to present yourself in a respectful manner that respects not only you, but also respects the people around you.

To Seema, the lack of hijab is fundamentally a lack in Islamic behavior that precedes modesty in the physical sense. She believes that enacting the principles of the hijab is equivalent to wearing the hijab. Wearing the hijab in this spiritual manner is what helped her learn how to love Islam rather than fear it like she did as a child. This shift in perspective has also allowed her to consider wearing the hijab in the future, but she emphasizes that not wearing it for the time being won't land her in hell.

Halima's Story:

Halima is someone who has moved frequently throughout her life. She has lived in Texas, South Dakota, and is currently in Knoxville, Tennessee. Like her experience moving around the United States, she has also journeyed through the different sects of Islam. She describes growing up Ismaili Shia and attending Jamatkhana rather than a mosque for religious services. The transition from Ismaili Shiaism to mainstream Islam occurred when she was around eighteen years old, and during this period of her life, she came to know the hijab. She describes this moment as "In like Ismaili, religion, culture, or whatever, you don't really wear the hijab, so I've never truly thought of it as like I need to do it until just very recently." Compared to mainstream sects of Islam, Ismaili women typically do not wear the hijab due to different interpretations and standards in place by their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan.

Alongside her unique religious identity, Halima describes herself as Indian-American. She notes that since Hindu culture dominates Indian society, her family has partaken in elements

of Indian culture influenced by Hinduism before moving to the United States. Due to these influences, Halima considers herself fairly new to mainstream Islam. She says,

I do believe that religion exists, and that Islam, the religion I follow, is the true religion.

However, I don't follow all the guidelines I'm supposed to. For example, I am supposed to wear the hijab. I don't. I am supposed to pray 5 times a day. I barely make it to 2 or 3, and I should be better. If I classified myself, I wouldn't say I'm overly religious, but I think I have the religious morals that I need.

Halima seems to abide by mainstream Islamic interpretations, such as wearing the hijab being mandatory for Muslim women. However, she acknowledges that she does not meet this standard.

She does wear the hijab in situations where most Muslim women would wear it, such as attending the mosque or other Islamic events. She mentioned how she and her mother would wear the hijab in the presence of certain guests; her family reasons that doing so around these people who might expect her to wear the hijab shows them respect. However, Halima describes this instance as a scenario where she feels forced to wear the hijab. She says,

It usually is that where we have guests coming over, and it's like, 'Oh, like there are these very good Muslims, so we don't want to disrespect them. So put the hijab on.' And the thing that gets to me is, I feel disingenuous because I'm not wearing it for its true meaning. I'm wearing it to make those people happy, which I could care less what they think. But like culturally or like in this setting, it almost seemed like I had to, and I don't like that.

Halima clearly describes this behavior, perpetuated by her parents, to be rooted in culture. In their eyes, they equate the hijab with respect and virtue, like the rhetoric perpetuated by Muslims. Therefore, to appease these types of Muslim guests, they feel like Halima should show

them respect by wearing the hijab. When Halima does wear the hijab in scenarios such as these and others, she credits her Indian culture with influencing the manner in which she wears it. As mentioned before, many Muslims attribute “proper hijab” with Arabized elements such as the abaya and a hijab that does not show a strand of hair. She says, “Down in India, people don't really wear the proper hijab. It's just like you put it over your head. And it's like you're covered. And all your hair is falling out everything. But like, as long as you have that over your head, you're fine.” So, despite being forced to wear the hijab in some scenarios, Halima maintains her Indian culture while doing so. She can still follow the expectations placed on her by family members and guests who associate the hijab with respect, but maintains her Indian identity at the same time.

Throughout the interview, Halima asserts that she is still new to mainstream Islam, yet already holds many opinions surrounding the way Muslims practice Islam. For example, she firmly believes that Muslims are tainting Islam with cultural interpretations of certain religious viewpoints and practices. She says,

All these emotions and anger that I have towards our religion are actually towards the people who have changed it and put it in a more cultural view. So like all the negative things about women, and like berating women. It's more of a cultural thing. It's not a religious thing. Our prophet used to respect all the women he was around and was so respectful to his wife, to his daughter...And so I don't think our religion has really affected or changed my viewpoint on hijab. It's more a cultural aspect of controlling women.

Based on Halima's response, it is clear that cultural rhetoric rooted in sexism has infiltrated the actions of Muslims. Muslim men, specifically, are empowered by cultural ideas that assert their

superiority over Muslim women. Halima challenges these men by citing the Prophet Muhammad's just treatment of the women in his life. By differentiating true Islamic values against cultural norms, Halima stipulates that cultural reasons are purely responsible for turning her away from the hijab.

At the same time, Halima expresses that she has not worn the hijab because of the fear of judgment from other Muslims. She recalls seeing Muslims on social media bashing Muslim women for the way they wear their hijabs. She says, "I've heard people say, 'Oh, if you're not going to wear it properly, why even bother wearing it?' And it's like, at least those women are making an attempt to wear the hijab, whereas I'm in the position where I've totally given up and I'm not wearing it." Many Muslims perpetuate the all-or-nothing rhetoric of wearing the hijab. These Muslims view wearing the hijab as a continuous commitment, and since the hijab symbolizes Islam, which is viewed as a perfect religion, wearing it in a manner that does not meet certain standards often results in harsh criticism, as outlined by Halima. Essentially, expecting perfection from hijabis is another means by which Muslim women are drawn away from the hijab.

I asked her why perfectionism is expected of Muslim women, and Halima answered that gender inequality among Muslims plays a role in these attitudes. She describes it as,

The inequality we see between men and women. Because men are also supposed to dress modestly. They don't have to put on a hijab, but they have to dress modestly, and you best believe there have been prayers that I go to, and I see boys coming in in their gym shorts and a T-shirt. And that is not the right attire. They're supposed to cover their arms all the way until their wrists and wear long pants. Do they know? Does anyone say

anything? No, but you best believe if I came in that same outfit, all hell would break loose. Because how dare you wear that?

Here, Halima refers to how the hijab for men is not enforced the same way it is enforced upon women. As mentioned before, the Muslim men are also expected to abide by modesty standards; however, the conversation surrounding women and modesty overshadows their responsibilities. Even in religious settings such as prayer, men are permitted to exist while not adhering to Islamic modesty, whereas all Muslim women are expected to wear the hijab during prayer. She further elaborates that while this issue is rooted in gender inequality, there are “as many toxic women as you have toxic men.” She discusses that oftentimes, it is older women she refers to as “aunties,” who perpetuate the rhetoric that Muslim women are held to a higher standard when it comes to modesty. Inappropriate and invasive behavior, such as policing younger Muslim girls, is common, she says, and oftentimes these women are hypocritical since they do not hold their sons to the same modesty expectations. This relates to the idea that Muslim women can be enforcers of the rhetoric that places hijabis on a pedestal. Since this rhetoric benefits them, they feel as though they have authority over women who do not abide by the same modesty standards, all while ignoring the men who may not fulfill Islamic modesty standards.

As the interview continues, the conversation shifts to wearing the hijab in Knoxville, Tennessee. She believes that the Islamophobic rhetoric from the media influences her not to wear the hijab more than Indian culture. She states,

Maybe because there is this negative connotation, with wearing the hijab, especially in like Western culture, where it's seen as like, ‘Oh, you're being controlled.’ So maybe there's like a subliminal aspect of me not wanting to wear it because of that. But there's also, I feel afraid for my life and my family's life with how Muslims are viewed in the

Western media. If I am wearing a hijab, you know. So I feel like that has more of a hold on me than the culture itself, the Indian culture.

Halima acknowledges that the rhetoric against Muslims from the Western media has unconsciously influenced her not to wear the hijab. She goes on to elaborate that she feels unsafe wearing the hijab in the South. She cites hate crimes as a factor that draws her away from wearing the hijab, such as a Texas woman attempting to drown a three-year-old child because their mother was Muslim (Alsharif and Bouarrouj). She continues to describe how wearing the hijab makes Muslim women more identifiable and therefore more vulnerable to attacks. She says,

Because it's viewed as a negative thing here in the South and just in the western area as a whole, that scares me and my family as well, because there have been attacks on certain Muslim families and women specifically, because, see Muslim men, you can't tell who they are like right away, whereas Muslim women with one look, you know, they're Muslim women, because they're wearing the hijab, and it's obvious that, she's one of them. So that would be something I would say has had an effect on my choice of not wearing it.

Halima's fear of hypervisibility while wearing the hijab is another factor that ultimately draws her away from wearing it. Since the hijab is a symbol so connected with Islam as a religion, it immediately communicates to everyone within the vicinity of the wearer that they are Muslim. In a way, Halima is fearful of being labelled as a Muslim, thus becoming a walking target for hateful people.

As a Muslim woman who does not wear the hijab, Halima describes this choice to be rooted in convenience. When asked to elaborate on this idea, she points to the assertion that hijabis are held to a standard by non-Muslims and Muslims. She says,

I feel like women who wear the hijab have to, like, present themselves in this way and hold themselves up to the standard, and because I don't wear it, I feel like I don't have to meet that standard. I could just look homeless and go to school and be fine, whereas if I were wearing a hijab, I would hold myself up to a standard as like, 'oh, I can't look like this, because I'm representing my religion by wearing this.' So again, the word that comes to mind is convenience.

The standard that Halima is referring to is the notion that Muslim women who wear the hijab represent Islam, therefore, they need to act as perfectly as possible. This includes behaving in ways that are deemed Islamic. If she falls outside this standard, she could be accused of disrespecting Islam since she symbolizes Islam with her hijab. When I asked who she believed set this standard, her answer surprised me. She replies,

Western culture, because it's seen as if you're wearing the hijab, you're repressed. So I feel like these women are trying to show that like, hey? No, we still have free will, and can do what we want, and dress the way we want. As long as we're following our religion and the guidelines that are given to us, we can still look good and slay, and all the things while wearing the hijab.

Her answer corresponds to the paradox of Muslim women having to be modest while also drawing attention to themselves in Western society. She believes that hijabi women existing boldly squashes the rhetoric from the West that hijab equals oppression. This idea is similar to the goals of Mona Haydar's song "Wrap My hijab," which demonstrates that hijabis are not

oppressed and can creatively be themselves while representing their faith. However, by not wearing the hijab, Halima realizes that most people will not view her as a Muslim at first glance. She says, “Non-muslims don't know I'm Muslim until I openly tell them that I'm Muslim, because I don't wear the hijab. They could think I'm Hindu because I'm from India, or they could think I'm Christian, like my best friend is from India, and she's Christian, so like they don't know right away until I like tell them because I'm not wearing it.” The convenience factor of not wearing the hijab manifests in these scenarios by allowing Halima to reveal her religious identity on her terms. She can strategically reveal her Muslim identity depending on the situation or who she is interacting with in a way that is convenient for her. However, she believes that by not wearing the hijab, she has become detached from Islam because she feels she can better herself as a Muslim through wearing the hijab.

Toward the end of the interview, I asked Halima to reflect on the meaning of the hijab. She describes the hijab as being a symbol associated with good and positivity. She says, “I think the hijab represents a very modest, good person. If I see someone wearing a hijab. I automatically think of them as a good person. They probably have good morals. They are probably sweet and kind and caring, and all the good synonyms.” The meaning she has made of the hijab reflects the rhetoric perpetuated by Muslims that associates hijab wearing women with virtue and other good qualities. Unlike these Muslims, Halima avoids putting hijabis on a pedestal because she describes not wearing the hijab as something more meaningful. She says, “I don't think it means you're a bad Muslim. I think it means you're a Muslim who's like striving to hopefully be a better Muslim.” This attitude directly counters the rhetoric that Muslim women who do not wear the hijab are impure and less than hijabis. Instead, Halima's approach allows for non-hijabis to be viewed positively and ultimately as human. The expectations of perfection

from Muslim women can be overwhelming, and Halima's beliefs allow room for growth for Muslim women, rather than being stifled by the divisive rhetoric against them. As a Muslim woman who does not wear the hijab, she calls for people she interacts with to treat her the same as any other person. She emphasizes that at the end of the day, everyone is human and deserves to be treated with respect, regardless of their religion and how they choose to present themselves.

Discussion

Overall, Seema and Halima share similar sentiments as they navigate society as Muslim women who do not wear the hijab. Their stories highlight how Muslim women who do not wear the hijab become invisible compared to their hijabi counterparts. As a result, they lose a sense of their Islamic identity and may feel the need to compensate for it through other identifiers. For the women in this study, Halima's experiences reflect Seema's in that their ethnicities overshadow their religious identity. Without the hijab, their religious affiliation is less apparent to the non-Muslims around them. Therefore, aspects of their identities, such as their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, become highlighted when it comes to others making sense of their identities. Therefore, women who do not wear the hijab feel that they have to prove their religious affiliation in other ways, such as through their name, as Seema noted before. But it is ultimately through the Islamophobic rhetoric of the Western media, combined with the rhetoric from Muslims that places expectations of perfection onto Muslim women, that guides Seema and Halima away from the hijab. Making sense of what Islam teaches without cultural influence was used by both women to validate their choices not to wear the hijab. Divorcing culture from religion is an important factor in encouraging Muslim women who do not wear the hijab to stay in the faith and practice as they please.

Identity and Representing Islam

When the media constantly paints women who wear the hijab as oppressed and associates Muslims with terrorism, it can be daunting to represent a religion that is so targeted. The women who have never worn a hijab express that by not wearing the hijab, they do not have to conform to Muslims' and non-Muslims' expectations of them. As previously discussed, Halima believes that not wearing the hijab is a convenient decision that allows her to get away with dressing informally. However, her beliefs further reflect the rhetoric that Muslim women are representatives of Islam. This belief inadvertently affirms the rhetoric that Muslim women need to abide by specific conditions of fulfilling the hijab. As mentioned earlier, many Muslims believe the hijab needs to look a certain way, with some going as far as believing pants on women do not fulfill the expectations of the hijab. Halima understands that she cannot fulfill these expectations because she knows she cannot meet those standards. Essentially, she believes that she is afforded the convenience of not having to represent Islam in her day-to-day life while also acknowledging that women who wear the hijab have to go the extra mile to counter the negative rhetoric enforced by Western media. Halima's acknowledgement of hijabi women representing Islam through their appearance reflects the responses of some of the women in Hopkins and Greenwood's study. They find,

Proud to assert her Muslim identity, yet aware of others' perceptions of Muslim women's oppression, this interviewee modified the performance of her Muslim identity through wearing scarves judged to communicate her happiness in being a Muslim woman. Moreover, this allowed her to perform her gender identity in an Islamically acceptable manner—as long as her scarf covered her hair she could assert a fashionable individuality.

The participant in this study directly reflects what Halima describes as Muslim women “slaying” while still adhering to Islamic modesty standards. To Halima and Hopkins and Greenwood’s participant, representing Islam in a positive manner can uplift a Muslim woman’s sense of identity while countering the rhetoric that the hijab is oppressive.

In Seema’s case, she negotiates the concept of identity with her practice of the hijab in a behavioral and spiritual sense. She still tries her best to dress modestly according to Islamic standards. Her conceptualization of her identity through practicing the hijab in her behavior and actions aligns with Karaman’s findings that non-hijabis can still represent Islam. She writes, “As a result, not only does the hijab play a role as a boundary marker, but also modestly dressing and her lifestyle play as a boundary marker between hijabi and non-hijabi American Muslim women and the importance of their religious identity in their lives” (Karaman 107). Both Karaman’s participants and Seema developed their identities in the context of Knoxville, Tennessee. Therefore, it can be inferred that American Muslim women in the South can still represent Islamic values of modesty, whether or not they wear the hijab.

Fear

After reviewing Halima and Seema’s interviews, the notion of fear is brought up many times. No matter the context, fear has played a significant role in Halima and Seema’s decisions not to wear the hijab. Muslim women face criticism from both Muslim and non-Muslims; Halima and Seema both shared specific instances and stories where they felt a sense of fear from both angles. Therefore, it can be argued that the fear of Islamophobia and judgment from Muslims contributes to Muslim women not wearing the hijab in the South.

Islamophobia

Halima especially expands upon how the rise of Islamophobia discourages her from wearing the hijab. As she discussed in her interview, she recalls learning of hate crimes directed towards Muslims, specifically involving hijabi women, as examples of why she does not wear the hijab. Halima broadly blames the anti-Islam rhetoric present in Western media for the occurrence of these hate crimes and the general villainization of Muslims. Her sentiments reflect the responses of some of Droogsma's hijabi participants, some of whom lived through the 9/11 attacks. She writes, "Indeed, several of the women noted feeling fairly inconspicuous before September 11, but being glared at and shouted at after September 11. Certainly media coverage of the War on Terror has associated veiled women with the 'enemy' (Cloud, 2004) and, thus, has made them targets of anger and fear" (Droogsma 308). The difference between Halima and the participants in Droogsma's study is that they still maintain wearing their hijabs despite the negative media coverage that can make them targets. This is why Halima believes that not wearing the hijab is a convenient decision for her, but still views hijabis with honor. Seema similarly believes that women who wear the hijab are brave for communicating their religious identity in a hostile environment.

Fear of Muslims

For both Halima and Seema, the fear of judgment from the Muslim community is enough to discourage them from wearing the hijab. As Seema described in her interview, the hijab was introduced as a scare tactic to her as a young child. The threat of hell loomed over her if she did not abide by her teachers' expectations of the hijab, which mirrors the rhetoric from many Muslims who equate wearing the hijab with virtue. Essentially, in Seema's experience, the hijab was not only a threat but also a means to pit her against other Muslim girls for the sake of

maintaining the innocence of her male classmates. As described by the graphic in Figure 3, the less a Muslim woman abides by the notion of proper hijab, the greater trial she becomes for Muslim men. When the hijab is framed this way, all religious meaning is lost. Instead, the hijab becomes a purely cultural garment that caters to men while comparing Muslim women based on their appearances. Halima mentions this idea as well, stating that she holds anger against Muslims who have used culture to justify sexist practices among Muslim communities. Redefining the hijab back to its original religious purpose can eliminate the cultural rhetoric that has muddled the meaning of the hijab. Doing so may also encourage Muslim women to wear the hijab without the fear of culturally rooted and sexist judgment.

Chapter 5: Women who recently started wearing the hijab

This chapter centers women who have recently started wearing the hijab. They are defined in this study as have started wearing the hijab in the past 2-3 years after not wearing it their entire lives. Specifically, they started to wear the hijab in adulthood. Two participants, Emmy and Sara, both consider themselves to be a part of this category. Both women describe wearing the hijab in their early twenties during college, and currently wear it today. As they illustrate their stories, they emphasize how adding religious meaning to the hijab empowers them to wear the hijab despite rhetoric from Muslims and non-Muslims that can potentially draw them away.

Sara's story

Initially, Sara had a negative attitude towards the hijab. She recalls her father asking her when she would start wearing the hijab, which led her to believe that the garment was a “restriction” and “limitation.” As a child of Pakistani immigrant parents, Sara’s initial beliefs toward the hijab are not uncommon. Sara, who is twenty-four years old, has lived through post-9/11 America much like the other participants. As one of the older participants in the study, Sara has been exposed to Islamophobic rhetoric longer. Her language towards the hijab is similar to the findings presented in *Covering Muslims*. The authors conclude, “Indeed, ‘radical’ and ‘extremist’ are among the words a U.S. newspaper reader has been most likely to see in the immediate context of the root words Muslim* or Islam* since 9/11” (Bleich and van der Veen 94). Characterizing Muslims and Islam with this rhetoric would surely affect Muslim youth, therefore, it isn’t surprising that Sara would inadvertently similarly view the hijab. At the same time, the insistence to wear the hijab came from her father, who is not visibly Muslim the same way hijabis are. The discontent Sara felt earlier likely also stemmed from the rhetoric

perpetuated by Muslim men, who feel as though they have a say in whether or not a Muslim woman wears the hijab.

As a Pakistani American, Sara understands that her cultural background is deeply tied to Islam. Pakistan is a Muslim majority country founded on the principles of Islam. Even though Islam reflects a majority of the population's beliefs, Sara notes that Pakistani culture has become synonymous with Islam at times, which can lead to confusion. She says,

But sometimes the culture says one thing, and religion is actually like something else. So something becomes culturally religious, which is confusing, because then, you get the two confused. So, I guess I just had to distinguish between what was culture and what was religion, because some of the things that I didn't like were actually culture and not religion.

This shift in mindset became a guiding force for Sara as she came to wear the hijab. When the line between culture and religion is blurred, there is an opportunity to use culture to misconstrue religious beliefs.

As she grew older, Sara eventually found herself studying Islam more and felt guided to wear the hijab. She notes that she became interested in practicing her religion in college and took steps to prepare herself to wear the hijab. She started "wearing loose clothes and covering fully," as per the standards detailed by websites like Islam Question and Answer. She took further action and says, "I cut my hair because, like I think, I was attached to my hair when it was long" to encourage herself to wear the hijab. For Sara, easing into modest dressing was the best approach for her when it came to wearing the hijab. When asked why she decided to wear the hijab, she replied that she came to wear it because she believes that God commanded Muslim women to wear the hijab in the Quran. She goes on to describe how if it weren't for the rhetoric

against Niqabs, or hijabs that include full face coverings, she would probably wear one since she follows the interpretation by Islamic scholars who believe that Muslim women should be covering their faces. Sara feels empowered to wear the hijab due to her belief in Islam.

The trust she holds in God also allows Sara to feel more protected in the hijab and, therefore, more human. She attributes the meaning of the hijab to her as a form of protection and her way of following God's commands. Therefore, when Sara didn't wear the hijab, she meant she was not following God's commands. She describes this as when "I'm not wearing it. I'm just far from what I need to be doing." She prefaces this overarching belief with a story. She states:

First, the Quran says that everything in the heavens and Earth prostrates to Allah. And then— I don't know if this is a verse or like or what— but it says most people are ungrateful, and most people don't realize that. But it made me realize that every single thing is following the command of Allah. And like it doesn't have a choice, you know. So they do [follow Allah]. But human beings have a voice, and they have free will. And most of them choose to disobey, along with the free will that He gave us, so I feel like by not wearing it and disobeying Allah, I was further from my natural state.

Sara believes that wearing the hijab is a part of her natural state as prescribed by God. Not fulfilling God's commands could make her ungrateful; therefore, wearing the hijab is one step towards consciously obeying God through her free will. This line of thinking attributes the hijab as a solely religious garment in Sara's case, which challenges the cultural rhetorics that have been attached to the hijab. Interestingly, this is Sara's way of distinguishing religion from culture. It seems to have worked for her, since she still wants to continue wearing the hijab.

Toward the end of the interview, Sara and I began to relate with one another about our experiences as new hijabis. The issue of social media was brought up. Sara describes that when

she, like many other new hijabis, chose to wear the hijab, she deleted all the hijab-less photos on her social media accounts. She says, “Yeah, to cover your hair, because then we kind of have to delete like all our past pictures, and like your life before. And then you're just kind of like, you're a new person, like, you're just a fresh person.” As we discussed this, Sara and I realized that a sudden blank social media profile of a Muslim woman can usually indicate that the user will begin to wear the hijab soon. The association with the hijab and a social fresh start of sorts is an experience innate to women who have recently begun wearing the hijab. The women from the other categories typically do not have to erase their old lives in the name of the hijab. The act of erasing one's past self through the deletion of old social media posts is a bold decision, especially in the digital age, where people share their lives online. Rhetorically, social media serves as a powerful tool when it comes to publicly coming out as a hijabi. The act of deleting and replacing photos of oneself with their new identity is a powerful way of expressing a major personal change.

Overall, Sara believes that wearing the hijab was the right choice for her. She also wants to be there for her friends who are considering wearing the hijab, since she emphasizes how important community is when it comes to a decision as important as the hijab. She insists that a nonjudgmental perspective is important when it comes to supporting Muslim women who want to wear the hijab because of how aspects of culture have muddled the meaning of the hijab. She ultimately wishes to continue her education in Islamic studies to educate more women about their role and rights in Islam.

Emmy's Story

Emmy's hijab story tells a different story, rooted more in the significance of location. She is ethnically Bangladeshi, but spent a lot of time in Morristown, Tennessee, before eventually

settling in Knoxville, Tennessee. She describes these locations as not having a strong presence of hijabis. Growing up across these locations, she witnessed her mother's relationship with the hijab develop. She describes her mother wearing the hijab for some periods, and then removing it during other times. As she watched her mother's changing relationship with the hijab, she slowly began to consider what her own journey with the hijab would entail.

Like Sara, Emmy associates beginning to wear the hijab with a fresh start in life. She discusses that in middle school and high school, she believed that the hijab would be a foreign concept to her peers since they lived in such a small city with no other hijabis. Therefore, she made it a goal for herself to wear the hijab when she started college in Knoxville. She says,

But I had a feeling like in college, you can start kind of fresh, and everyone is different. They're more used to seeing different people from different backgrounds, if not the hijab, then at least something different. So it just wouldn't matter by then. So I kind of prepared myself to change and start wearing it once college started, and that so coincidentally hit on my 18th birthday. And that's just so like, luckily, that's just kind of how I started wearing it.

For Emmy, wearing the hijab during this major shift in her life contributed to her feeling of starting fresh. She had become an adult, moved to a new city, and was starting college. All of these life events are associated with the concept of starting fresh, and therefore, she capitalized on these factors to include her appearance. For her, the hijab was as much of a fresh start as these major life events.

Interestingly enough, Emmy associates Knoxville, Tennessee, with significant diversity that served as a motivational factor to begin wearing the hijab. She describes Morristown as having “nothing” in terms of diversity, which caused her to associate Knoxville with the place

where she would begin to wear the hijab. When she first wore the hijab in Knoxville, she recalls being on the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's campus. Even though she admits to feeling self-conscious that day, she realized that she did not receive any hostility that day. She says, "I think no one cared. It was very neutral, so no one had any opinion. That was just how they saw me." The reaction from her peers supports Emmy's assumption that the hijab would be viewed indifferently in Knoxville. Choosing to wear it for the first time on campus was also a significant move because college campuses are typically a place where diversity is more common compared to a small city. For Emmy, location was found to be a major supporting factor when it comes to wearing the hijab. She reasons that "Everyone's just kind of worried about themselves, especially in college" to explain why she has not faced Islamophobia or any other forms of hatred.

One of the things that held Emmy back from wearing the hijab was the notion of becoming visibly Muslim. She asserts that wearing the hijab was a religious decision, but representing Islam was daunting. She says,

Not just modesty, but showing that you're publicly Muslim was a big challenge. Also, not prioritizing religion was a big deal. So then finally, when I did [wear the hijab], I was just kind of like, why was I trying to hide from people what my religion was? Because back then, like in my old town, I would never say I was Muslim until I was prompted to, but I didn't think that was me hiding my religion. But it was never really a question.

For Emmy, not wearing the hijab was hiding a part of her identity in a way. While some people associate the hijab with hiding oneself, Emmy believes that without a hijab, she was able to indirectly conceal her religion; essentially, by not presenting as Muslim, she was able to reveal her religious identity on her terms. However, wearing the hijab changed her views. She says, "I didn't realize I was hiding from it until I started wearing it. And I was like, Wow! I was ashamed

of it without realizing it, too. So once I wore it, I feel like that made me prouder to be Muslim, and I could tell people about it, and I could show it off without saying a word, which is a big difference from back then.” For Emmy, finally being able to reveal her religious identity was empowering after hiding for years. Her story illustrates another paradox faced by Muslim women. Even though the hijab physically covers the wearer, it signifies that they are Muslim; however, by not covering with the hijab, the wearer’s religious identity remains concealed. The semiotic meaning of the hijab served as a powerful tool for Emmy to feel pride in her identity as a Muslim woman. Some can argue that Muslim women are hiding themselves behind the hijab, but Emmy initially hid her religious identity by not covering her hair. She expands upon this notion when she discusses what not wearing the hijab means to her. She says, “I think to me personally, it was just kind of hiding, which is kind of counterintuitive. So me wearing the hijab to people can be hiding, hiding my hair, hiding, you know, something like that. But now, if I took it off, that’s more of me hiding from who I am or should be.” From this assertion, Emmy seems to have incorporated the hijab into her identity, equating not wearing it to hiding herself. Even though she has only been wearing it for about three and a half years now, the hijab has effectively made her identity more visible.

As she eased into wearing the hijab, Emmy began to associate the hijab with respect in different ways. For example, in her day-to-day interactions with people, she believes her hijab empowers others to treat her with respect. She says, “People will take me seriously. Respect, be more careful with what they tell me... but in a positive way, not a negative way. So I think that alone makes you feel empowered, like, okay, I’m well respected. I’m looked at differently, but in the way that I want to be looked at, and not in a derogatory way.” This experience ultimately allows Emmy to feel empowered in her hijab because she believes that it can command a sense

of authority she would not have received when she did not wear the hijab. In a society where women's looks can determine the amount of respect they receive, Emmy believes that the hijab supercedes this notion by forcing those around her to see her for herself. This is why she wishes that if she had known people would react this way to her in the hijab, she would have begun wearing the hijab earlier.

Even though Emmy says wearing the hijab was more of a religious decision, she believes the hijab has enhanced her relationship with Bangladeshi culture through her way of dressing. She says,

Culturally, every event I go to, I just feel with the hijab like a lot more festive, a lot more me. Like before, I was so worried about the hair part of the outfit. And now I'm like worried about the cultural outfit itself. The culture overall. I feel like hair was such a big deal to me before. I was always focused on how it would look to other people a lot more than the cultural part of everything. Now I feel like I embrace the culture a lot more.

For Emmy, the hijab is not cultural, but rather a means of highlighting her culture by shifting the focus away from her to the uniqueness of her cultural garments. She later adds that while many people assume the hijab takes away from the beauty of the outfit, she thinks the hijab adds to the beauty. Maintaining her culture through the addition of the hijab has therefore strengthened her relationship with both her religion and Bangladeshi culture.

As the interview comes to a close, Emmy candidly discusses how her life has been affected by choosing to wear the hijab. She admits that sometimes, she struggles with keeping it on. She says,

I miss playing with my hair and showing it and stuff like before. I like, you know, wear an outfit to go out. I kind of like look in the mirror beforehand with my hair, and I'm like,

Wow! It looks so good with my hair out. So I always have that little moment, and then I wear the hijab, and I'm like, 'Oh, I mean, it did look better with my hair. No one's ever going to know, though'.

When asked how she copes with these doubts, she replies that she would be embarrassed by herself for taking off the hijab for such trivial reasons. She emphasizes that it took a lot of courage and time to wear the hijab in the first place, so to Emmy, removing it would seemingly erase years of progress and hurt her in the long run. She sympathizes with a lot of hijabis since she believes this is a common train of thought, however, she emphasizes that the hijab is a commitment and goes beyond just being a piece of fabric.

Discussion

For both Sara and Emmy, becoming adults in college has proved to be a beneficial time in their lives to start wearing the hijab. They both have navigated life as not visibly Muslim to very visibly Muslim, and this change in lifestyle has ultimately benefited them both spiritually, socially, and has contributed to their growth as people. As adults, they were able to confidently say wearing the hijab on their own accord was their choice rooted in religious reasons. At the same time, they both gained a clearer understanding of their South Asian cultures and the role hijab plays in maintaining it. While they both expressed fear in being visibly Muslim, both Emmy and Sara overcame those emotions, thus ultimately encouraging them to hold onto the hijab. For women who have recently started wearing the hijab, it seems as if community and location are important factors to drawing them to wear and continue wearing the hijab.

Identity and Representing Islam

For Emmy and Sara, becoming hijabis drastically changed their appearances, and in turn, affected their identities. Becoming visibly Muslim after spending their whole lives not presenting

their religious affiliation physically has allowed both women to further expand their sense of identity as they matured into adulthood. Emmy specifically began to wear the hijab on her eighteenth birthday, signifying a physical and mental transition into adulthood. At the same time, this sense of maturity made Emmy realize that by not wearing the hijab, she was effectively hiding her Muslim identity from the world. Her newfound desire to become visibly Muslim reflects the findings of Hopkins and Greenwood that “Several participants described adopting hijab so as to make their Muslim identity visible” (441). This was also the case for Sara, who started wearing the hijab once she was able to untangle the cultural elements that had embedded itself into Islamic values. When it comes to gaining a confident understanding of Islam, it seems as though new hijabis try to embody Islam as a next step in their religious journey.

Emmy and Sara also believe that wearing the hijab has changed how they conduct themselves in public. Emmy says, “Character is important. That also influences the way I act towards people just ‘cause I’m representing more than just my clothes.” Sara’s responses agree with Emmy’s sentiment. Sara further explains that since hijabis are easily identifiable as Muslims, she tries her best to behave in a rational and calm manner, such as controlling her road rage in case the other driver sees her and attributes her rage to Islam. These attitudes directly support the findings of Droogsma, whose participants also discussed improving their behavior so they could better represent Islam. She writes, “While they recognized that this may seem constraining to non-Muslim persons, the women insisted that hijab allows them to control their behavior so that they feel good about the example they set, as Muslim women, through their everyday actions” (Droogsma 304). These attitudes also reflect Hopkins and Greenwood’s findings that Muslim women who wear the hijab adjust their behavior by performing Islamic

values through their actions since they are fully aware of the negative rhetoric against Muslims (442).

Fear

For women in the other categories, fear seemed to be an overwhelming factor that influenced their decision to wear the hijab or not. However, women who recently began wearing the hijab are practically fearless when it comes to being visually Muslim. It can be argued that their lack of fear could be attributed to factors such as the amount of time they have spent wearing the hijab and their environment. Emmy describes feeling as though she was hiding her religious identity before she wore the hijab. However, when she finally came to wear the hijab, she realized she had nothing to fear, especially since moving to Knoxville and wearing the hijab at the University of Tennessee, where she encountered more diversity than in her hometown. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the environment, consisting of geographical location and the types of people present, are significant factors that contribute to Muslim women wearing the hijab. Sara has not encountered Islamophobia either. She describes the worst reactions as stares from some people, but she chalks it up to pure curiosity since it is still somewhat uncommon to see hijabis in Knoxville. However, Sara does acknowledge that wearing the hijab would have been much easier for her if she started wearing it in a more diverse environment with a higher Muslim population.

Chapter 6: Women who previously wore the hijab and have since removed it

This chapter outlines the experiences of women who previously wore the hijab and have since removed it. For this study, participants in this category are described as having worn the hijab at some point in their lives for variable lengths of time. They have ceased wearing the hijab at some point in their lives. Currently, they do not wear the hijab. Both Selena, Attiya, and Mariam have worn the hijab for a period of their lives and have since removed it. All women currently do not wear the hijab anymore for various reasons such as not wearing it on their own accord, experiencing Islamophobic hate crimes, and believing they were not wearing it for religious reasons. Even though they do not wear the hijab anymore, they all still identify as Muslim.

Selena's Story

Selena presents herself as level-headed and calm as she recounts her story of wearing the hijab and taking it off. She starts off her story by identifying herself when she wore the hijab as a *muhajjabba*, which “refers to any female who chooses to cover her hair with a scarf that is clearly distinguishable and identifiable as hijab. This act alone is sufficient to acquire the social label of muhajjabba” (Al-Mahadin 10). She specifically remembers not being asked, instead, being told she was going to wear the hijab when she was fourteen years old. This led her to decide to wear the hijab at age sixteen, since she was already used to wearing it in places such as her private Islamic school. She admits she did not fully understand why she was wearing it, however. This lack of understanding and explanation from the people who encouraged her to wear it eventually led to her harboring feelings of confusion toward the hijab.

Selena is Palestinian and has grown up in the United States since she was an infant. She has spent the majority of her life in Knoxville, Tennessee. Therefore, she strongly identifies with

Palestinian culture and has discussed that the values of her culture are implemented at home. Values such as emphasis on family have taught her “Not to be so reliant on being around your friends, and all the other societal cultural influences that we have. And really, in our household, we're taught more to just be more on the religious side of things rather than the cultural side.” Despite teaching her values of religion, Selena believes that Islam was only seriously implemented in her life when she was nine years old and had been enrolled in a private Islamic school, similar to some of the other participants in this study. She credits this moment as the time she became more practicing as a Muslim through her actions, such as following the five pillars of Islam, which include prayer and giving charity.

Despite wearing the hijab during middle school at the Islamic school, Selena truly began to wear the hijab at her public high school in Knoxville. She discusses that her high school was “A very, very inclusive environment, where people were more accepting about like diversity and religions, and all the varieties of cultures.” She further elaborates that while her high school peers and faculty were accepting, broadly speaking, but Knoxville was not as friendly. She says, “We live in the South, and all people are more against it. So I just felt like when I was out in public, I don't know, I just felt like I had to be on high alert, so in the beginning I felt more like that. But then, later on, I did eventually get used to it, but I still got those stares here and there, but later on I felt more okay with it.” Being visibly Muslim in the South during the latter half of the 2010s was likely a challenge due to the conservative nature of the residents of Knoxville. Selena’s feelings of being on high alert are understandable since she felt the attention the hijab attracted.

Even though Selena was the only person in her direct family who wore the hijab, she believed that culture played a role in her wearing the hijab. She says, “I feel like the cultural side

of my family were wanting me to wear it. So that kind of influenced me to want to wear it.”

These family members likely conflated the hijab as a cultural garment, the same way Selena believes members of the Muslim community in Knoxville have defined it. She describes that “The Muslim community, they're really all for it. You wear it, like you're a good person. You're on the right path, this and that, you know. So I felt like that kind of like pushed me more into wanting to wear it, because I was like, ‘I want to better myself, be a better person.’ So I was like, yeah, I will just fully commit to it.” The rhetoric that conflates wearing the hijab to being a better person is prevalent in the Muslim community of Knoxville, which reflects the findings of various studies equating the hijab to virtue. This rhetoric impacts teenage girls like Selena to wear the hijab in order to be viewed as a good person amongst Muslims. Due to this rhetoric, Selena ultimately concludes that while she understood wearing the hijab to be a religious decision, her experience has mostly been cultural. She says, “Yes, I do believe it was a purely cultural decision I made. I don't believe it was anything religious, I just felt like it was just because I was already wearing it at school, and all that and some events. It just became like, ‘Oh, yeah, I'll just wear it everywhere.’ But I don't really feel like that's a religious influence, in my opinion.”

Typically, when people view the hijab as a cultural element, they usually turn toward specific cultures, such as the country of origin for the wearer. However, for Selena, it was the culture of equating the hijab to virtue, perpetuated by other Muslims, that pushed her to wear it. As described before, Muslim women and girls are taught that their actions and appearance reflect Islam as a religion due to the rhetoric that the hijab represents Islam. Therefore, this culture can lead to Muslim women and girls being pressured to wear the hijab, or otherwise be viewed negatively by other Muslims.

Ultimately, wearing the hijab under these conditions influenced Selena to take off the hijab three years later at the age of nineteen. She describes the feelings that led her to remove it. She says, “For the most part, I was fine. I felt like, though, as the years went by, I just felt more insecure about it and uncertain of why I was really wearing it. Like, I didn't feel like I was wearing it for the right reasons, and it just made me feel not great internally. So I think that's kind of what led to what led to me taking it off.” In Selena’s case, she wanted to wear the hijab with a purpose. Since her introduction to wearing the hijab was mainly cultural, she felt as though the religious sentiment of the hijab was not present while she wore it. This led her to feel insecure and uncertain about wearing the hijab, as she believed that she was wearing it for the wrong reasons. She discusses that while the reactions of her family and the Muslim community were positive, she emphasizes that “I wasn't really doing it to please other people.” Despite being fed the rhetoric that wearing the hijab would make her appear as a better person, Selena knew early on that she was not wearing the hijab for the sake of the people around her. Even though she felt like she was wearing the hijab for the wrong reasons, Selena still believed that the hijab reminded her of Islam. She says, “I felt like when I wore it, like, you know, that was a good reminder to dress modestly, you know. Do your prayers like this, and I felt like it was a good reminder of that. And it's a good reminder also of Allah at the same time, so I felt like that did influence me to becoming like closer to my religion.” Selena was able to effectively add religious meaning to wearing the hijab despite feeling as though she was wearing it for cultural reasons. The ability to redefine the hijab from a cultural garment meant to improve her status as a Muslim woman to a physical reminder of her religious values is proof that the hijab holds multiple meanings. Associating the hijab with Islamic values allowed Selena to feel closer to her faith compared to what she felt initially wearing the hijab.

Selena makes an important distinction between being a *muhajjabba* and simply wearing the hijab. She states, “I feel like becoming a *muhajjabba* was fully my choice. I feel like, though wearing the hijab, like, at school and other places. It was not my choice.” Coming back to Al-Mahadin’s definition of *muhajjabba*, the act of presenting oneself as a Muslim is a social act. The author says, “Thus, to carry the label of *muhajjabba* is to invest the woman with values such as chastity, virtue and honour which often far exceed the importance of the religious dimension of hijab. Making a choice to mark oneself as a *muhajjabba* does not necessarily entail adhering properly to religious modes of dress but it certainly reflects a statement about one’s chastity” (Al-Mahadin 12). Selana’s differentiates being a *muhajjabba* with wearing the hijab in that choosing to be a *muhajjabba* emphasizes religious values such as virtue and chastity, while the act of wearing the hijab does not necessarily reflect the values of a *muhajjabba*. As Al-Mahadin describes, being a *muhajjabba* does not mean adhering to proper hijab; instead, the label of *muhajjabba* is associated more with the religious values upheld by the wearer. Therefore, choosing to reflect Islamic values by labelling herself as a *muhajjabba* was Selena’s ultimate choice when representing Islam, not through simply wearing the hijab.

Selena emphasizes that if the hijab had been better explained with a more religious emphasis, she might have had a different relationship with the hijab. However, since this was not the case, she removed the hijab. She describes the various reactions she received to her choice. The non-Muslims around her reacted animatedly, with expressions like “Oh, my gosh! I love your hair!” The reaction of the Muslim community surprised her. She says, “I felt like most people, for the most part, were weirdly enough, like nonchalant and normal about it. Some people, though, like they’ll kind of distance themselves from you like you did some something so *haram* or so wrong when you took it off.” The reaction of some other Muslims further reflects

the cultural rhetoric that the hijab emphasizes virtue. By distancing themselves from Selena, they believe that she was not a good person since she removed the very garment they believe brings virtue to the wearer. Essentially, these people othered Selana. Yet at the same time, Selena felt that wearing the hijab in the South othered her. She says,

We do live in a country where most people are not wearing the hijab. So you just kind of feel like an outsider when everyone else is not wearing it, and then I felt like a little bit of it has a factor to it. Like I just felt very insecure, very different and just, I don't know, just very bad about wearing it. And I felt like part of it was just not only because I didn't feel like I was doing it for the right reasons, but I just felt very just too much like an outsider.

Ultimately, Selena believes that her environment and the culture surrounding the hijab contributed to her decision to stop wearing the hijab. By not having the proper reasons and justifications for wearing the hijab other than cultural factors, Selena did not have a strong enough relationship with the hijab to keep wearing it in the South. As her environment othered her, the hijab offered no refuge to counter these feelings since the hijab did not offer any religious motivation, only murky cultural reasons as defined by those around her. Essentially, there was no “Selena” in the hijab, only the definitions of others. This is why she believes removing the hijab was a religious choice. She says, “So yes, just because I felt like once I realized that you wear for the sake of Allah, then, I thought ‘I don't really feel like I'm wearing it for that purpose.’” She further elaborates that she felt an overwhelming sense of guilt when she learned that Muslim women should wear the hijab for the sake of Allah. She says, “I think when I came to the realization of why people wear it, I'm like, ‘this is not the reason that I'm wearing it.’ So I just felt like very guilty. I'm not doing it for the right reason at all. I'm not doing it the right way. So I was like, I don't even know why I'm wearing it.” Therefore, Selena concludes that

removing the hijab served as a step to understanding true Islam, not people's cultural assumptions about the religion.

Selena grapples with these feelings of guilt by emphasizing that it is important for her to develop a stronger relationship with Islam before making life-changing decisions such as wearing the hijab. She says, "I think I need to work on becoming a better Muslim, dressing more modestly on the outside, too, and being more of a modest person on the inside, before fully committing to wearing the headscarf portion of the hijab." Here, Selena has emphasized that behaving like a Muslim in accordance with Islam is a far more important step to master before wearing the hijab. For her, the hijab serves as a behavioral concept before the physical act of wearing it. She says that for her, the hijab now means "Symbolizing to other people that I'm a Muslim, you know. Allah is my Creator, and I'm to worship him and him alone. And then is also just symbolizes modesty." This new meaning of the hijab is a stark contrast to how the hijab was initially presented to Selena. I asked her to expand on the modesty element of the hijab, and Selena answered, "hijab has a big meaning, too, like it doesn't only just mean covering your hair. It means covering your entire body. You know, not like wearing heavy makeup, or, like, all the bling, like showing off, and all that stuff. It's definitely more like a like a humility kind of thing. So I feel like modesty has a very big meaning to a lot of people." Like the participants who have never worn the hijab, Selena expresses a similar meaning of the hijab. For them, the Hjiab means acting in accordance with good Islamic manners, and for Selena, with humility. It seems as though the act of not wearing the hijab encourages those who do not wear it currently to represent the hijab through their behavior. Selena expands on this notion by comparing the experiences of those who have worn the hijab for a while to those who currently do not wear it. She says,

I feel like some people became *muhajjabba* just for headscarf. I feel like they grew up in a household where they believe you got to put on a headscarf, and then you're a hijabi or *muhajjabba*. So I feel like that's how they see what it means. But the ones who are non hijabis, I don't necessarily think that they don't want to be. I think it's just they're trying to find their path to wanting to become one. And so I feel like they have a more broad definition of hijab. And I mean, it is a broad term, anyway, like it means modesty. It does not mean headscarf.

Here, Selena differentiates what the hijab means to non-hijabis versus *muhajjabba*, or hijabis. She believes that those who wear the hijab from the start are led to believe that the hijab simply means headscarf and do not truly understand the behavioral aspect of the hijab. Therefore, non-hijabis are more insightful about the meaning of the hijab in terms of behavior, since they cannot physically represent Islam through their appearance. Essentially, in order to represent Islam, non-hijabis have to compensate for their lack of headscarf through their actions, such as behaving modestly with humility.

Even though she feels like she understands the meaning of the hijab better now, Selena feels like not wearing the hijab makes her feel less of a Muslim. She explains this by saying, "Being like part of being a Muslim is wearing the hijab, you know. Everyone knows that, or just wearing the headscarf portion at least." Even though Selena has negotiated the meaning of the hijab in more of a behavioral sense, she understands that for both Muslims and non-Muslims, the hijab automatically represents Islam to those who perceive the viewer. This societal meaning of the hijab has therefore made her believe she lost a part of her Muslim identity visually. She continues to describe that although these meanings are in place, she doesn't let not wearing the hijab define her as a Muslim. She goes on to say, "I feel a little better that I'm not wearing it, you

know, for the wrong reasons, but I'm just hopeful, *Inshallah*, maybe like in the near future I'll be *muhajjabba* one day.” In order to prepare herself for wearing the hijab again, she again emphasizes that following Islam closely is key. To Selena, this means following the five pillars of Islam and studying more elements of the religion. Doing so has strengthened her relationship with Islam compared to how she knew the religion during the time she wore the hijab. Essentially, repairing her relationship with Islam through gaining knowledge is what motivates Selena to wear the hijab again. Even though it appears as just a headscarf to many, for women who have taken it off, the hijab represents so much more than just covering and by not wearing it, they are able to make meaning of the hijab as a practice than an object.

Attiya's Story

Attiya starts the interview by revealing that her family had forced her to wear the hijab. When she was in middle school, members of her family tried to ease her into wearing the hijab before she eventually had to wear it on their terms. She describes always dressing modestly, but her family prepared her to wear the hijab by instructing her to wear a scarf around her neck no matter the season. She says, “I really tried to protest a lot, and they would literally say, ‘You're not going to school unless you put the scarf on your neck.’” These threats continued before high school. She describes one instance as, “Actually, we were going somewhere, and my aunt was like, ‘Before you start school. You're going to start wearing the hijab.’ And I told them, I was like, ‘I don't want to yet,’ and they said, ‘You're going to wear it, or you're not going to school.’” The threat of being taken out of school and other trips continued, and Attiya realized, “Well, they're not gonna let me go unless I put the hijab on. So that's when I started officially wearing a hijab is when I went on that trip, and then I wore it from during the summer of my freshman year

of high school, and I wore it up until like the summer of 2022.” She had worn the hijab for seven years total.

Attiya attributes Pakistani culture to her family’s insistence for her to wear the hijab. Even though she was born and raised in Knoxville, she felt as though Pakistani culture was the hallmark of the reason she had to wear the hijab. She defines this as “Pakistani Islam” because many Pakistanis in her experience have an Arabized interpretation of Islam. She says,

I think a lot of what I felt was they wanted a lot of proximity to Arabness. If that makes sense, like they wanted a lot of proximity to being able to to claim that like, ‘I dress like this naturally,’ or like, ‘we eat foods like this naturally,’ or ‘we follow the hadith of the prophet naturally,’ which is like, I understand, that aspect. But also, we have our own culture. And like, it's okay that our culture isn't something that the prophet grew up with. This interpretation of Islam conflates the religion with Arab culture, which in turn, perpetuates the notion of Arab supremacy as previously discussed by other Pakistani participants like Seema. Pakistanis who are trying to emulate Arab culture are therefore attaching more cultural meanings to Islamic practices as a way to situate themselves in proximity to Arab-ness. She further elaborates that, “Traditional Pakistani values tended to kind of come through, like the whole, you know, being modest, and the daughter representing the respect and the status of the family. Things like that used to kind of overshine, overpower the main principles of Islam that I say kind of had to take more on the back burner for a little bit.” Attitudes such as these are what Attiya attributes to her having to wear the hijab. She believes her family thought wearing the hijab would retain her Pakistani Muslim identity. She says, “They thought that me not wearing a hijab meant that I was very American, and that I was like losing my sense of self.” In Attiya’s situation, the hijab was used as a tool to maintain her culture and religion in an environment

where American-ness was seen as a threat. She mentions that older Pakistani women would compliment her on wearing the hijab, urging her to not remove it, because they believed the hijab would “keep her innocence.” Essentially, the more American they perceived Attiya to be, the less innocent, Muslim, and Pakistani she would become.

Attiya eventually put on the hijab on her family’s terms. During that period, she lived in South Knoxville, yet went to high school in West Knoxville, where she saw more diversity. She felt better about wearing the hijab at her high school since there were other hijabis, but she noticed she was treated differently by some of her peers. She says, “When I put on the hijab, the people that used to speak to me in middle school didn't speak to me in high school.” This experience, she says, affected her sense of self. She elaborates that, “My change is contingent on the groups around me and the social groups I want to align myself with, but geographically it was hard. It was really hard, but I can see from my family's perspective why they were pushing so much for it, because we were the only Muslim family in South Knoxville.” Even though she wanted to fit in to a degree, Attiya reflects that her family’s insistence that she wear the hijab was a result of maintaining their identity in a place where they were othered. The separation from the more diverse West Knoxville to the isolation she faced in South Knoxville proved to be another reason why environment plays a major role in whether or not Muslim women wear the hijab or not.

For Attiya, this isolation further justified her family’s reasoning that the hijab connects her to them, instead of trying to conform to the “other,” which are non-Muslims. Her mother further pushed this sense of “us” through the family’s relationship with the broader Muslim community in Knoxville. She recalls, “My mom really wanted to push in the fact that I am Muslim, like this is part of who you are, and also just the fact that we participated in the Muslim

community. And they did use kind of those tactics of like ‘You're the only girl of the family. Your dad was a very pious man like, what are people going to say?’” Here, Attiya shows an example of how her family’s reasoning, rooted in Pakistani culture, was used to persuade her to wear the hijab. Placing the family’s honor upon the girls and women in the family is a common way of thinking in Pakistani culture, and when paired with the hijab, the garment takes a purely cultural form rather than a religious one.

Additionally, Attiya expands upon the religious meaning of the hijab for her. She demonstrates this through recalling a discussion with her non-hijabi friend and how hearing different interpretations of the hijab helped her make sense of the hijab as a concept. She says,

I remember talking to a friend at the time, and she's Arab, and I remember asking, ‘Well, one of your sisters wears the hijab, and you don't, like, what's that about? My family made me wear the hijab.’ And she was like, ‘Well, my dad always told me, as long as I have the hijab in my heart, it doesn't matter to him.’ And so I kind of thought about that for a little bit...I guess my interpretation of Islam is very literal, and I think that's just the way that I grew up.

Hearing this interpretation of the hijab broadened Attiya’s horizon. She began to understand that the hijab can be spiritual, as her friend’s father described. The older she got, the more she realized that wearing the hijab should not automatically be an indicator of faith. She says, “I know that there's like that sentiment of women who wear the hijab are more pious than other Muslims, and I don't think that's true. I think that everybody has their own journey with religion, spirituality, and everybody practices differently.”

At the same time, however, she began to grow distant toward the hijab. She would often use self-deprecating humor against the hijab and Islam to pander to non-Muslims. She says she

did this “to make it easier for people to be around me.” Yet these actions only reflected her doubts about wearing the hijab. She describes thinking, “I do not feel good having the hijab on, it doesn't feel like me. I feel like I'm being disrespectful toward the hijab, if that makes sense. I don't feel like I'm representing Islam. When people look at me, I feel like I'm constantly going against what I'm supposed to be representing.” When asked to expand upon that notion, Attiya describes how societally, hijabis are viewed in a certain way. She says, “I always felt that I didn't act like in line with being a hijabi, because, like, I have a very loud, obnoxious laugh and it's very distinct. And I remember like I'd listen to lectures, they're always just like ‘When you wear a hijab, you're supposed to be modest and have a specific demeanor to you.’” She is referencing the rhetoric imposed upon hijabis by some Muslims that they have to represent Islam through their appearances and behavior. As a visual representation of Islam, some Muslims argue that hijabis need to subdue a part of their personalities to better represent Islam. Attiya believes that she cannot conform to that rhetoric. Instead, she describes herself when she wore the hijab as angry and aggressive at times in response to non-Muslims’ assumptions about her. She says,

But even just being on a predominantly white campus, every time somebody looked at me, I'd take it as anger. And I think that that anger eventually started to turn into resentment. Because I was just like, ‘Why can't people just look me in the eye when they have a conversation with me?’ I noticed that people tended to just look at the hijab when they were talking to me. They never looked at my eyes.

Essentially, Attiya was all too aware of the Islamophobic rhetoric against Muslims and became very defensive toward non-Muslims as a result. She eventually realized she had started to resent the hijab because, in her eyes, she thought the negative treatment she received from non-Muslims could be blamed on the hijab. She also describes how the hijab overtook her personhood since

she felt as though people saw her hijab and nothing else. Attributing these new negative meanings to the hijab supported her decision to remove it. She eventually told her mother and aunt she was going to remove the hijab, and they were not supportive.

The first day of not wearing the hijab was emotional for Attiya. She describes crying the entirety of her shift at work, which caused concern among her co-workers. Thankfully for Attiya, they were supportive of her choice and emphasized that they were there for her. When asked why this was so emotional for her, Attiya describes that “The first day that I took it off, I remember telling my friend, ‘I can't stop crying. I just can't.’ Because I genuinely think I was mourning like a part of myself. It was genuinely like, I think the hijab has protected me from a lot of things, and I think, after taking it off, I felt very vulnerable for a very long time.” Many people believe that the hijab offers security and protection for the wearers, and Attiya believes that removing the hijab stripped her of that protection. Likewise, the hijab offered a sense of identity and familiarity for Attiya, having worn it for seven years. Presenting herself without the hijab likely meant losing a part of her identity, as she had grown attached to herself in the hijab.

The Muslims in Attiya’s life reacted with less support, specifically her extended family members. She tells the story about how they found out she had removed the hijab by finding her social media accounts. She says,

Actually, my extended family, though I haven't spoken to them in a while. They reacted terribly, which is crazy because I had not had a conversation with any of them in 4 years, and all of a sudden, I found out because my account is public, my Instagram account. I found out that they told me that I'm going to hell. They called my mom. They were distraught. They're like, ‘Did she drop out of college or something? Tell her she's going to hell. She has to put it back on.’ And I was like, that's crazy. That's insane. But I think

the reason that it stung more was because of the fact that I'm associated with my family, right? So like all of this is falling back on my mom, and it was a reflection of her, which really hurt at the time. But it was a reflection of her right, she's a widow. And so she was the matriarch of the house, right, and raising the only daughter of the family. The cultural aspect of it definitely hurt on my mom's side.

In her case, Attiya believes that the negativity she received from her extended family is connected to the cultural concept that the honor of a family depends on the actions of its daughters. Since she is the only daughter of her family, the action of her removing the hijab inevitably reflected her mother's parenting, according to those extended family members. Essentially, due to cultural factors, Attiya's removal of the hijab affected her family's reputation even though it was her personal choice. She describes these family members as living in the United States for a significant period, so their reaction may be yet another attempt to hold onto Pakistani culture.

In the same way Attiya's extended family heard about her decision to remove the hijab, her former male classmates from high school took notice. Since her social media accounts were public, these men saw her without the hijab for the first time. As a result, some of them messaged her. She describes a specific moment where one of the men brought up her lack of hijab. She says,

One of them was just like, 'How do you feel now? Do you feel free afterwards?' And I was like, is this what you thought about the hijab? I will say that throughout all of my years of wearing the hijab, whenever people ask me about it, I was very proud to wear the hijab. I had my mixed feelings, but the one thing that I did have was pride, and I did feel pride to have it on... I did think that the hijab made me feel beautiful at times, but the

reaction that I got from white men afterwards, I've never been interested in white men.

But the white men who did DM, me and reach out to me, I was really uncomfortable.

It is interesting to note that the white men who showed interest in Attiya after she removed her hijab associated the hijab with oppression. Asking her if she felt “free” after removing it shows that non-Muslim white American men have fallen for the rhetoric from Western media that the hijab is an oppressive garment. I asked Attiya why she thought they reached out to her specifically after she removed the hijab. She said, “Men are dogs.” Even though her tone sounded lighthearted, her response held resentment. She elaborates on this notion by describing that her removal of the hijab was seen as an invitation by those men. She says, “I don't know why that was such an invitation, like that doesn't mean that I'm not Muslim anymore. I'm still Muslim, like I'm still not gonna engage in talking to y'all...I truly don't understand what that mindset was... but maybe they saw it as me becoming a little bit more American, but that's really a reach, like I don't know what they were thinking.” The removal of an exoticizing garment like the hijab is seemingly enticing to those who believe the garment is woven with oppression. By seeing a part of Attiya that was previously unseen, these men feel drawn to her and ultimately contribute to the fetishization of Muslim women by non-Muslim men.

Interestingly enough, both these white men and her extended family associated Attiya's removal of the hijab with distancing herself from Islam. The reality is that Attiya still identifies as a Muslim and has simply stopped presenting herself as one, appearance-wise. Yet, both view the removal of the hijab as an invitation. To her extended family, removing the hijab invited them to tell her mother she would be going to hell. For the white men, removing the hijab was seen as Attiya inviting them to engage with her.

As the interview came to an end, I asked Attiya the meanings she had made of the hijab based on her experiences. She believes that the hijab means modesty. She explains,

I think modesty is a very good way to put it, because I do think that, like in the systems that we live in today, like a very capitalistic system, a very, a very fascist and ethno-nationalist system, that modesty is a very good thing to have, and I wish that a good majority of people had it. And I mean, like modesty in your mannerisms, like modesty in your tone when you speak to people. Modesty in what you think. Modesty in your social interactions.

Here, Attiya emphasizes that the hijab can be a means of resisting harmful social systems. She emphasizes that modesty does not necessarily have to manifest itself in the physical sense, but through a person's actions, such as how they treat other people. As she learned through her friend's father, the hijab can be in a person's heart and actions rather than simply wearing a headscarf. Comparatively, Attiya believes that not wearing the hijab is also modesty in the same sense that non-hijabis can fulfil the hijab through demonstrating kindness. However, she does note that not wearing the hijab means she needs to have a more active effort in reminding people she is Muslim. She realizes that the physical act of wearing the hijab had contributed to the people around her knowing that she is Muslim. Therefore, not wearing the hijab means actively communicating to others that she is Muslim, such as reminding her non-Muslim friends that she is fasting during Ramadan. She uses this same reasoning as she navigates as a Muslim woman without the hijab in the South by actively trying to communicate to others that she is Muslim. Even though it has been a few years since she has worn the hijab, Attiya still is optimistic that she will come back to wearing the hijab someday in the future on her terms.

Marwa's Story

Even though she is the youngest participant in this study, Marwa's experience wearing the hijab and taking it off shows even more insight into the perspective of Muslim women navigating life in the South. As a child, she felt empowered by wearing the hijab through representing her faith and culture. However, as she grew older, she became more aware of the negative attention she received on behalf of her hijab by the non-Muslims around her. Marwa decided that if she was still going to live in the South, she would feel safer by removing her hijab.

She starts her story by explaining her ethnic and cultural background. Marwa describes herself as Jordanian-American, with her father immigrating to the United States from Jordan to marry her American mother. Marwa emphasizes that her parents wanted to raise her and her siblings with knowledge of both of their cultures as they brought her up in Knoxville, Tennessee. She says,

They wanted me and my siblings to be able to experience both sides of the culture without feeling pressured into it. So I would go to both church and the mosque in the same week as I was growing up, and I was kind of allowed to experiment and ask questions, and I was encouraged to form my own opinions, based on what I was hearing, and it felt really good to have that that autonomy and power when you're younger, because you don't always feel valued at that age, and I felt seen and heard more than ever by being allowed those experiences.

For Marwa, being brought up in a multicultural and multireligious household is a strength. She believes that her parents did a superb job of balancing both American and Jordanian culture in her life, which led her to be more open-minded compared to the people around her. She further

explains that she started actively practicing Islam at the age of eleven, just before her mother converted to Islam. Both of her parents emphasized that Islam is a lifestyle that prioritizes actions such as prayer. For Marwa, implementing Islam into her life included wearing the hijab.

Like many of the other participants, Marwa also attended a private Islamic school. She recalls starting to wear the hijab at the age of nine or ten in fourth grade on her own accord after experimenting with wearing it for a few weeks. She reveals that her classmates were very encouraging of her decision, but it was ultimately a religious decision that led her to wear it. Growing up going to church and the mosque, Marwa compares wearing the hijab for Muslims to wearing the cross for Christians. She reasoned that since she believed in her Islamic faith, she might as well show it through her appearance by wearing the hijab. Even though she was young, Marwa believed that the hijab instilled a sense of responsibility and accountability in her. She recalls, “I thought that nobody could touch me. I felt very powerful for a while. I was like, ‘I’m making this decision on my own. I don’t care what anybody says.’” As a child, Marwa recognized the importance of choice when it came to presenting herself and felt empowered. However, at an early age, she learned that not everybody around her would support her choice. She describes her first time experiencing Islamophobia at the age of twelve. She says,

But eventually the years kind of like come by, and especially in the South, in Tennessee and Knoxville, you encounter some really awful experiences I once had. And I think this is actually the experience that planted the 1st seed of, like, self-doubt and embarrassment in me. A mother in a Barnes Noble in Knoxville sent her very young child up to me at the age of twelve to ask me why I was a terrorist...The child was very young, like maybe 5 or 6 years old, clearly doesn’t know what they’re talking about, and the only reason I know the mother sent her child is because she, instead of telling her child to ‘come back

here, that's not a nice question,' she was looking over the bookshelves at me, waiting for me to answer. and I just felt very caught off guard, and the whole situation felt inappropriate. And I just kindly explained to the kid, like in shock, that I'm not a terrorist. I just wear a headscarf. And the kid, who clearly doesn't even know what terrorist means, is like. 'Oh, that's cool. Why do you wear it?' And the kid is eventually asking their own questions. I was like, I don't know. I just felt like it was right for me, and I eventually sent the kid back to their mother, who was just allowing the exchange to go on.

Being visibly Muslim at such a young age made Marwa realize that even as a child, she was not exempt from Islamophobia. This moment made her realize that she was not completely safe and that it was a very real possibility that people with this mindset could take their bigotry out on her. She describes this as a very adult realization she had come to, which influenced how she felt wearing the hijab.

Marwa continues to grapple with the concept of being visibly Muslim in a hostile environment by alluding to the paradox that while the hijab is a symbol for modesty, it draws attention to the wearer. Due to this paradox's presence in environments such as the Southern United States, Marwa believes that the physical act of wearing the hijab should be defined as a decision rather than an obligation to protect Muslim women's lives. She elaborates on her opinion by explaining that the cultural connotations that prescribed the hijab have changed in a rapidly changing world. She states that,

The hijab in the Quran is supposed to be a protection for women, and is a way to help them from standing out or being taken advantage of. And in America, it does the exact opposite of what it's created for its purposes. And I feel that if you believe in the Quran for what it is in Allah's words, you would understand that it's while it is great if you can

put up with all of this and you feel powerful, it also isn't recommended for you to put your mental or physical well-being on the line.

As a victim of Islamophobia from a young age, Marwa emphasizes the importance of considering the safety of Muslim women when wearing the hijab in the South. She believes that since the hijab visibly signifies the wearer as Muslim in an environment where Islamophobia is not uncommon, the original purpose of the hijab is defeated. While the hijab can protect the wearer from certain situations, it can still draw unwanted attention depending on the environment. Even with the added context of living in the South, Marwa believes that in the Muslim community, there is a stigma that surrounds women who don't wear the hijab. She elaborates,

I feel like there's a sense of shame for certain people who don't wear hijab in the Muslim community that shouldn't be there because we're supposed to support each other as a community, and when both society and your community aren't supporting you, it can really put you down, and you'll just be pushed in the direction that you feel most safe in which usually ends up being the majority, because then you don't have to deal with the majority being against you. So it's really sad to think that because of the mix of both religious and cultural and societal expectations causes so much turmoil from a simple spiritual head covering.

Here, Marwa recognizes that Muslim women face Islamophobia from non-Muslims and criticism from the Muslim community at the same time, no matter if she wears the hijab or not. She highlights that the lack of support from society and the Muslim community can be an isolating experience that forces Muslim women to abide by the majority opinion, depending on the

environment she is in. She ultimately blames the mixing of religion, culture, and society for drawing so much attention to the hijab.

Marwa expands more upon how living in the South influenced her to remove the hijab with another experience she faced, this time with her mother. She says,

I felt pressured by society because it was dangerous, and my life was at stake. People treat you so differently. My mother, who wore a hijab, was once cut off by a guy in a Ford truck, and she looked out the window and he was clearly aggravated with us. But then he looked at my mom and was about to start cursing, and then he saw she had a hijab, and his mouth closed. And it was really weird. And I thought, like, 'Oh, he sees she's a lady. He's gonna stop like he realized he did something wrong.' Road rage, whatever, and instead of that, he goes to reach down, and this makes me a little nauseous. But he goes to reach down, and he flashes his gun at us through the window. And I've never felt so afraid in my little tiny life, not for myself even, but for my own mother.

The actions of the Ford driver toward Marwa's mother demonstrate that Islamophobia transcends factors like race. Marwa's mother is a white American woman, and yet, by wearing a hijab, she still faced violent threats from another white American. Marwa posits, "There are certain groups of people who hate her more than they would hate me for her taking up the hijab. They see her as a race traitor because of the instance of 9/11, they see her as a person who is turning her back on her people." It did not matter if she was with her child either, because the hijab had already defined her as a threat to this man. Due to the rhetoric from the Western media that continuously others Muslims, Marwa and her mother were not seen as American. Instead, they were intimidated by a person who felt empowered by the rhetoric against Muslims.

It was ultimately for safety reasons that Marwa made the choice to remove her hijab. At the age of twenty, she stopped wearing the hijab and admits to struggling for a few months since she was used to covering up. However, the safety benefits outweighed this struggle. She says,

I hated having to change something I was so familiar with. But honestly, I feel a lot safer in public, which is again sad to say, but it's the truth. I feel less singled out and seen. I feel less likely to be taken advantage of. I didn't realize just how many sideways looks I had gotten beforehand that I didn't deserve until I had taken it off, and I was nearly never noticed as much as I was when I wore hijab like, I could go to the mall without like a group of teenage boys pointing and giggling at me for once, which was crazy.

Marwa once again indirectly references the paradox of the hijab. It made her hypervisible even though the hijab is worn to draw less attention to the wearer. Based on her case, it seems as though the environment directly correlates with the existence of this paradox. Had Marwa not been in the South and instead lived in a Muslim country, she would not be rendered hypervisible. Instead, wearing the hijab would draw less attention to herself, and perhaps she would still be wearing it. Marwa believes that the support from the Muslim community for all women, not just hijabis, is crucial to supporting all Muslim women, especially in the South, where freedom of religion does not apply to everyone. She says,

The fact that you get such judgment from both women and men in a country that preaches freedom and right to show one's true self through the freedom of religion and practice and then to have that freedom subtly taken away simply because people cannot cope with something different from what they've grown up with is abhorrent. And I think we just need to preach a more accepting society as a whole, or at least accept those within our

community who are struggling with the hijab as we are, because it's unfair for them to not only have to fight every day they go outside, but within their own homes.

The Muslim community offering support to Muslim women, no matter their relationship with the hijab, is the least that could be done to ease the burdens they face living in the South. Marwa emphasizes the exigency of the study, that Muslim women face criticism from their own community on top of Islamophobia from some non-Muslims.

Yet, in her experience removing the hijab, Marwa faced criticism from fellow Muslims, particularly a Muslim man questioning her decision. She says,

He was really pushy about why I decided to take off my hijab, and never in my whole life did I ever want the opinion of a man on hijab, and I'm going to be so honest right now, it's not asked for. You can feel free to share your opinions on hijab, but not with someone who is uncomfortable with it, not with a girl who is like 10 years younger than you. You don't need to debate her like, please stay in your lane. So Muslim community wise?

Yeah, it was most of a shock, but most of them got over it pretty quickly.

Even though the Muslim community was shocked by Marwa's decision, she believes that no one, especially Muslim men, is entitled to know the reason why she removed the hijab. As previously described, the physical act of wearing the hijab is an act taken upon Muslim women. While men do have their form of hijab in the behavioral sense, such as by lowering their gazes, they often do not follow through, as seen with the pushy man Marwa encountered. Marwa believes this reaction came from the need to preserve a sense of culture in a society where Muslims are the minority. She says,

People within the culture feel an obligation to communicate that they feel you're making a poor decision because they feel like you are taking a step away from the culture, rather

than trying to preserve it, and they don't fully understand that because they have never experienced it. And the women who do wear hijab, especially older generations, are only typically judgmental because their cultures pressured them into it, and they can't understand why you're being rebellious when you're truly not. You're just simply trying to do what's best for you and everyone around you most of the time.

This story represents a fatal cultural flaw in the ways Muslim communities are built: the honor preservation of the community is placed upon the women, and yet they are not supported when non-Muslim societies show them hostility. Instead, the broader Muslim community comes to criticize women for taking actions that prioritize their safety in an intolerant region such as the South. This, in turn, leads to a sense of entitlement over Muslim women and their choices to represent the community or not. The reality is that the hijab should represent the wearer's devotion to their *faith*, not the *culture* of their community. The very existence of Muslim women in the South, no matter how they present themselves, is a devotion to their faith.

Therefore, it was no surprise to Marwa that her friends, both Muslim and non-Muslim, supported her decision to not wear the hijab because they had been exposed to Islamophobic rhetoric from the media their entire lives. She describes,

Most of the people who are in my age group understand that there's a certain uncomfortable feeling that comes with wearing the hijab in public. Especially in the political climate we live in as of today that had been building for a while, and because we grew up with the stories of 9/11, and understanding the bias towards Muslims and Arabs as a whole.

As the youngest participant in this study, Marwa was born several years after the 9/11 attacks, and members of her age group have only experienced media with an anti-Muslim bias. Their

awareness of anti-Muslim bias reflects some of the findings in *Covering Muslims*. The authors found that “Taken together, ‘radical/radicalism,’ ‘militant/militancy,’ ‘fundamentalist/fundamentalism,’ and ‘extremist/extremism’ make up 8 of the top 12 words in the United States and Canada...” used to describe Muslims in the media (Bleich and van der Veen 107). Living alongside this rhetoric only makes Marwa and her friends even more familiar with the consequences of widespread Islamophobia, especially since Marwa has been directly called some of these terms while she wore the hijab. So even though Marwa notes that she has been treated better by the broader public since removing the hijab, she feels an overwhelming sense of hurt. She questions why a piece of cloth can strip the humanity out of some people.

At the end of the interview, Marwa reflects on the meaning she had made of her experience wearing the hijab. She answers, “The hijab is more of a symbol of my past experiences than it is a symbol of who I’ve become. I believe that no one should be so heavily dependent on anything in their lives that it makes them feel like a changed person if they lose it.” She further expresses that she has no regrets wearing the hijab, even going as far as describing it to be “nostalgic.” Likewise, she believes not wearing the hijab means parting with a personal object. She describes this as “It was a little bit like putting down a favorite item of mine. Everybody has a comfort item, many men have, like a watch given by their fathers or grandfathers. It felt like putting down a part of my culture and kind of unwillingly leaving it, but understanding that it’s the best for me.” She goes on to say how parting with the hijab will open doors to her future by shielding her from hatred. At the same time, removing the hijab will have prevented her from fostering feelings of resentment towards the hijab and Islam. That’s why Marwa ultimately believes that her religion influenced her to remove the hijab as much as her environment did. While she faced Islamophobia in Knoxville, she believed that her religion

empowered her to make the choice that would best prioritize her safety, even if that meant not representing the religion anymore.

Discussion:

After hearing the stories of three Muslim women who have previously worn the hijab and have stopped wearing it, many patterns arise. Matters like identity, representing Islam, and different types of fear are expressed by the participants.

Identity:

Selena, Attiya, and Marwa discussed the notion of the hijab as tied to their identity in one way or another. Even though these participants have ceased wearing the hijab, they relate their experience wearing the hijab as signifying their Muslim identities and grapple with the consequences of parting away with the hijab. As told in Attiya's section, her feelings leading up to the removal of her hijab led to an identity crisis. When Attiya began to harbor negative feelings toward the hijab, she recognized her behavior did not reflect who she was as a person. She reflects, "My sense of identity. I didn't know who I was without it, the hijab. I truly did not know who I was. It's like I'm kind of getting lost, and I was losing myself." Attiya's loss of identity directly contrasts with the findings of Droogsma's study. Her participants expressed the opposite and "...feel hijab helps them resist many of these constraints since it provides them with a greater feeling of control over their bodies and, thus, their interactions with others. These findings reveal much greater depth behind American women's choice to wear hijab" (Droogsma 311). The main distinguishing factor between Droogsma's participants and Attiya's experience is that her participants chose to wear the hijab while Attiya did not. Attiya's lack of bodily autonomy led to resentment toward the hijab and eventually, an overall lack of identity. Thus, it can be assumed that choice plays a major role in the creation and maintenance of an identity for

Muslim women. Even though she felt as though she lost her identity while wearing the hijab, Attiya still mourned the hijabi identity she lost when she chose to remove her hijab.

Even though they both removed their hijabs in their early twenties after wearing the hijab since their youth, Marwa presents a different perspective on identity. She agrees that for her, the hijab is merely a symbol of her past self that led to who she has become today. However, she argues that it is unhealthy for people to develop an attachment to something that would fundamentally change them if they lose it. Marwa's beliefs represent an outlier among the participants in her category. For Marwa, it can be inferred that her exposure to Islamophobia at such a young age prevented her from forming her identity around the hijab. Even though she wore the hijab for a longer period compared to the other women who took it off, she likely already had a sense of identity through her culture that the other participants did not have. Early in her interview, Marwa expresses gratitude toward her parents for presenting both Jordanian and American cultures equally and positively. This is a direct contrast to Attiya, who believed that Pakistani culture overshadowed Islamic values and felt suppressed. As a result, she let her cultural and religious identity become the target of her self-deprecating jokes to fit in with non-Muslims. Since removing the hijab, Attiya says she holds pride in being Pakistani more compared to when she wore the hijab. However, it is likely through her previous resentment for her culture that Attiya ended up creating her identity around the hijab.

Selena's experience with identity was different compared to Marwa's and Attiya's experiences. As noted before, Selena distinguished herself as a *muhajjabba* when she wore the hijab as per Al-Mahadin's definition (12). Through identifying as a *muhajjabba*, Selena was able to express chastity, virtue, and honour as more important than the act of wearing a headscarf. For her, the removal of the hijab erased her identity as a *muhajjabba* in the physical sense, yet she

still tries to uphold the values of chastity, virtue, and honor as a non-hijabi. Thus, Selena's current identity as a non-hijabi reflects the notion that "Even when the product is absent, the label is enough to channel the set of values attached to it" (Al-Mahadin 12).

Representing Islam:

As with the participants from other categories, Selena, Attiya, and Marwa all discussed the general notion that the hijab is associated with Islam. As Selena previously discussed in her story, Muslims and non-Muslims alike seem to associate the headscarf with Islam. As a rhetorical device, the hijab communicates to the public that the wearer is a Muslim. Essentially, it is the most outward indication that a person is Muslim without the wearer ever having to state their religious affiliation. The association between a simple headscarf with the second most followed religion is a bold, yet unspoken statement.

After removing their hijabs, Attiya and Marwa believe their appearances do not communicate that they are Muslim. Attiya specifically mentions that one of the struggles she encountered as she began to navigate life without a hijab is that she needs to make an active effort when it comes to letting others know she is Muslim. Even though she is Pakistani, without her hijab, most people in Tennessee assume she is Hispanic instead. As someone who faced a lot of Islamophobia from a young age, Marwa feels less pressure to represent Islam. Marwa feels safer in general since her appearance does not reveal her religious affiliation. Like Attiya, she gets mistaken for different ethnicities on account of appearing white passing, especially without the hijab. Marwa states that this confusion is minor compared to the amount of bigotry she faced when wearing the hijab.

Attiya also believed that her bold personality could come off as aggressive or obnoxious, also clashed with the idea that Muslim women embody Islam. This idea supports the findings of

Droogsma, whose participants “described the role of hijab as a ‘behavior check’ before they act” (304). Essentially, the women in Droogsma’s study are conforming to the idea that, as hijabis, they represent Islam; therefore, they need to not only look modest but also act modestly. Attiya believed that due to her personality being the opposite of modest, she did not represent Islam well enough to continue wearing the hijab.

Even though they now navigate the world without hijabs, all three of the women in this category still identify as Muslims. Selena illustrates this fact by mentioning that by not wearing the hijab, she has dedicated her time to learning more about Islam in the religious sense rather than the cultural. For her, this means practicing Islam more actively through prayer and charity. This sentiment reflects the findings of Karaman, whose participants also lived in Knoxville. Her non-hijab participants believed that “Being non-hijabi is not a restriction for them in order to practice their religion” (Karaman 89). In fact, all participants who removed their hijab expressed that their relationship with Islam has improved since removing it. It is noteworthy that not representing Islam visually anymore gave room for these participants to create more meaningful relationships with their religion.

Fear:

A consistent theme across all former hijab wearers was an overwhelming sense of fear throughout their experience. As theorized before, Muslim women face criticism from both Muslim and non-Muslims. Therefore, it is plausible to believe that the decision to remove the hijab is associated with fear.

Islamophobia

Based on all three women’s accounts, Islamophobia is alive in Knoxville, Tennessee. While Selena only faced mild forms of Islamophobia, like rude stares, she still believes it was

enough for her to doubt her relationship with the hijab. At the same time, Attiya and Marwa describe facing more blatant instances of Islamophobia directed at them.

Even though Marwa mentions having trash thrown at her and people laughing at her, she recounts two specific stories in detail about being the target of Islamophobia. The first story involved a mother asking their child to confront Marwa to ask her why she wore the hijab. Even though Marwa knew the child was innocent, she could sense the mother was using her child to question her presence. As Marwa stated, this incident was responsible for her subsequent removal of the hijab when she became a young adult. The blatant Islamophobia from the mother of the child reflects how anti-Islamic rhetoric manifests itself in day-to-day encounters, such as what Marwa experienced. Essentially, the rhetoric of the media has successfully othered Muslims and symbolized Muslim women as the representations of Islam. The findings in *Covering Muslims* reflect this sense of othering. The authors write, “...the media still play a central role in defying the presumptively meaningful differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Bleich and van der Veen 142). Despite being half white American, her hijab automatically signaled her as an other to the mother. Even though she made it clear that it was only the mother who held these Islamophobic ideas while the child was simply following their parent’s orders, this is exactly how Islamophobic rhetoric is perpetuated. Parents pass their beliefs to their children and encourage them to engage in it, which was the case for this incident. Even though this child was innocent, growing up with a parent demonstrating Islamophobic behavior fosters potential hatred at a young age. By Marwa’s account, this incident occurred around 2016 in Knoxville, Tennessee. Donald Trump won Tennessee in the 2016 presidential election after promoting Islamophobia as a part of his platform.

Marwa's other story involved an incident of road rage that turned into a threat of violence from a disgruntled driver who threatened her mother with a gun upon seeing her clad in a hijab. The attitude of the driver reflects the idea that "In the aftermath of 9/11, many Americans, traumatized by the attacks, began to identify the headscarf as a symbol of the enemy" (Elver 111). It did not matter if Marwa's mother was a white American woman. Her hijab transcended her racial identity because the hijab is "Transcendental because once it is there, it takes precedence over any other sign, a supra-signifier under which every other sign slides. And precisely because it is transcendental, it is void of meaning but the ones imposed by the gaze" (Al-Mahadin 5). In cases of Islamophobia, the presence of the hijab signifies the wearer is Muslim upon first glance, rather than solely focusing on race, thus attributing meaning to the wearer by the viewer.

Even though Attiya's experiences of Islamophobia were not as overt as Marwa's, she still credits the reactions of non-Muslims for drawing her away from wearing the hijab. Exhausted by the anti-Muslim rhetoric she faced from her former friends who stopped communicating with her after she was forced to wear the hijab, Attiya felt anger any time she believed a non-Muslim was staring too intently. For Attiya, becoming hypervisible was an uncomfortable experience. Coupled with perceiving negative interactions from non-Muslims as Islamophobic, the added hypervisibility she felt was supported during conversation when she noticed people would make eye contact with her hijab instead of her.

Fear of Muslims

While Islamophobia remains a major factor that induces fear to women who have ceased wearing the hijab, Muslim women still face criticism from another angle: Muslim communities. Even though Selena did not face direct criticism from the Muslim community when she stopped

wearing the hijab, she remained suspicious. She recalls some Muslims responding to other women who have removed the hijab with threats of going to hell. She attributes this exclusive attitude to cultural values that have embedded themselves into Islam. Attiya was directly told she would be going to hell by her extended family members for removing her hijab. Though Selena has not faced violence on account of her decision to remove the hijab, it is cultural attitudes like these, rooted in control and fear, that governments upholding mandatory hijab laws are allowed to thrive. Even though the Muslim community in Knoxville is much smaller in scale compared to countries like Iran, cultural attitudes that dominate religious values still manage to demotivate Muslim women from keeping the hijab on. Therefore, this rhetoric, rooted in fear and control, only empowers some Muslims to assert superiority over other Muslims.

At the very least, some Muslims parrot the sentiment that women who wear the hijab are inherently better than those who do not. All of the women in this category disagree with that notion. Selena notes that even if you're trying to abide by the standards of the proper hijab as outlined in the literature review by unqualified internet users, "They always manage to find ways to make people feel bad about themselves." Despite this, after removing their hijabs, Selena, Attiya, and Marwa do not oppose wearing the hijab again. They were able to reconcile their relationship with Islam and even their cultures. Therefore, this shows that prioritizing Islamic values, such as those mentioned in the five pillars, is more important than presenting as visibly Muslim through wearing the hijab.

Chapter 7: Women who have always worn the hijab

This chapter includes the stories of women who have always worn the hijab. In this study, they are described as wearing the hijab since they were children or teenagers. What distinguishes them from the women in other categories is that they have maintained wearing the hijab throughout their lives since they were minors. They also currently wear the hijab and have not removed it at any point in their lives, even if they expressed doubts. Understanding the stories of Muslim women who only know how to navigate life as hijabis is important to distinguishing the religious, cultural, and environmental factors that encouraged them to keep wearing the hijab. At the same time, hearing their stories can also shed light on how these factors have worked against their decision to wear the hijab. In this section, I examine the stories of Rania, Zara, and Layla. All three women fulfil the criteria for this category and still proudly wear their hijabs today.

Rania's Story:

Rania begins the interview with enthusiasm laced in her tone as she describes how she came to know and wear the hijab. Like many of the other participants in the study, she attended a private Islamic school where the hijab was a familiar concept to her. At the same time, she attributes looking up to older girls who wore the hijab, as well as her mother. She wanted to emulate them and had an understanding that she was going to wear the hijab regardless. When she turned ten years old, Rania decided to wear the hijab despite not knowing the Islamic reasoning for wearing it. Even though Rania did not fully understand the meaning of the hijab at the time, she believed that since it was her choice to wear it, she still has a good relationship with it currently. She describes this as, “But as I grew older, I started to learn as to why we have to do

it, and why it's encouraged, and that is why I kept it on, and that is why I am fulfilled. I never took it off, even though my decision started way before I was supposed to wear it.”

Rania describes her cultural background as Palestinian American. She says that both of her parents are Palestinian, but her mother was born and raised in the United States, like Rania and her siblings. This factor encouraged her parents to maintain Palestinian culture in their household, such as speaking to their children in Arabic. However, her parents realized that American culture could negatively affect their children, so they decided to live abroad for a change. Rania says, “So my parents then decided that we should go to Jordan for a few years, just so that we can get more of a glimpse of like where we're from, because Jordan is the closest place to Palestine, culturally and like with language and everything like that.” In terms of environment, for Rania, this move was welcomed because she was able to grow up with both American and Arab cultures, which broadened her worldview. She currently lives in Knoxville, Tennessee, and believes that living in the West has forced her to be more aware of how she practices and maintains Islam in her life compared to when she lived in the Middle East. Rania finds that Islam is implemented in her life in Knoxville through her interactions with the Muslims in her circle. She believes the Muslims in her life encourage her to practice Islam and can hold her accountable if she strays from Islamic values. She says, “Most of the people I surround myself with nowadays will tell me if I'm doing something wrong, and that will be a reminder to go back in the right direction and stuff. And that really helps me a lot.” She goes on to exemplify this interview as a way of implementing accountability and maintaining Islam in her life. She says,

But since this interview is here now, it opens my eyes to a lot of things. And obviously I'm being interviewed by a really good friend of mine. And she's really passionate about

Islam and about spreading awareness and everything like that. And that's very beautiful. So it's things like that. So it's implemented by my family, by my friends, by everyone around me. No matter what happens, I feel like there's a good community and a good group of people who will always like help.

Rania's response surprised me. While I believe that my research, through conducting these interviews, can spread awareness about the issues Muslim women in Knoxville face, I never examined my positionality as extending beyond that of a researcher who happens to be friends with this participant. Hearing that Rania groups her participation in this study as a means of her community implementing Islam in her life is profound and illustrates the strengths of being a member of the group being researched. Had I been a stranger, Rania likely would not have believed participating in an interview like this would contribute to her sense of community.

Since we were already discussing the topic of community, I asked Rania how her community looked when she first began wearing the hijab at the age of ten. As mentioned before, she went to a private Islamic school like several other participants. Even though her journey wearing the hijab had been easy, she recalls being met with judgment from other Muslim students her age. She says,

And when I started wearing it at the Islamic school I went to, they kind of forced it upon us at that age, like middle school. You had to wear it even if you hadn't reached puberty. So it wasn't really hard for me. However, I do have to say there were a few struggles, because there were a few people who came to that school who wouldn't wear it outside of school, so if I were to hang out with them, or if they found out I was still hijabi outside of school, they would kind of make fun of me and tell me, 'Why would you do that?' Even

though they were Muslim? So those struggles were still there. But for the main part, it wasn't too hard.

Many Muslims believe that the hijab should be worn once girls reach the age of puberty. In Rania's case, she had already begun to wear the hijab before she reached that stage in life. Ironically, Rania faced judgment from her Muslim classmates, some of whom wore the hijab with her at school. To these children, the hijab likely became associated with their school uniform rather than viewed as a religious object, as it was intended. This disconnect between Rania and her classmates served as a struggle for her despite being in an Islamic environment. When asked why she thinks they treated her that way, Rania answered that they likely thought she was too young to be wearing the hijab. Rania personally believes that if she had not started wearing the hijab when she did, she likely would have struggled wearing it later on. At the same time, when she lived in Jordan, she recalls the locals being surprised that she wore the hijab. She remembers, "They made me feel weird because I was American and I was wearing it. They were just like, 'Aren't you not supposed to wear it?' And I'm like, 'No like I said, I'm Muslim.'" Even though those Jordanians were Muslims themselves, they saw Rania's American nationality before her religious identity. For them, being American does not mean wearing the hijab. This contrasts with Rania's belief that her identity as a Muslim comes before her culture and nationality.

On the other hand, Rania believes that non-Muslims showed her more support than Muslims did when she started wearing the hijab. She recalls,

I would wear it when I went shopping and stuff, and older people would compliment me. They would tell me I looked good and things like that. The community was very welcoming, and I know you wouldn't think so, but for living in the south and stuff, when

I was younger, I didn't experience any racism towards my scarf at all, so that was pretty good.

Compared to other participants' experiences in Knoxville, Rania describes receiving the most support from non-Muslims. She feels lucky not to have experienced Islamophobia on account of her appearance.

When it comes to wearing the hijab, Rania believes that her culture did not play as much of a role as her religion did. She describes her parents' attitudes toward Arab culture that pushed her away from implementing the culture in her own life. She says, "I would always hear my parents say, for example, 'Well, us Arabs do this.' And for me, I always used to say, 'I do not care.' As long as it's not something, like Arabs, and any culture, too, will literally like forbid something that Islam never forbids. So I'm always like, well, it doesn't really matter to me as long as it makes me happy." Rania then goes on to explain how Muslim women from countries and ethnicities can dress in their cultural garments while abiding by the standards of the hijab. She feels that if the hijab was centered around Arab culture, she would "find that a little racist, because then you'll see, like an Arab not agreeing with how like, say, Pakistanis wear their hijab, or like Turkish people, wear the hijab and like to me, it's like, 'Well, if it's not wrong, why are you against it? Is it because your culture said it's wrong?'" Essentially, Rania seems to be rejecting the notion of Arab supremacy that conflates Arab culture with Islam. She realizes that her family "probably wouldn't agree with what I say, because they always think culture has a big part in religion. I personally don't agree with that, but that's just my personal thing." She goes on to elaborate that culture is still a good thing, and that more people need to realize that they can still practice the culture without implementing harmful practices. This includes not emphasizing culture over Islam, because Rania believes that the values of Islam are superior to culture,

especially in cases where culture prohibits things Islam has deemed as permissible. She concludes this belief by countering the language of her parents. She says, “I don't want to hear ‘Arabs don't do this. Arabs don't do that.’ I want to hear ‘Muslims don't do this. Muslims don't do that,’” and firmly stating, “I believe culture oppresses more than religion.”

While Rania is still confident about her decision to wear the hijab, she acknowledges that she struggles some days. She admits that “Sometimes it can be difficult, but not because I want to take it off, but because I feel like having a bad hijab day is worse than having a bad hair day, in my opinion.” She expands on this notion by explaining that while everyone has moments when they feel insecure in their appearance, such as through not wearing makeup, non-hijabis can at least compensate with their hair. Rania emphasizes that hijabis need to feel confident about their facial features since this is the only part of them revealed to the world. She explains that “There are days where you're just not going to wear makeup. There are days where you're just going to have to put on a hijab and leave the house quickly. You're going to look like a bum, but you're going to look like a bum that looks like an egg, because there's nothing on your head except for a wrap.” However, Rania believes that the honor of representing Islam is significantly more fulfilling than worrying about her appearance. So even though she sometimes feels like an egg, she still describes feeling beautiful through representing Islam.

However, when it comes to representing Islam, Rania believes that there are added responsibilities that are often overlooked. She says,

I get to represent Islam, but then that means I have to work on my personality a lot more outside, because I am the one representing Islam in front of everyone else. It's a little different how I feel in America versus like in other countries where it's normalized. I just feel like I'm doing what everyone else is doing. So it's fine. But, like here, specifically,

you do feel some sort of way. It's a good thing, though, because you are representing your religion.

Rania is alluding to the rhetoric that Muslim women who wear the hijab hold the responsibility of representing Islam. She finds herself adhering to these standards, especially living in the South, where people are more influenced by the Islamophobic rhetoric against Muslims. Here, Rania is cognizant that wearing the hijab in the United States means that non-Muslims will associate her with Islam. Therefore, she acknowledges that she needs to be aware of how she behaves in public since her actions could be attributed to her religious affiliation by outsiders. She does this by saying,

I personally act better, because I'm representing Islam in front of other people...But specifically, if you are a hijabi, I believe you should show love and care and patience with anyone, even if it's very inconvenient to you, because they look at you as a Muslim, and those are characteristics that Islam gave you. Everyone's going to look at me and be like. 'Oh, she is Muslim' because of my hijab. So it's kind of like a symbol. So be kind because you want to show people that that's what your religion taught you to do.

Here, Rania discusses the semiotic nature of the hijab as an identifier that people make meaning of based on the actions and behavior of the wearer. The hijab also renders her hypervisible, thus further pushing her to represent Islam well through her actions.

With the hypervisible nature of the hijab comes unwanted attention. Rania mentions that while she is wearing the hijab for purely religious reasons, some non-Muslim men feel entitled to her body. She says, "Then you have like men who will, unfortunately, and I hate to say this, but they will try and sexualize it like they do." She explains that men at her workplace would sexualize her by asking to see her hair. She says,

I had my manager literally beg me multiple times, and he wasn't a weirdo, like I don't want to say he was, but he would beg me multiple times to at least get a glimpse of my hair, like, 'Please let me see what it looks like. I'm curious.' And I'll be like, 'No, that's just not how that works.' He would even ask my friend who wasn't Muslim, because she had pictures of me [without the hijab]. He would be like, 'Let me see.' And she would be like, 'No, I cannot show you things like that.'

Perhaps to her manager, Rania's choice to dress modestly and wear the hijab was an exotic concept. This incident is similar to Al-Mahadin's claim that the hijab communicates inaccessibility. For non-Muslims, "The hijab tantalizes because it forces the body to the forefront; nudging it forward, making the gaze pay attention to its hiddenness" (Al-Mahadin 13). This notion once again represents the paradox that while the hijab was meant to be worn for modesty, it draws attention to the wearer. Rania's manager felt entitled to her body because he perceived the hijab as making the hiddenness of her body apparent. Rania's hijabi coworker experienced similar comments and recalls a man telling her, "I love hijabis because it's always a mystery what they're covering." Attitudes such as these are why it is no surprise that the hijab has been fetishized, even though it serves the opposite purpose. This goes to show that while the hijab as a rhetorical device communicates modesty and the wearer's Muslim identity, some depraved people will still find a way to sexualize it.

As the interview came to a close, Rania emphasized that the hijab means an act of worship. She also believes that the hijab can offer protection from bad influences and encourage self-love without male validation. She describes the act of wearing the hijab as an inherently feminine concept; therefore, to Rania, the hijab can also mean female empowerment in a

sexualized world. When asked why she would continue wearing the hijab, Rania likens wearing the hijab to common life goals. She responds,

You're asking me if I'm in, say, grad school, why do you continue to take your classes and do your homework well? Because of the result. You know what I mean, but it's easier for me to say that than to say, the result is heaven, because you can't really see it. It just depends on your faith. But that's why I'm trying to work hard on it, because I don't want to reach a point where I'm going to say, 'I want to take it off because I'm not faithful enough to believe that heaven is real.' I don't want to reach that point ever."

Even though aspirations like graduate school provide tangible results in the form of diplomas, Rania has faith that heaven would be granted to her if she continues to believe in Islam and wear the hijab. She realizes that she could die at any point in her life, so by wearing the hijab, she makes a conscious effort to practice Islam so she can reach heaven.

Before I could conclude the interview, Rania emphasized one final thought. Since she believes that the topic of the hijab has been addressed in the Quran, wearing the hijab should be viewed as an order from God. She expands on that thought when she says,

I'll conclude with this. I honestly wish that more people spoke about this here in America, but I feel like the topic of hijab has become so sensitive to the point where we're not acknowledging that it's *fard* (mandatory) anymore. We're acknowledging that it's literally just a choice, which is like yes, you choose to worship God. But, like I said, people are just talking about the beauty of it and the meaning behind it, which is great. I want people to know about that. But people also need to understand that this is something you kind of still have to do...I just wish, like in Knoxville. Specifically, we talked more about this topic.

While Rania still emphasizes the importance of individual choice when it comes to wearing the hijab, she urges Muslim women in Knoxville specifically to be conscious about the Quranic evidence for the hijab. Rhetoric emphasizing freedom and bodily autonomy for Muslim women can often overshadow mainstream Islamic interpretations that deem wearing the hijab as mandatory. While every Muslim woman has a unique relationship with the hijab, Rania ultimately believes that the hijab is still mandatory. However, since the negative rhetoric against Muslims and the hijab is present in American society, some Muslims end up forgetting their obligations to their faith as they choose to reframe the hijab to appeal to Western society.

Layla's Story:

Layla's journey with the hijab begins two weeks into the start of high school. She had initially wanted to wear it on the first day of high school, but her mother advised against it, since she felt her daughter was too young. Instead, her mother suggested that Layla could wear the hijab when performing smaller tasks such as shopping for groceries or studying at the library. However, Layla came to wear the hijab upon hearing the tragic story of her friend's friend. She says, "Her friend had always wanted to wear the hijab, and kept mentioning it over and over again, but she ended up getting in a car accident, and she never had that chance to wear the hijab and like be able to fulfill that requirement." Upon listening to this tragic story, Layla felt even more compelled to wear the hijab. Like Rania mentioned before, death could come at any time, and in Layla's case, hearing a real-life example of a person dying before they could wear the hijab solidified that reality.

Before she committed to wearing the hijab, the Islamic month of Ramadan had just passed. Layla spent this month improving herself, as she describes. She achieved this through fulfilling Islamic obligations such as praying five times a day. She also learned more about Islam

by listening to lectures on Islamic matters. For Layla, the hijab was naturally the next step in her self-fulfillment journey. She describes this era of her life as difficult, but becoming closer to Islam helped her significantly. She says, “I was in a depressive state. So I think with Ramadan, it was like a time for me to like, want to improve, and to get out of that state. And I felt like this, then, was definitely something that helped me get out of it. And yeah, wanting to wear the hijab, too, was like my way of kind of being able to get closer to that [religion].” Therefore, Layla’s decision to wear the hijab was solely a religious decision. Even though she still identifies with her Egyptian cultural background, she attributes her choice to wear the hijab for purely religious reasons.

As Layla enters her ninth year of wearing the hijab, she realizes that the hijab means an expression of her faith. She explains this realization by describing how hijabis visually represent Islam. She says, “I think, now wearing the hijab, whenever I see another woman wear a hijab, I immediately know that they’re Muslim, and like I get that sense of gratification, like knowing that, I’m like somewhat representing Islam by wearing the hijab.” Layla’s experiences confirm the notion that the hijab first and foremost expresses that the wearer is Muslim. Feeling a sense of community by being able to identify with other Muslim women through their hijab is a unique hijabi experience. Layla believes that by representing Islam through wearing the hijab, she also has to adjust her behavior, similar to the points made by Rania. She says, “I feel like I have some duty to act in a certain way, like to do my best to implement the Islamic teachings... sometimes it can feel like this weight on your shoulders, like, you want to try and do the best that you can, and making sure that you’re being that source of information for people, especially for non-muslims.” Here, Layla discusses that she feels the responsibility of representing Islam to non-Muslim through wearing the hijab. When asked why she believes she needs to do this, she

believes that setting a good example of what a Muslim is can counter the Islamophobic rhetoric of Western media. She says, “You gotta be that person that shows them that Islam is not like what the media portrays.” She emphasizes that, living in Knoxville, she notices many residents have not encountered a single Muslim in their lives. As consumers of Western media, non-Muslims in Knoxville have only been exposed to the rhetoric that denotes Muslims as terrorists. For Layla, acting with Islamic behavior towards non-Muslims can counter the rhetoric they have been fed about Muslims their entire lives. She says, “I think, like being Muslim women in the West, we can be able to portray a different story– the correct story, and the representation that Islam actually is good.” Layla finds strength in her positionality as a Muslim woman. Even though Muslim women who wear the hijab often find themselves as a target for hatred, Layla reasons that the hypervisibility of being a Muslim is an advantage because their acts of kindness will be more apparent.

Similarly to Rania, Layla believes that wearing the hijab was her own choice. At the same time, she clarifies that Muslim women are obligated to wear the hijab according to the Quran. While notes that this obligation becomes a requirement once the wearer reaches the age of puberty, she personally came to wear the hijab a little after this point in her life. She believes that if the hijab had been forced upon her, especially at a younger age, she would have grown to harbor resentment toward it. Ultimately, Layla believes that extra time allowed her to gain a better understanding of why Muslim women wear the hijab. She says, “I didn't have that knowledge in the beginning, like of what Islam truly was. I think I still needed to learn more about it, to like, have the bond, and like the desire to [wear it].” With this in mind, I asked her if she believed she chose to wear the hijab at the right age, to which she answered yes. She emphasizes that at fourteen years old, she had not only gained more Islamic knowledge but also

seen more hijabis in Knoxville compared to her childhood. Seeing Muslim girls wearing the hijab at her high school also served to motivate her to wear the hijab. She believed that through those visibly Muslim girls that her non-Muslim classmates became more exposed to the hijab and therefore more tolerant. However, Layla notes that she still received the occasional dirty look, but never anything more than that.

As the interview progresses, Layla continues to emphasize that wearing the hijab was a religious reason. As she read the Quran, Layla felt seen in the stories of the prophets. She compares the obligation that Muslim women need to wear the hijab to the story of Moses. In a translation by Sahih International, the verse states, “[Allah] said, 'O Moses, I have chosen you over the people with My messages and My words [to you]. So take what I have given you and be among the grateful’” (Quran 7:144). Layla interprets this verse as God choosing her to be a Muslim, therefore representing Islam through the hijab. She says, “I felt like it, kind of applied to us as Muslims, like, Allah chose us to be Muslims to be that representation of Islam... He chose me to be able to be a Muslim, and to be able to represent Muslims.” While some Muslims may view representing the religion of Islam as a daunting task, Layla believes that God chose women for this task the same way he chose Moses and all of the other prophets to spread the message of Islam. She further explains that Islam is a religion that respects women. She discusses revered women in Islam, such as Mary, the mother of Jesus, Khadija, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad and first convert to Islam, and Sumaya, the first martyr for Islam, to illustrate that women have always had a role in Islam. Essentially, Layla finds strength in Islamic figures when it comes to countering rhetoric against Muslims; this, in turn, motivates her to wear the hijab to emulate these figures.

Toward the end of the interview, I asked Layla what the hijab means to her. She expresses that “The hijab is definitely one of those factors to like showcase my one step to wanting to try and be a better Muslim and a better person.” Layla approaches wearing the hijab in the same way that some other Muslims prioritize reading the Quran or becoming steadfast with their prayers. All elements are important to practicing Islam, and in her case, the hijab seemed to be the next step to symbolizing her pursuit as she follows Islam. She also realized that wearing the hijab was a litmus to weed out any bad company in her life. She says, “A lot of people would tell me that like when you wear the hijab that’s going to differentiate between your real friends and who aren’t your real friends. Religion to me was like such a big part of me, and I feel like the people that you choose to be your friends need to be accepting of who you are.” In this way, she indicates that the hijab can also mean protection from fake friends. She goes on to clarify that because the hijab holds so much meaning for her, ranging from being able to represent her religion to empowerment, she would never take it off. She says, “I want to make sure that I always hold onto it...I feel like this is the right thing for me to stay doing.” To Layla, the hijab is an anchor she can hold onto when times get difficult to remind her how far she has come.

Zara’s Story

Zara’s experiences with the hijab reflect the experiences of other Muslim women in Knoxville. Like many of the other participants, she attended a private Islamic school and formally began to wear the hijab when she was around twelve or thirteen years old. She describes her grandmother serving as an inspiration and role model for her decision to wear the hijab, as she was the only other person in her family who wore it. Zara chuckles as she recalls her grandmother’s shocked reaction. She says, “Funny enough, she was like, ‘You’re too young.

You don't need to wear it!” From an early age, Zara could tell that her grandmother’s reasoning was rooted in Turkish culture. She explains that in Turkey, it is common for women to start wearing the hijab after they marry. While Zara emphasizes that she is proud of her culture, she also states that she grew up in the United States and does not feel like she needs to abide by certain Turkish customs. For example, some people ask her why she doesn’t follow Turkish hijab styles, which include square pieces of fabric compared to the standard rectangular fabric many hijabis use, wrapped tightly over a volumizing scrunchie. She says, “There’s a specific hijab style there that I’m not a fan of, because they do a whole fake bun, and it makes their head look like, you know the babies that like come out 1st thing, you know, newborns...I was like to each their own. I guess it’s just not for me. So discovering my own style, and then having to deal with my own style of like the way that I wrap it” was important to distinguishing her individuality rather than abiding to cultural customs. However, when she went to Turkey wearing her unique style, Turkish locals often mistook her for other ethnicities. Even though she was still wearing the hijab, not wearing it in a style traditional to Turkish culture caused her to be othered. Zara eventually learned that for some, culture dominates religious obligations, such as with the way she styled her hijab. Overall, she feels lucky to have the freedom and choice to follow customs and traditions from both Turkish and American culture.

Zara came to follow Islam actively through her enrollment at the private Islamic school. There, she emphasizes being able to learn a lot about Islam, but notes that she has struggled following certain aspects of Islam. She says, “I have no qualms with the religion itself. I think the religion is beautiful. I will say I think people, not like my family, but people make it unhealthy. Either they take it to a point of like they read one rule, and then they go run with that even though there’s like 0 context with it.” She understands that people like this can sour some

aspects of Islam for others. However, she emphasizes the importance of obtaining more knowledge as she grew up and started going to public school, and eventually, college. Even though she understands she spent her early school years in a more Islamic environment, she believes her relationship with Islam was the strongest in college. She says, “I will say, I think my peak of my like religiosity is probably college, and I think that's just because you're becoming more of an adult, you're understanding a lot more. And there's many more resources when it comes to this stuff. And there's many more programs. And you just understand more because your brain is developing properly.” She attributes the social aspects of college for bringing her closer to her faith, such as participating in Muslim Student Association events where she could learn more about Islam with her peers in a less institutionalized environment.

Despite feeling closer to Islam at a later age, Zara tells me that she began to wear the hijab as soon as she began puberty. Like Rania, Zara already had the understanding that she would wear it when this time came. She describes this moment as her choice, yet realizes that there were other factors that influenced her to wear it. She says, “So 95% yes, because it was completely my decision. No other people around me really told me to. The 5% was just my internal thing of well, people would like me more if that makes sense.” However, shortly after wearing the hijab, Zara faced Islamophobia for the first time in Knoxville. She describes,

I was walking through like the crowded Mall, and it was like so packed there was no room between each other. And then I felt like a huge tug on my hijab at like 12 to 13 years old, and I turned around as this random white man just ran off. I didn't think of calling the police. I didn't think of anything, because I'm young like, and I'm with my friend group. And so, my friend group, they're like, ‘Oh, my God! What happened?’ I'm

just like shaken. I'm like, 'What the hell just happened?' I had no idea. Yeah, it's still something like a blur to me, because I don't like it. It was like scary, if anything.

After hearing about their daughter being a victim to a hate crime, her parents suggested calling the police, but Zara declined. This would not be the only incident of hatred Zara will face in Knoxville. Apart from receiving a few hateful glares here and there, Zara recounts another incident that occurred a few years later in high school. She says,

I was in my freshman year of high school, and I was just walking around in the gym and there was this guy with his friend, but he specifically was yelling. He just yelled 'Terrorist!' At the time, it was me and one other hijabi friend and one black girl, and I went to my coach immediately, and then just let her know. And he got suspended. There's so many people like that that get away with it. But I'm going to do what I can to stand up for myself.

Both incidents reflect that Islamophobia has been present in Knoxville, and some of the youth are empowered by this rhetoric enough to hurl insults at their Muslim peers. As Zara grew older between the first and second incident, she realized that she owes it to herself to protect herself by reporting these acts of hatred. Thankfully, justice was served for Zara as indicated by her classmate's suspension.

However, Zara admits to not feeling confident in the hijab during high school. As a teenager, she felt like she did not have a sense of style in terms of her clothing like her non-Muslim peers and would often wear anything between "tight clothes" to looking "like a little grandma." She says, "Feeling confident in the hijab was a struggle, too, because, like, you're trying to find your own style, you're trying to find what works with you?. What makes you unique." As someone who has worn the hijab for her whole life, Zara's experience with feeling

insecure in the hijab are unique since other participants who have never worn the hijab or are new to the hijab did not face adolescence while trying to abide by the hijab. She eventually grew out of that insecurity, yet faced even more adult realizations once she went to college. She says,

I didn't experience my microaggressions in college, but I have had fears to wear the hijab if there's a big news event that happened or either, like big political parties are very much anti-Muslim. It's like, 'Oh, I am very visually hijabi.' And this is the moment where I have worn a hoodie a couple of times in my life to kind of get away with, just looking like. you know, just a girl that's just wearing a hood.

As someone who has already faced bigotry from a young age after wearing the hijab, Zara is more vigilant any time she is aware of periods where anti-Muslim rhetoric is high. For her, this means shedding her identity as a visible Muslim, but still trying to maintain her devotion to the hijab in other acceptable forms, like wearing hoodies. She realizes that although Knoxville is her hometown, people living here are capable of expressing anti-Muslim sentiments due to their consumption of Western media which has a bias against Muslims as seen in the findings in *Covering Muslims*. However, Zara notes that in other places in the South such as Houston or Dallas, she felt welcome while wearing the hijab since these areas have a higher Muslim population compared to Knoxville. She says that overall, "The region didn't really affect it as much. The only way that it would affect it was like I was concerned with the political environment, especially when elections come up. And then you're just kind of like, 'Do I continue like? Do I conceal it a little bit more do I go outside?'" It seems that for Zara, the political climate of the area matters more than the geographical region when it comes to feeling welcome while wearing the hijab. After all, it is the people that make the place.

Even though she has faced her fair share of Islamophobia, Zara asserts that she is still keen on wearing the hijab. When I asked her the extent her religion influences her decision to wear the hijab, Zara quantifies her response. She answers,

75%, I would think. I'm saving this 25% for, like other factors. I feel more confident this way. And in Islam it is mandatory. But people around me growing up wore it. A lot of the teachers inspired me to wear it. And so I was just kind of like 'This feels right?' I don't know. There's just a feeling that just happens in your heart. And this is nice. I want to wear this.

She describes the other seventy-five percent of her religious decision to wear the hijab as rooted in connection to Islam. She says, "I think hijab was the one thing that did keep me connected, even at my lowest lows of feeling religious. That was the thing that still connected me. It was kind of like a reminder for me. You still gotta follow it." For Zara, the hijab served as a physical reminder that even when life became difficult, her faith remained.

Zara also makes meaning of the hijab by describing it as "the cherry on top." Zara believes that the hijab encourages her fashion hobby and allows her to be more creative when expressing herself. She says, I'm only relating it to fashion just because it builds my confidence. I think confidence and hijab do correlate a lot with me." She describes that through fashion and the hijab, she can represent Islam in her daily life. She says,

It makes me proud to be a physical representation of Islam, if that makes sense. And even if I'm an inspiration for one person, that's plenty... At the same time I love seeing others wear it around me, and even others asking me about it. And sometimes when I get random people that ask. I was at the K.Brew at school the other day, and this guy, he just

goes, ‘Oh, my God! I didn't realize your hijab was bedazzled!’ It's this random white man too, it's so cute.

While Zara previously describes receiving negative attention because of her hijab, she also experiences positive interactions with Muslims and non-Muslims alike. She describes loving to observe how other Muslim women incorporate the hijab with their unique fashion sense, which in turn inspires her and clashes against the idea that Muslim women are a monolith when it comes to the clothes they wear. As a result, non-Muslims are also impressed by how versatile and fashionable the hijab actually is. The man who complimented Zara's hijab did not even know hijabs could be bedazzled. Interactions like these can further squash the rhetoric that the hijab is oppressive. Zara and her friends demonstrate that the hijab can cater to the individual's fashion sense while still upholding Islamic modesty standards.

Zara uses another metaphor to describe what she believes the hijab means. She says, “The hijab's like the soil and Islam's the roots.” She goes on to elaborate that the soil, the hijab in her case, holds the roots of her faith together. The more she waters, or nurtures her faith, the more “fruitful” her hijab would be when it comes to representing Islam. Zara returns to the idea that fashion is a way of motivating her to continue wearing the hijab, such as through experimenting with new hijab styles. For her, it makes life less mundane and allows her to continuously build a relationship with Islam through her outward appearance.

As the interview comes to a close, Zara emphasizes that although Knoxville will always be her hometown, she wants to move somewhere with a higher population of Muslims to experience a new environment. She notes that her friends from cities with higher Muslim populations are genuinely surprised by the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in Knoxville. While

this is not an issue for Zara personally, she feels like moving to a more diverse city will be a new experience.

Zara says that she will continue to wear the hijab and only remove it for safety reasons if she feels endangered. She credits the hijab to becoming a part of her identity, to the point of becoming a part of her subconscious. She says,

It's my identity. I think it's weird because if I go to sleep and have a dream, and I don't see myself with a hijab on. I'm like, that's not me. You know what I mean. It's as simple as that, like, even like my subconscious is going to be thinking to itself as 'that's not you'. I've gotten so used to myself even when I come home. You know how some people rip off the hijab immediately? That used to be me. And sometimes now I just sit there with the hijab, and I'm just kind of like whatever it's on me.

The ability for the hijab to embed itself so deeply into the identities of Muslim women shows how the hijab is more than just a simple headscarf or a tool of oppression. It is something that many women cannot live without. It offers a sense of identity, which is crucial for developing a sense of self. If she were to remove the hijab, Zara feels as though she would be losing a part of her identity. Therefore, Zara will continue wearing the hijab for her sake.

Discussion:

The stories of Rania, Layla, and Zara show that Muslim women who have always worn the hijab have faced negativity from both Muslims and non-Muslims in their lives. Nonetheless, they portray themselves as resilient against the rhetoric that judges them. Since these women have worn the hijab for about half of their lives now, they have faced a variety of unique interactions with all types of people influenced by various rhetoric. Whether it's Islamophobia or fear from other Muslims, through it all, they still hold onto the hijab because it holds so much

meaning to them. Layla emphasizes that Western media is to blame for the dirty looks she has received while wearing her hijab. Zara would also agree with that sentiment, except in her experiences, the people most empowered by anti-Muslim rhetoric from the media acted on their hatred. Rania thankfully has not experienced Islamophobia, but fetishization by non-Muslim men instead, who ascribe a sexualized meaning to the hijab.

While Rania was supported to wear the hijab at a young age, Layla and Zara's parents and grandparents held reservations about their daughters becoming visibly Muslim. At the same time, all three young women made their families proud by wearing the hijab, yet, they all assert that culture should not influence their choice to wear the hijab at all. Instead, they all prioritize learning more about Islamic values to counter negative aspects of their cultures. This eventually leads all three women to creating their own identities through the hijab.

Their experiences can be elaborated in further detail by grouping them into their respective codes and analyzing their stories previous research. Doing so can further validate their experiences in the context of Knoxville, Tennessee, as well as shed light on any unique findings.

Identity:

Since Rania, Layla, and Zara have worn the hijab for a significant portion of their lives and still continue to wear it, they believe the hijab has played a role in developing their identity. Based on their accounts, it seems as though all three participants have developed their identity not through their culture, but through their religion instead. Rania's experiences tell a story of deconstructing Arab culture from Islam the same way Zara does for Turkish culture. When Rania and Zara visit their respective home countries, they describe being othered for actively following Islam through wearing the hijab. In Jordan, Rania discussed that locals were shocked that she still wore the hijab even though she was born and raised in the United States. Based on her

experience, it seems to confirm the rhetoric that virtue is associated with the hijab, yet to some Arabs, being American communicates the opposite. To the Global South, the United States presents itself as a land where freedom is inherent. This includes freedom of religion, which boils down to the freedom to present one's religious affiliation through their appearance. In *Covering Muslims*, the authors found that newspapers in the Global South focus more on domestic stories compared to how Western media is found to perpetuate rhetoric against Muslims (Bleich and van der Veen 114). Therefore, it is understandable that non-Americans assumed Rania's American-ness overshadowed her religious identity, especially since these countries report less on foreign affairs the same way Western media magnifies incidents to push an anti-Islam narrative. This supports Karaman's findings that "Additionally, several hijabi American Muslim women who visit regularly their home country in summer argued that they feel different in their interactions not only with the majority white non-Muslim individuals in America, but also with Muslim people in Middle Eastern countries. Since, these women believed that they are out of the circle both in America and in Middle Eastern or other Muslim countries" (46). The idea that these women feel out of the circle in both American and Middle Eastern cultures affirms Rania, Layla, and Zara's desire to divorce their culture from Islam.

Layla expressed that since she had never been to Egypt, she felt a disconnect from Egyptian culture and instead used that as an advantage to learn about Islam through an objective lens. Even though Zara expresses her love for Turkish culture, she also reaches the same conclusion as Layla and learned Islam without the influence of culture. Rania recalls having to learn how to separate Islam from Arab culture and only making this distinction at eighteen years old, since her family perpetuated some of the rhetoric of Arab supremacy. Even though Malaibari's study measured a sense of national identity among Muslim women in Knoxville,

Rania, Layla, and Zara all “used their own rhetorical moves and organization to explain their identities” too (195). They did this through denouncing the toxic elements of their culture that muddled their understanding of Islam and created a uniquely Muslim identity and reasoning for their choice to wear the hijab.

Representing Islam

For the most part, all three participants in this category believed that by wearing the hijab, they could better represent Islam. This concept is tied pretty closely to forming an identity around the hijab, but emphasizes the element of personifying and embodying Islam. Layla in particular believes that while this is a heavy task, demonstrating the hijab not only physically but through kind behavior can counter anti-Muslim rhetoric among people in Knoxville, who have already been exposed to Western media. Layla’s behavior reflects the behavior expressed by one of Hopkins and Greenwood’s participants. They write, “Indeed, she explained that such visibility encouraged the project of ‘perfecting, perfecting yourself, perfecting your Islam so people can see’ what Islam is. Thus, although orienting to others’ judgements could in some ways be onerous, it also could be experienced positively, and as motivating efforts to improve oneself as a Muslim” (Hopkins and Greenwood 444).

Layla also attributes Islamic religious figures as inspirations that encourage her to wear the hijab. By seeing figures such as Moses or Mary as role models, who God ordered to spread Islam through their specific missions, she is fulfilling God’s commands to represent Islam through wearing the hijab. Rania especially emphasizes that representing Islam by wearing the hijab is an order from God for Muslim women. It is one thing to choose to wear the hijab, but Rania specifically calls for Muslim women in Knoxville to understand how just because it is a choice to wear the hijab, God still commands Muslim women to wear it. Adding religious

meaning and a sense of identity correlates to the findings Ireiqiat observed in her participants.

She writes,

They confirmed that hijab was considered as a symbol of Muslim identity and it came as an order from Allah to girls after the age of puberty. Furthermore, the six participants insured the researcher that Islam values women's rights more than their culture and they expressed their hope that their communities will follow the guidelines of Islam in honoring women's rights.

Like Ireiqat's participants, Rania, Layla, and Zara all denounced toxic parts of their culture to elevate their rights as Muslim women. They hope by defining the hijab in a religious lens can counter the rhetoric from Muslim communities that empowers them to control and criticize Muslim women for not following certain interpretations of the hijab.

Islamophobia

Of the three women who have worn the hijab for the majority of their lives, Zara's encounters with Islamophobia were the most blatant. In her interview, Zara recalled how as a child, her hijab was pulled off by an adult man in the middle of the mall. Incidents such as these call for questions about the rhetoric that empowered an adult man to assault a preteen girl. Did the rhetoric of othering of Muslims convince him that assaulting a child was the answer? Or was her hijab perceived as a threat? Al-Mahadin explains this entanglement in terms of gaze. She writes, "Gaze is first and foremost one of fear and apprehension; two emotions that construct and weave narratives to allay anxiety. We are afraid of what is hidden (the hair), of what is inaccessible (the body as a whole as symbolized by the hair). A nun's habit does not arouse the same kind of anxiety because it has one meaning: I am the bride of Christ" (Al-Mahadin 6). The fact that Zara's hair and body were hidden, even as a child, was enough to evoke hatred in that

man to rip her hijab off in public shows that the Islamophobic rhetoric consumed by some people in Knoxville is enough to empower them to take matters into their own hands. The violent removal of her hijab signifies the power this man believes he holds over Muslims, specifically Muslim girls. What Zara experienced is not common. As mentioned in the literature review, there have been many headlines of Muslim women and girls experiencing Islamophobic hate crimes such as having their hijabs ripped from their heads.

After reading Rania's lack of encounters with Islamophobia, it is important to not overlook the fact that she was fetishized by non-Muslim men by wearing the hijab. Her manager's desire to see her hair represents a sense of entitlement some men have towards women's bodies. Since the hair is typically an uncovered feature for most women, Rania's choice to hide her hair underneath her hijab presented her manager with something against the grain. Instead of asking her what the hijab meant to her or why she wears it, the manager instead sexualized the hijab as soon as he demanded to see her hair. Al-Mahadin expands more on the fetishization of the hijab. She writes, "If fetishization, as Mulvey (1975) pointedly argues, turns the object into something reassuring and less threatening, then semiotic fetishization – assigning it a Eurocentric meaning – dispels the horror of the stain that the hijab represents and avoids the trauma of not being able to grasp the meaning of the hijab simply because it belongs to the context of an 'other'" (Al-Mahadin 6). Here, the new, Eurocentric meaning the manager assigned to Rania's hijab was sexual. Even though he chose to hide a part of herself for religious reasons, this concept was not understood, or perhaps ignored, by the manager. Therefore, he coped with this ignorance by sexualizing the hijab. Thus, Rania's experiences directly contrast Droogsma's findings that "Although most of the women have faced some discrimination due to the hijab,

nearly all of them felt that they receive more respect from both Muslim and non-Muslim men because they veil” (307).

Fear of Muslims

Since each of these participants have navigated their lives wearing the hijab, it is understandable that they do not receive the same criticism non-hijabis do. At the same time, Rania remembers that when she was new to the hijab, some of her Muslim peers were against her wearing it. Even though she attributes this to her age at the time, she still was shocked that Muslims would not support another Muslim for choosing to wear the hijab. Although she only expresses this one incident as a negative encounter between her and other Muslims, I realize that Rima Elabdali’s concept of embodied reflexivity is positively implemented in my research encounter with Rania. Since the interview was conducted privately in our own homes over Zoom, I was able to conduct the interview unveiled. Upon seeing me without my hijab, Rania expresses excitement. She says, “Oh, my goodness, literally, I didn’t even know what color your hair was. I literally thought I was gonna see you with like, maybe purple hair this time.” Even though Rania has seen my hair before, sometimes it is difficult to see other hijabis unveiled since most settings we interact with each other are public. The interview presented itself as a rare opportunity for Rania to see me without my veil, and in turn, made her feel more comfortable with participating in this interview.

Chapter 8: New category- Women who wore the hijab, took it off, and put it back on

Originally, this category was not a part of the original four categories of Muslim women and their relationship with the hijab. One of the most unique findings in this study was the emergence of a new category. As the participants described their stories as wearing the hijab, removing it, and putting it back on, I believed their unique experiences deserved a separate category. The women in this category are Dania and Fatima. They both wore the hijab as children, removed it at some point in their lives, and eventually put it back on. It would be unfair to box them into categories such as “women who have always worn the hijab” or “women who have taken off the hijab.” Therefore, their unique experiences are outlined in this chapter.

Dania’s Story

Dania begins her story by emphasizing that as a child, she felt pressure to wear the hijab when she started puberty. During this time, she felt unsure about wearing the hijab because she understood it to be a commitment without knowing the reasons why Muslim women wore it. Due to this hesitation, she felt pestered by her parents who urged her to wear the hijab regardless of her understanding of it. It came to a point to where she grew annoyed and wore the hijab to appease them. However, she states that when she wore it, “I did not like myself wearing it at all. I was not feeling it at that time.”

She explains that since her father was a religious leader in the Muslim Community of Knoxville, her family wanted to uphold a standard since their family was very influential in the community. She ultimately also blames culture as a reason her family urged her to wear the hijab. Dania and her family are Palestinian, and she explains,

It's more common or more of an expectation to wear hijab. But we came from like a smaller village. So culturally, there are people that are very ignorant of Islam there, even

like my relatives back, home and everything. But it is just something that is kind of expected of you at a certain point, like people just wear it because everybody else is wearing it.

She adds that she believes the area of Palestine she is from has become more cultural than religious. When she was introduced to the hijab, Dania believes that it was explained in a very black and white manner with limited reasoning about its religious purpose. She says, “We put it on, but it's like we don't even understand the benefit or why we're doing it. So we weren't connecting. But that's kind of how it, you know, how the dynamic was at the time.” This introduction and implementation of the hijab in Dania’s life caused even further confusion. It didn’t help that these relatives tended to gossip. She says, “My parents were like, well, if they find out that you're not wearing it, then they're all going to start talking. And then that's gonna make us look bad.” This added pressure further defined the hijab as a cultural practice than a religious obligation to Dania, since she realized that wearing it would only appease her family.

Like some of the other participants, Dania went to the private Islamic school in Knoxville for a brief period before transferring to a public middle school. She describes this moment as

That flip of environment definitely affected me a lot more and brought out more negative feelings that I may have been feeling about the hijab and just made me feel more alienated like, you're already in a new school, and then you have that [hijab]. And then it's like, who's gonna want to get to know me, or they already have pre-existing thoughts of me, or whatever so definitely was wanting to, you know, just blend in.

Dania was already aware of the anti-Muslim bias present in Knoxville during her childhood, and she feared becoming a target in a new non-Muslim environment. Due to this, Dania grew up feeling hypervisible. She says, “But you just felt eyes on you, you know. You felt like you had to

live up to a certain expectation.” She brings up the notion that as a hijabi, she needed to reflect Islamic values through her behavior and appearance, a responsibility she was not ready to take.

Similar to Seema’s introduction to the hijab, Dania mentions that the hijab was explained to her through the candy wrapper analogy. To them, the hijab signified something untouched and pure like a wrapped piece of candy whereas an unwrapped candy was viewed as dirty, as expressed in figure 3. This analogy prevented Dania from associating any religious meaning with the hijab. Since she did not have a solid understanding or reason to wear the hijab, Dania admits that she removed the hijab after she initially started wearing it. She says,

So I took it off twice officially. I took it off once in high school and it was kind of terrible of me to do it at that point, because my parents were like kind of at a low point with some other things...So because they were undergoing a lot of pressure in terms of other things, it made it very hard for me to continue keeping it off, because my mom would just like sometimes get a little upset, and would like make a comment, and they would just say things that like were hurtful. But I also understand it because they were, you know going through a lot as is. And then I added that to the mix, so that 1st time I just put it on to shut them up once again.

In Dania’s experience, taking off the hijab appeared as a burden to her parents who already had a lot on their plates. Despite stating that “I grew up with like a lot of insecurities of myself physically. So I feel like that always made me feel like quote unquote, uglier, or something,” she believed wearing the hijab again for her parents’ sake was the selfless thing to do.

During the second period of time she spent not wearing the hijab, Dania was in college and felt even further away from both the hijab and Islam. She realized that she had lost the sense of protection the hijab offered her when she wore it. She describes “living without a sense of

purpose” during this period without the hijab that lasted about a year. Upon realizing this, Dania had a newfound desire to wear the hijab again. She wanted to show the world that she was a Muslim. She says, “Whenever I was not wearing it, and I would do good things, for example, like hold the door for somebody, or like help somebody with something, or whatever, I wish they knew I was Muslim.” I asked her to expand upon why it was important for others to know her religious identity, and she said that her good actions can represent Islam and potentially encourage other people to join Islam. From this point, she began to associate the hijab more with Islam. She credits speaking with other Muslim women about her struggles, which ultimately encouraged her to feel secure wearing the hijab. Dania mentions that she took it upon herself to learn more about Islam in a seminary setting similar to Sara. She also describes being advised by another Muslim woman that “Allah chose women to be like the ambassadors of Islam.” She goes on to acknowledge that representing Islam is “a hefty weight to have to carry, but then that also kind of like resonated with that feeling I was feeling earlier of like wanting people to know my identity, you know, so that if I did do something good it was like showing them [Islam].” Seeking advice from other Muslim women taught Dania of the purpose of the hijab and the honor that comes with representing the faith. Here, Dania inadvertently practices the tenets of feminist epistemology. Instead of seeking advice from Muslim men, Muslim women like Dania trust the advice of fellow Muslim women when it comes to the hijab because, as Royster and Kirsch said, women have a unique way of interpreting and interacting with the world around them and can offer insights that show more care to these matters (20).

After going through these experiences, Dania shifts the cultural meaning of the hijab. Originally, she viewed the hijab as something women in Palestinian culture had to wear one day. However, her perspective on her culture changed when the October 7th attacks happened. The

subsequent genocide that occurred in Gaza, Palestine, made Dania feel a newfound appreciation for her culture. She saw that even in the rubble, “these people are still persevering. They're still steadfast, and they are still wearing it [hijab].” Seeing Palestinians persevere through the violence imposed upon them while still following Islam, such as the women still wearing their hijabs, inspired Dania to reflect upon how she could emulate them. She realizes that her struggles with the hijab were minuscule compared to the onslaught her people were going through. Therefore, she feels even more confident wearing her hijab, and attributes the resilience of Palestinians as a reason she can keep wearing it.

When asked if wearing the hijab was her choice, she emphasized that wearing it again during college after learning more about Islam was her first time choosing to wear it. She realizes that the previous times she wore the hijab, she was too young and coerced into it. As an adult, she was able to learn that the hijab is not just the physical act of wearing the headscarf. She learned that the hijab consists of “how we dress ourselves from head to toe, and that hijab is how we act.” She also mentions that even though she struggled with the hijab, wearing it is still an obligation in Islam, just like prayer is. With this in mind, she emphasizes that the hijab is also an obligation for men. She says, “Men first need to lower their gaze as well. They were told to do that first.”

As the interview comes to a close, Dania emphasizes that the hijab means identity to her. She says,

Just having that Muslim identity, it being known, being able to represent Islam, and in turn, while you're representing Islam, that makes you feel more mindful of like where you're at, what you're doing, how you're acting. You think twice about that. And initially, whenever I was younger. That was a negative thing to me, because I was like, well I don't

like that pressure, you know. But now I'm like, no, it's okay, like I can handle that responsibility. It is not anything crazy. And it's actually more of an honor. If we really think about it.

Even though she struggled a lot growing up, Dania eventually learned more about Islam and is proud to show her religion through her appearance. She also believes that by wearing the hijab, she holds herself accountable to uphold Islamic standards wherever she goes. Because identity plays such a big role in her wearing the hijab now, Dania is confident that she will not remove it again.

Fatima's Story:

Like Dania, Fatima began to wear the hijab at a young age. Fatima describes going to the private Islamic school in Knoxville for a brief period and came to know the hijab through seeing her mother and older sister wear it. As a child, she was eager to emulate them. The first time she wore the hijab was at her majority white public middle school. She recalls that although it was a mostly positive experience, she felt anxious at times because she was the only student wearing a hijab. As a result, she dealt with a few disrespectful stares and some Islamophobic comments. The second time she wore the hijab was when she was eighteen years old. By then, she believes that she was able to adequately learn more about Islam and why she wore it. She also mentions that she wanted the hijab to be something personal to her. She says, "I wanted to have a more personal relationship with it before I wore it, and I was like a visual representation of the religion. So when I put it back on, I felt a lot more confident." She currently wears the hijab and believes that this was a religious decision.

Fatima comes from an Egyptian background who were also very active participants in the Muslim Community of Knoxville. She emphasizes that her parents did a good job of

distinguishing between culture and religion. She says her parents told her, “You should wear it because of your own like relationship with God, and wanting to get closer to him in that way and represent your faith, more than like a cultural response.” So when Fatima detailed her experience wearing the hijab for a second time, she felt as though she could represent Islam more confidently. She says, “I’m glad that, like if I do anything good, it’s attributed or associated with how I present myself and wearing the hijab. So yeah, I think it’s just a part of who I am. And yeah, I’m glad I’m wearing it, even though there are some days where it’s more difficult.” Fatima elaborates that she, like many other hijabis in this study, can counter any anti-Muslim sentiments people have through her behavior. She says, “I’m always interacting with different people, and a lot of them haven’t really been close to a Muslim before or had very surface-level interactions with Muslims. So I feel like it’s important to, you know. Give them those good impressions to defeat those stereotypes that they might have.” In the context of Knoxville, Tennessee, most people would indeed have limited contact with Muslims due to their small population. In Fatima’s case, she is well aware of the Islamophobic rhetoric perpetuated by the media and the impact it would have on her neighbors. Therefore, by modeling good behavior while wearing the hijab, she believes that she could potentially change their views with her actions. Like other participants, Fatima has good experiences with Knoxville, however, she has a desire to explore other places with more diversity.

Fatima emphasizes it was her choice to wear the hijab both times. However, she felt more confident wearing the hijab the second time around when she was eighteen years old. She says,

I think it was the right age the second time, but I think for every person it’s different. Like everybody matures at a different age, and some people grow up like having a very strong connection, and they’re very confident about their religion from a young age. So it might

be easier for them to wear it at that age. And then others might take more time to figure it out. And I think it's just on a case by case basis. But for me, I thought when I started wearing it again when I was 18, I think that was the right age for me, just because that's the point when, like, I formed my own relationship with it and knew why I was wearing it, and I was very confident in it. Yeah, I mean, I don't think it was a mistake before, but I just think like I could have been a bit more mature if that makes sense.

For Fatima, gaining confidence in wearing the hijab meant gaining more Islamic knowledge to support her decision. She believed that when she was younger, she did not truly understand the meaning of wearing the hijab. However, now that she has learned more about Islam, Fatima feels more credible when it comes to not only representing Islam but also holding Islamic knowledge.

As the interview concluded, Fatima stated that the hijab means "following my religion and representing my religion." Even when she did not wear the hijab for a seven year period, Fatima emphasizes she still believed in her religion and had to make an active effort to become more practicing. Ultimately, she believes that not wearing the hijab was a period of growth that was necessary for her to put it back on in the future. She is confident that after gaining this knowledge during the time she did not wear the hijab, she would continue wearing the hijab for as long as she can.

Discussion

When initially interviewing Dania and Fatima, I was under the assumption they had always worn the hijab. It wasn't until after starting their interviews they revealed they had taken off the hijab and reworn it throughout their lives. With this in mind, I paid special attention to asking them about their experiences wearing and not wearing the hijab before they eventually put it back on. It was interesting to note that both of them developed new meanings of their

conceptualization of the hijab rooted in religion rather than confusion or lack of knowledge. Even though both Dania and Fatima are Arab women who have taken off the hijab and put it back on at some point, they received different reactions due to the people surrounding them. While Dania's family responded negatively, Fatima's family was "supportive both times because it was a decision I made for myself." Perhaps this difference in reaction can be attributed to culture; some Arab subcultures emphasize the hijab more so than others such as North African countries like Egypt, where the hijab played a cultural role in colonial resistance. Even though both women came from families active in the Muslim Community of Knoxville, Fatima's family made an active effort to differentiate between culture and religion while Dania's did not. Even though Fatima states that she removed the hijab because she lacked religious knowledge, culture did not play a significant factor in her decision. Meanwhile, Dania understands that she did not agree with the cultural meaning attributed to the hijab by her family, which caused her to have a complicated relationship with the hijab. In the end, both women have found religious meaning and knowledge as they came to wear the hijab again.

Identity

Both Dania and Fatima reference identity as a common factor when describing their hijab journey. Dania particularly intertwines her sense of identity throughout her experience wearing and not wearing the hijab. For example, as a middle school aged child she explained that she felt like her identity as a Muslim would isolate her from her peers at her new public school since she was well aware of the anti-Muslim rhetoric in the media. Experiences like these led her to feeling insecure about herself, going as far as describing herself as "ugly." Dania's fears are confirmed by the experiences of Karaman's participants who were also studied in Knoxville. She says, "Especially, a colored American woman believed that she felt as a part of the community before

she converted to Islam and started to wear a hijab. After she has become a hijabi, she has started to face exclusion as a form of racialization that shapes her experiences because of the role of the hijab as a racialized boundary maker” (Karaman 51). Even as a child, Dania had an understanding that by wearing the hijab at public school, she would face exclusion much like Karaman’s participant. Feeling this way encouraged Dania to remove the hijab in hopes of repairing her damaged sense of identity. However, due to the cultural pressure from her family, she was forced to wear it again before she could develop a sense of identity. When Dania eventually came back to wear the hijab on her own accord, she realized that wearing the hijab contributes to her sense of identity through the privilege of representing her religion.

Representing Islam

As Dania and Fatima navigated their lives after removing the hijab, they expressed that they lost the ability to represent Islam. For Fatima, representing Islam by wearing the hijab and lacking religious knowledge was a major disconnect. She says, “I’m representing my faith...And I think that’s part of why I stopped wearing it. I just felt like I didn’t know enough where I didn’t feel like I could confidently answer questions if people had them.” The task to represent Islam while not having enough knowledge of the religion made Fatima feel like she should not continue wearing the hijab. In a rhetorical view, Fatima ultimately believed she lacked ethos, or the credibility to represent Islam through the hijab. After not wearing the hijab for a period, Fatima was able to learn more about Islam. From then, she gained the ethos she had been lacking and eventually started wearing the hijab again. For her, coming back to the hijab means she is representing and following her faith with that newfound knowledge.

After removing the hijab for the second time in her life, Dania realized that without the hijab, she truly could not represent Islam which affected her behavior. She says,

If you're not wearing the hijab, it's like, 'Oh, it's okay, like I fit in here. Nobody's going to second guess it.' I'm not going to stick out like a sore thumb, you know, and that's like a severe example, but you know, just like it affected who I would surround myself around, and things that I would get involved in, because I felt like nobody knows I'm Muslim, so who cares? I'm not representing anything.

By not wearing the hijab, Dania could not hold herself accountable when it came to surrounding herself with certain people or visiting certain places that would be deemed unacceptable for a hijabi. This lack of self accountability eventually led Dania to feel as though she did not represent anything. Without the hijab, she essentially felt meaningless. These feelings, alongside other events in her life, allowed her to return to the hijab. Dania's feelings affirm the results in Karaman's study that "For hijabi American Muslim female students, wearing a hijab is not only an Islamic rule, but also it means to represent Islam and other Muslims. Wearing a hijab is also a message for other people to see she is a Muslim who is not involved in certain behaviors such as drinking alcohol, eating pork, and dating" (82). By wearing the hijab again, Dania could show those around her that she is Muslim and abides by Islamic values and behaviors.

Islamophobia

Through she does not go into too much detail, Fatima mentions that during the time she initially wore the hijab, she faced some Islamophobia. She says,

I did have a couple times where I dealt with ignorance more than anything like kids, just wondering like why I wear it, and just never having had seen somebody who looked like me. Probably there were only a couple of times where I got like disrespectful or Islamophobic comments, and that wasn't fun as a middle schooler. I think they'd be easier to brush off at my age. But yeah, I mean, for the most part it was positive. But there were

definitely like, you know, the usual stares and questions and stuff like that.

Fatima's discussion of facing Islamophobia as a child raise attention to how anti-Muslim rhetoric from Western media embeds itself so deeply in society that Muslim children end up being targets and facing bigotry. As confirmed in *Covering Muslims*, "There is simply no group we have identified for which the tone of coverage is anywhere near as negative as it is for Muslims," (Bleich and van der Veen 71). Fatima, like all of the other participants, spent their childhoods in a post 9/11 United States where they were constantly bombarded with rhetoric against their religion. As a result, the media stripped Muslim children of their innocence causing them to become targets for Islamophobia. This fear is also expressed by Dania, who believed that her peers at public school would "already have preexisting thoughts of me" when she entered school with a hijab. Thankfully Dania did not face Islamophobia, however, her fears were valid. At the same time, no child should fear how they would be perceived by their peers, especially in a time and place where the media perpetuates these divisions.

Fear of Muslims

Facing judgment from other Muslims was a central theme in Dania's experience wearing and not wearing the hijab. Since she did not initially wear the hijab when her parents first urged her to, they reminded her that her relatives would gossip about her and make her family look bad. The practice of placing the honor upon the daughters in a family is something that has not been seen in Islam. Instead, it is purely cultural and used as a tactic to coerce young Muslim girls into an important decision like wearing the hijab. Culturally equating the hijab with honor and virtue places an extreme responsibility on Muslim girls, and as mentioned in the literature review, consequences can include acts of violence. Thankfully for Dania, she did not face violence. Instead, not wearing the hijab made Dania hypervisible to these Muslim family

members. To her family and culture, not wearing the hijab was not normal. This connects to Knoblauch and Moeller's idea that "The body is often only seen as a body when it is not the presumed norm. Knowledge, then, is often only seen as embodied when the body producing that knowledge is imagined as Other," (8). Not wearing a hijab and removing it after wearing it effectively othered Dania from her family and culture, causing her to gain knowledge in Islam rather than through culture. Once she was able to gain a sense of Islamic knowledge, she was then able to embody this newfound Islamic knowledge when she wore the hijab again on her own terms. From Dania's story, it is crucial to learn that the fear of other members in a community is due to being othered, and therefore, gaining knowledge in a way that empowers oneself is a tactic to making meaning of the world and how rhetoric influences the attitudes of people.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

After examining the stories of twelve Muslim women and their different experiences with the hijab, it is clear that Muslim women are not a monolith. Muslim women come from many cultural backgrounds and relationships with the hijab. Some choose to present as visibly Muslim while others do not. Some were pressured to wear the hijab while others simply never wore it. Some have enjoyed and will continue to wear the hijab while others are just now starting to wear it. Some have taken off the hijab but have put it back on. All of these types of Muslim women are valid in the way they practice and make sense of the hijab. As mentioned before, being constantly surrounded by negative rhetoric from Western media with an anti-Muslim bias is overwhelming. At the same time, the rhetoric perpetuated by some Muslims is rooted less in religious values and more in cultural ideas of purity. Even if they have different relationships with the hijab, all of these Muslim women counter the rhetoric aimed at them through making meaning of the hijab with their own knowledge and experiences.

Essentially, Islam broadly unifies Muslim women in the South, not necessarily culture. Even though scholarship insists there is considerable overlap between the two, the participants all explicitly try to define Islam and culture as different practices. Given these women's experiences, they attribute their wearing the hijab to religious reasons, by which they mean defining religion with solely Islamic practices, and not cultural reasons, which they define as harmful practices and rules that contradict Islam.

Research Questions:

The results and analysis of the stories of twelve Muslim women in Knoxville, Tennessee with different experiences with the hijab can effectively answer the research questions that guided this study. The first research question asks "How do Muslim women in the American

South choose to present themselves amidst religious, cultural, and geographical rhetorics?” before delving into the other research questions that ask what factors encourage and discourage Muslim women’s choices. Based on the results of the women in the study, all of the women agree that their relationship with the hijab is largely attributed to religion. Specifically the rhetoric of Islamic teachings is what encourages women to wear the hijab, and in some cases, not wear it. Participants like Layla, who has worn the hijab for a majority of her life, are inspired to wear the hijab due to the information presented in the Quran. While she believes that the Quran has stated the hijab to be an obligation for Muslim women, it is truly through the stories of Islamic figures being chosen by God that motivate her to keep wearing the hijab. She believes, like God chose the prophets to spread the message of Islam, that she and other Muslim women were chosen to spread Islam by embodying the religion. At the same time, Seema, who has never worn the hijab, offers a Quranist interpretation to Islam and counters the idea that the hijab is obligatory. Due to these beliefs, Seema says not wearing the hijab is a religious decision and instead opts to wear the hijab in a behavioral sense. Even after removing the hijab, Fatima credits gaining knowledge in Islam for bringing her back to wearing the hijab. Having religious knowledge was key for Fatima’s ethos as a Muslim woman who represents Islam as she embodies Islam as a hijabi. Sara came to wear the hijab in a similar way as she learned more about Islam in which she learned that the hijab was an obligation that would please God.

For Dania, culture plays a significant role when it comes to returning to wear the hijab. After seeing the resilience of Palestinian people facing atrocities one after another, she is inspired to emulate them by keeping her hijab on. Even though culture initially led her to remove the hijab, as it did for Selena and Attiya, Dania returned to wearing the hijab after making peace with the positive aspects of her culture and learning more about her religion. For Selena, it was

not necessarily her culture that led her to remove the hijab. Instead, it was the culture of the Muslim community that attributed the hijab to virtue that pushed her to wear the hijab rather than religious reasons. Attiya experienced similar reasons for being forced to wear the hijab yet felt a deep sense of sorrow when she took off the hijab. She blames Pakistani culture for equating some of its values with Islam for her family's pressure to wear the hijab. Now that Selena and Attiya have taken off the hijab, they are able to see the difference between culture and religion clearly and look forward to wearing the hijab again in the future. Rania outright rejects many negativities in Palestinian culture and defines herself as a Muslim first. This motivates her to keep wearing the hijab despite some people in her family adding cultural meaning to the hijab.

Participants like Marwa are solely driven by environmental factors when it comes to not wearing the hijab. She blames Western media for its anti-Muslim rhetoric that empowered the Islamophobic people in Knoxville who made her feel unsafe and targeted. From a young age, she was aware of the effects of anti-Muslim rhetoric and as an adult, she chooses to prioritize her safety even if that means not being visibly Muslim anymore. These sentiments are the same reason why Halima will not wear the hijab. She believes the anti-Muslim rhetoric perpetuated by Western media is responsible for her choice not to wear the hijab, especially since hearing of different hate crimes targeting Muslim women. At the same time, Emmy came to wear the hijab because she viewed Knoxville as a more diverse place compared to the old town she lived in. While she did wear the hijab for religious reasons, she experienced feeling welcome in Knoxville as she observed more diversity. The University of Tennessee also affected her choice to wear the hijab since she realizes college students are exposed to more types of people. Zara also experienced Islamophobia in Knoxville at a young age, yet she has continued to wear the hijab because she emphasizes the religious reasons as she credits the hijab to creating a sense of

identity and self-confidence.

Overall, this study shows that Muslim women have a variety of different opinions and experiences about the hijab as they live in Knoxville, Tennessee. Coming from various cultural backgrounds ultimately does not influence these women to wear or not wear the hijab. Instead, religious reasons motivate every participants' decision when it comes to presenting themselves as Muslim or not. Even the participants who do not wear the hijab find that the hijab is empowering in the context of living in a society where the hijab can be demonized. Still, all of these participants remain aware that the hijab will draw them extra attention as they wear it in Knoxville. Most of the participants see this as an opportunity to spread Islam through their behavior, further embodying Islam in a way non-hijabis and Muslim men cannot. These women seem to have a lot of respect for one another's decisions, emphasizing the need for sisterhood amongst Muslim women. Having this sense of community offers support for Muslim women as a whole, no matter their relationship with the hijab.

Future Implications

Future studies can adopt the categorization methodology I have developed when it comes to conducting research on Muslim women and the hijab. From the research outlined in this study, it is clear that a woman's relationship with the hijab affects her meaning of the hijab. Therefore, it is important to consider factors such as being a new hijabi or a former hijabi when studying Muslim women. This can extend beyond the hijab and into studies focusing on Muslim women and their relationship with Islam overall.

Closing Thoughts

After hearing the stories of twelve inspirational Muslim women, I have come to create a greater appreciation for my sisters in faith. Knowing that we face so much criticism from within

and outside our communities and still persist with our own knowledge and opinions is nothing short of inspirational. Hearing stories of hardship and perseverance to stories of healing and learning show that it is possible to make meaning of something as contested as the hijab. Understanding the choices Muslim women make in spite of rhetorical factors like religion, culture, and environment is essential to understanding how marginalized communities make meaning of objects that should be theirs despite rhetoric saying otherwise. Hearing out stories and experiences is crucial to determining how we navigate to veil or not to veil.

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Appendices

Approved Consent:

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: The Rhetorics of the Hijab: The Intersections of Religion and Culture in the American South

Researcher(s): Ayesha Ahmed, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Dr. Lisa King, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because you fit the criteria of the participants being used in this study (Muslim woman from the American South). Muslim women broadly all have experiences with the garment and concept of the Hijab and present a unique perspective among Muslims and non-Muslims.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to investigate how cultural and religious influences impact Muslim women to wear the Hijab or not. Investigating these intersecting identities can shed light onto how the Hijab is defined by Muslim women compared to the definitions of Muslim men, non-Muslims, and the media. By interviewing Muslim women directly, the cultural and religious influences are more likely to be illuminated. Studying these influences can also shed light onto how American Muslim women navigate a world where their identities are questioned, politicized, and policed.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will last for approximately 1-2 hours via interview and appropriate follow up questions. The first hour of the interview will consist of me asking you questions and your responses. The next hour will consist of follow up questions and time for any other information you want to share. You will only be asked to be interviewed once and may receive messages/emails surrounding questions related to clarity and accuracy (i.e. I forgot to ask you your age in the interview so I will follow up with an email to clarify).

What will happen if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research study"?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to participate in an approximately one to two-hour long interview via Zoom. The meeting will be recorded and all identifiers will be excluded from the study minus variables such as your age, ethnicity, etc. The interview can be scheduled during a time that best fits your schedule.

What happens if I say "No, I do not want to be in this research study"?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won't affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say "Yes" but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

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If you decide to stop before the study is completed, you can contact me or my research advisor via email and we will destroy any data related to your participation in the study, including identifiers, recordings, and transcripts.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about Muslim women in the South and their relationship with Hijab within religious and cultural frameworks. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by securing all recordings on password protected university Google Drives. The transcripts of these recordings will also be secured there too, along with names and other identifiers. Only I, the primary researcher, will have access to the recordings, transcripts, and any other identifiable information.

Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym to ensure the upmost confidentiality. The pseudonym is what you'll be identified with throughout the study. We understand that you would be sharing your personal story for the sake of this research, therefore, we strive to maintain your confidentiality. Names of identifiable places such as schools, workplaces, etc. will be omitted. If information from this study is published or presented at meetings or conferences, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will keep your information to use for when this study may be referenced to in the future. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from your research data collected as part of the study. Therefore, your information will be private and you'll continue to only be identified by your pseudonym.

We will not share your research data with other researchers.

What will happen if there is a point beyond which my data can no longer be removed from the study?

After your data from your interviews are de-identified (i.e. coded for relevant information and trends), we will no longer be able to retract your data from the study. However, confidentiality is the upmost importance within this project, therefore, identifiers will be kept secure.

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Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Ayesha Ahmed, *aahmed17@vols.utk.edu*, 8653081282 and Dr. Lisa King, *lking33@utk.edu*

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: *utkirb@utk.edu*

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant

Signature of Adult Participant

Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

Name of Research Team Member

Signature of Research Team Member

Date

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-24-08506-XM
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 12/06/2024
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 12/05/2027

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

A) Women who previously wore the Hijab and have since removed it:

Life History Questions:

Main Question: Tell me the story of how you came to wear the Hijab.

Potential follow-up questions:

- Could you please explain your cultural/ethnic background? To what extent was your cultural background implemented throughout your life?
- Could you please explain your religious background? To what extent was your religion implemented throughout your life?
- Where did you start wearing the Hijab? Can you describe the environment?
- How old were you when you started wearing the Hijab?
- To what extent do you think your cultural background influenced your decision to wear the Hijab?
- To what extent do you think your religion influenced your decision to wear the Hijab?
- At what age did you stop wearing the Hijab?
- How did you feel when you took off the Hijab for the first time?

Details of the Experience:

Main Question: Tell me what it was like when you wore the Hijab.

Potential follow up questions:

- Are there any specific instances/stories of your culture influencing you and your actions?
- Are there any specific instances/stories of your religion influencing you and your actions?
- Do you believe that wearing the Hijab was fully your choice?
- Do you believe you were too young when you started wearing the Hijab?

- When you stopped wearing the Hijab, how did the people around you react?
- Do you believe that your cultural background influenced your choice to remove the Hijab?
- Do you believe that your religious background influenced your choice to remove the Hijab?
- How has your geographical location influenced your choice to stop wearing the Hijab?

Reflection on the Meaning:

Main question: What does the Hijab mean to you now? What does not wearing the Hijab mean to you now?

Potential follow up questions:

- Back when you wore the Hijab, what do you think wearing the Hijab meant to you?
- When you first took off the Hijab, why do you think people reacted the way that they did?
- How would you have wanted the people around you to react when you took off your hijab?
- What is your current relationship with your cultural background?
- What is your current relationship with your religion?
- What is your relationship with your current environment?
- Would you ever consider wearing the Hijab again? Why or why not?

B) Women who have worn the Hijab for the majority of their lives:

Life History Questions:

Main Question: Tell me the story of how you came to wear the Hijab.

Potential follow-up questions:

- Could you please explain your cultural/ethnic background? To what extent was your cultural background implemented throughout your life?
- Could you please explain your religious background? To what extent was your religion implemented throughout your life?
- Where did you start wearing the Hijab? Can you describe the environment?
- How old were you when you started wearing the Hijab?
- To what extent do you think your cultural background influenced your decision to wear the Hijab?
- To what extent do you think your religion influenced your decision to wear the Hijab?
- Are you still wearing the Hijab?

Details of the Experience:

Main Question: Tell me what it was like when you wore the Hijab.

Potential follow up questions:

- Are there any specific instances/stories of your culture influencing you and your actions?
- Are there any specific instances/stories of your religion influencing you and your actions?
- Do you believe that wearing the Hijab was fully your choice?

- Do you believe you were too young when you started wearing the Hijab?
- How do people around you react to you wearing the Hijab?
- Do you believe that your cultural background influenced your choice to continue wearing the Hijab?
- Do you believe that your religious background influenced your choice to continue wearing the Hijab?
- How has your geographical location influenced your choice to continue wearing the Hijab?

Reflection on the Meaning:

Main question: What does the Hijab mean to you now? What does wearing the Hijab mean to you now?

Potential follow up questions:

- What do you think wearing the Hijab means to you?
- When you first wore the Hijab, why do you think people reacted the way that they did?
- How would you have wanted the people around you to react when you started wearing your hijab?
- What is your current relationship with your cultural background?
- What is your current relationship with your religion?
- What is your relationship with your current environment?
- Would you ever consider taking off the Hijab?
- Why will you continue to wear the Hijab?

C) Women who recently started wearing the Hijab

Life History Questions:

Main Question: Tell me the story of how you came to wear the Hijab.

Potential follow-up questions:

- Could you please explain your cultural/ethnic background? To what extent was your cultural background implemented throughout your life?
- Could you please explain your religious background? To what extent was your religion implemented throughout your life?
- Where did you start wearing the Hijab? Can you describe the environment?
- How old were you when you started wearing the Hijab?
- To what extent do you think your cultural background influenced your decision to wear the Hijab?
- To what extent do you think your religion influenced your decision to wear the Hijab?

Details of the Experience:

Main Question: Tell me what it was like when you wore the Hijab.

Potential follow up questions:

- Are there any specific instances/stories of your culture influencing you and your actions?
- Are there any specific instances/stories of your religion influencing you and your actions?
- Do you believe that wearing the Hijab was fully your choice?
- Do you believe you were the right age when you started wearing the Hijab?
- How do people around you react to you wearing the Hijab?

- Do you believe that your cultural background influenced your choice to start wearing the Hijab?
- Do you believe that your religious background influenced your choice to start wearing the Hijab?
- How has your geographical location influenced your choice to start wearing the Hijab?

Reflection on the Meaning:

Main question: What does the Hijab mean to you now? What does not wearing the Hijab mean to you now?

Potential follow up questions:

- What do you think wearing the Hijab means to you?
- When you first wore the Hijab, why do you think people reacted the way that they did?
- How would you have wanted the people around you to react when you started wearing your hijab?
- What is your current relationship with your cultural background?
- What is your current relationship with your religion?
- What is your relationship with your current environment?
- Would you ever consider taking off the Hijab?
- Why will you continue to wear the Hijab?

D) Women who have never worn the Hijab

Life History Questions:

Main Question: Tell me the story of how you came to know about the Hijab.

Potential follow-up questions:

- Could you please explain your cultural/ethnic background? To what extent was your cultural background implemented throughout your life?
- Could you please explain your religious background? To what extent was your religion implemented throughout your life?
- In what situations did you wear the Hijab? Can you describe the environment?
- How old were you when you started wearing the Hijab in these events?
- To what extent do you think your cultural background influenced your decision to not wear the Hijab?
- To what extent do you think your religion influenced your decision to not wear the Hijab?
- To what extent has your environment influenced your decision not to wear the Hijab?

Details of the Experience:

Main Question: Tell me what it's like not wearing the Hijab

Potential follow up questions:

- Are there any specific instances/stories of your culture influencing you and your actions?
- Are there any specific instances/stories of your religion influencing you and your actions?
- Do you believe that not wearing the Hijab was fully your choice?
- How do people around you react to you not wearing the Hijab?
- Do you believe that your cultural background influenced your choice to not wear the Hijab?

- Do you believe that your religious background influenced your choice to not wear the Hijab?
- How has your geographical location influenced your choice to not wear the Hijab?

Reflection on the Meaning:

Main question: What does the Hijab mean to you now? What does not wearing the Hijab mean to you now?

Potential follow up questions:

- What do you think wearing the Hijab means to you?
- What does not wearing the Hijab mean to you?
- As someone who doesn't wear the Hijab, why do you think people react the way that they did?
- How would you have wanted the people around you to react when you are not wearing the Hijab?
- How has not wearing the Hijab influenced your identity as a Muslim?
- What is your current relationship with your cultural background?
- What is your current relationship with your religion?
- What is your relationship with your current environment?
- Would you ever consider wearing the Hijab?
- Why will you continue to notwear the Hijab?

Vita

Ayesha Ahmed earned her bachelors degree in English with concentrations in Rhetoric and Writing and Literature from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She continued her education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, by embarking on the journey of obtaining her Master's degree in English Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics. She enjoys teaching First-Year Composition and making rhetorical strategies fun and transferrable for all and passionate about uplifting and highlighting the experiences of Muslim women in the West.