

Voguing the Veil

Exploring an Emerging Youth Subculture of Muslim Women Fashioning a New Canadian Identity

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Dedication

For my Parents, my Husband and my Baby Boys.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank the women who allowed me to be a part of their lives and share their most personal stories. Without you all, this thesis would be impossible. May this thesis shed bright, shining light on how inspirational women such as yourselves ‘vogue the veil’ to demonstrate how transformative and welcoming Canadian spaces can be.

To Ruth: you have supported me unconditionally for the past 8 years. You were first my teacher, then my thesis supervisor and now I have come to see you as a good friend and mentor. Truly, I would not be at the finish line without your help and support. Thank you.

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Last but certainly not least, thank you to my family. Without your support I could never be where I am today. Your tremendous love, encouragement and faith in me inspire me to be a better person.

Abstract

The population of 2nd generation Canadian-Muslim women who choose to veil, or wear the *hijab*, is steadily increasing. Rather than inquire *why* these women choose to do so, this study explores *how* Muslim youth use the veil as a fashion accessory. Guided by research questions that focus on the representation of the veil in popular culture, this study explores the veil as a sign as the women negotiate ‘being Muslim’ and ‘being Canadian’. Informed by a cultural studies conceptual framework, veiling in fashionable ways, or, ‘voguing the veil’, is explored as a form of ‘public pedagogy’ (Giroux, 2004).

Using an Advocacy and Participatory methodology, the four women and myself engage in a collaborative inquiry examining meanings behind *how* we vogue the veil. Through a series of interviews, focus groups and journal entries accompanied by personal photographs (photovoice), the women and I co-construct narratives around their identity as women who veil in ways that contest dominant discourse. Together we explore the impact of constructs such as beauty, femininity and sexuality on our identities as Muslim women who veil in Canada. Co-constructing participant case studies permits readers “access to the world from the view-point of individuals who have not traditionally held control over the means of imaging the world” (Berg, 2007, p. 233), at many times surprising and contradicting what is ‘known’ about the veiled Muslim woman.

The findings reveal themes that deeply impact how the women choose to veil. These themes include the strategies the women use to employ their veils as a means of agency and how, within and through different pedagogical spaces, the women’s performances and performativity of the veil shifts. The women in the study demonstrate that by ‘voguing the veil’, they are in fact attempting to transform the meaning of the veil as a marker of Canadian Identity. Using the voices, photos and narratives of the four women I argue that through ‘voguing the veil’ these young Muslim women are actively entering into and creating spaces so to be seen as an integral part of Canadian society and as such can be recognized as an emerging subculture.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Vogue, adjective, \`vōg\ - one that is in fashion at a particular time.

-Merriam-Webster Dictionary

In early April of 2012, the number one story in Canada revolved around a single brassiere. An art student at the University of Kamloops photographed her friend, who happens to wear a *burqa* veil, holding up her bra while doing laundry. The image sparked widespread controversy. A professor at the university tore the picture down labeling it as offensive while the Saudi Embassy called it ‘irresponsible’ to display such a photo without including text to clarify the artist’s intentions (“Muslim woman’s bra,” 2012). The artist rebutted that the photo is meant to “humanize” the veiled woman, illustrating that underneath the veil she is just like any other woman (Burgmann, 2012). The image confused those unfamiliar with the veil and seemed to discomfort those who were. Thousands of comments followed on various news threads and television reports. Who was this fully veiled woman holding up such an intimate piece of clothing and why did her bra seduce international news?



Figure 1: CBC.ca (April 12, 2012). The image that sparked controversy as photographed by Sooraya Graham.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the meaning(s) behind the veil, and in doing so, to problematize, dig deeper and yes, ‘humanize’ the women who wear it. More specifically, the thesis aims to explore how women who veil use their bodies and the objects they put on their bodies as a statement beyond religious affiliation, as has been the focus of previous studies

(Roald, 2001, Seggie & Sandford, 2010, Todd, 1998; 1999, Zine, 2000; 2001; 2003; 2006; 2007). The women who participated in this study demonstrate how they use fashion and popular culture as an avenue to de-mystify the veil in mainstream Canadian society. By examining the veil through this lens, I hope to disrupt the space that currently shrouds the veil.

I define veiling as more than the traditional, mainstream understanding of the '*hijab*' (Meshal, 2003, Zine, 2006) which has typically referred to the fabric that covers a Muslim woman's hair. The Arabic roots of the term *hijab* actually mean to screen or to cover, not necessarily in any one particular way. Therefore, veiling or *hijab* in this context is defined as the act of covering in a way that identifies a woman as Muslim. More specifically, I am interested in *how* a Muslim woman chooses to cover and how *much* she chooses to cover. It goes beyond covering her hair. Veiling includes her whole ensemble such as her clothes and accessories. It includes how she chooses to dress in accordance to *her* interpretation of what it means to veil and how she 'keeps it halal'¹. Although predominantly the term 'veil' will be used throughout the study, the term '*hijab*' will also be used interchangeably, understood to mean the same thing as the veil.

Research Questions

This study gains insight into how Canadian Muslim women who veil in fashionable ways make meaning of the veil. Exploring their identities and how they choose to represent themselves is an integral part of the study. Therefore, the following questions guide the study:

1) What does 'voguing the veil' mean to Canadian Muslim women?

¹'keeps' or 'keeping it halal' is slang for doing things within the perimeters of one's religious beliefs

2) How do certain performances of veiling contest existing discourses about Canadian Muslim women?

3) What factors influence how Muslim women perform the veil?

4) What are the implications of ‘voguing the veil’ as a form of public pedagogy?

Secondary questions emerge from asking participants to share personal narratives and images that are meaningful to them.

Participants contributed questions they felt would inform the study. These questions are diverse and vary from one participant to the other. They are reflected in each respective case study.

The Hijabi Code

Hi-jab, noun, \he-jab\ - Arabic origins, to cover, screen, veil.

-Merriam-Webster Dictionary

My interest in this topic stems from my own experiences as a woman who veils. In my experience, the veil and what it represents has maintained what Edward Said (1978) refers to as a “static image” (p. 215) in the minds of people. Microsoft Office, a widely used word processing program, illustrates this point well. When words such as “Islam” and “Muslim” are entered as key words in a clip art search, stereotypical images of veiled women and men in long white robes appear, as well as pictures of mosques and minarets. The religion and the millions of people who follow it are reduced to a few stereotypical symbols. In particular, veiling is most often taken in strictly a religious context where the individual has her identity over-veiled by such institutionalized religious representations. In turn, the veiled Muslim woman is reduced to the

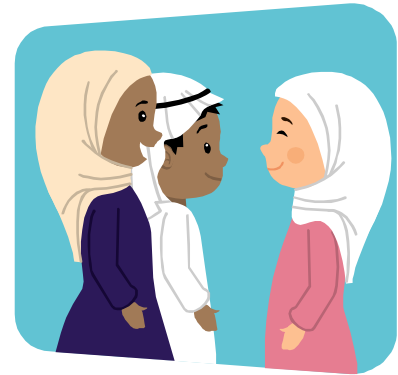


Figure 2: An example of the type of image that appears when searching "Muslim" in Microsoft Word. Is this a fair representation?

‘*hijabi*.’ She is seen only in the realm of her *hijab*, often interpreted by some as a symbol of fundamentalism and little more. Aly and Walker (2007) elaborate on this point as they note “the veil is the shroud through which the muffled voices of Muslim women struggle to be heard...Muslim women are homogenized and objectified, losing their individual identities in the process” (p. 208). Who are these women? Rarely are they given a voice.

Over the last several years as I have navigated through the buildings of my post secondary institution, I have noticed a steady increase in the representation of women visibly identifiable as Muslim (i.e. the ones veiling in some way). The variety of ways in which the veil is worn and performed continues to fascinate me. I see women fully covered wearing the *nikab*². There are women wearing the traditional long black gowns known as an *abaya*³ and there are women wearing just the headscarf with what is regarded as ‘western’ clothing such as pants/skirts and a top. More interesting to me however, are the women with Louis Vuitton and Gucci head scarves pulled back ever so slightly so their highlighted side bangs can sweep through; and the women fully covered in *nikab* with nothing but their eyes (at times heavily done up with makeup) and Nike shoes visible. There are women in *abayas* that are (intentionally?) left unbuttoned from the bottom so that with every breeze a glimpse of their skinny jeans and ultra high heels peek through. The variety of ways in which the headscarf alone can be fashioned is amazing. It is fascinating because all of these women are choosing to be identifiable as Muslim by veiling in some form and yet they have a myriad of ways of representing themselves as such. They are representing the veil in ways that are not commonly represented in mainstream discourse. They are making fashion forward statements with their supposedly backwards

² *Nikab* refers to the long gown and the covering of the face, with nothing but the eyes visible.

³ *Abaya* refers to the long black gown worn with the *hijab*.

thinking veils. To me, these women are not just veiling, they are starting a movement. They are disturbing the space around what is expected and imagined of a Muslim woman who veils. They are activists perhaps without even knowing it. Through fashion, they are resisting and rebelling against the images and stories being told about them via the media and other grand narratives. Al- Saji's (2010) words run through my mind as I gaze at my colleagues from behind my own veil: "there is neither an essence to Muslim veils, nor is veiling easily reducible to any one dimension of sense" (p. 893). This silent movement on my very own campus has led me to reflect on my transformation as a woman who veils.

When I first began veiling almost 10 years ago⁴ I owned seven black square headscarves; one for every day of the week. My rationale was that black matches with everything. I went on a "hijab-friendly" shopping expedition which meant buying several long sleeve loose fitting tops and other items of clothing that was not figure-revealing. I stuck to neutral colours because I felt I had to fit into the role of 'being' a *hijabi* or at least what I thought it meant to be a *hijabi* and what it meant to be modest. At the time, being modest took on a couple of different meanings: First, I did not want to wear clothing that would accentuate my curves and second, I did not want to buy clothing that would attract any extra attention to myself, such as wearing bright colours or anything extravagant. Clearly, my interpretation of 'modesty' was synonymous with being subtle—flying under the radar. I soon became shopping savvy and learned that I actually had to do all my summer shopping in the winter. Finding what I considered at the time to be 'modest' clothing in the summer time in Canada was almost impossible. Over time, I established 'rules' of dress as I navigated through this new '*hijabi*' world of mine.

⁴ I began veiling on September 4, 2001 – 1 week before the terrorist attacks took place in New York City. A day that would come to be known as 9/11.

As the years progressed and particular personal and political situations arose, I began to transform. I evolved as a Canadian Muslim woman who veils. This was a result of critically examining how I thought I *should* look as a veiled woman versus wanting to reflect who I think I really am as an individual, a Canadian, a Muslim, a woman, a human being. I had let the stereotypes that I detested dictate how I veiled. I realize now that my veil was performing to other people's expectations of it. The people I refer to are Muslims, non-Muslims and members of my own community. They are the people who veil themselves and those who did not. What was more eye-opening was when I realized I had my own stereotypes of what it means to veil and I was placing myself within that schema. I had to confront my own assumptions of what it

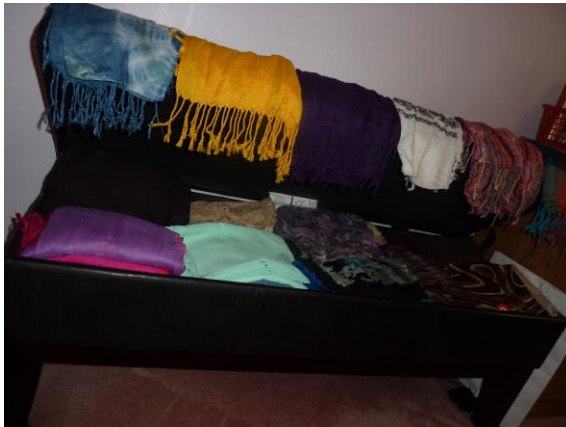


Figure 3: A sample of my scarf collection. I have over 70 scarves.

meant to 'be' *hijabi*.

It has been a gradual change but how I perform my veil has evolved. Now, veiling is not only a sign of my dedication and interpretation of Islam, it is also a political symbol of resistance

against those who question my right to wear it. I use my veil to challenge those who think that veiling means only one thing or can look only one way. Sometimes, it is my very self that is challenged. The meanings behind my veil continue to shift.

As I have transformed, so have my 'rules'. I now have over seventy headscarves and by the time this thesis is published, I will probably have more. They are in every colour imaginable; in fact, I hardly wear black anymore. I have moved on from square scarves to rectangular ones. To most people this shift of my performed subjectivity seems insignificant but it is in many ways the basis of this thesis. The preference from square to rectangular scarf is purely a fashion

choice. There it is, that word: Fashion. Something I began wearing for religious purposes is now sharing space with my desire to be fashionable. My scarf now serves as an accessory along with my shoes, rings, bangles and necklaces. To be



Figure 4: Some of my decorative scarf pins resting on a custom made pin cushion.

noted here is the absence of earrings. Why wear an accessory that no one can see?⁵ My headscarves

are colour coordinated and complementary to my clothing as well as my other accessories.

Sometimes I pick out my scarf first and then find an outfit to match it, and yes, there is such a thing as having a ‘bad *hijab* day’. As for my rules, there are many. If I am wearing a printed top, I do not wear a printed scarf; my scarf cannot be the same colour as my top, rather, it must be a complementary colour or the same colour as another accessory I am wearing. In the winter, dark colours dominate my wardrobe while in the summer bright and pastel colours are my preference. These are just a few of my fashion dos and do nots. Finally, the finishing touch to every ensemble is pinning my scarf with a decorative pin, a collection that is rapidly growing. It may surprise some to know that even my accessories have accessories. I have custom made hangers to display my scarves and handmade pin cushions to accommodate my decorative scarf pins. Every season when a new trend emerges in the fashion industry and trickles down into the malls, I brainstorm ideas of how I can wear it, all the while ‘keeping it *halal*’. I look to other veiled women for fashion inspiration and hope that I am one too.

I am not alone in this journey. There are over 400,000 *hijab* related videos on YouTube

⁵ This is a personal choice. Many veiled women fashion their scarf in such a way that their earrings are visible.

including over a *hundred* thousand tutorials about *hijab* fashion⁶. A growing number of blogs and Facebook groups are emerging on the same topic as are professional businesses solely based on marketing to women who wish to veil in fashionable ways. Muslim women around the world are sharing their ideas on how to wear the latest trends in ‘Muslim-friendly’ ways and where one can go to find the most extravagant Chanel and Swarovski crystal *abayas* and headscarves (costing anywhere from hundreds to thousands of dollars!). These growing numbers of sources may suggest that the desire to veil in trendy ways is a fast growing movement across the globe and certainly within North America; it becomes necessary then to question why the dominant images shown in mainstream media fail to reflect this.

What this illustrates to me is the aesthetic science behind fashionably veiling or what I now refer to as ‘voguing the veil’. As the above paragraphs demonstrate, the *concept* of voguing the veil is not new, rather giving it the name of *voguing* or identifying it as such is. Voguing the veil as a concept seems to exist (and be thriving) internationally. It is apparent that much thought and coordination is put into how Muslim women are veiling. These women are following their own set of rules or a ‘*hijabi* code’. They are making conscious and complex decisions as they choose what to put on their bodies. They are carefully navigating through religion and fashion as they decipher what is, and perhaps more importantly, what is *not* veiling. I believe they are breaking stereotypes and ultimately changing the meaning behind the veil. They are using fashion to perform their identity as Muslim women. They are re-creating the meaning of what it means to be modest and in doing so, creating a new ‘modern modest’ that is not necessarily

⁶ It is interesting to note that from the initial drafts of this thesis to the final draft (approximately a two year time-frame) the representations of hijab fashion have significantly increased on the internet. My very first draft boasted that over a hundred hijab tutorials existed on YouTube. As of March 2013, that number has risen to approximately 113,000.

about ‘flying under the radar’ as I had previously restricted it to mean. For myself, now modesty means not to go unnoticed, rather, to demonstrate through my subjectivity that I can be trendy and beautiful and yes, perhaps even sexy without conforming to the mainstream ways these ideals are performed; that I do not need to show my hair or my curves to be recognized as fashionable or feminine. That veiling in Canada *is* a norm and has the capability to be as stylish as the women who dominate television and the covers of fashion magazines.

Significance of the Issue

“Dear Iraqi girl in my seminar, I like your hijab – I hope that’s okay”

(Joshua Cassara, The Faster Times, 2011)

The Muslim population is rapidly increasing with “more than 500,000 Muslims in Canada, between one and three million Muslims in the United states and 1.5 billion in the world” (The Ottawa Citizen, January 2010). Within Ottawa alone the Muslim population has grown from 4,300 to 65,000 in less than three decades. As Islam becomes the fastest growing religion in Canada, representation of the veil is also on the rise. While many may assume that the population of women wearing the veil are immigrants to Canada from Muslim countries, studies show that veiling has increasingly become popular amongst young Muslim women who were born and raised in non-Muslim countries and to whom veiling may be “culturally alien” (Meshal, 2003, p. 73; see also, Hoodfar, 2003).

The events of September 11th, 2001 (9/11) brought into focus increased imagery and curiosity about the veiled woman (Bakht, 2008; Meshal, 2003; Todd, 1998). Images in news media and internet searches depict the variety of ways in which a woman belonging to the Muslim faith covers herself. These images include women in *burqas*, *nikabs*, and headscarves.

Although these images tend to be of women in Muslim countries, the question of whether or not a woman should be able to cover in any of the above ways when interacting within a non-Muslim country has become an international topic of debate⁷. Perhaps the most notable example is that of France. During the early 1990s, many Muslim women who veil were expelled from their institutions on the basis that the veil was not to be worn while at school (Khan, 2010). While this decision was eventually revoked, a decade later in 2004, France placed another ban on the use of religious symbols in schools, this time including not only the Muslim veil, but also “Sikh turbans, Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crosses” (CBC News Online, 2004). The decision was justified in the name of secularism by then President Jacques Chirac who stated a ban on religious symbols would “prevent the division of society into ethnic communities, and promote integration into French society” (ibid). This was particularly problematic for many of the women who veil because they regard the veil not only as a choice but a religious obligation.

Canada is not exempt from its own share of discrimination when it comes to the veil. In 1993, a Quebec judge expelled a woman from a municipal court when she arrived for her hearing wearing a headscarf (Baker, Authier & Riga, 1993). Defending his decision the judge stated that wearing anything on one’s head went against the rules of practice within a court. The judge later apologized as there was in fact no such legislation that prevented individuals from covering their head while in court (McDonough, 2003). In 1994, a young Quebec woman wearing a headscarf was sent home by the principal based on the premise that it went against the school’s dress code to wear hats or other attire that had the potential to “distinguish students from their peers” (Khan, 2010, p. 2). In support of the school’s decision, the federation of Quebec teachers, or *Centrale de*

⁷ Although recognized as Muslim countries, Tunisia and Turkey have also shown opposition to the wearing of *hijab* in universities and state offices (Al-Hamroni, 2006).

l'enseignement du Quebec (CEQ) stated that they were “opposed to the wearing of the Islamic veil in public schools” (CEQ, 1995, as stated in McDonough, 2003, p. 124). Again in Quebec, during a soccer tournament in 2007, an 11-year old girl was disqualified from participating when a referee forbade her from playing with her headscarf on, claiming that it posed a safety issue. The referee, also a Muslim, stated that wearing the veil violates the Quebec Soccer Federation rule, which under FIFA “prohibits players from wearing clothing or jewelry that might endanger the safety of themselves or others” (as cited in CBC News, 2007).⁸

Quebec has also shown particular opposition to the wearing of *nikab* and *burqa*. The introduction of Bill 94, *An Act to establish guidelines governing accommodation requests within the Administration and certain institutions*, legislates that “... a person to whom services are being provided by the Administration or the institution *show their face during the delivery of services* is a general practice, and that *if an accommodation involves an adaptation of that practice* and reasons of security, communication or identification warrant it, *the accommodation must be denied*” (National Assembly of Quebec, Bill 94, *emphasis added*). Although no specific reference is made about Muslim women who veil, it appears that such bills are targeted at the population of Muslim women who wear the *nikab* or *burqa*.

The Muslim Canadian Congress proposed to Prime Minister Stephen Harper that face-coverings be banned in Canada completely. The former president of the Congress, Farzana Hassan, argued that the *Quran* does not dictate veiling in such a way, thus making it a non-religious practice. She added “the veil is a tradition, a tool of oppression created by men” (as

⁸ In 2010, FIFA placed a ban on Iran’s girls’ soccer team from participating in the Singapore 2010 Youth Olympics because of teammates who wear head scarves. The ban that has since been lifted stated that, according to the FIFA international rule book, player’s equipment should not depict in anyway “political, religious or personal statements” (de Tarczynski, 2010).

cited in Bakht, 2008, p. 111). Bakht rebuttals this argument stating “there appears to be little willingness on the part of these Muslims to accept, firstly, that different women may adhere to different levels of religiosity, and secondly, that there may simply be a difference of opinion amongst Muslims about religious requirements” (ibid). While the debate continues to focus on religious and physical boundaries, Morton (2009) brings it back to the question of human rights, stating “there is no doubt that, regardless of whether wearing a *burqa* is an impediment to the assimilation of its wearer, there is a constitutional right to wear one” (The Ottawa Citizen, October, 2009).

Furthermore, Canada faced scrutiny with the introduction of Bill C-6, *An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (visual identification of voters)*. This Act would prevent citizens from voting unless they showed their face. Again, such a bill would prove to be problematic for those women whose veil includes covering the face. Both Bill 94 and Bill C-6 received widespread criticism from Muslims and non-Muslims such as Sikh groups who recognize that these bills infringe upon the religious rights of individuals (Kay, 2011).

With respect to wearing specifically a *nikab* or *burqa*, these forms of veiling also face (no pun intended) opposition all over Europe. Jack Straw, ex-leader of the British House of Commons, sparked controversy when he voiced his discomfort when interacting with Muslim women who cover their faces (Bakht, 2008). He further expressed that he would prefer face coverings such as the *nikab* and *burqa* not be worn *at all* in the United Kingdom (Ruitenber, 2008). His sentiments were shared by Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair who made similar comments regarding the *nikab* (Bakht, 2008). In Sweden, school administrators have the authority to expel students wearing the *burqa* (Todd, 2006; Ruitenber, 2008). France has taken extreme measures to permanently banning the use of *nikabs* and *burqas*, approving a bill that

would ban wearing the full veil in public. If the bill is ratified by the Senate it will be illegal to fully cover one's face. Women who are caught doing so will be charged 150 Euros and men who force their wives to veil will be fined 30,000 Euros and up to one year in jail (BBC News Europe, July 2010)⁹. How one would prove that a man has forced a woman to veil is another issue of debate altogether.

In protest of former French President Nicholas Sarkozy's initial pledge to ban all Islamic veils, high profile fashion designer Givenchy dedicated his whole 2010 Fall/Winter Paris fashion show in support of those who choose to veil. Givenchy had many of the models wearing his designs cover their face as they walked the runway, showing his support for those who choose to veil in this way and perhaps hoping to break the stereotypes that exist about Muslim women who don the veil.

MacDonald (2006) notes that this increased coverage and thus visibility of veiled women in the media must not be mistaken for diversity. As the above cases suggest, there still seems to be much discomfort when it comes to the veil. Those opposed to veiling defend their decision voicing concern over gender equality and safety issues. One of the most common reasons cited for the opposition of veiling is its supposed oppressive nature on the women who wear it (see Alvi, 2008; Aswad & Bilge, 1996; Haddad, Smith & Moore, 2006; McDonough, 2003; Rezai-Rashti, 1994). Aly and Walker (2007) note, "the veil stands as the single, most powerful symbol of the gender based oppression that women in non-Western countries suffer" (p. 204).

Unfortunately this burden is transferred to Muslim women living in the West as well. It is often

⁹ It is interesting to note that in 1996 the Ontario Court of Appeal ruled that women have the right to appear topless in public. As a response to the proposed burqa ban, the editors of *Maclean's* magazine retort "Canadians can tolerate a woman's decision to wear no clothes at all, but they are united coast to coast in limiting her ability to add extra layers" (*Maclean's Magazine*, April 2006, p.4).

regarded as a piece of clothing forcefully thrust upon Muslim women by the dominating men of their religion (see Alvi, 2008; Aswad & Bilge, 1996; Haddad, Smith & Moore, 2006; McDonough, 2003; Rezai-Rashti, 1994). I do not deny that there may be instances where this may be true but as the literature review will illustrate, the decision to veil or not to veil within a North American, particularly Canadian context, is predominantly the choice of the individual wearing it.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The literature review will focus on two main areas of scholarship. The first is what I refer to as issues of ‘Muslimness’. This is comprised of studies that are available about Muslims, Muslim women and Muslim women who veil. There are two main themes prevalent in literature on Muslims; the first is Muslim experiences in education, and the second, Muslim women and veiling. I title this section ‘Being Muslim’ in Pedagogical Spaces and ‘Being Hijabi’ in Pedagogical Spaces, where pedagogy is not limited to institutional spaces. These sections, at times interconnected, explore the experiences of young Muslims living in the west and how factors such as race, gender and space intersect and influence their identities.

The second section explores documented cultural studies, with a particular focus on subcultures. This section titled ‘Sub/Cultural Studies’ explores how youth subcultures use ‘style’ or fashion to perform and how this performativity shifts across time, space, race and gender. These studies contextualize how the concept of ‘voguing the veil’ connect within the larger discourse of ‘style’. I conclude with addressing how the study at hand can contribute to the literature.

‘Being Muslim’ in Pedagogical Spaces

“When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing”

- Adrienne Rich

Jasmine Zine (2000, 2001, 2006, and 2007) has conducted several studies over the past decade that explores Muslims and their schooling experiences in Canada. In her 2001 study, she

reports how Muslim students in Toronto schools negotiate their Islamic identity and how this intersects with race and gender. The emerging themes centre around one main issue, that is, the social influences Muslim students face that, at times, compromise their religious identity. Participants share the constant struggle between conforming to the culture of the school where dating, dressing a certain way and experimentation are the norms, while at the same time resisting peer pressure from their non-Muslim peers so to maintain an Islamic lifestyle. Al-Jabri (1995) refers to the tensions minoritized students negotiate at school as ‘split personality syndrome’ whereby Muslim students take on a double identity so they can function and fit in with their non-Muslim and Muslim peers.

Mir (2009) examines a similar issue in an American context. She narrates the necessity many Muslim women feel to ‘pass’ as ‘normal’. She describes this as “remaining in the shadowy liminality, rather than by simulating behavior {sic} identical to the majority” (p. 240). Participants in Mir’s study confess they often remain ambiguous about certain topics, such as pre-marital sex and dating, when interacting with their non-Muslim peers.

Muslim students who are perhaps able to avoid to some extent what Al-Jabri (1995), Zine (2001) and Mir (2009) refer to, are students who partake in organizations such as the Muslim Students’ Association (MSA), a subculture Zine (2000) researched in Toronto schools. Associations such as the MSA are seen largely as a form of resistance on the part of Muslim students; a space where Muslim youth can go to be with “their own kind” and not have to explain things such as why they do not date or why they pray five times a day (p. 306)¹⁰. Participants in Zine’s (2000) study view MSAs as an outlet where Muslim students do not have to compromise their identities as Muslims. The presence of Islamic schools in big Canadian cities such as

¹⁰ This is not to say that all Muslims refrain from dating or that all Muslims pray 5 times a day.

Toronto and Ottawa also provide a similar setting for Muslim students, although, as Zine (2007) later notes, Islamic schools have been accused of “ghettoizing” students and failing to prepare them adequately for transition within society at large (p. 71).

When discussing their identity as Muslims, participants in Mir’s (2009) study note the tensions they face to be not only the stereotypical accusations made by non-Muslims, but confronting their own underlying assumptions as well. For example, participants were often faced with generalizations from their peers such as the correlation made between Muslims and terrorism and women and oppression. These types of correlations, according to Kincheloe and Steinberg (2004), Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2008) and Said (1997) are largely a result of media representations of the veil. Al-Saji (2010) argues that generalizations such as these are in fact a form of ‘cultural racism’ whereby Muslims are reduced to a simplified ‘Muslim culture’ that fails to take into account the complexities that comprise ethnic and religious sects. She further theorizes that when it comes to the veil in particular, cultural racism is hidden under the guise of gender equality.

To add to the complexity, Mir’s (2009) participants also felt the need to fit into certain stereotypes, such as acting in ways they felt were expected of them religiously like being conservative. If wearing the veil, participants felt they were expected to ‘act’ the way a veiled woman is supposed to act. Definitions are not made explicit such as what it means to be conservative or to ‘act *hijabi*’ but this notion reminds me of my own experiences of feeling I had to behave in a particular way when I first began to veil. Mir’s participants also spoke to how their actions changed depending on the spaces they occupied. When entering into the MSA space, there was, at some level, a conscious awareness of behaving more conservatively. Seggie and Sandford (2010) report similar findings in their study whereby one participant notes that by

veiling she feels she has the responsibility of representing Islam in a positive way and therefore, acts in conscious ways. Another participant in the same study shared that since veiling, she has taken on a mellower, more 'reserved' personality. In both cases, participants feel their identities as Muslims and outsider expectations of the veil, affect their actions.

Participants in Zine's 2001 study also share perceived experiences of discrimination based on their status as Muslims. Students feel some teachers hold misconceptions about Muslims, in particular, Muslim women and their apparent lack of value for education. Some participants also feel they are unwarrantedly put into general streams because their teachers make rash assumptions about their level of intelligence. This ultimately leads to experiences of isolation from their teachers, peers and schooling experiences overall. Similarly, the perceptions and experiences of Muslim women who veil at an American, predominantly Christian university are examined in Seggie and Sanford's (2010) study. Participants report that initially, their non-Muslim peers and teachers assumed that they could not speak English fluently. Similar to the participants in Zine's study (2001), the participants in this study also feel that their academic abilities are often underestimated, at times their grades reflective of this.

Cole and Ahmadi (2010) examine the experiences of Muslim students in an American university and how Islam influences their experiences and academic achievement compared to their Jewish and Christian counterparts. The study reveals that the Muslim participants find no difference in treatment from their peers or professors. Although this study focuses predominantly on the *academic* experiences of students, findings did illustrate that Muslim students are *less* satisfied with their educational experience than their Jewish colleagues even though they are involved in several community and campus events and workshops.

Similar findings are discussed in a study I conducted in 2008 where I examine the social

experiences of high school Muslim youth who veil. Participants share an overwhelming feeling of disconnection from their peers and an overall lack of the ‘high school experience’ (Alvi, 2008). Participants felt that the social realm of high school was just as important as the academic one but that public schools lack the inclusivity of activities that allow Muslim students to participate without feeling like they compromise their values and religious principles.

Although there is a growing body of literature on Muslim issues in education, religion continues to be used as the primary marker of identity when examining experiences. There also appears to be a focus on perceived negative experiences such as the perceptions of discrimination and stereotyping that contribute to feelings of ‘us vs. them’ (Aswad & Bilge, 1996; Bakht, 2008; Barlas, 2007; Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Haddad, Smith & Moore, 2006; Hoodfar, 2003; Seggie & Sanford, 2010).

‘Being Hijabi’ in Pedagogical Spaces

“There is little question that the hijab has become the most stereotypical symbol of Muslim womanhood.”

(Haddad, Smith & Moore, 2006, p.38)

Since the rise of veiling in North America, researchers have taken interest in examining the factors that influence a Muslim woman to veil. In a Canadian context, Zine (2001) notes that one of the major reasons women wear the *hijab* is to maintain “an Islamic lifestyle despite the pressures of conformity to the dominant culture” (p. 399; see also, Aswad & Bilge 1996; Roald, 2001). Hoodfar (2003) recognizes it as an adaptive strategy whereby women use their veils as a tool for raising awareness about Islam, maintaining an Islamic identity, exercising their democratic rights and even gaining trust and freedom from their parents. She further states,

“questions of identity and the demonization of Islam and Muslims in Canada and in the West in general, play a role in the decision of some women to take up the veil” (p. 30). These sentiments resonate closely with the participants in Watt’s (2011) study. Watt explores the impact media representations of *hijab* have on mainstream perceptions of veiling and on the Muslim women who practice it. Participants in Watt’s study share how they continuously negotiate their identities within formal educational institutions as Muslim women who veil. For some of her participant’s, veiling is a way of asserting their identities as Muslims while simultaneously creating ‘Muslim spaces’ within the school. Her findings resonate closely with my own experiences as I regard the act of veiling as an opportunity to change the sentiments of those who are Islamophobic or opposed to the veil.

McDonough (2003) notes that veiling is also a source of empowerment for some Muslim women where “each one of them is clearly thinking, and thinking for herself” (p. 106). This contradicts the popular belief that veiling is oppressive and that the veil is worn against the will of those wearing it. Regardless of the reasons behind veiling, Haddad, Smith and Moore (2006) emphasize “that conservative dress does *not* represent constriction, repression, or any of the other terms by which Westerners have generally understood the Muslim woman’s condition” (2006, p. 9, emphasis in original). These statements may be a generalization as some women may feel veiling is oppressive or a religious misinterpretation; however, what can be taken from these statements is the likely possibility that within a North American context, many women veil by choice.

Situated in Toronto, Zine (2006) examines the ethno-religious oppression and gendered Islamophobia experienced by veiled women attending a segregated Islamic school. Zine discussed how within non-Muslim countries such as Canada “the identities of Muslim girls

converge on the matrix of race, ethnicity, and religious difference and create a nexus of interlocking oppressions that position them as subaltern subjects” (p. 246). The study looks at the discrimination unique to Muslim women who are marked by their veils and thus often misunderstood and stereotyped negatively by those outside the ‘safe haven’ of the Islamic schools they attend. Participants share perceptions of discrimination and how this informs their sense of self. Major themes discussed are the discursive norms of dress amongst students who feel comfortable with veiling as well as those who feel their bodies and what they put on it are ‘policed’ by school authorities. Participants are also subject to stereotyping, often facing negative comments about their veil from non-Muslims. In the same study, Zine also examines how participants construct a sense of femininity. While most participants view veiling as an act of resistance and non-conformity, they also recognize that it goes against the norms of beauty and sexuality within a Eurocentric paradigm; however, participants share that veiling gives them a sense of control over who can have access to their bodies.

The veiled body is often a topic of debate as the dominant perception is that Muslim women who veil are “subjugated, veiled, secluded and in need of being rescued” (Rezai-Rashti, 1994, p. 37). McDonough (2003) notes that the veil is often viewed as a symbol of oppression and backwardness (see also Nayebzadah, 2010) acting as a barrier between the individual veiling and those they interact with. This resonates with Hoodfar (2003) who states, “the imaginary veil that comes to the minds of most Westerners is an awkward black cloak that covers the whole body, including the face, and which is designed to prevent women’s mobility” (p. 11). In each description, the focus is on the apparent victimization of the veiled woman. She continues to be exoticized and seen as a subjugated being living in a ‘free’ world. When a Muslim woman does not fit the stereotypical image that is perceived in the minds of many, she is seen as an exception

to the rule, a 'liberated' woman. The students in Professor Barlas's (2007) class attribute her "powerful and aggressive" personality to living in America where she enjoys the gift of freedom (p. 368). This mentality assumes that Muslim women such as Barlas experience a newfound sense of liberation in North America, breaking free of the supposed oppression women face in Muslim countries.

As mentioned earlier, the tendency to make correlations between oppression and veiling for example, is what Said (1978) refers to as the 'static image' that is embedded into the mind of the West¹¹ when it comes to questions of Islam. Almost three decades after Said writes of the Western perception of the East, it seems little has changed. Hoodfar (2003) makes similar observations noting "in Western literature veiling is often presented as a uniform and static practice" (p. 11). Women who veil are often looked at only through a religious lens, their identity and actions seldom attributed to anything but relating to Islam. In her article examining white privilege McIntosh (2005) raises similar issues as she describes one of the many advantages she has as a white woman: "I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group." McIntosh examines how minority groups are often typecast into superficial categories and generalized to represent all 'others' like them. Like minoritized groups, veiled Muslim women too are often burdened with the responsibility of representing *all* Muslim women. The actions of one individual become generalized and applicable to the whole population. Barlas (2007) speaks of her own experience as she relates "I consciously resist assuming the burden of representation...Islam is not just a subject but the very basis of my own subjectivity" (p. 370).

¹¹ My understanding of the terms "West" and "East" are influenced by Said (1978) and his work on Orientalism. West and East do not refer to any specific geographical region; rather, the West refers to "a society that is depicted as forward-thinking, liberal and progressive", while the East refers to a society that is depicted as "barbaric, savage, backward-thinking and retrogressive." Both concepts bring ethnicity, class and gender into play. (Nayebzadah, 2010, p.94).

The tendency to generalize all Muslims is problematic for many reasons; not only because a whole religion cannot be represented by a few individuals, but also because the representations depicted of Muslim women who veil in outlets such as the media are limited and at times extreme, representing only a small minority. Furthermore, even within Islam there are several sects and within these sects exist several schools of thought. The differences that exist between two Muslims within the same sect are so vast that trying to represent all Muslims and all of Islam in one way is virtually impossible.

Nayebzadah (2010) articulately describes the complex state of the veil as:

No other item of clothing compares to the veil. The veil is always being defined, and each time it is defined, it has been distorted. The veil cannot escape egregious interpretations or dichotomous relationships: it is both an area of interest for the West and the East; the Muslim and the non-Muslim; and, the veiled and the unveiled (p. 101).

As this passage illustrates, there appears to be much confusion and misunderstanding when dealing with the practice of veiling, an issue that leads to the premise that there is also much ambiguity when it comes to Islam. When Barlas (2007) writes about why students enroll in her course about Islam, she writes it is because they know “nothing” about Islam. She elaborates, “of course, the ‘nothing’ they know is deeply embedded, both in the sense that they actually don’t know much about Islam and in the sense that whatever they do is in the form of ‘negative’ knowledge” (pp. 368-9)¹². The discourse of Islam, as it is presently understood, has been represented in such a way that the religion is confused with culture and its followers most often associated with violence, terrorism and ‘backward’ practices (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2004;

¹² “A 2009 Angus Reid poll found 45 percent of Canadians believe Islam incites violence. Just 28 percent have a generally positive view of the faith. Yet only 32 percent claim to have a thorough knowledge of it. In other words, 68 percent admit they don’t really know what they’re talking about” (The Ottawa Citizen, August, 2009).

Said, 1978, 1981). To further complicate matters, Rizvi (2005) notes that we now live in a “political climate suspicious of Islam” (p. 168). This may be reinforced by the media’s coverage of anything related to Islam. Since 9/11, Said (2002) writes that the media has engaged in “exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility” towards Muslims (p. xi) leading “the average reader to...see Islam and fundamentalism as essentially the same thing” (p. xvi). Said further implicates the media stating that the way in which Islam is presented reduces it to “a handful of rules, stereotypes, and generalizations about the faith, its founder, and its entire people.” (ibid). He concludes by describing the dangerous effects of such actions as he writes “the reinforcement of every negative fact associated with Islam – its violence, primitiveness, atavism, threatening qualities – is perpetuated” (ibid). Rezai-Rashti (2005) agrees with Said and notes, “Western media’s distorted coverage of almost anything Islamic has contributed to the persistence of long held stereotypical attitudes” (p. 178). The implications of such negative attention is detrimental to the women who choose to veil as they constantly negotiate the tensions of veiling in spaces that do not welcome difference.

Women who veil are criticized not only by non-Muslims, but also by members that many would consider a part of the ‘insider’ community. In a previous study I conducted, young women wearing the veil reported the ridicule they received from members of the Muslim community (Alvi, 2008). More surprising were the comments some women received from other veiled women. Questions of how one should ‘properly’ wear a headscarf were asked as some felt that particular groups of Muslim women did not do justice to veiling and as a result, perpetuate negative discourse in mainstream society. This further demonstrates how complex and vast the variation of representation within Islam is, reiterating the need for new ways of examining the veil and those who wear it.

While there are policies in some countries that prevent Muslim women from veiling, Ruitenbergh (2008) states that banning the veil especially in schools is a form of censorship and is in fact miseducative in the sense that it “impedes the achievement of important educational goals, especially in public education” (p. 17). Todd (1998) calls for “educating beyond tolerance” whereby representations such as the veil are seen as “neither ‘true’ nor ‘false’” (p. 440). Regardless of the stance one takes on the veil, there appears to be no middle ground; to veil or not to veil seems to be the only questions being asked. This is not only limiting, but also has serious implications for those students who choose to veil.

Sub/Cultural Studies

Subculture is defined by Gelder (2005) as “groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices” (p.1). Barker (2008) further clarifies that the ‘sub’ in subculture “has connoted notions of distinctiveness and difference from the dominant or mainstream society” while culture refers to “a whole way of life” for that particular group (Barker, 2008, p. 322). One of the most influential texts written on subculture was compiled and edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (2005) with contributions from many of their colleagues who were also cultural theorists at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural studies. First published in 1976, *Resistance Through Rituals* presents a collection of articles that explore various subcultures that were present in post-war Britain, such as skinheads and Teds. This reader was followed by Hebdige’s 1979 book titled *Subculture*. In his book, Hebdige further explores the way subcultures use objects and styles to express themselves. He writes “we are intrigued by the most mundane objects – a safety pin, a pointed shoe, a motor cycle – which nonetheless...take on a symbolic dimension, becoming a form of stigmata, tokens of a self-imposed exile” (Hebdige, 2003, p.2).

The way subcultures operate continue to be documented today. In Park's 2011 study she explores in depth the five most popular subcultures amongst Japanese youth. She identifies them as cosupure, bikies, gyarus, gosuroris, emos and surfers. Each subculture relies on particular fashion trends to perform personal values. Cosupure subculture represents a "subculture of duplicity" (p. 13) where participators often wear costumes to take on different personas. In particular, this subculture looks to fictional characters that give impressions of innocence demonstrating "the importance of image in Japanese society" (p. 14).

Bikies refers to biker gangs, a space occupied predominantly by males, much like the biker gangs in North America that inspire them. This subculture is again concerned with image as participants spend a significant amount of money adorning their motorcycles than actually riding them. The gyarus subculture has a distinct style that consists of "dark tans, bleached hair and pursue a highly exaggerated western image" (p. 14). Next, the gosuroris subculture genders its members through colour whereby men wear "dark, masculine" goth-like clothing and the women wear "doll-like, feminine" Lolita-inspired clothing (ibid). Here the woman's clothing performs a hyper-sexualized function to "express a Western aesthetic" (ibid). Emo subcultures in Japan, like bike subculture, are highly influenced by the emo subcultures of North America. Individuals from this group use clothing to express emotions of sorrow and solitude. Similarly, the last subculture Park identifies is the surfer, and she regards America as a guiding force to Japanese culture's interest in this sport. Like the bikies, the surfers place more emphasis on dressing like surfers than actually surfing. In terms of identity, Stranger's (2010) study reports significantly different findings on surfer subculture in Australia whereby 'real' surfers do not rely on fashion to perform their identity or credibility as surfers, rather, "...the emphasis on fashion as an indicator of identity to outsiders decreases in favour of a shift to performance as an

indication of status to insiders” (p. 1127). In this context, performance refers to the actual physical skills surfers can perform on the surfboard.

Park (2011) asserts that subcultures play a significant role in shaping the identity of Japanese youth and how they perform through fashion. Park notes the impact style has on the sexual identity of Japanese youth stating that while traditionally formed by men, many subcultures in Japan are in fact formed by women and even influence how men dress. She describes the “feminine elements” of men’s fashion, including “platform shoes, a tight silhouette and heavy makeup” (p. 18). Female participation in Japanese subcultures reaffirms what some scholars note about the study of subcultures, that is, that the female presence exists, but continues to be ignored (McRobbie & Garber, 2005). VanRoosmalen and Krahn (1996) point to literature that illustrate how subcultures that focus on males tend to explore public spaces while female subcultures are often ignored because they are “centre[d] around the domestic/social sphere-the bedroom culture of music, chit-chat, and good friends” (p. 4), also referred to as private spaces. Their 1996 study explores how the public and private spaces of high school students (both male and female) from three different Canadian cities influence how youth compartmentalize aspects of their social life. Their findings reveal that overall, both genders partake in public and private space subcultures, contrary to previous studies that claim women simply did not partake in public subcultures. Publicly spaced subcultures that seem to have a higher participation on the part of males include drug-use, alcohol consumption and sport-participation, however, many females engage in these activities too, just to a lesser extent.

Park (2011) concludes her study with theorizing that one of the main goals for the youth who partake in Japanese subcultures is to “resist the older generation and the rigid social atmosphere it created” (p. 18). They perform this resistance through fashion, often deeply

influenced by Western popular culture. Park emphasizes the impact the West has on the formation of new subcultures in Japan and how youth are striving to resist the old mainstream ways of their parents' generation.

Following the work of Stuart Hall, Ibrahim (2008) explores the tensions between 'Old' and 'New' identities in his study on Francophone-African youth refugees in Canada and the formation of their social identity. He articulates how participants perform through both the language and clothing of their continental African roots and their emerging identities of 'becoming black' in Canada by taking on a hip-hop cultural identity. Ibrahim theorizes this performativity as a 'third space', a language of 'in-between' whereby participants in his study "become a negotiated product of the translated Old and New" (p. 247). He draws a distinct difference between the male and female participants in his study, noting "...the female body seems to fall under stricter rules and policed more rigidly and systematically (ibid, 248; see also Ibrahim, 1998). Participants in Zine's (2006) Toronto based study report similar sentiments, sharing narratives of how the insider and outsider gaze of their veils raise constant critique of their bodies and how they perform *hijab* or 'should' perform *hijab*.

As Ibrahim explores hip-hop identity, so too do Baxter and Marina (2008) in their study on African-American youth subculture in New Orleans. They illustrate how urban black youth use hip-hop fashion, such as baggy pants and braided hairstyles to "...manifest an ambiguous cocktail of resistance and acceptance of hegemonic authority..." (p. 94). Baxter and Marina argue that certain elements of hip-hop fashion have been deemed as criminal thus challenging members of this subculture when confronted by institutional authority, even though they may or may not be part of a gang or subscribe to thug-life.

Several other studies explore how subcultures use fashion and 'style' to perform aspects

of identity, varying across time and space. Perho (2000) examines the 'skinhead' culture of Finland and how members of this subculture wear army boots and bomber jackets and shave their heads to identify themselves as members. This subculture is not limited to males only; Perho also interviewed girls who are a part of the skinhead culture. These participants described how they style their hair to mimic the shaved head of their male counterparts. They call it the 'hidden bald' whereby the hair at the back of the head is trimmed significantly shorter than the rest of the hair. The hair is then tied up to make the shorter portion visible to others. Participants in the study noted that 'looking' like a skinhead is an important way to show uniformity with other skinheads and to demonstrate loyalty to the subculture, even if participants do not understand the significance behind the actual articles of clothing.

How the body is literally used to perform through style is explored in Atkinson's (2005) study on tattooing. He critiques subculture theory and argues that rather than understanding those who he labels 'tattoo enthusiasts' as a subculture, they are better understood as a social 'figuration' (p.327; also see Elias, 1994). Social figuration theory is interested in the *process* of becoming part of a community rather than the assumption of a community already 'being'. Participants in Atkinson's study share the process of becoming tattooed and the interrelated relationships that develop as part of that process.

Snyder (2011) explores skateboarding subculture in his American based ethnographical study. His study differs than previous studies on subcultures because it explores the use of subculture less as an avenue of resistance through style and more on how members use skateboarding to create positive, self-sustaining career opportunities for themselves and others who are part of the subculture. Snyder asserts that there are two types of skateboarders; those who own a skateboard and buy skateboard fashion to merely taking on an outside identity as a

‘skateboarder’, and those who are truly part of the skateboarding culture. He argues that a true skateboarder is “...one who has made a physical and mental commitment to learning skateboarding tricks, and has knowledge of the culture. Skateboarding... is based upon one thing only, the ability to skateboard (p. 313). These findings reaffirm Stranger’s (2010) findings on the identity formation of surfers in Australia and how ‘being’ a surfer relies more on the physical capabilities as opposed to performing the identity through surfer fashion.

Hodkinson (2005) and Williams (2006) both explore how online spaces are used by individuals to participate in subcultures to varying extents, giving participants the option of *temporarily* subscribing to different subcultures at different times. Hodkinson’s (2002) study focuses on the use of the internet to participate in goth subculture. While he acknowledges that the world wide web can be used to create multiple online identities, his study focuses on how goth subculture uses the internet to “reinforce the boundaries of the grouping” by organizing live, social spaces that allow goths to increase their participation in the subculture (p. 565). In this study, the internet is actually used to facilitate more face-to-face meetings amongst goth members. Williams’ (2006) study explores the straightedge culture and how the internet has helped this group expand. Straightedge members are part of the punk culture movement, but view themselves as a “positive youth punk band” that resists the stereotypical punk affiliations by centring their identity on maintaining a drug-free, alcohol-free and promiscuous sex-free lifestyle (p. 176). In both Hodkinson’s and Williams’ study, music plays a determining force in how subcultures perform through style. Music is a platform that perpetuates punk or goth fashion and acts as an avenue through which members often first encounter one another.

Religion and cultural spaces are explored in Minwalla et al.’s (2005) study on ‘progressive’ gay Muslims in North America. Participants share how experiences of ‘being’

Muslim and 'being' gay inform their identities. In this context, participants shared feelings of being able to 'be' gay living in the West as opposed to openly disclosing their sexuality outside of North America. Many participants are openly gay within the gay community of their cities but within their private lives amongst their families, they hide their sexual orientation. Participants who are all of various ethnic backgrounds also share what it means to 'be' gay as South Asians or Arabs and how this affects their relationship with gay Whites within the gay community. Religious texts are explored by researchers and participants as the latter reinterpret the role of homosexuality in Islam. While fashion is not explored as an expression of identity, Minwalla et al. do claim to offer one of the only studies available about gay Muslim subculture.

As the above studies illustrate, subcultures represent groups of individuals that vary across different races, class, gender and spaces. While some rely on fashion to perform an identity, other subcultures value skills over material signifiers; in both cases however, members seem to be negotiating an identity of what it means to truly 'be' a member of a particular subculture. All these subcultures share a commonality in that their subscription to a subculture is grounded in loyalty and their desire to be part of a community of others 'like them'. Regardless of their intention, Hoechsmann (2004) reminds us that:

...hybrid moments bring [subcultures] together in shared tropes such as body image, media stereotypes, peer pressure, parental and other forms of authority, generalized bias towards youth, antiracism, global consciousness, sexuality, concern about education and jobs, and social change" (p. 193).

Subscribing to a subculture appears to a space where marginalized and minoritized groups can build community and resistance to the mainstream.

Contributions to Literature

The current literature demonstrates that within Muslim literature, there is an urgent need for a new space surrounding the discourse of Muslims, and in particular, Muslim women. The majority of studies examining the discourse surrounding Muslims focus on questions around Islamophobia and why the veil is worn. The main focus seems to be on Islam as a religion and not on the individual and the other factors that inform their identity. It takes for granted that religion is *the* identity of the individuals in question. What seems to be lacking is scholarship that goes beyond seeing the veil as solely a religious piece of clothing or that focuses on Muslim women who do not fit into stereotypes of the veiled Muslim woman. While the proposed thesis is very much about the veil, it is at the same time much more than the veil. Fashion is used as an entry point that goes beyond seeing the veil as a religious object and examining what the veil means as a performative *sign*.

Within discourses that surround subculture, Muslim subcultures are sorely underrepresented. Muslims comprise one of the largest growing populations of the world who may also be one of the most misunderstood populations of the world; therefore, studies that explore their lived experiences are much needed. The women who participated in this study differ from many previous studies on subcultures in that, style is used not as a method of resisting mainstream society, rather as a strategy of resisting stereotypes and integrating into spaces that are normally perceived as closed. Fashion is platform through which these women create welcoming spaces that help them be seen as legitimate members of mainstream society.

This study calls for an “unveiling of the mind” (El-Sadaawi, 1997, p. 18-19). I hope it allows an opportunity for the veil to mean something more than a religious sign and the veiled woman to be more than the “quintessential symbol of patriarchal oppression” (Martino & Rezai-

Rashti, p. 4). This study offers Muslim women who veil an opportunity to re-present the veil, re-produce the images that are available on Muslim women and share their own stories that open a new space around what it means to veil in Canada.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

The research is guided by a cultural studies conceptual framework. Because there are different ways to approach a cultural study, the following chapter details the theories and theorists who have deeply informed my understanding of cultural studies and how I therefore approach the topic being explored.

Cultural Studies

“From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We think only in signs”

-Derrida

Often described as an “anti-discipline” a cultural study is a critical approach toward “understanding culture in all its complex forms” (Sardar & Van Loon, 1997, p. 8). Defining “culture” must be explicit because the term holds such vast meaning in various contexts and is still continuously re-defined in different ways (see Barker, 2008; Rojek, 2007; Surber, 1998; Taylor, 1871; Williams, 1981). Hall (1997) notes that in the most traditional sense, culture represents “the sum of the great ideas, as represented in the classic works of literature, painting, music and philosophy” (p. 2) while in more modern terms, culture represents what is referred to as ‘popular culture’, that is, the music, the art and literature that is widely distributed, or what Hall refers to as ‘mass culture’. Hall also provides an anthropological definition of culture as “whatever is distinctive about the ‘way of life’ of a people” (p. 2). However, culture is understood quite distinctively within a cultural studies context as it takes on more political meaning. “Culture, it is argued, is not so much a set of things...as a process, a set of

practices...culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings...between the members of a society or group” (ibid; see also, Thwaites, Davis & Mules, 1994).

How meaning is made and exchanged is of great significance in cultural studies. Culture in this context acts “as a terrain of conflict and contestation” where we, the consumers, struggle to make meaning of the “texts and practices of everyday life” (Storey, 1996, p. 2). One of the complexities of understanding culture in this way is the unfixed nature that meanings can take on as each individual makes her own meaning. As Grossberg (1992) elaborates:

The meaning of a text is not given in some independently available set of codes which we can consult at our own convenience. A text does not carry its own meaning or politics already inside of itself; no text is able to guarantee what its effects will be. People are constantly struggling, not merely to figure out what a text means, but to make it mean something that connects to their own lives, experiences, needs and desires (p. 52).

Similarly, Hall (1997) theorizes that meaning is never fixed rather it is dependent on how people make meaning of a sign and in effect *represent* it. He notes that “meaning does not inhere *in* things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is the result of signifying practice—a practice that *produces* meaning, that *makes things mean*” (p. 24, emphasis in original). Therefore, texts do not mean on their own, rather, meanings are put into them.

In particular, Hall (1997) implicates the media in the way it represents signs. He notes that there seems to be a gap of representation between the apparent ‘true meaning’ of a sign and the way it is represented by the media but in fact, there is *no* fixed true meaning rather, “representation is *part* of the event” (Hall, 1997). Therefore, representation does not occur before or after an image, it occurs *within* it, “representation is constitutive of the event” (ibid). Outlets such as the television which Storey (1996) states as, “the popular cultural form of the late

twentieth century” (p. 9) play a significant role in exposing the masses to misrepresentations. Following the work of Stuart Hall, Giroux (2005) also views the media as playing a significant role in influencing viewer perceptions. He notes that, “the media, as well as the culture they produce, distribute, sanction, have become the most important educational force in creating citizens and social agents” (p. 45). While media is not limited to television exclusively, television is recognized as a reflection of the way signs are represented in the broader media such as the news, magazines and papers. Therefore, as the study unfolds, I theorize that while the media and popular culture attempt to represent the veil as a sign in a particular way, the women in the study fashion their veils in ways that attempt to re-present the veil in contrasting ways. Important to note is that although not just about popular culture, “the study of popular culture is central to the project of cultural studies” (Storey 1996, p. 2). In this study, popular culture is of relevance as the fashion trends the women follow are at times deeply influenced by outlets such as the fashion and music industry as well as other popular culture influences on their sense of self.

Critical to cultural studies is the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) whose work influenced the development of semiotics. Semiotics is the study of signs and is a major concept in cultural studies. A sign in this context is defined as “anything which produces meaning” (Thwaites, Davis & Mules, 1994, p. 7). Signs are guided by some basic principle, such as the belief that they are “not just comments on the world, but are themselves things *in* the world – and specifically, in the *social* world” (ibid, emphasis in original). Also, a sign has the potential to produce *many* meanings. This principle reminds us that meaning can never be “*finally* fixed” (Hall, 1997, p. 23, emphasis in original). In order to communicate and understand one another, “we can ‘agree’ to allow words to carry somewhat different meanings” explains Hall (ibid) who

might refer to this as meanings ‘without guarantees’.

Furthermore, signs can be recognized by most people as a sign and they refer to something other than the actual sign (Sardar & Van Loon, 1997). Vital to the sign are the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the “sensory impression of the sign” or in the other words, the mental image that comes to mind when we see or hear a sign (Thwaites, Davis & Mules, 2002, p. 31). The signified is the “concept the sign invokes” (ibid). Therefore, in this study, semiotic readings of the veil are done in various ways such as discursive and visual analysis. The veil is examined as a signifier, that is, what participants envision the veil to be, mean and to include. The veil is also examined as the signified, that is, what the veil means to those who practice it and what they perceive the meaning taken out of it is by those who do not.

While there is no particular way to define a cultural study, there are general guidelines of what comprises a cultural study. The role of power is critical. In an effort to understand the way cultural practices work in society, a primary aim of cultural studies is to “illuminate issues of power by understanding the role of culture in social and economic oppression while reconceptualizing culture as an important form of resistance” (Gaztambide-Fernandez, Harding & Sorde-Marti, 2004, p. 2). Foucault (1980; 1982) who also makes a deep connection between power and knowledge, heavily influences the concept of power in cultural studies. Foucault suggests that knowledge and truth are tied to power to regulate individuals. He demonstrates how power and knowledge influence one’s identity, or the self as a subject. He notes that knowledge and ‘regimes of truth’ make us its subjects and in turn, affect our identity. Individual identity is informed through institutionalized forms of knowledge. One’s identity informs how one chooses to represent oneself, and for this study, this representation is performed through the body (the act of veiling). The way the women in the study resist representations of

the veil demonstrates the productive nature of power and how it “marks [her] by [her] own individuality, attaches [her] to [her] own identity, imposes a law of truth on [her] which [she] must recognize and others recognize in [her]” (Foucault, 1982, p. 781).

Cultural studies also seek to address how knowledge is formed and in doing so, exposing how ‘universal truths’ are internalized. Furthermore, culture is to be explored in all its complexity and placed within the study as “both the *object* of the study and the *location* of political criticism and action” (Sardar & Van Loon, p. 9, emphasis in original). And finally, a cultural study “aims to *understand* and *change* the structures of dominance” (ibid). The culture being explored in this study addresses these guidelines. The media is identified as a source of power and brings into question how power and knowledge normalize ‘regimes of truth’ and how this in turn affects (and produces) the discourse that currently surrounds veiling. It also recognizes those who veil in non-traditional ways as disrupting dominant discourses, thus demonstrating how power can be oppressive but also productive. Furthermore, it demonstrates how signifying practices, such as fashion can be a form of resistance.

Culture as Public Pedagogy

The broad definition of culture, as defined within the context of cultural studies enables culture to be a site of learning, or a form of ‘public pedagogy’ (Giroux, 2004). Giroux’s (2004) concept of culture as public pedagogy asserts that “culture functions as a contested sphere over the production, distribution, and regulation of power, and how and where it operates both symbolically and institutionally as an educational, political, and economic force” (p. 62). Giroux argues that pedagogy is often limited to formal institutions such as the classroom and that many educators overlook the value of pedagogy as a political practice outside schools. He stresses that culture plays a significant role as an educational site, writing “identities are being continually

transformed, power is enacted, and learning assumes a political dynamic as it becomes not only the condition for the acquisition of agency but also the sphere for imagining oppositional social change” (ibid, p. 60). Similarly, Ellsworth (2005) in her work refers to “anomalous places of learning” (p.5). These are spaces that decentre the traditional understanding of pedagogy by encouraging others to value the experiences of learning outside of formal institutions.

For the purpose of this study, I recognize the ways in which participants veil as a form of public pedagogy. The young women who participated are part of a youth subculture that use style and the way they perform their identities through ‘voguing the veil’ as a means of reaching out and educating those around them about what it means to veil in Canada.

Subcultures in Cultural Studies

Subcultures play an important role within cultural studies because they represent the complexities that exist within culture. Hall and Jefferson (2005) and Hebdige (2003) place a particular focus on youth subcultures and what Barker (2008) describes as “the more spectacular youth cultures, the visible, the loud, different, avant-garde youth styles” (p. 319). The reference to youth is not indicative of any particular age group. Grossberg (1992) notes that “youth is a cultural rather than a biographical category” (p. 176). Several other cultural theorists have since written on various subcultures, exploring the strategies used to sustain such groups and how they resist the mainstream (Atkinson, 2005; Macdonald, 2001; Halberstam, 2003; McRobbie & Garber, 2005).

McRobbie and Garber (2005) note that when it comes to exploring subcultures, a minimal amount of work has been done on female subcultures. They note that women have largely been ignored, questioning, “Are girls really not present in youth subcultures? Or is it something in the way this kind of research is carried out that renders them invisible? (p. 105).

They add that any reference to women within the context of subcultures solely refers to them in terms of their sexual attractiveness. Van Roosmalen and Krahn (1996) add “The participation and involvement of girls in group activities and street life are at best viewed as contained within existing male cultures” (p. 5). The women who participated in this study bring the focus back on to female youths who are a part of a subculture. As concepts of beauty and sexuality are explored, it inevitably reinforces the claims of McRobbie and Garber (2005), though in this context, the women explore issues from within a female perspective, as opposed to an existing male subculture or perspective.

While the focus of the thesis is on a female subculture, it is by no means a feminist project, though many similarities can be found between feminism and cultural studies. Feminist theories are complex and the boundaries fluid, often dipping into other disciplines. Hooks (1982) defines feminism in uncomplicated ways as “the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular class of women. It does not privilege women over men” (p. 28). Therefore, the agenda of feminism is quite political, similar to cultural studies. Both feminism and cultural studies aim to address and dismantle hegemonic structures of power in place that disadvantage marginalized groups of people. Both disciplines take into account the intersection of race, class, sexuality and ethnicity.

Feminists argue against ‘fixed’ notions of gender and contend that societal gender constructions precede biological gender differences (Davies, 2003; Mac Naughton, 2000). In other words, from a very young age, children are ‘gendered’ through their constructed labels of ‘boy’ and ‘girl’. Feminists suggest that “we should move away from these essentializing theories of gender construction because they simplify and reduce all femininities and masculinities to one dualism and are unable to theorize power adequately” (Blaise, 2005). Power plays a central role

in how gender norms are deconstructed in feminism. Butler (1999) discusses how heterosexuality remains a powerful institutionalized discourse that effects one's internal process of gendering. Like many feminists, I seek to examine how power structures 'fix' constructs and affect one's sense of self. However, I consciously choose to explore the issue at hand through a cultural studies framework because I want to explore the concept of voguing the veil as more than gender equity. The following section explores further how I draw on certain feminist concepts into my exploration of this topic.

Performativity

The concept of performativity plays a critical role in the study. Here I invoke Judith Butler and Erving Goffman and their work on how the body performs. The two take on a different conceptual stance as to how one's sense of self becomes a subject. Butler (1999) contests the notion that there exists a single identity of gender as she questions the constructed societal roles of women and men. She argues that gender roles are shaped through discourse where gender is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1999, p. 33). She notes a difference between a performance and performativity, where the latter is defined as something that "...produces a series of effect. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman" (Butler, 2011). Butler (1999) implicates the act of "bodily gestures, movements and styles" as gendering one's sense of self (p. 139). Gender performativity challenges constructed expectations of one's sense of self, one's body and one's assumed gender. It confronts normalized 'myths' about signs in society. This includes questions about societal norms regarding beauty, sexuality and femininity.

Goffman (1959) explores performances in different ways than Butler in his text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Here Goffman (1959) proposes that we are all, in part, actors of a “theatrical performance” (p. xi) where “the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them” (ibid). Goffman (1959) refers to the “front region” (p. 107) and “back region” or “backstage” (p. 112) where the former is the stage on which we, the actors, perform for the audience through discourse or “gestural interchanges” (p. 107). Backstage is where “the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character” (p. 112). Goffman emphasizes the consciousness of our individual performances and one’s desire to “control” impressions made upon others (the audience) (p. 15).

Both Butler and Goffman implicate the social process of gendering in their work whereby social constructs precede natural differences. While Goffman recognizes the role of gender in the way women and men perform on and off ‘stage’ his work expands beyond gender while Butler dedicates much of her work examining gender discourse. It is important to distinguish the difference between a performance and performativity. I interpret performances as informed by Goffman (1959) as the single acts we engage in while performativity, as mentioned earlier, refers to the collective acts of performances that produce effects on how discourse is carried out.

For the purpose of this study, I borrow from both Butler and Goffman. I draw on Butler’s (1999) concept of gender performativity and apply it to how clothing can be performative, specifically, how voguing the veil is performative. While this discussion inevitably includes gender as the participants in the study are women and use their status as such to perform certain fashion trends, they also use fashion to express much more than their gender. I use Butler’s

concept of performativity to explore how the body can be performative beyond gender but still very much informing one's sense of self. Goffman's work is influential to this study in that it explores how one's location on stage, whether it be front or back, informs one's interactions with others and also one's subjectivity. Impressions are meaningful on these stages and deeply impact how one performs.

Exploring how constructed norms of beauty, femininity and sexuality inform performances thus rendering them performative becomes a pertinent question of interest. Wolf (1991) largely blames the media for engaging women in what she calls the 'the beauty myth'. Wolf holds the media accountable for a limited portrayal of beauty that focuses on unrealistic images of women with skin, hair and bodies photoshopped to perfection. This in turn creates distorted expectations of femininity and beauty that men and women buy into.

Gagnon and Simon (2005) argue that performing gender goes beyond just the media. They theorize that sexuality is "always grounded in wider material and cultural forces" including "economic, religious, political, familial and social conditions" (p.xii). As a result, human sexualities are constantly in a cycle of re-production where they are "socially organized...maintained...and transformed" (ibid). This can have implications on individuals from a very young age. Studies have shown how cultural forces such as the ones Gagnon and Simon identify, influence how children as young as four perform their gender through body language and clothing (Blaise, 2005).

This implicates clothing as a significant act of performing. Rubinstein (1995) notes, clothing can be an influential tool of resistance used to signify a group or an individual's ideology. Studies demonstrate that dressing provocatively can be a "demonstration of empowerment" for some girls (Willett, 2008, p.421). Instead of being passive sex subjects,

women use particular ways of dressing to demonstrate power over their own bodies. Muslim participants in Zine's (2006) study shared similar sentiments. Participants shared how by veiling and dressing modestly, they were given a sense of autonomy. It gave them control over who could and could not see their bodies. Both are examples of how the body and what is put on it can inform and perform one's identity.

Al-Saji (2010) recognizes clothing as an intimate piece that informs one's physical sense of self; it is worth quoting at length how she frames the veil as such:

...clothing constitutes a bodily extension that cannot be removed without transforming one's bodily sense of self...clothing is no longer felt as an object apart from the lived body, but comes to form an integrated part of one's body schema. Bodily extensions (which include articles of clothing but also tools) become themselves dimensions through which the subject perceives and interacts with the world and others...such extensions affectively and kinaesthetically transform and recast one's sense of bodily space...The limits of one's body are felt not at the skin, but at the surface and edges of clothing one wears, redefining one's sense of 'here'. In navigating one's surrounding, it is in terms of this 'here' that a sense of 'there', an external space, is configured (p. 890).

She theorizes that enforcing laws that prevent women from veiling will not result in a sense of liberation for women, rather a "bodily disintegration and immobilization" for the women who do veil (ibid). In her article she ultimately argues that the veil is used as a form of cultural racism whereby the veil is interpreted as a sign of Muslim culture and "an explanation of its inferiority" (ibid).

Clothing as fashion or 'style' is used as an entry point into the discourse of the veil as 'voguing the veil' is explored. Hebdige (2003) describes 'style' as the "mundane objects which

have double meaning” (p. 2). He defines style as a transformation that goes “‘against nature’, interrupting the process of ‘normalization’” (p. 18). His work on how subcultures has informed my own understanding of the way Muslim women use fashion to ‘vogue the veil’. He theorizes that, “...the idea of style as a coded response to change affecting the entire community has literally transformed the study of spectacular youth culture” (p. 80). This has implications for how clothing and style influences youth and subcultures across private and public pedagogical spaces and is further explored in the next section.

The Geo/Politics of Space

Chapman (2011) notes that key elements of present-day geopolitics include:

...the belief that states have boundaries, capital, communication lines, consciousness, and culture; the belief that a state’s size and resources can determine its strength; and the belief that states are in continual competition and that larger states seek to expand to consolidate their power (p. 7).

Spaces are not limited to geographical boundaries in the physical sense. Toal and Agnew (2009) remind us that geography is “understood as including social and economic differences between places without necessarily ascribing these to physical differences...” (p. 455). Barker (2008) argues that the spaces that we occupy can deeply inform the construction of our identity. While being aware of the physical spaces and borders that divide people, one must also be aware of the places that exist within these marked spaces and how these spaces can take on different, politicized meanings. Silverstone (1994) makes a distinction between spaces and places suggesting that spaces become places when emotions become attached to them. Places are often located within the subtle in-between spaces found within social, personal, private and public places and perhaps all formed within the pedagogical. Massey (1994) refers to these in between

spaces as 'spaces/places' and in her work explores how spaces can produce subjects. To add further complexity, the introduction of the internet and its mass consumption in recent times, offers online spaces as a new trajectory through which identities become informed. Summarized quite adequately by Longhurst (2009), "'doing' geography means 'doing' subjectivity" (p. 283).

Chavez (2010) describes the political nature of space stating "personal relationships between people, political and historical relationships between affiliated groups, and even economic relationships, between nation-states are kinds of relationships that constitute space" (p. 4). Allen et al. (2002) explore how the space of 'class' difference influences group identities of those who are constructed as 'middle class' and 'working class'. Gender also plays a role as the nuances of difference between men and women in the same social spaces inform their identities. Constructions of race and ethnicity contribute to how mobile individuals can be in social places, leaving some groups of people immobile depending on the space they are in. These are "spaces of exclusion" where those who do not share the same grid as the majority are marginalized and pit against the so-called norms of the society they reside in (ibid, p. 99). These constructs demonstrate how the politics that reside within spaces can transform a space into place and vice versa and. For example, reference to some countries as 'Third World' "generate particular understandings of places, communities and accompanying identities" (Dodds, 2007, p. 22). This is in part because of the way physical geographies are represented in popular culture. Also known as 'popular geopolitics' (Ditmer & Dodds, 2008), representations of geographical regions of the world influence the way the individuals act and interacts with those who occupy or are linked to those particular spaces.

The geo/politics of space tie in all the notions brought forth earlier in the study's theoretical framework. Geo/politics encompass how bodies are performed in different spaces and

how meaning is made from a cultural studies perspective. It explores how pedagogy enters spaces outside of institutional practices. It addresses the in-between spaces of the physical borders that divide us.

Expanding on the politics of space, it is necessary to include the historical role of the veil in the West. The way the veil has been represented is a product of what Said (1978) calls orientalism. In this context, the term East and West are used in specific ways. Said explores the East and West not only as geographical regions, but also as binary opposites where East is represented as barbaric and savage while the West is represented as progressive and liberal. He suggests that the meaning behind representing the East and West as dichotomies has a political agenda, stating:

My whole point about this system is not that it is a misrepresentation of some Oriental essence — in which I do not for a moment believe — but that it operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting" (Said, 1978, p. 273).

The veil as it is associated with the East, is signified as the ‘other’ in the West. It is represented as a piece of clothing that illustrates the oppressive nature of Muslim women.

Conclusion

The above theoretical constructs and concepts are critical to examining the veil. It seems that the act of veiling contradicts norms that are valued in the West. How then does a veiled woman perform identity and negotiate her veil while she covers all those parts of her body that are valued by mainstream society? It calls for the questioning of the way meaning is made in society. As Hall (1997) emphasizes “things don’t *mean*: we *construct* meaning” (p.25, emphasis

in original). It also recognizes that there is a growing phenomenon of women choosing to veil in the West. What are these women saying?

Chapter 4

Research Design And Methodology

Creswell (1998) defines research design as “the entire process of research from conceptualizing a problem to writing the narrative” (p. 2). The birth of this project has already been narrated. The purpose of this chapter is to give a detailed description of the methodological steps that followed. I start with discussing the type of research design I used, followed by my philosophical worldview. Next, I describe how participants were recruited and my rationale for the presentation of the data. I review the ethical procedures that were followed and how data was collected and analyzed in various stages. I close the chapter with positioning myself as a researcher within the project and discuss some of the limitations and potential contributions of the study.

Qualitative Research

I use Creswell’s (2009) definition of qualitative research as my guideline. He notes that qualitative research “is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Johnson and Christensen (2004) simplify this definition further as they note that qualitative research relies “primarily on a collection of qualitative data (nonnumerical data such as words and pictures)” (p. 359). The later definition may suggest that qualitative data is in some ways uncomplicated and perhaps even an insignificant method in social science research. This would explain why quantitative research dominated the field for many years, taking credit for being numerical and precise. Although both approaches have merit, Berg (2007) argues that in fact qualitative data “requires greater clarity of goals during design stages” (p. 2) and furthers that there are stories and experiences that can only

be captured by “study[ing] things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). The meaning making process is of the utmost importance in this context as I strive to articulate the meanings my participants give to the veil and the role it plays in their lives as Canadian Muslim women. Therefore, using purely qualitative methods were essential to this project.

Philosophical Worldview - Advocacy and Participatory Research

Unfolding from a social constructivist paradigm, advocacy and participatory perspectives prominently emerged during the late 1970s to early 1980s¹³. Focusing on four main perspectives: political, empowerment, issue oriented and collaborative, this stance aims for an action agenda, a crucial component that was lacking from constructivism. Social justice issues are not only addressed but collaboratively advocated for under the umbrella of advocacy and participatory perspectives. Included under this umbrella term are perspectives such as Action Research (Elliot, 1991), Participatory Research (Rosenberg, 1999), Reflective Practice-Based Research (McDonald, 1992), and Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Kekale & Pirttila, 2006). All these methods focus on advocacy in some form.

Advocacy and participatory research was greatly influenced by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) who, in his revolutionary work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, critiqued the banking relationship between teacher and student. He proposed a new model that would make students co-creators of knowledge, writing: “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry human

¹³ Advocacy and participatory perspectives were first introduced as a methodology during the 1950s (Corey, 1953; Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993; Lewin, 1946) but gained recognition and popularity during the ‘70s onwards.

beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (1970, p. 46). Researchers in education pioneering in advocacy and participatory perspectives looked to Freire’s model to seek new ways of knowing and presenting knowledge. For some researchers a new paradigm was needed because “the postpositivists impose structural laws and theories that do not fit marginalized individuals or groups and the constructivists do not go far enough in advocating for actions to help individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). Former approaches did not go far enough in advocating for an action agenda that addressed issues such as oppression and inequality, at least not in meaningful ways that gave participants agency. Advocacy and participatory perspectives empowered participants by sharing the research space and co-creating knowledge with them as co-researchers.

There seems to be consensus that no two advocacy and participatory research projects are alike as “the activities, methods, participants, objectives, and collection techniques are all particular to the context in which the project takes place.” (McIntyre, 2008; see also: Berg, 2007; Creswell, 2009; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). Nonetheless, I draw from the listed sources some key features of advocacy and participatory perspectives. The process begins with questioning a social issue that is meaningful to the group involved. In the case of this study, my experiences with veiling provoked the investigation and I sought participants who were intrigued by similar issues and wanted to explore them alongside with me. I worked collaboratively with participants, “not outside as an objective observer or external consultant” (Berg, 2007, p. 230).

This leads to one of the most important aspects of advocacy and participatory research: participants are invited to be *active* participants. In this particular context McTaggart (1997) notes that participation holds specific value and differs from mere involvement. Participation gives individuals a greater sense of ownership of the research process and the final project.

Involvement limits participation to activities such as answering questions that have been created by the principal investigator alone followed by an analysis that gives participants minimal voice.

While I created the primary research questions, the participants of the study contributed significantly to the secondary questions that ultimately drove the focus groups. Secondary questions were drafted after the initial one on one interviews. Participants were asked to contribute questions and raise issues they felt were of particular importance to their story and for readers. Furthermore, while the interview protocol guided the one on one interviews and the focus groups, the questions were open ended. Throughout the data generation process, participants were encouraged to include questions they felt would be meaningful to the study.

Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) note that advocacy and participatory perspectives should be recursive or dialectic with the focus being on facilitating change; however they also note that the sole purpose is not necessarily to create a physical change; it is just as meaningful for participants to “have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution” over the course of the project (p. 21). Participants in the study were given an opportunity to collaboratively critically examine the constraints of powerful institutions such as the media and formal education. This process led to emancipation in some capacity allowing participants to confront, if only on an internal level, the unjust nature of structures in society (Creswell, 2009). The overall focus of advocacy and participatory research is to “uncover” issues that will inform a group of people and to “*enlighten* and *empower* the average person in the group” (Berg, 2007, p. 224, emphasis in original). By engaging with one another and reflecting on their own narratives, participants shared that the data collection process gave them the ability to articulate in new ways why they veiled the way they did.

Methodologically speaking, there is a very thin line that separates advocacy and

participatory perspectives as an epistemology and as a methodology. Trochim (2006) reminds us that the two are “intimately related” because the perspective calls for an action agenda (p. 1). To live this worldview means to put it into practice. There is no one way to implement advocacy and participatory research and it is this very quality that attracts me to such a perspective. The issues affecting our world are so vast that there cannot only be one way to address them. We know the world through our experiences and each holds her own truth as to how the world works. One of the most important ways to learn about the world around us especially when dealing in the area of inequality is to engage with those closest to the issue in question. What can we learn from the individuals who live and are affected by harsh realities on a daily basis? How do they make meaning of the world around them? Heron and Reason (1997) articulate the necessity of such paradigms as one that:

allows us as human persons to know that we are part of the whole, rather than separated as mind over and against matter, or placed here in the relatively separate creation of a transcendent god. It allows us to join with fellow humans in collaborative forms of inquiry. It places us back in relation with the living world... (pp. 274-275).

In an effort to understand the experiences of woman who participated in the study, a group of people who can be described as marginalized in Western society, an advocacy and participatory approach was the most necessary way to examine the issue at hand. By collaborating with other Muslim women who veil I hope to create a more thorough understanding of their lived experiences.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited from three post-secondary institutions located within Ottawa. My first method of recruitment was through the use of informational posters that were displayed

throughout the three campuses. The requirements were simple, I was seeking Muslim women in university or college who veiled in some form and self-identified as fashionable. I did not define fashionable, it was open to interpretation to each interested individual (Appendix A). I also approached personally women who I thought would be good candidates for the study. This included bias on my part as I approached veiled women who I believe dress fashionably and break stereotypes about Muslim women. Purposeful sampling was necessary for a study such as this because it would “provide an in-depth understanding of the culture that [was] being studied” (McMillan, 2004, p. 262).

Initially five potential participants were recruited. Four contacted me via e-mail and one I personally approached on campus and invited to participate. I sent each potential participant an e-mail introducing myself and attached an informational sheet about the study (Appendix B). I also attached a copy of the consent form so they could review what participation in the study entailed. I requested they go over the details of the study and if they were still interested to reply back and we would set up a meeting for our first interview. All five participants replied showing interest in participating and subsequent meetings were set up. After the initial one on one interview, only four participants remained. The woman I had personally approached could no longer commit to the significant amount of time involved and therefore after our first interview chose to withdraw from the study. This data is not included in the findings.

The data I collected from the first set of individual interviews along with two focus group sessions, the collaborative transcript analysis and the photo-voice journals are extremely rich. Additionally, I also had personal field notes and ongoing correspondence via Facebook and e-mail with participants. I was confident that the data I collected would allow me to give detailed descriptions of each participant and give readers a glimpse into the everyday life of the four

women that were part of the study. While the views of these participants may not be representative of a large population of veiled women, the participants involved are the ones believed to be “most informative” for the purpose of this study (MacMillan, 2004, p. 262).

Research Approach – In-depth Multiple Case Studies

Each participant has her own individual case study in the thesis. Case studies involve “systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how the subject operates or functions” (Berg, 2007, p. 283). Case studies are also concerned with “the specificities of the case, providing rich, detailed data” (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2002, p. 308). This approach is fitting as I collected a significant amount of rich data to provide an in-depth characterization of each participant. Dedicating individual cases to each participant will hopefully help readers develop a connection with each woman and gain a more personal understanding of the veil as she experiences it. Most importantly, individual case studies provide participants with a space to claim as their own. It gives the women a sense of ownership and validation of their narratives.

There are four case studies in total, which according to Stake (2006) is a suitable number to draw conclusions from. Each case study begins with a description of my first meeting with the participants such as where we met, interesting first impressions I had, as well as what the participant was wearing as it is relevant to the study. I relied on detailed field notes I kept through the data collection process to recall these stories as accurately as possible and document my own reflexivity. The case studies do not claim to be representative of all veiled women, rather the focus is on “particularization, not generalization” (Stake, 2006, p. 8); however, I do hope that the findings will be transferrable to similar studies.

Research Ethics Protocol

Prior to any data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Ottawa's Office of Research and Ethics Integrity. Measures were carefully taken to ensure that participants would not experience any discomfort throughout the data collection process nor would their identity be revealed to anyone outside the study. All photographs, transcripts and images that are included in the thesis have been approved by participants and their names have been replaced with pseudonyms. If participants felt at any point their identity was at risk this information was withdrawn from the thesis. Participants also had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any negative consequences. All participants signed consent forms outlining in length the details of the study including time commitments such as how often and approximately how long participants would need to meet with me individually and as part of a focus group. They were also told in advance the number of photovoice journals I was requesting and the length of time participants would need to stay in touch with me in order to collaborate for the initial stages of data analysis. I clearly indicated how participants could contact me or my thesis supervisor should any questions or concerns arise. Additionally, participants were given a list of resources should they require any outside support as a result of participation in the study.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected over the course of eight months in three main ways. First, a one on one face-to-face interview with each participant was conducted. Then two focus groups were held to allow participants to meet each other and discuss the topics in question together allowing for further insight. New questions and issues emerged from these discussions. Finally,

participants were asked to keep a photovoice journal over the course of the data collection period. This gave them ample time to reflect and write about issues that were important to them as veiled women. The collaborative data analysis process produced additional data that have been included in the findings of the study. In what follows, is a detailed description of how data was collected.

Face-to-Face Interviews

Two face to face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant using “open-ended, evolving, and nondirectional” questions (Creswell, 1998, p. 99) using a digital voice recorder. The first meeting gave me the opportunity to meet each participant individually and for us to build an initial comfort level with one another. We met in locations that were familiar to and convenient for the woman. For three of the women this meant a private room on the campus which they attended. One of the participants asked me to meet her in her home. These first meetings gave me an opportunity to go over in detail again what I needed from each participant throughout the research process. Advocacy and participatory research require a great amount of commitment from participants and I wanted to ensure each participant knew what to expect. Their participation would not end after data collection. I would need these women to be actively involved in every step of the study until submission. After participants agreed to this, the first interview included questions about why the women chose to veil, how they veiled, what veiling meant to them and their overall daily experiences as Muslim women who veil in Canada. These interviews lasted approximately one and a half to two hours each.

The second interview occurred after the rest of the data was collected. These interviews were not all face-to-face. Some of them occurred through a series of e-mails and private Facebook messages, as some of the women had relocated to other cities by this time. These

interviews gave the women a chance to reflect back on the previous months of data collection as well as share any lingering thoughts about the issue at hand. It was interesting to hear how some of their views had come to change over the course of the year. The participants of the study stayed in touch with me up until the final draft of this thesis, in fact, some of us are still in contact. Every word I have written and every picture I have included has been approved by them.

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held over the course of four months. This gave participants the opportunity to collaborate, share and reflect on their experiences together. Each session lasted approximately 3 hours, though this never seemed like enough time. These were powerful sessions and much was accomplished. I started each session by reviewing the etiquettes of a focus group. Participants were encouraged to be open and honest in their discussions and respectful of one another's opinions. They were also reminded to maintain each other's anonymity outside the focus group even though they chose to openly identify themselves to one another.

During the first focus group I asked the women to define 'veiling' and 'fashion' and share their definitions with one another. Although I had asked each of them to do this during our one on one interviews, it was useful to have them write down their definitions during the focus group sessions too. Not only was this helpful during our discussions to know how the other women defined these terms, it was also a way to see if their definitions were consistent with the ones they provided during our one on one interviews. The rest of the focus groups were structured around a series of questions the women had contributed earlier during our initial interviews as well as issues they collaboratively agreed would be meaningful to the study. I also organized a series of activities that included examining images that were relevant to the study.

These images were either of women veiling in provocative, fashionable or stereotypical ways, or, of women who dominated runways and magazine covers in North America. Over the course of two focus groups there were eight activities in total that included 21 images that were examined as a group. There were also focus group protocol questions which were similar to the interview questions such as asking the women what it meant to veil; however as the women discussed the images, the answers to these questions came up throughout the discussions as they shared their stories. Focus group protocol questions were quite useful in steering the conversation back to relevant topics when we would lose direction as a group. I asked the women for feedback and encouraged them to share personal experiences that related to the images if applicable. The images used were from different sources, primarily popular culture such as magazine covers, television shows and news media.

Focus group sessions elicited a significant amount of data. Everyone had an opinion and it was often different from their fellow participants. We respectfully disagreed with one another many times and with each disagreement got to know one another a little better. Participants shared personal stories about their experiences as women who veiled. Some stories were funny and we all laughed together while others were emotional, at times disturbing. I watched as the women nodded their head in support of one another. It was clear that they related on many issues as well.

The women also used this time to share tips with each other. I learned some new things as well (like how to turn an old earring into a headscarf pin!). It was truly fascinating. Thirty minutes would pass and I would not have to say a single word because the women were engaged in dialogue about why they chose to veil or stories about amusing comments they received from people about their veils and how they responded to such feedback. They also shared all the

positive comments they received which I believe is a narrative seldom shared in literature.

The second focus group also included an activity. I gathered the latest trends of 2011 from popular clothing websites such as H&M and Marc Jacobs. These were both big names the participants had mentioned in their one on one interviews with me. I put together several pages of images that included clothing pieces such as tops, bottoms, dresses and skirts. I also included accessories like belts, shoes, jewelry and scarves. Participants were then asked to work independently and create three outfits to share with one another and the readers. They were asked to put together creative collages displaying daywear/professional wear, casual wear and all-girl party wear. The outfits had to be reflective of their style as veiled women. They were asked to include personal side notes describing each outfit. This exercise had significance for many reasons: first, it allowed the participants to interact with the reader as the fashion collages allows their personalities to shine through. I hope this fosters a connection between participant and reader. Secondly, it also gave the women a sense of ownership over their contributions to the final thesis. Images from this activity have been included in the respective case-studies. Next, as the women and I discussed, this exercise illustrates how veiling did not mean covering in one way. Each woman shares in her own unique way how her veil can be fashioned to reflect her individual identity. Finally, it was one of the only ways we could share with readers a glimpse of the type of clothing the women wear at all-girl parties. We agreed this was an important side to share in our effort to demystify the veil. Giving readers access to this information would hopefully clarify one of the most common questions the women (including myself) were often asked: Do we *always* have to veil?

It was fun to watch as the women put their outfits together. They talked excitedly and laughed as they worked on their pieces. Sometimes they would hold up a picture and ask me

where I got the image from because they wanted to buy it and sometimes they would point out the items they already owned. I remember thinking several times that these women were just like so many other girls their age but seldom seen this way. By the end of the second focus group all the women had exchanged numbers and had added each other on various social networking sites. These focus group sessions appeared to be therapeutic as they gave participants a forum to share their experiences; *halal* chicken soup for the soul.

Photovoice Journals

Each participant was also asked to keep a photovoice journal. This approach allows participants to use photography “to raise awareness and make change” through images that capture “aspects of their communities, and of their daily lives, from their own perspectives” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 22). In recent years, photovoice has gained popularity in action research as it allows “access to the world from the view-point of individuals who have not traditionally held control over the means of imaging the world” (Berg, 2007, p. 233). This activity would give the women a chance to control the images people saw of veiled woman. I asked the women to use their personal cameras to take pictures that were meaningful to them and reflected who they were as Canadian Muslim women who veiled. This gave them the opportunity to share the influences in their life they believed played a role in shaping their identity as Muslim women. Pictures ranged from how they fashioned their headscarf to the influences that affected how they veiled. These photos were accompanied by written journal entries whereby participants articulated what each image meant to them “thus providing outsiders with insiders’ knowledge about aspects of their communities that they take great pride in, and, as important, have great concerns about” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 22).

Each participant was asked to submit a minimum of five entries each, spread out over an

eight month time frame. I gave the women little direction as to what kind of entries they were to submit. The only instructions I gave them at the beginning of the activity were “*share your experiences as a hijabi fashionista through photographs. What does veiling mean to you?*” Their entries wowed me. I had hoped their entries would surprise those individuals who knew very little about the veil and perhaps make people re-think what the veil ‘is/was’ as depicted through the eyes of the media; I was not prepared that their entries would surprise *me* and cause me to re-think and re-examine my own perceptions of the veil.

The focus of all three data collection methods was to capture as much of the women’s voices and descriptive text about their experiences as possible. Experience is central when using a cultural studies framework as Pickering (2008) notes:

While the experience is common to both researcher and researched, the specific experiences we have are always in some degree different and individual to us, as are the ways we derive meaning and significance from experience or draw on our experience to contest cultural definitions put upon experience, particularly by those in positions of power, authority and control (pp. 17-18).

He further notes that experiences are “always to be interrogated...approached carefully and critically because it is not simply equivalent to what happens to us. Experience is just as much about what we make out of what happens to us, and for many, that is where its value really lies” (ibid, p. 19). Therefore, making meaning of the lived experiences of each participant was vital to the analysis process of the thesis.

Data Analysis

This section outlines the three stages data was analyzed in. The first two stages were analyzed in collaboration with participants. The third stage was analyzed independently by me.

The first stage is the transcript analysis. This includes the one-on-one interview transcripts, the focus group transcripts and the photovoice journal entries. I describe how transcripts were analyzed and coded to produce four over-arching themes that frame the case studies.

The second stage of analysis is a semiotic analysis of a collection of images. This analysis was structured around the focus group activities mentioned earlier. It documents the women's discussions around the images explored and their views on various topics that informed their identities as women who veil.

The third and final stage of analysis was conducted independently. I unpack the first two stages of analysis to create a meta-analysis that I organize into three significant themes. This stage of analysis also serves as a discussion of the study and the surrounding discourse. Although the third stage of analysis was conducted independently, all themes produced have been verified and approved by participants.

Stage One: Transcript Analysis

Analysis began with sending each participant a copy of her individual interview transcript. They were asked to read it and make any necessary changes whether it was to add or make alterations to any of the dialogue. This gave participants an opportunity to review how their responses looked on paper and clarify in writing anything that did not translate from audio to text. I spent approximately 5 months reading through all the transcripts in collaboration with participants. I worked with one participant at a time. I first read our interview transcript followed by e-mailing her a copy of it with my comments and follow-up questions. The participant would respond to all my comments and e-mail me a copy back with any amendments. This would go on until we were both content with the final product, in one case taking up to eleven exchanges. The final transcripts were each bombarded with a side dialogue between the participant and myself.

These comments included afterthoughts or additions. They were an ongoing conversation about the complex issue we were exploring.

Focus groups were also transcribed and sent to all participants. Again participants were given the opportunity to read through the transcripts and make any necessary changes. If I had any questions or clarifications about something said during a focus group by a particular participant I contacted her privately. Sometimes two participants were contacted together if clarification was needed over interactions they had with each other during a focus group session. This process was surprisingly less time consuming than the one on one interview transcripts.

Images from photovoice journals have been included in the case studies along with accompanied analysis conducted by participants and myself. These entries also serve as an opportunity to share raw data with the reader. The photographs provide incredible glimpses into the lives of the women interviewed.

After the women and I were content with the transcripts, participants were asked to read and re-read their individual transcripts as well as focus group transcripts several times and make note of reoccurring themes and patterns. I did the same. I reminded participants to keep the reader in mind since one of the aims of the study is to help readers understand or ‘know’ the veil in new ways. Also, the women were instructed to focus their themes around what they wanted to share about their experiences. Therefore, it was important that participants include data that would contribute to this goal. Because each woman was also asked to contribute her own questions during the interview stage, some issues and themes are unique to each participant. Initially we came up with several themes between the five of us. I then took a closer look at the themes and clustered together similar topics. This allowed me to narrow the themes down into four major themes with several sub-themes. In this way, I was able to include *all* the topics that

were suggested by the women. For example, themes such as how they performed femininity and beauty came up repeatedly so they were included as sub-themes of the larger theme of representation and the body. Major themes also allow for the inclusion of topics that are unique to each woman. For example, not all participants were comfortable openly discussing their views on members of the opposite sex. Two participants consciously chose not to share personal information on the topic while the other two participants were quite open about it. Thus, these topics are discussed independently under the existing themes as they are relevant to the participants.

I assigned each theme a colour and went through all the transcripts and photovoice journal entries and colour coded them accordingly. The women were then sent their newly colour coded transcripts and verified my organization of them. Once the women approved of the final themes, I worked independently with them to shape their case studies. This was done primarily over e-mail and Facebook. While I narrate their stories through the data collected, the women provided me with additional quotes and insights upon reading the initial drafts of their case studies. Participants all approved of their final case study drafts and the pictures used within each one. I emailed them separately prior to submitting the first draft of this thesis to request they read over their case studies one more time. Several months had passed between putting the case studies together and completing the first draft and I wanted to ensure the women were still comfortable sharing their stories so candidly. All four of the participants replied that they were pleased with the way the case studies had taken shape and were looking forward to reading the final thesis. I received e-mails from participants with comments such as “Wow! I love it!”; “We did an amazing job painting the ‘mod’ *hijabi* experience.”; “I’m going to miss hanging out with you guys!” My favourite comment was: “It was really nice getting to know you and the other

girls through this. Our discussions have inspired me to continue to find new ways of being a positive role model in the community.” Participants also asked me to keep them informed of future publications that would result from the thesis as they are curious to track how their perceptions may or may not change over time. The following provides a brief overview of how case studies are shaped by themes and subthemes.

Identity, Representation and the Body

This theme includes issues and stories that affected the identity formation of the women in question with particular attention to their identity as Muslim women who veil in Canada. It includes any discussions that were had about perceived beauty standards and personal beauty ideals the women had. Also included under this theme are discussions around the constructs of femininity and sexuality and how participants negotiated these concepts while veiling.

‘Being’ Muslim

This theme shares an overall essence of what it is like to ‘be’ *hijabi* in Canada as described by the woman. They share what veiling means to them and what it means to be a fashionable *hijabi*. They discussed how their veiling styles have evolved since they began veiling and they shared their fashion and popular culture inspirations. They also share the daily struggles they face veiling in Canada and how this has implications for how they veil in different spaces. ‘Being’ Muslim also illustrates the complex ways in which the women enact ‘being’ Muslim as opposed to ‘becoming’ which is most prevalent in Anna’s case study. ‘Being Muslim’ for the women means subscribing to the faith of Islam and in doing so, having their own interpretations of the actions and values one should encompass as a ‘Muslim’. ‘Becoming’ Muslim in the case of one of the participants means subscribing to the faith of Islam through actively changing her status, be it only a subconscious shift, from Christianity. After ‘becoming Muslim’ through an

official declaration of faith, Anna can now ‘be’ Muslim.

Being ‘More’ Muslim

This theme explores some of the politics that exist amongst veiled women. Participants discuss what they believe is and is not *hijab*. They discuss how veiling can misleadingly be associated with piety and modesty. They also discuss the concept of modesty in Islam within a Canadian context and how they negotiate the two.

Acting *Hijabi*

The closing theme of each case study explores the perceptions of participants. They discuss the perceptions they feel Muslims and non-Muslims have about veiling. They also share how their own perceptions of veiling affect their day to day interactions with others and how they perform their veils. Participants share their hopes for the future and the role they want to play as Canadian Muslims.

Stage Two: A Semiotic Reading

This stage of analysis documents the discussions and debates participants had about the various images explored over the two focus groups. There were twenty-one images explored over eight focus group activities. Most of the images were grouped together in pairs or threes. The images used were taken from popular culture sources such as well-known magazines, celebrities and brands. The images are shared and analyzed as they were discussed during the focus group sessions. The images are divided into three main groups. The first is Veiling and the Media. These are images that exemplify the types of images shown of veiled Muslim women in the media such as the news. The second is The (ab)Norms of Veiling. These are images that dominate mainstream television, music videos and magazine covers and how they compare to

images of Muslim women who veil in various ways. The final group of images are explored under the heading Defining the Veil. These are images of Muslim women who veil in various different ways, challenging the participants' views on what it means to veil. All the images are not included in this section, rather, in collaboration with the women, we chose the images that elicited the most discussion in our focus group as well as the images we felt best illustrated the topics at hand.

Stage Three: Stitching Together the Pieces

In this section I discuss the previous two chapters of analysis. I conduct a meta-analysis to build theory while simultaneously making connections to how the issues raised address the research questions. In order to do this, I re-read the women's transcripts, completed case-studies and semiotic analysis to focus on the complex issues as they related back to my conceptual framework. How did the women making meaning of their veils, what informed their perceptions of the veil and what political strategies were they using to vogue their veils? I organized these issues into four categories. They are: 1) Voguing the Veil as Agency/Advocacy 2) Veiling and the Geo/Politics of Space 3) Fashioning the Veil as a Performance and 4) Voguing the Veil as Subculture. Upon the completion of my initial draft of this section, I e-mailed participants a copy and asked them to read over and comment on this chapter. While they were at times unfamiliar with the terms and concepts being referred to, they all responded with positive feedback.

Researcher positionality

I recognize my role in this project to be quite fluid. I have both insider and outsider positionality. I was an insider because like the participants, I am also a Muslim woman who veils; this had both positive and negative implications. Participants recognized me as someone from inside the community and therefore putting at risk their anonymity in the study. At the

same time, I had privileged access because participants felt comfortable sharing their personal lives with me because they felt I could relate to some of the struggles they faced, and I often could.

I am also an outsider because I am a researcher requesting access into the private lives of individuals. One of the reservations I brought to the study was that I would in some way betray the women who agreed to partake in the study. As a Muslim woman I was afraid I would unintentionally damage the reputation of the women or perhaps even worse, tarnish the name of *all* Muslim women. Collaborating with the women helped me overcome these fears because the women were all enthusiastic about sharing their stories. I realize how blessed I am to have had the opportunity to work with this group of women. Any insecurity any of us may have struggled with was outweighed by our desire to facilitate change.

Limitations

One of the limitations of the study is the inability to define ‘fashionable’. Participants who self-identified as being fashionable may not be perceived as such by others. Similarly, participants that I perceive as breaking stereotypes, others may not. The focus therefore is more so on how the participants themselves make meaning out of the term ‘fashion’ and how they articulate and embody such constructs.

Another limitation is the small number of participants. One way I hope I have compensated for this is through thoroughness and detail. Participants sharing their experiences have done so through different mediums such as verbal narratives and photography. I share much of their stories as verbatim as possible using the raw data of their own voices. It is during this process that the emancipatory aspect of advocacy and participatory will be most prominent. Participants have shared their voices without any filters. This has undoubtedly given birth to new

truths, epistemologies and the “democratization of knowledge production and use” (Berg, 2007, p. 224). Therefore, while the findings may not be (nor should they be) generalized, the ideologies shared will provide explicit insight into these specific cases.

Additionally, some of the images provided by the women in their photovoice journals have been cropped to protect the women’s identities. There was no way to avoid this. It has taken away from some of the beauty of the images and has left the images without features that give the women the recognition they deserve, such as their eyes through which they experience the world and their mouths through which they share their voices. Therefore, these images have deeply affected me as I envisioned this thesis to be a space where the women could share their voices and gain ownership of their identities as Muslim women. Although it has not limited the findings of the study in any way, it has in some ways represented the women in the same restrictive ways the media continues to depict them.

Finally, all of the women who participated in the study have access to a university education which assumes that they belong to a particular socio-economic status. This may suggest that ‘voguing’ the veil is a privilege granted to those who can afford to do so and that perhaps the study would present different findings if participants came from less-privileged backgrounds.

Lastly, my own bias as a veiled woman with my own experiences and opinions will affect the study. While I will engaged in self-reflexivity along with participants, I have still strongly influence the study.

Potential Pedagogical Contributions

I would like to consider education as going beyond the realms of ‘schooling’, rather, education as engaging and learning from one another; education as the recognition of the various

‘truths’ of individuals. In this sense, examining the veil is deeply educational as it opens up a space to those previously silenced to re-present themselves. In this sense, voicing the veil is a form of public pedagogy (Giroux, 2004).

For educators and school administrators, this has implications inside the school as well. As more awareness and understanding is created about the veil, positive and perhaps more comfortable relationships can be established between those who veil and those who have previously (mis)understood it. It also highlights the need for a renewed focus on media literacy in schools and an overall critical understanding of social and cultural literacy. People must challenge the texts they see around them and question the institutions in place that normalize particular ideologies.

I also believe this study has the potential to make a significant contribution to the current literature available about Muslims and veiling. The current research on Muslim women is mostly limited to a religious context. There is minimal research in a Canadian context that examines how veiled women experience their bodies in a time and space where their bodies are very much contested. It will inevitably expand in new and complex ways how veiling is understood. I hope that the findings of the thesis will contribute to the beginning of a new discourse that may potentially change how the veil is currently perceived. Ultimately, what I hope this achieves is the *possibility* of awakening a new understanding of the veil, or as Al-Saji (2010) notes, to “insert hesitation” into the current perception of the veil (p. 893).

Chapter 5

Findings: In-Depth Individual Case Studies

The following chapter is broken into four parts. Each part presents an in depth case study of one of the four participants. As mentioned earlier, the case studies are organized around four main themes: 1) Identity, Representation and the Body, 2) ‘Being’ Muslim, 3) Being ‘More’ Muslim and 4) Acting *Hijabi*. Each individual case study includes data from the one on one interviews, focus groups, photovoice journals and focus group activities. Each case study begins with the participant’s name and her self-proclaimed style. This is followed by an introduction based on my field notes. The case studies, where possible, are written in present tense to convey the living narrative of each participant. Meaningful quotations from the participants and pictures from their photovoice journals are included. Each case study is followed by a synthesis that highlights the complexities within each particular case and closes with the women’s individual focus group fashion collage. The issues brought forth are often unique to the participants. Common themes are contextualized in the final chapter.

Case Study 1: Mina the “Avant Garde” *Hijabi*

“Nobody is going to wear the hijab and say, ‘oh, I’ve never thought about taking it off, like seriously, no, it’s an obstacle everyday”

- Mina



Figure 5

I meet with Mina for her interview in her home on a rainy day. She greets me at the door wearing an animal print Moroccan maxi gown with her hair pulled up into a bun, her golden brown curls falling around her face. She is not covering her hair because only she and I are at home. I am seven months pregnant and as soon as she opens the door she pulls me in out of the rain and gives me a warm hug. This is only the second time I have met her, but already it feels like we have known each other a lifetime. She makes me a homemade herbal tea and we begin talking.

Mina is in her last year of university, completing her undergraduate degree at the time of our interview. Born in the Middle East, Mina moved to Canada when she was eleven years old. Her parents still live in the Middle East and she visits them often. She explains that she is from a ‘liberal’ family where few women actually wear a headscarf. She began wearing a headscarf at a young age but took it off a few times before putting it on again for good at the age of 17. Initially it was the women she saw around her including her friends and her classmates who inspired her to put a headscarf on; now, she says, “I do it to make God happy.” An extremely talented photographer and makeup artist on the side, Mina describes her style as “simply avant garde with a vintage edge.” Her personal style pushes the boundaries of what she considers is the ‘norm’ for veiling. Her love for unique historical pieces adds an additional eccentricity to her style, truly making her stand out from everyone.

Identity, Representation and the Body

When talking about identity, Mina emphasizes that she recognizes herself as a “Muslim Canadian...or Canadian Muslim, the two go side by side.” For her, her ethnicity comes after her identity as a Canadian Muslim. Wearing a headscarf identifies Mina as a Muslim and this is important to her although she admits she often receives “weird” questions about her headscarf.

“People think we wear it when we sleep and when we shower,” she laughs, “I wasn’t born with it you know?” Mina believes that these questions are a reflection of some people’s lack of knowledge about the veil and Islam in general. She states, “It would be nice to have people more educated about the veil so they would know why people practice it.” She feels her unique ways of veiling, which include opting for a stylish toque instead of a headscarf (Figure 6) and twisting together her headscarf to form a braid (Figure 5), play an important role in addressing this problem. Using the style of her veil to reflect her personality, which she describes as “fun and creative”, often triggers curiosity in non-Muslims. According to Mina, this encourages non-Muslims to ask questions about her style of veiling, giving her an opportunity to educate others about why Muslim women veil. She also feels her creative style is an indication to others that she is open to discussion about her personal beliefs. “People don’t feel intimidated to ask me questions about Islam” she explains, in contrast “when other girls are more conservative, people get scared that they can’t talk to them.” Mina explains that the word ‘conservative’ refers to veiled women who wear veils like the *abaya* and *nikab*. In her opinion, these uniform, typically black veils give non-Muslims the impression that all Muslim women are expected to veil and to behave in a particular way. Veiling in a colorful and “unconventional way” as Mina describes it, not only allows for creative freedom, but more importantly, opens up a space for dialogue. Mina states that her style also gives inspiration to other Muslim women who want to veil but are perhaps hesitant to because of perceived fashion restrictions. She shares that veiling in different ways “creates options for people who don’t want to wear it the other way...so it’s really important to be



Figure 6: Being creative: Mina using a toque as a makeshift headscarf

fashionable” she continues, “because it serves a greater purpose than *just* dressing stylishly.”

When Mina and I discuss the many different ways she fashions her headscarf, it is the braided headscarf mentioned earlier that catches my attention the most. I cannot help but make the connection between braiding a scarf as one would braid hair. I ask Mina what she thinks about this and she responds “Exactly! I don’t do my hair but I do my scarf just like I would do my hair!” Mina shares how in many ways her headscarf is like a hair substitute. She spends just as much time, effort and money ‘doing’ her scarf as many women spend doing their hair. This does not mean, however, that Mina pays no attention to her hair. She proudly points to her freshly done highlights. She has received comments from friends and family about why she spends time and money on a part of her body that hardly anyone sees; to this she responds: “Hello! I like to look good for myself too!” Mina emphasizes that covering her hair does not mean she does not want to look or feel beautiful when she was unveiled. She feels it is important to pamper herself like any other woman would.

Instead of using her hair, Mina uses her headscarf and the rest of her veil to enact beauty when in public. One of the ways Mina does this is through her experience as a makeup artist. Wearing makeup makes her feel beautiful and helps put her “best face forward” since when covering her hair, her face becomes an obvious focal point. She feels making an effort to look good is a “reflection of your personality” and an important component when moving around in society. Again Mina emphasizes the importance of “looking approachable” to everyone. Not only does Mina feel more confident when she wears makeup and dresses fashionably, she also feels she has positive interactions with those around her. “When you’re dressed horribly” she notes “people look at you different and treat you different, yes it’s shallow, but you dress accordingly.” I ask her how she negotiates her desire to look beautiful for others with the concept

of modesty in Islam. She responds that wanting to look beautiful is an inherent desire in every woman. Elaborating she states “when you get older, you become more feminine, so you learn about makeup; you explore your sense of style and become more independent. You become inspired by the things around you like things you see on TV.” Makeup also inspires the artist within Mina who explains that playing with colour is a passion for her. This creative energy in turn affects her wardrobe as she experiments with different styles and textures. “It’s all part of being a female” she explained “and being a female is fun so you should have fun with it!” she exclaims. She adds that she feels non-Muslims and some Muslims too, particularly those who do not veil, have the perception that veiled women are not supposed to, or perhaps not ‘allowed’ to look attractive or beautiful: “some people think that if you wear the veil it is the end of the world for style, but it’s not like that.” She partially implicates the media for this perception saying Muslim women are often portrayed in a stagnant way. She also blames the veiled women who are unwilling or hesitant to update their veil styles to reflect a personal flare.

Although Mina shares that she feels more beautiful without her full veil on, it was for this very reason she wears the veil: “Your hair is an attractive piece, that’s why you’re wearing a veil, but that doesn’t mean you’re ugly.” This statement speaks to Mina’s religious beliefs and her high level of confidence, the latter, according to Mina, a critical characteristic of every *hijabi* fashionista. According to Mina, confidence is crucial since “Muslim women who veil are



Figure 7: Mina being Mina, doing the 'running man' dancing the night away with her veil dancing along with her.

constantly under scrutiny.” This scrutiny demands that Muslim women constantly defend their choice to veil and have the courage to speak up against those who question their right to wear it. Mina adds that in her experience, criticism comes from both Muslims and non-Muslims. Both groups have

challenged Mina's decision to veil in the past, and as a result, Mina feels that she has an obligation to be fashionable. She also advocates for other veiled women to do the same. According to Mina, dressing fashionably is a tool that proves veiling does not mean automatic segregation from societal norms or limitations when it comes to expressing one's femininity and beauty. What it takes, argues Mina, is for veiled women to be confident in themselves and in what they put on their bodies.

Linked to the ideas of beauty and femininity, I ask Mina what sexy means to her and if she thinks it is acceptable for a veiled woman to look sexy. Her first reaction is that it is a dichotomy; a Muslim woman if fully covered, should technically not look sexy. Mina's definition of sexy includes showing skin and wearing form fitted clothing that accentuates a woman's curves. It also includes showing one's hair. After some consideration, Mina said that a veiled woman could in fact look sexy, but that there was a "right way and a wrong way to look sexy." She explains that if a veiled woman is dressed stylishly and her face looks "fresh and complimented with makeup" then it is "okay" to look sexy but strictly limiting it to the face. She does not think a veiled woman can look sexy if she is covering her body "properly", "it won't be right" she stated. When I ask her to describe the difference between a sexy face and looking sexy overall, she pauses for a while before confessing she feels a bit uncomfortable with the word sexy being used at all to describe a Muslim woman who veils. "I just need to wrap my head around the whole word sexy" she says, "if someone said it to me, I would think like, oh my God, am I inappropriately dressed today?" To further complicate the issue, Mina feels there is a difference between someone saying "your hijab *pointing to her headscarf* is sexy" versus someone saying "you look sexy." By this, Mina suggests it is acceptable if the actual print of the headscarf is referred to as sexy, such as an animal print scarf or a scarf labeled with a brand

name such as Gucci or Louis Vuitton. If someone *looks* sexy, however, this refers to the body and the body shape giving off a sexual vibe, which Mina feels is inappropriate since in theory, a veiled woman should be covering up “enough” to not give this vibe. During the second focus group while on the topic of sexuality, Mina added that the concept of “sexy” in the west is intended for the wrong audience. As Mina puts it, “I wish I could dress in a certain way, not to attract the attention of a man, but for myself.” Mina feels a woman should look sexy for herself, meaning, the feeling of confidence one has when feeling sexy, as opposed to looking sexy for a man or solely for the purpose of attracting the attention of someone else. Still unsure of how she feels about the issue, Mina finds some closure stating, “at the end of the day you interpret fashion your own way. If you want to look sexy, you look sexy but in your own way and you stand out, and you shouldn’t feel less sexy than anyone who isn’t veiling.” Mina emphasizes the importance of being confident in every statement one makes whether it is verbally or expressed through the body.

‘Being’ Muslim

I ask Mina what it means to her to veil. She replies that veiling satisfies her needs on several levels. The first is that she feels it is an Islamic obligation. Secondly, she feels the veil protects her from the “wrong audience” and teaches her to dress modestly while maintaining her own sense of style. She shares that veiling is a part of her life that could fit into any lifestyle, regardless of the society she is living in: “You can make it fit your lifestyle, even if your *hijab* style changes...even if society changes, it will still work.” She explains how her style has changed over the years and how it continues to change. We discuss her beliefs about what is included under the term ‘veil’. To Mina veiling is about dressing in a “decent” way. This means

covering your body in a manner that will not attract too much “negative attention”. While at first I thought Mina was referring to sexual attention, she clarifies that she means this in more than one way. Indeed, she does not want men to look at her and judge her value as a woman based solely on certain physical attributes; however, she also re-emphasizes the importance of dressing in ways that adapt to the society one lives in. She elaborates that women who veil wearing only *abayas* and *niqabs* look “out of place” in Canadian society. While these women may be veiling in an effort to draw gazes away from their bodies, they are at the same time drawing *more* attention to themselves. “They stick out too much,” explained Mina of women who veil in conservative ways. Mina believes that “you have to kind of adapt to the society you are living in” and she relates a personal example as an illustration:

When I go to my country, an Arab country, I wear the *abaya*. My *hijab* changes so I can adapt, so I can fit in with the people there rather than stick out too much, because the point of *hijab* is not to be getting the wrong attention or getting too much attention. You want to get the right attention, so tone it down depending on where you live.

This philosophy influences how Mina veils in Canada. She dresses in ways that align with her religious beliefs as a Muslim while at the same time enable her to fit in as a member of Canadian society. According to Mina, this is one of the most beautiful aspects of the veil; it is adaptable to be part of any society at all times, never limiting her.

Mina defines fashion as “being trendy in a way that makes you unique and at the same time, fashion forward.” She shares how her own style has evolved explaining that when she first started veiling she had only one headscarf and she gave little consideration to how she looked wearing it. As the years passed, Mina’s collection of scarves grew. She increasingly became aware of ‘being’ a woman and came to believe there was an “innate femininity” that came along

with it. Mina started to see the potential her veil had as fashion accessory. She began watching fashion television and runway shows which influenced her style at the time, but now she is coming into her own, experimenting with different looks:

“If I look at it a few years back until now, it’s always changing. You

learn new styles and experiment with the scarf. It’s really nice to make your veil an expression of yourself and I like to have my creativity put on my veil so that it speaks to who I am.” Mina uses every opportunity

she can to express her creativity through her veil. Now as a photographer she extends this creativity, using her images and self-portraits as a way to show others that her veil is an integral part of her fashion sense.

When it comes to personal fashion dos and don’ts, Mina has plenty. As an artist, she believes in mixing colours together and experimenting with texture and clothing structure. She states it is her mood that guides her when choosing what to wear describing it as “my body feels it, it feels like my body is doing that on its own.” This is especially true when it comes to choosing colors. Mina does not believe in color coordinating everything, especially her headscarf. She talks at length about how she feels hair neutralizes an outfit regardless of the color but since veiled women cover their hair, they do not have the same advantages. Therefore, wearing the same color, such as green, from head(scarf) to toe would result in “looking like a green tree!” exclaims Mina who avoids such *hijabi* fashion faux-pas. Instead, Mina uses other colors to soften her overall look. She also includes makeup as an integral part of her wardrobe stating, “No look is complete without at least concealer, eyeliner and mascara.” When it comes to accessories such as jewelry, Mina believes less is more. She prefers her face be the focal point,

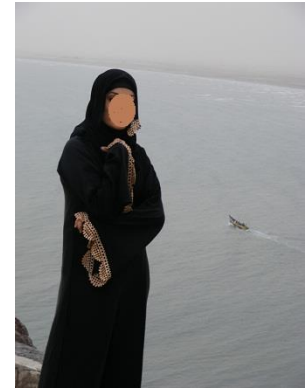


Figure 8: Mina wearing a traditional abaya on a family visit to the Middle East.

which is why she insists on using makeup to highlight her features. Mina occasionally wears earrings with her scarf but this all depends on the style she is using. Place also plays a factor as she tends to save accessories for special occasions such as weddings or a similar formal event.

When it comes to style inspiration, Mina gets hers “from all over the place – I don’t usually go with a certain style.” She is inspired by the looks she sees on the runway but she likes to give each outfit her own unique touch by mixing old pieces with new ones, her love for vintage pieces influencing her overall look. Mina emphasizes that her taste is always changing. She finds inspiration for her clothes from different historical eras such as the Victorian era with puffy sleeves and textured material, and then she looks to modern day designers to piece outfits together.

Mina often has to alter many of the styles she admires in order to make them “Muslim friendly.” One such trend is wearing mini-skirts. Mina pairs them with pants. She feels that by layering these pieces she contradicts the sexual appeal mini-skirts are meant to have. Overall, she feels that shopping in Canada during the summer season is difficult for hijabi women because clothing is often too revealing. Mina turns to online shopping alternatives, including the growing number of Muslim businesses that cater to veiled women who wish to dress modestly yet stylishly.

Mina sees the veil as more than just an object she put on her body; rather, it has the potential to carry a message. Wearing the veil with confidence not only reaffirms her faith to both herself and onlookers, it also enhances her appearance. Regardless of what she is wearing, her positive attitude plays an important role. To Mina, looking fashionable is more about confidence than the actual pieces of clothing “it’s up to *you* to make your clothes look good.”

Being 'More' Muslim

Besides discussing what Mina's personal fashion faux pas are, we also discuss what she feels is and is not hijab. Veiling for Mina is not just about covering one's body, it is about covering it in a certain way. To Mina, concealing the shape of one's figure is also important and wearing tight clothing is not an acceptable form of coverage simply because it covers one's skin. In particular, Mina feels that wearing loose fitted clothing around the chest is a priority. She admits that at times other veiled women criticize her because her headscarf style sometimes reveals her neck. However, Mina views such criticism as unjust since "some girls cover their neck but everything else is sticking out." She feels the other parts 'sticking out' are more suggestive than her showing her neck. The main thing according to Mina is "maintaining a decent style" which means displaying modesty in the way one dresses. As long as this is the intention, she explains "you can go in many directions." Intentions plays an important role according to Mina who believes dressing modestly is open to interpretation and ultimately between an individual and God.

There are particular styles that Mina feels are improper ways of veiling. By improper she explains that certain styles of veiling go against modest intentions. For example, a trend that is becoming more and more popular amongst veiled women involves using a hairpiece underneath the headscarf to give the scarf 'volume'. Mina quite simply refers to this look as "alien head." She claims it started as a status symbol for women in the Middle East but has now become a common practice amongst budding *hijabi* fashionistas everywhere. According to Mina "It's not *hijab*" When I point out that this contradicted her earlier statement about veiling with a "decent" intention in mind, Mina defends her statement using Islamic texts stating "this is Islamically wrong." Mina refers to the *hadiths* (stories from the life of the Prophet Muhammad) where

women were instructed not to create headscarf styles that resembled the hump of a camel as it suggested arrogance in one's character. It is a debate that I have heard often with no real conclusion. Other examples of "wrong *hijab*" according to Mina include wearing form fitting clothing that accentuate a woman's chest or the shape of her thighs. Mina feels a major component of veiling includes concealing one's shape. She does not feel one's shape has to be completely hidden, but concealed to such a degree that attention is not drawn to different features.

There are also veil styles that Mina thinks are 'wrong' in the fashion sense, including wearing several layers of headscarves in order to achieve a multi-color effect. Additionally, she does not like when veiled women use scarf décor such as flowers and sparkly pins. "How many hours did you spend on that?" exclaims Mina, "for me the max time I spend on my scarf is five minutes." Mina also raises the term "part time *hijabis*", an expression referring to women who wear a veil some of the time but depending on the occasion will remove it temporarily. Mina recounts her high school days sounding a little perplexed, "there were *hijabi* girls who wore *hijab* but when they went to prom they took it off so they could wear their dresses...or when they took their grad photo they took their *hijab* off because they thought the *hijab* might make them look not pretty."

You know, it's difficult. I'm sure every *hijabi* gets to the point where she thinks 'oh I wish I didn't wear it'. You know, like when it's too hot outside or when you're in a hurry to go out and you're like 'oh, I have to put a scarf on'. Every *hijabi* goes through that headache, but *hijab* is a struggle, you get rewarded for it, you get benefits, and people respect you more when you appreciate your scarf and respect it.

She adds that many women who veil hold their own preconceived images of what the veil is supposed to look like, which limits their ability to be creative when wearing one. According to Mina, if all women who veil took the time to explore their sense of style, “they would love wearing the veil!”

Mina feels many women veil for the wrong reasons noting cultural influence as a significant one, which, she feels often leads women to veil and at times behave in ways that confuse others. She feels that the primary reason a Muslim woman should veil is out of sincere dedication to God and that allowing culture to influence one’s intention behind veiling or how one chooses to veil, is in fact doing injustice to other women who veil. According to Mina, this is problematic for many reasons. The one that concerns her most living in Canada is the perception it may give to non-Muslims about the veil. Mina argues that:

non-Muslims know we are supposed to do it (veil) in a certain way, so I have had people say to me ‘aren’t you not supposed to do this’ and they will show me a Muslim woman doing something wrong...and you feel embarrassed that these women are representing you in the wrong way.

Therefore, when veiled women send out mixed messages like veiling “part time” it not only confuses non-Muslims, it also mis-educates them about the veil. This has difficult implications for Muslim women who are committed to veiling ‘full time’. One of the ways it affects women like Mina is because it sparks the “weird” questions she referred to earlier. To Mina it is clear “if you don’t want to wear the *hijab*, then don’t wear the *hijab*, it’s okay, but if you’re going to wear it, respect it.”

Mina explains that veiling styles are not a measure of modesty or religiosity in her opinion. A non-veiled woman could be more religious than a veiled woman, she just has a

different way of expressing it. As Mina explains, “I know girls who are not *hijabi* and they are beautiful people and more Muslim than girls who wear *hijab* I think.” In clarifying what being “more Muslim” meant to her and Mina explains “even though their knowledge of Islam may not be good, personality wise, character wise, they are better...more humble, not arrogant.” Therefore, ‘being’ Muslim to Mina is not just about looking Muslim but also acting Muslim, and according to her, one’s actions are a better indication of one’s faith in God than clothing.

Similarly, Mina argues that a woman in *niqab* is not necessarily more religious than a woman who wears only the headscarf, saying, “Girls who are more conventional think they are so much better than other people.” Again, Mina uses the term conventional to refer to Muslim women who veil in *abayas* and *niqabs*. Emphasizing that veiling does not automatically equal piety, Mina defends a Muslim woman’s right to wear or not wear the veil saying “Yes, it’s an obligation, but it’s also their choice. If they are still committing to their other obligations in Islam, then I mean, it’s only God that can judge them, not us.”

On the issue of Muslim women judging one another’s veils Mina claims that non-Muslims judge Muslims less than Muslims judge each other, “A non-Muslim would never judge that way. I’ve never met a non-Muslim who thinks they can tell who is more religious just by the way we are covering”. Mina admits that she can also be guilty of this, confessing, “We Muslims are more harsh on each other than non-Muslims are. We discriminate against each other a lot more.” Mina objects to the ways some Muslim women in Middle Eastern countries fashion their veils to indicate a rank in social status such as the “alien head” scarf style. Mina argues that such women use their veil style to create barriers between individuals when in religion there should be no such thing.

Acting Hijabi

I asked Mina how she feels non-Muslims feel about the veil. After a long pause, Mina replied that her first response is to think a lot of individuals are unaware why some Muslim women choose to veil. “They just think it’s a religious thing ... like we are forced to wear it by our parents and our religion.” Mina feels there is little critical thought on the part of non-Muslims about the veil. She feels Muslim women are singled out when in actuality the veil is “an international symbol” for many religions and plays an integral part in Christianity and Judaism. Mina feels that the commonly held perception by non-Muslims of Muslim women who veil is that of a solemn figure, someone who is not allowed to be “an outgoing fun person.” In contrast Mina states “They have no idea that we have our own fun. I tell people you have no idea what *hijabis* do when we get together at a party. Yes we cover up, but we also make up for it when we get together!” for “exclusive all girls’ parties” which are a common occurrence in the ‘*hijabi* world’. These parties allow Mina and her other female friends to get together and enjoy many of the social activities they do not participate in in public. Mina explains that veiled women use these parties as an opportunity to show off the short dresses and low cut tops they admire on the runway and in store windows. It also gives them an opportunity to do their hair, something that is a luxury for many veiled women who seldom get to do this in front of other people. These parties are usually social gatherings at someone’s home where Mina and her friends eat, gossip and dance the night away. She sometimes wishes people outside her circle could see this side of her so “they [would] know we have fun and we know how to have fun.” Because so many people do not get to see this side of her, Mina feels it is important to show her outgoing side when in public. She notes that fashion has the potential to bridge this misconception between Muslims and non-Muslims.

I think it's important that veiled Muslim women enjoy 'playing', in this sense, meaning to explore and experiment with their headscarves to create a look that says something about them and makes others more interested in learning about their headscarves.

Mina feels that women who veil are on some level accountable for the misconceptions some non-Muslims may have of Muslims. Mina notes that "some *hijabis* only make friends with Muslims" but she argues that this is limiting for both Muslims and non-Muslims as, "we should know all kinds of people, all kinds of religions and all kinds of cultures so they can know us as well." Mina feels this would combat many of the issues Muslims are facing currently in society.

Mina advocates passionately for resisting the images and stereotypes of Muslim women depicted in the media noting that, "it's our responsibility to tell people it's not like that." It is for this very reason that Mina feels that being a fashionable *hijabi* is important. "When you wear *hijab* you are already under a lot of attention from people, you are put into a bubble and it changes how people look at you." Therefore, according to Mina, by veiling fashionably, one has the opportunity to "inspire people." Mina does not limit this inspiration to non-Muslims; she acknowledges that many Muslims have similar perceptions about veiling and its limitations. Therefore, veiling in interesting ways allows others to see that the veil is not limiting, rather, "just another accessory, something else I get to dress up."

Mina believes that as a woman who veils, she carries a responsibility to represent Muslim women in a positive light. "I feel like *hijabis* have a responsibility to make an effort to look nice when they go out because you represent *all* *hijabis*". Further, "as a *hijabi* you are representing *all* *hijabis* so how you act in society kind of reflects how people perceive Muslim women." This thinking affects how Mina moves through spaces in daily life; she makes a conscious effort to dress well and be positive with people she encounters as a way of challenging the stereotypes she

feels exist about veiling and about Muslims.

This sense of responsibility for how others view Muslims also motivates the activist in Mina who told me about the various organizations she is a part of. In one of her journal entries Mina wrote one of the main reasons she actively participates in the community around her is because she believes “Muslims should always strive to make a difference in their community, and thus give a great representation of Islam.” Mina hopes that her actions will create a positive perception in the eyes of non-Muslims about veiling and the Muslim community at large. She feels this is a significant strategy to counter the images many individuals hold of Muslim women and of Muslims in general. As Mina and I reflected on these comments we discussed how she appears to be consciously aware at all times of her status as a Muslim woman, especially when interacting with non-Muslims. While she feels she is being true to herself, she admits she makes a greater effort to show all her complex sides when around non-Muslims. Mina believes this is all part of having an optimistic attitude and being committed to making a positive change for the future. She takes on a personal responsibility to represent all Muslims in a positive way and hopes the interactions she has with others will influence how they perceive Muslims, particularly Muslim women.

Synthesis

How Mina manipulates the use of the headscarf is of particular interest. She seems aware at all time of her status as a Muslim, regardless of the spaces she enters. In fact, depending on the spaces she enters, such as moving through the public spaces of society, she is *especially* aware of her status as a Muslim. Therefore, it is interesting to explore whether by *not* wearing a stereotypical headscarf, one that automatically places her as a Muslim on most people’s grid of common knowledge, her conscious awareness of ‘being’ Muslim shifts? It is also interesting to

note this this option of being ambiguous about her Muslim identity may only be possible in the winter where wearing full clothing and accessories such as toques are the norm. However, wearing an ‘ambiguous’ headscarf may still not prevent people from racializing her as a Muslim. Mina’s features and skin color may still mark her as a Muslim amongst society, even though ethnically, many Christians also live in the Middle Eastern region where Mina’s parents were born. This implicates the assumptions that people make based solely on phenotypical attributes.

Mina is also aware that certain spaces come attached with a particular set of codes; physical and social public and private spaces all carry with them a set of guidelines that the veil adheres to. For Mina, this means wearing a certain type of veil when visiting family abroad and altering the veil when mingling with friends in Canada. Even within Canada, there are spaces that require alterations to her veil, such as the private spaces of all-women parties and the public spaces of hanging out with friends in public. Knowing how to manipulate her veil and being aware of the social norms of the spaces she enters, help Mina navigate through society.

Mina also sees her body as a division of spaces that can perform femininity, where some parts are clearly off limits as an expression of sexuality in public. For example, by using makeup, her constructs of what can or cannot be classified as ‘sexy’ on one’s body are brought to the surface. Mina is comfortable with her face or her scarf looking sexy, but not her entire body, at least when in public. Sexy, it seems, is limited to above the neckline. Therefore, certain brands as marked on the headscarf by a logo, can be deemed sexy. This is clearly a reflection of the influence of popular culture and the hegemonic power of fashion. The ‘in’ styles of the present are what decide which designers make products that are interpreted as ‘sexy’. However, while a Marc Jacob scarf can be ‘sexy’ if worn on the head, the same designer can make a blouse or a skirt that is ‘too sexy’ and thus, no longer appropriate. Accentuating facial features also allows

Mina to express her femininity. Makeup is used to accentuate features that are often correlated with beauty, such as defined eyes and long, sultry eyelashes

While keeping in mind her limits of expressing femininity through her body, Mina manages to negotiate contradicting stereotypes of the hijab. She uses fashion to bridge the gap of misunderstanding she feels exists amongst non-Muslims. She also uses fashion as a way to reach out to other Muslim women who perhaps see veiling as limiting their options when it came to fashion. This is perhaps a silent movement in the sense that the Muslim women around her do not always explicitly ask for fashion advice, rather Mina takes it on as a personal responsibility. It demonstrates her role as an agent in the community in the numerous ways in which she uses her veil to interact with those around her.

Case Study 2: Imaan the ‘British Hipster’

“People ask me, ‘why do you wear it if you live in the west and I’m like well, because I live in the west, that’s why I wear it.”

-Imaan



Figure 9

Imaan and I meet on campus for our first interview. She is late and apologizes saying it was all her eyeliner's fault. As we take the elevator up to our interview room she explains how hard it was to get it [the eyeliner] perfectly even on both eyelids. It was worth the wait because indeed her eyes looked amazing. She had on metallic blue eye shadow and used that finicky eyeliner pencil to achieve sultry cat eyes. Imaan was also late coming to our second focus group too, this time blaming her jewellery. She was wearing a stone studded necklace not on her neck but across the forehead of her headscarf. She looked like royalty. She is in fact an undergraduate student. The daughter of a religious leader, Imaan is a second generation Canadian. She began wearing the headscarf at the young age of 9. She describes her current style as "British hipster." This look is inspired by the British music scene along with the clothing style of the 60s era. She is inspired by what she describes as "non-mainstream sensibility and unconventional fashion choices."

Identity, Representation and the Body

Imaan tells me she veils because it is how she chooses to express herself. She links her veil style to her identity as a "Western Muslim." I asked her what this means and she explained:

It shows that I don't just wear black *hijabs*, I wear colorful *hijabs*, I wear them in different ways like anyone would wear bangs and their hair up in a ponytail; same thing with headscarf, when I'm working out I can put it up. I can wear it in different ways. I can wear different fabrics, I can wear different colors.

Imaan's initial decision to wear the headscarf was influenced by her older sisters who also wore it but when they decided to take it off after 9/11, she felt a deeper connection to it than ever before. "It just made me more attached to it" explained Imaan, "because I felt like they were bending to societal pressure. It was kind of a rights movement for me, like *now* is the time to

wear it.” To Imaan, veiling in Canada means taking advantage of her right to wear the veil and wearing it in the style she prefers. She feels fortunate to be a Canadian Muslim saying it is a country where her rights to practice her religion are honored. She shared that people often ask her why she wears the veil in the West, a country of liberation, to which she responds “because I live in the West, that’s why I wear it.” These rights directly inform Imaan’s identity as a Canadian; her religious freedom gives her a strong sense of “being Canadian.” She explains, “I’m very happy to live in this country, people who have prejudices have to keep it to themselves.” During our second focus group, she made similar comments during a discussion about veiling in Canada, stating “I love living here because we have that option to wear what we like and to express ourselves without fear of being reprimanded.” Imaan further demonstrates how important the title “second generation Canadian” is to her, saying, “I am a part of this culture.” She does not see herself as an outsider in Canada rather a part of the intricate fabric that makes up society. Imaan states several times that the way she veils is an extension of who she is as a Canadian, a reflection of herself. She wants people to see her personality before her veil. Veiling is a way of sharing with others her identity as not only a Muslim, but also who she is beyond that. In her photovoice journal she shared:

My goal is so that when people see me they see my personality, my style, my way of thinking and then they also see that I’m a *hijabi* and a Muslim. In other words, my choice of faith isn’t the only thing that I am and I want to show every part of my personality, tastes and interests as best I can.

Imaan suggests that the act of veiling also serves as a visual sign to those around her that she has a personal relationship with God:

It's important for them to know that I'm a spiritual person. I think that being whatever, a Muslim, a Jew, a Sikh, a Hindu, as long as people know that spirituality is a big part of my life. I think it just makes it easier to interact with people when they know who I am.

Imaan argues that veiling gives her an opportunity to express herself, to present "who I am...me...not because of my skin colour, not because where my family is from." For Imaan, the veil is a direct reflection of her identity and she is proud to wear it and proud to be a Canadian Muslim.

I asked Imaan how she negotiates the idea of beauty and femininity as a Canadian Muslim woman who veils in a society where showing skin seems to inform most people's idea of these concepts. Imaan appreciates that a "Western society" values specific attributes when it came to beauty, such as "fair skin colour" and "tall and skinny body types" but that these attributes "are not even representative of their own population." By "their" Imaan is referring to the white women she mostly sees on runway shows and on magazine covers. "I look at that and know myself as someone who is East-African and we have different body types." Imaan adds another dimension to her identity, the connection she feels to her ethnicity as an East-African. From a young age Imaan's parents reassured her and her sisters that they were beautiful and that



Figure 10: Imaan experiments with a look she describes as "urban fashion." She supports many local Muslim designers whose outlook on fashion closely reflects her own.

they did not "have to look like the models we saw wearing barely anything." This gave Imaan a conscious understanding of her body, "I think at a very young age I was aware that I have a curvier shape and that I don't have to look like that [skinny] to be beautiful. I internalized that at a very young age." Imaan gesturing to some of the images I had pulled from the internet of some of North America's

highest grossing models says “I guess I’ve always known that those aren’t realistic images because a small percentage of the population actually looks like that.” Imaan is confident about her body shape and finds the representation of beauty in the media limiting and a false reflection of most women in society.

I asked Imaan if wearing a headscarf takes anything away from her feelings of femininity. To Imaan, ‘being’ feminine means embracing one’s personal sense of sexuality, however one chose to express it. Therefore ‘being’ sexy did not mean flaunting one’s body in a certain way. Imaan explains that the models she sees on the runway exaggerate their gender as women for the sake of the audience. Imaan does not feel pressure to express her femininity in the same way: “These models may look sexy, but I can still look good too, I don’t have to show everything. That doesn’t define sexy.” Imaan defines sexy as

... not putting out everything; sexy is somebody who is confident and comfortable in their own skin and doesn’t have to over compensate. I feel when I dress up, my definition of sexy and *hijab* are synonymous with each other, they aren’t contradictory.

To Imaan it is sexier to “leave things to the imagination” and this is something she accomplishes by veiling; “I think it’s a new way of modern modesty...what you’re wearing is actually more important than actually showing skin”. She gives examples from conversations she has had with male colleagues and coworkers:

They say I like the way you dress because I can see that you are beautiful but you are leaving things to the imagination and it makes me want to pursue you more because there is a lot of unknown, whereas, if they see someone who they can just see everything they are like, ‘yeah, you’re hot but I’m not driven to pursue you.’ So people have to recognize

too that the way you clothe your body says a lot about you and a lot about your sexuality. During a focus group Imaan added, “I do dress skimpy, but I do it in a different way and at a different time.” Imaan was referring to the all-girl parties she attends. This is the space in which she wears the clothing she considers too revealing to wear in public. She is aware that the concept of ‘all girl parties’ seems unusual to some people. She feels that most women probably wear revealing clothing to attract the attention of a man, yet veiled Muslim women only do it behind closed doors amongst one another, where no man is present. Imaan relayed that people ask her what the point is of taking care of oneself if not to show it off, to which she replies, “When you get a Brazilian wax, do you show it to everyone? What I consider private is a little different but doesn’t mean you don’t take care of it.” Imaan notes that this does not mean she thinks she is more modest or a better person than those individuals who choose to express their “sexiness” in other ways, saying:

When I look at somebody who does that I’m like okay that’s fine, do that, that’s you, and if you want to show more skin, that’s fine, do it sister, but for me, I have a different paradigm. My paradigm is does the cut look good, or like in the summer, the dead of the summer I’m concerned about the way I look in that is it current, is my headscarf flowy and summery?”

For Imaan looking sexy is more about carrying oneself with confidence and using the veil in fashion forward ways to express the different ways one can be stylish.

During the second focus group, I shared with the women that there were times when I wish the outside world could see the side of me that my friends get to see at all-girl parties. This was not because I want to prove that I can be sexy or beautiful but more so to show that I am just like any other girl. Although originally Imaan said this did not matter to her, upon hearing my

confession she also admitted that she shares similar sentiments:

Well, I guess when you put it that way, yes, I do want people to see that different side of me because then they get to see that we haven't repressed our sexuality and that we have it and it's still there. I know my friends that aren't Muslim and I'm very open with them about that fact, that Muslim women are still sexual beings, we aren't a-sexual.

For Imaan clothing has the power to express one's sexuality, however, a woman wearing a veil could not express this in the same way as women who does not veil. The latter could explicitly use her clothes to show parts of her body to communicate many things about her sexuality. However, Imaan does not think it impossible to express the many sides of her personality including her sexuality through her veil stating, "we just have a different way of doing it." Imaan uses different makeup and clothing styles to express these things and to her, feeling sexy does not necessarily mean she wants others to look at her lustfully, it is more a reflection of her identity as a woman and wanting to feel in tune with her femininity. Imaan suggests that because Muslim women such as her cover, they are in fact more in tune with their sexuality than are other women. She argues that she has a more personal relationship with this part of her identity because other's perceptions of it are not constantly distracting her and she does not need to prove anything to anyone especially when it comes to her body. It is an intimate side of the Muslim woman that she has total ownership of; she gets to decide who sees it and when to show it.

'Being' Muslim

To Imaan veiling means two interconnected things: first, it is a way for her to "express her spirituality" not only to others, but also as a self-portrayal of her personal growth as a Muslim. She explains, "I've gotten to a certain point of my understanding of Islam and how I

practice it that I've come to wear the veil and know that I am comfortable with who I am."

Secondly, it allows her to portray her commitment as a Muslim while "looking good" which she believes is important. She elaborates that these two reasons are not contradictory, rather, "quite complementary, so even though I'm wearing it to remind myself to always be mindful of God, at the same time I don't think I should look dowdy, because my faith tells me to look good and present the best face possible when dealing with others." She emphasizes that veiling does not mean compromising on fashion or style, rather, veiling means "looking good and expressing myself as a Muslim and as someone who grew up and was raised in the West. I don't think that clashes at all."

When I asked Imaan how she defined fashion, she replied, "fashionable is someone who understands cut, colour, styling, body type and look." She explained that fashion is much more about an inward understanding than an outward representation, although the two are intrinsically linked. To Imaan being fashionable does not necessarily mean wearing the latest trends or big name labels, rather, it meant to truly understand "what works for you as an individual." This includes paying attention to skin tone and the way clothes shaped one's body.

Imaan admitted that she was not always as fashion conscious as she is now, nor did her veil always reflect her personal style. Imaan started by wearing a triangle headscarf, similar to the one I described in my own narrative earlier. She used a safety pin to secure her headscarf under her neckline to prevent it from slipping around and showed me her "battle scar" as she refers to it; a slight mark under her chin from where the safety pin had repeatedly rested against



Figure 11: "Confidence is key" writes Imaan. She described this look as "urban hip-hop" illustrating the many genres of clothing she explores as a veiled woman.

her skin, a reminder of her journey. She then moved on to rectangular scarves. This was during her high school days, a time when she started experimenting more with the veil. She told me that these were “rebellious days” when she would let her hair peek from underneath her scarf and often show her neck. “That was my way of rebelling” she said, “I’d go out and tie it tight and when my mom wasn’t looking I’d loosen it all up, you know, it was all about experimentation.” She recognizes that the way she rebelled was quite different from many of her high school peers. It illustrated the complexity of growing up Muslim in Canada and the experiences she felt were unique to Muslim youth here. Although bending the rules of veiling may seem trivial or mundane to most people, Imaan emphasizes that it was still a significant moment in her life, a part of her youth that defined who she is today as a woman who veils in Canada. Imaan’s ‘rebellion’ helped her explore her identity as a Canadian Muslim as she tried to find her place amidst the school hallways where many around her did not veil. Although there was no pressure from Imaan’s family for her to veil, in her early days she did it mostly to follow in the steps of her sisters. Since then her reasons for veiling have changed but her desire to experiment with her veil has not. She describes the different ways she veils now which include wearing headbands over her scarf, layering her scarves and braiding them together. She says these changes are a reflection of her growth as a person who is constantly changing, “The more different I become as a person, the more I evolve in my *hijab* styles.”

I asked Imaan how she picked out her clothes on a typical day. She describes how she first picks out a long top, an important part of displaying her modesty. She prefers neutral colored pants like her favorite pair of skinny jeans; these are somewhat fitted to balance out her loose fitting tops. Her final step is picking out her scarf; the scarf for Imaan is the essence of the whole outfit, it often acts as her “pop piece”. This means picking out a scarf that will not only

bring the whole outfit together but will also be the central focus of the whole outfit. “The headscarf is a real set piece” she explained, “especially because it’s against my face so I want it to look nice.” For Imaan, it is all about bringing the right attention to her scarf which she believes is the first thing most people notice when they see her; therefore, her aim is to ensure that onlookers have something nice to look at, making the veil a positive focus rather than a negative one.

Major don’ts for Imaan include wearing short tops that accentuated parts of her body. She is particular about dressing according to her body type that she sees as curvy in shape. She is in tune with what looks good on her, including paying particular attention to her skin tone pointing that, “Yes, when you’re black you can be washed out by certain colors.” She avoids pastel colors saying, “you have to wear saturated warm colors that suit your undertones.” It is important for Imaan that her face looks good since according to her it is a focal point. In one of her photovoice journals she writes in depth about using the right colors to enhance her beauty writing “when you talk to me, you’re only looking at my face, so it better damn well look amazing!”

As mentioned earlier, Imaan’s sense of fashion is heavily influenced by the British rock music scene. She is also into big designer labels such as Jean Paul Gaultier and Alexander McQueen. Although these high fashion designers create runway looks that are not always “*hijab* friendly” Imaan said their trends influence her understanding of fashion. She notes:

I don’t think people have the right idea of what fashion means. We look at high fashion and it’s an idea of what clothing should look like...it’s an idea. They’re artists. Like certain things you wouldn’t bring into your house like haute couture things to your house, but it’s supposed to give you ideas. I wouldn’t try all the styles on the runway, but I’d look at the look at try to incorporate it into my style.

Music also influences Imaan's clothing style; many of her music icons are male bands such as the Killers whose fashion trends appeal to Imaan who says her clothes are at times "gender bending" blurring the line between male and female clothing. Imaan identifies these influences as opening up a whole new side of fashion for her; she began shopping in the men's section of clothing stores. I asked her if wearing male clothing affects her sense of femininity at all referring to her earlier comments on the same topic; she replied that the veil helps her maintain her femininity at all times because it is an article of clothing that is exclusive to Muslim women thus constantly giving her a sense of "being a woman."

I asked her if there is ever a clash between her sense of fashion and the way she practices religion. Imaan acknowledges that, at times, she faces an internal struggle as a Muslim woman in Canada trying to find a balance between wanting to be fashionable in "western standards" while at the same time staying within the parameters of what she finds acceptable when it comes to religion. "I'm in between," she explains, "and it's an ongoing thing and you're already trying to push the limits but then you have to realize what you're doing." Imaan admits that there are times when she feels she is pushing the boundaries of her own beliefs when it comes to veiling. One of the struggles she feels Muslim Canadians face is constantly trying to prove oneself as a part of society. She recognizes clothing as one of the most visible ways members of a community relate to one another and therefore veiled women face an inherent struggle as they seek to fit in. Imaan sympathizes with this struggle but states it is a situation every Muslim has to confront living in Canada and one she continues to negotiate on a daily basis.

Being 'More' Muslim

Throughout our conversations, I could sense Imaan's struggle to negotiate her desire to be fashionable with her commitment to veil. She explains that the prominent role her father plays

in the community affects how she practices the veil. She feels a silent pressure to maintain a particular standard of veiling even though there were never any spoken restrictions put on her; after all, she has sisters who do not veil at all. In our final conversation, I ask her if she is satisfied with the way she is veiling to which she replied, “I don’t think you can ever say you are following it to a T. I’m not wearing anything that’s too revealing, it’s not see-through, it’s not form fitting...what’s the problem?” The essence of the veil according to Imaan is covering the hair. When it comes to covering the body, she feels there are many ways to do this, not limiting it to the *abaya*. She does believe there is a “wrong” way to veil, mentioning again that tight or sheer clothes are too much of a compromise that many veiled women make. “It’s almost like being half-assed” she explains “You can’t half ass anything in your life especially when you’re following your beliefs.” To Imaan, the most important thing is focusing on herself as a Muslim and seeing the veil as a piece of clothing that has personal meaning to her. She believes every woman has to experience the veil in her own way and use the veil as a positive tool for change.

While many interpret the veil as debilitating to women and some Muslim women themselves look at it as something that restricts their mobility in Canadian society, Imaan prefers to put a positive spin on it saying, “there are so many things you can do with the veil, like why are people focusing on what you *can’t* do? That is so limiting.” Imaan does not see the veil as restricting in any capacity. She participates in every aspect of society including social activities such as sports. The headscarf is just a layer, a piece of cloth that allows her to express herself in many ways. She sees its potential as another accessory giving her the opportunity to “dress something else up.” Her focus is on transforming people’s views of the veil through her own interpretation of it.

When I asked Imaan if veiling in any way reveals one’s level of religiosity she disagreed

saying “I know Muslims who don’t wear *hijab* to be better Muslims than Muslims who wear *hijab*.” Imaan argues that the notion that veiling is a reflection of the strength of one’s religious connection to God puts a lot of pressure on both veiled and non-veiled Muslim women. As a veiled woman, Imaan is often subject to unrealistic expectations and given little sympathy if she participates in what some individuals believe to be un-Islamic behavior; yet, if a Muslim woman who does not veil, engages in similar actions they are taken in a different context, somehow less un-Islamic. Similarly, Muslim women who do not veil are at times considered to be totally absent from religious practices as though they do not practice religion at all, even if they do. “*Hijab* should not be a litmus test to see who is a good Muslim and who is a bad Muslim” stated Imaan who says it is this mentality that often leads to spiteful feelings amongst women in the Muslim community. “What is a good Muslim or a bad Muslim?” asked Imaan, “that’s subjective and open to interpretation. No one is the perfect Muslim, and that’s the truth.” Imaan particularly criticizes individuals she referred to as “religobots.” These were people within the Muslim community who, according to Imaan, try to regulate how the veil should be worn. They often frown upon the modern modest styles of young Muslim women such as herself. “Their interpretations are oppressive” she pointed out, “the article of clothing itself isn’t oppressive, it’s some people’s interpretation of it.” While there are certain styles Imaan feels are “not *hijab*” she does not believe it is her or anyone else’s job to make such judgments nor to tell others. “We live in a free liberal country” she asserts, why should I tell somebody how they should be veiling?”

Acting Hijabi:

When I asked Imaan what she thinks non-Muslims believe about the veil, she responded that there appears to be a lot of misinformation about it. Imaan primarily blames the media for people’s misunderstandings, suggesting that the images they show often only represent a small

percentage of Muslims. “Muslims are the new ‘other’ now we have the crosses painted on us.” Imaan refers to the deliberate targeting she feels Muslims are often subject to, including the political backlash that was occurring in France at the time of our interview. Several riots had recently broken out in an effort to ban the veil. As a Canadian Muslim, Imaan felt protected to a certain extent from discrimination and people’s prejudices, stating that even when she crosses the border into the US, she immediately feels more vulnerable. She feels there is a negative image of Muslims overall because of the extremist representations depicted in the media. Lacking were the portrayals of the average, good citizen Muslims, who, according to Imaan are the norm, “the



Figure 12: Veiling in new and different spaces.

majority of Muslims don’t fit into that stereotype, it’s a very small percentage of Muslims that do.” Imaan suggests that static representations of the veil in the media have serious implications:

“People think the veil is such a monolithic piece of cloth. It’s not. The veil is completely different every time

and that’s the thing that bothers me about the media, that they depict the veil as only meaning one thing and always meaning something. What it means to me is personal, so when I wear my veil I wear it for my reason, but you know it’s a fashion statement too, so if I want it to look a certain way, I’ll make it look a certain way.”

Imaan argues that because of the current negative discourse surrounding Muslims, it is the responsibility of all Muslims to make deliberate efforts to change this perception. She believes Muslim women have a significant role to play in this change, “We should make an extra effort

because there is so much negative image and talk about Muslims in general that we should make an extra effort to show who we are as a person so we don't fit into a stereotype." Further, she argues that:

You have to always put your best foot forward because we are in a society where there is a lot of misinformation going on and people will always keep in mind the interactions they have. If they see positive interactions that will stay with them longer and they will see the media and think for themselves that this is wrong.

Later in our interview Imaan emphasizes the role that fashion plays in resisting stereotypes, "It should be imperative for you to be fashionable when you veil because all the negative stereotypes of people thinking we look oppressed." Imaan uses herself as an example sharing her experiences as a frequent traveler. When travelling through airports, a space where Imaan feels especially vulnerable, she does her best to present herself with extra flare. She describes it as "I go the whole nine yards; I'm not going to lie. But you know what happens? It's like an unspoken conversation that happens." Imaan explains how her efforts to fashion her veil in modern and stylish ways make her appear less threatening to airport officials, and as a result, she faces less hostility from them. Of course Imaan recognizes that this is her perception and that there may be other factors at play; however, she strongly believes that when she makes an effort to be approachable through her veil, people see past the "Muslim girl stereotype" and recognize her as an individual. She adds that countering stereotypes does not just stop at being Muslim, but also engages her identity as a Black Muslim. She shares stories of how her interest in rock music often surprises those around her, who expect her to prefer the hip hop music genre. "I thought if I liked hip hop I would have bought into the stereotype that black people like hip hop. I was like okay, I'm going to listen to something completely different because I like being

different.”

Throughout our conversations, Imaan emphasizes several times how her veil is not only a religious symbol but that it helps her to express herself in a physical way to those around her. She is confident and passionate about being a unique individual. When we were closing our last interview I asked her what she wanted to share with anyone who would read this thesis. She replied:

I want to send a message that just because I subscribe to a certain belief or that I choose to embody it on an article of clothing, it doesn't mean that I'm oppressed. It means that I want people to know it's something I do that I like to do and it's just like wearing different miniskirts or different shoes, I wear different types of *hijabs*. It helps me express myself.

Synthesis

Imaan is very aware of the way 'style' operates in society. Though she may not be aware of it as a discourse, her own exploration of various styles within different genres demonstrates her knowledge of how style can be used as a tool of resistance and or as a subscription to different communities within society. She uses fashion and music as ways of exploring how one can perform gender and ethnicity, at times being critically aware that she is going outside of constructed norms.

Her narrative reveals how ideologies become flexible when considered in different contexts, such as her stories of how she enacted rebelliousness in her high school days. Within her family and perhaps even transferrable to other Muslim women who veil, rebelling means experimentation with how one veils, pushing the boundaries through veiling in ways that

confront one's own assumptions of what the veil 'should' look like or how one is to 'properly' veil. Imaan conveyed that by wearing her headscarf loosely she revealed glimpses of her hair and parts of her neck. Perhaps this went unnoticed by her schoolmates but clearly these memories of high school 'rebellion' have informed Mina's identity today as a woman who veils.

Similar to Mina, Imaan is also aware of how to manipulate the veil depending on the space she is in. Arguably, she is also manipulating the space itself, if only psychologically. Her experience at airports become less intimidating as she fashions her veil in ways that help her navigate through this space. While she feels her style influences the way institutional authorities interact with her, her own comfort within this space increases as a result. By understanding the political implications of her veil, Imaan is able to carefully navigate across various geographical borders. She is aware of the baggage she carries as a Muslim marked by her hijab. Her own assumptions are confronted again when she feels a sense of security when moving within spaces in Canada as opposed to American spaces. Her assumptions of racism and antiracism in Canada and America are brought to the surface and she feels safe and accepted within Canada and unsafe, perhaps even targeted, within American borders. Regardless of the space she is in, Imaan recognizes her veil as educative. She recognizes her style as a way of informing others of the various ways the veil can be performed.

Case Study 3: Aleena the 'Chic' Hijabi

"I never knew one accessory could change so much how people look at you"

- Aleena



Figure 13

Aleena is my very first interview. We meet on campus and she greets me with a big hug like we are old friends, meeting after a long time. Her headscarf is drawn loosely over her head with her side bangs sweeping through. She is wearing a bright blue top that matched perfectly with her bright blue peep toe shoes. Aleena is a second generation Canadian whose parents immigrated from Pakistan. She is the eldest of three siblings and a student in her third year of university at the time of our interview. Aleena refers to herself as a “new *hijabi*” having just recently begun veiling. It was during the month of Ramadan the year before that she wanted to wear the veil to “see what it was like.” By the end of the month she decided she wanted to continue wearing it and has been ever since. With over a hundred headscarves, Aleena describes her style as “chic” saying her wardrobe is inspired by trendy runway fashion and bright colors to suit her mood.

Identity, Representation and Body

Aleena’s best friend initially inspired her to explore the veil. The very first time Aleena stepped outside of the house with it on and into the public eye she immediately felt like a different person: “I felt like it was my identity. It becomes a part of your identity so when people see me just from the top of my head they know, this girl is Muslim. That is a profound feeling.” This is important to Aleena; wearing a veil gives her a sense of “belonging” to a community whereas before she did not necessarily feel attached to one. “You feel like, I don’t know, like you know each other” says Aleena of her fellow hijabi colleagues with whom she exchanges smiles, even though she may not know them. This is all a part of the sisterhood she feels while veiling. Aleena also feels she is breaking stereotypes about the veil:

I feel like there's a stereotype about *hijabis*, that they are really quiet and really shy and they are really strict, but I've met so many interesting personalities who, like me, are *hijabi* but are always pushing the limit, crossing the supposed line.

Aleena refers to the way she veils and how she believes she is expanding people's perceptions of what it means to veil, "I feel like I can help change their minds." Aleena feels she is playing a significant role, along with other Muslim women in Canada, strategically changing the perception of the veil as a limiting element. I asked her who 'they' were to which she replied Muslims and non-Muslims. Aleena particularly wants to inspire other Muslim women who see the veil as a limitation in certain situations such as during sporting events. Aleena is an avid soccer player, and she remembers her reservations about veiling because she thought it meant she could no longer play the sport she is so passionate about. It was her own misconceptions that made her feel this way, but she soon overcame them when she played soccer for the first time in her veil. She writes about this experience in one of her photovoice journals noting it as a defining moment because she broke her own stereotype that day about what it meant to veil in Canada. It was at that moment that she truly recognized that the veil did not make her an outsider. She was still as Canadian as the rest of her teammates.

Covering her hair also gives Aleena the opportunity to stand out as an individual person rather than just "the Paki girl" as she was so often reduced to before. She notes in a journal entry that "hair is like an identity marker for people. Once you cover it, it's hard to place where you're from." Aleena likes this aspect of veiling. Although she is proud of her Pakistani heritage, as a Canadian Muslim, she feels the veil in many ways creates an equal playing ground for those who practice it. The veil according to Aleena allows her to unite with others under one title, that of Islam. Within Islam, ethnicities are numerous and often divide individuals, even those practicing

the same religion. However, since veiling, Aleena has encountered another challenge: “People have starting assuming I’m Arab”. Such speaks volumes to what some people’s perceptions are about those who veil. Aleena notes that non-Muslims often associate the veil with certain ethnicities not realizing that Muslims come from all parts of the world and the practice of veiling is not unique to a certain demographic of people. Aleena feels it is difficult to become close friends with non-Muslims because of these types of misunderstandings. Ever since she began university, her circle of friends has gradually shifted from a mix of friends from various religious and cultural backgrounds to mostly Muslim friends. She explains that this change took place as she increasingly became involved with the University’s Muslim Student Association (MSA). She soon became friends with the other Muslim students she met at the University’s official prayer place which is actually a “meditation room” available to all students. Aleena feels a sense of belonging in the company of other Muslims noting, “We all can go to pray together and become involved in the events that the MSA hosts.” Again, the sense of community plays an important role in Aleena’s life.

I asked Aleena her opinion on whether or not veiled women have the potential to look sexy. Aleena defines sexy as a sense of “looking good and feeling good.” She elaborates that “Sexy doesn’t mean showing more skin”, it does not mean using your body to attract others in a physical way. According to Aleena, Muslim women “can look really good just depending on what they wear, and no, *hijabs* don’t make you look ugly.” She challenges the often held perception that veiling meant making oneself look unattractive as a conscious action and argues

that veiling fashionably could change such perceptions. Aleena believes it is possible to look modest and attractive. She gave me examples from her own fashion philosophy. Aleena likes to accessorize with heels and earrings and she loves using makeup. Aleena's travels to the Middle East inspire her style; the fully covered women with elaborate makeup look extremely sexy in her opinion, even though she could only see their eyes. It is the manner in which these women carry themselves that Aleena finds most attractive, and although their eyes are heavily done up with makeup, it is the spark in their eye that reveals their confidence. I asked Aleena if wearing makeup defeats the purpose of trying to maintain a degree of modesty. Aleena disagrees, "They are still girls and girls like to dress up." Her statement reminds me of a premise for this thesis.



Figure 14: Aleena making jewelry for her scarf out of unique necklaces.

'They are still girls' describes accurately a factor often overlooked by many; that the women who wear the veil are still human. They are women who have desires and worldly ones at that.

Aleena does not think that the purpose of wearing makeup is to attract

the opposite sex. She believes many women wear makeup for themselves, to look good and feel good about how they look. If wearing makeup did attract attention from members of the opposite sex, the onus was on the men, "It's not their problem!" she exclaims, referring to the women. Aleena speaks to this misconception further, "people think the veil is worn to keep the men's desires in check...wearing a *hijab* is more like a constant reminder that women don't have to design their lives for men." To Aleena the meaning of the veil was much more significant than keeping a man's sexual desire at bay, and to consider its function reduced its value.

When it comes to sexiness, Aleena emphasizes that sexiness is a quality that comes from

within. Feeling sexy is important and meaningful when done for yourself. She explains: “I think everyone should feel good in what they wear, they shouldn’t go for appeal, like, what other people think.” For Aleena, having confidence was the sexiest accessory one could have; sexy and being feminine are *complementary* to one another, “I don’t think you can look sexy without being feminine. When you are a woman you have curves and it’s very feminine and if you are enhancing them the right way you look sexy; so being feminine and sexy go hand in hand.” However, later, in our second focus group when the women were discussing sexy in relation to their own sexuality and how veiling in so called ‘sexy’ ways reflected their own sexuality, Aleena commented “When it comes to *hijab*, I don’t think the word sexy and *hijab* should go together because the thing we are trying to do with *hijab* is prevent....” she paused and Imaan interjected, “...sex?!” We all laughed at this sudden outburst and at the idea of the veil having the power to do such a thing. Aleena then clarified:

No, not prevent sex but just the thought that comes with being and looking sexy. I learned in science class that humans think about making babies all the time, that’s how we’re programmed and boys they are a little different than girls, like how their brains are wired and they think about sex more than girls...but the *hijab* I think what it does is kind of help, well not helps, but you know what I am trying to say, right?

At the time, we moved on but later on in one of our exchanges I asked her to clarify what she meant. Aleena views the veil as a constant reminder of one’s commitment to modesty for both men and women. Wearing the veil was less about men and more about keeping her in “check” as she put it. “It’s a constant reminder of who you are” she said, “so you don’t get lost with everything going on. It’s important to stay true to you own values. I obviously wear it for God and the representation that you’re Muslim and people recognize you as Muslim.” Aleena referred

back to what she had said during our first interview, that she believes a veiled woman can (and should) look sexy but that it was an inward attitude that should express it. “It’s not about putting everything out there,” she said, “somebody who is confident and comfortable in their own skin and doesn’t overcompensate – now that’s sexy.” Aleena suggests that veiling in stylish ways contributes to one’s sexiness and that her headscarf could not take that away, even if she was dressed modestly, “clothes are there to enhance your features so if you know how to dress and if you know how to accessorize, I think anyone can look sexy.”

‘Being’ Muslim

I asked Aleena what the veil meant to her and it brought out an emotional response. Aleena refers to her veil as a “shield” that has protected her from making decisions she knew were bad for her. The obstacles and moral dilemmas Aleena faced in the past and she experimented with in high school still haunt her. Like many teenagers, Aleena did things to fit in with the crowd, not always having the confidence to speak against them; she made compromises as a young Muslim growing up in Canada, yearning to find a place to belong. Now that she wore a headscarf, it serves as a constant reminder to her that she has to respect the territory that came along with veiling.

“If the people I hang out with want to do something that is not appropriate and if I think about it, if I wasn’t *hijabi*, maybe I’d be like okay, why not? But now that I am *hijabi*, I’m like no wait; I have to consider a lot of things.”

The veil also serves as a reminder to those around her of her status as a Muslim and Aleena believes that this deters them from asking her to engage in activities that would compromise her beliefs. She even feels that she has gained a newfound respect from members of

the opposite sex, “they look at you different, they think ‘oh this girl’s proper’. They won’t try stuff on you or anything and that’s what I like about it. They won’t mess around with you like they do with other girls. They have a certain respect for you.” I asked her if this pertained to Muslim or non-Muslim boys to which she responded “I think everybody, being *hijabi* is not so uncommon, not here anymore. I am sure everyone knows what it means, especially when you’re *hijabi*, you’re *hijabi* all over, like your outfit, so they have this respect for you.” Aleena explains that since wearing the veil no boys had expressed romantic interest in her, “Maybe they feel like, ‘oh I’m not at her level yet’. Sometimes I feel they think ‘I don’t deserve her because she’s so up there, and I’m not.’” Aleena views this as one of the positive aspects of veiling; it sends a message to members of the opposite sex that she is only to be approached if someone had something meaningful to offer. It is an aspect of the veil that Aleena feels people seldom ever acknowledge, the territory of respect that came along with veiling.

I was interested in knowing more about her interactions with members of the opposite sex since I had developed many of my own theories over the years. I asked her if her style of dressing had changed significantly since she began veiling and if she felt this was the reason behind receiving less male attention. She told me that her wardrobe had changed very little since she began veiling. For the most part, the only thing that changed was that she put a headscarf on, as for the rest, “I wear the same clothes now as I wore before.” She said that many of her female friends and colleagues told her that her sense of style had improved since she began veiling. Aleena told me that her clothes had not changed nor had her sense of style, rather, she felt that the people around her did not expect to see a veiled woman dressing so stylishly; “I didn’t know one accessory could change so much how people look at you.” When it came to boys, for the most part wearing a veil gave them a ‘hands off’ perception, something that for now Aleena did

not mind since her main focus was her education.

To Aleena, fashionable was “someone who’s not boring...they are always trying to spice their wardrobe up, always trying different things and their not afraid to experiment...you should be able to get away with anything and everything and just make it work for you.” Before she began officially wearing the headscarf, Aleena experimented with different styles and colors to see what suited her best. She looked to friends and YouTube videos to learn new ways to tie her headscarf; “I feel like there isn’t just one way to tie it, there are so many ways. You can style it in so many different ways and explore what looks best on you.” Aleena prefers to wear her scarf loosely around her head with her ears visible and her bangs exposed. “I

tried a lot of different styles to see what would suit me” she said, “I think because my cheekbones are high up, this style highlights that, but I change it up all the time.” Before deciding to wear the headscarf permanently, Aleena had family living in the Middle East send her several dozen headscarves varying in material in color. She has recently

learned to tie her scarf into a braid and how when she goes to the gym she ties her scarf back in a bun. These intricate ways of fashioning the veil made Aleena realize that veiling did not have to limit her, admitting

“I used to think really negatively before I became *hijabi*, like, how am I going to get a job now? How am I going to play soccer or go to the gym?” When she eventually wore the headscarf, she realized that different styles of the headscarf could accommodate her lifestyle, “like, if I’m going to the gym I’ll wear my scarf the other way around in a bun and I’m good to go.” She dresses up her veil for parties by pinning flowers to her scarf and wearing sparkly earrings that



Figure 15: One of the many intricate ways in which Aleena ties her scarf.

complimented her outfit. Aleena confidently exclaims, “I can do anything in *hijab* that I could do before”.

Aleena describes her overall style as “chic” which she defines as being “on trend”, her style is constantly changing to reflect the latest trends. Adding color was Aleena’s way of giving every outfit her signature touch, “I feel like it shows your personality, it shows you’re a confident and bold person.” She has rules when it comes to dressing but these rules are always changing and bending. According to Aleena, a fashion faux pas is wearing the color black, as from her perspective it gives non-Muslims the perception that wearing black was a religious constraint. She admits that there are many challenges with dressing “*hijabi* friendly” such as trying to find suitable clothing in stores during the summer months, but, as a fashionista, she enjoys the creative challenge that comes with this.

You can’t show skin so it’s hard sometimes finding the perfect top and bottom. But then you add the headscarf and some jewelry, and, it’s a little harder, I can understand why some girls wouldn’t do it, but I like the challenge.” In one of her journal entries she wrote how she veiling soon became exciting for her as she realized she had a “whole new world of fashion to explore.

On a typical day Aleena puts together her outfit starting with her scarf: “the first thing I do is usually choose a scarf then I match it up to an outfit - I find it’s easier that way. Then I choose my jewelry then finally my shoes have to really pop, to balance out my scarf.” Aleena has at least 6 chest drawers full of scarves; easily making it over a hundred including the ones she had sprawled all over the house. She also has her “*hijab* lingerie” as we referred to it jokingly; headbands often worn under the headscarf to prevent it from slipping. These were

particularly useful if wearing a silky headscarf.

Aleena does not really have a lot of *hijabi* dos and don'ts. She said as long as her clothing was *hijabi* friendly, which meant, covering her head to symbolize her status as a Muslim as well as covering her arms and legs, everything was acceptable. "There are no particular guidelines on how it should be worn, what colors are allowed or materials are acceptable." To Aleena, "that is why *hijab* is unique to the individual who wears it." She emphasizes the importance of being confident in what she put on her body. Regardless of the trend she is following, the confidence alone, according to Aleena, makes the veil work. She does however have some style tips to share with other veiled woman, including "Tone down your scarf and show off your outfit" and vice versa "wear a super cool bright scarf and then everything else should be neutral." To Aleena these looks were timeless, they would never go out of style. As for what influences her, Aleena looks to fashion shows on television to stay on trend, "I love Project Runway and America's Next Top Model". She encourages the use of jewelry to take the focus away from the headscarf "so it's not the only thing people are seeing." She points to her own big hoop earrings and long necklace she had accessorized with her outfit that day, noting that the headscarf should be a part of the outfit "not the whole outfit." The veil is to be treated as another accessory, complementary to the other accessories one was wearing, for example, "Wear a totally black outfit then wear a red scarf, a red bag and red shoes." Anna's enthusiasm for fashion is obvious I hear it in her voice every time she talks about it or gives me fashion tips.

For Aleena, one of the most important things to know about the veil is that it "could and should look good." Aleena argues that the veil fulfills two important requirements: first, it completes its duty in religious terms, and second, by fashioning the veil in stylish ways, it gives a good impression of the veil to onlookers, both Muslims and non-Muslims. The individuals who

had stereotypes about veiling, including Muslims, would read the thesis and learn that women who veil “are not really quiet and really shy and really strict” and those who veiled would learn it was possible to wear the veil and be fashionable.

Being ‘More’ Muslim

Our discussion on what counted as veiling was interesting because Aleena has the most lenient views of the whole group. For Aleena there was no ‘wrong’ way to veil as she explains:

I don’t think people should tell you how you should veil or anything like that. If you feel comfortable and if you think you look good, that’s how you should do it. There should be no specific way, except for the fact that your hair should be covered.

To Aleena the amount of hair that should be covered depends on where you lived. In a Canadian context, she suggests you can be more lenient. Aleena argues that one of the main purposes of the veil is to represent yourself as a Muslim, therefore it does not matter if all your hair is covered “as long as you have something on your head” adding, “I do bangs sometimes too” and gestured to her own headscarf with her side bangs showing. I asked her why her veil changed depending on the space she was in. Aleena replies that the veil is all about context which is why women all over the world and historically have practiced it in different ways. Providing examples from her own life Aleena recalls attending Pakistani weddings or other cultural events with her headscarf drawn loosely over her head with her bangs showing. She explains that this style was the norm at such events stating “I think it’s a culture thing, because in my culture most people wear *hijab* with a little hair showing as long as everything else is covered and you still have it on your head.” She acknowledges that fellow *hijabis* sometimes disagreed with the way she veiled to which she replied, “I’m just more lenient. I go with the flow.” Overall Aleena feels that she is staying within the constraints of modest clothing defining it as clothing that is “a little

loose, and appropriate for the occasion.” Within Canada, Aleena suggests that parts of the body such as the neck are not perceived in the same sexual manner as perhaps in more conservative Muslim countries; therefore, even if she did not always cover her neck or all her hair, to most she would still appear modest in her dress. She further adds:

Even if I wasn't wearing a headscarf, I would still be considered to be dressing modestly; it's not like stuff changed drastically after I began wearing a scarf. The only thing that changed was that I don't wear t-shirts anymore...and I never wore shorts before either, I never showed my legs.

Overall Aleena feels she has always maintained a sense of modesty, the only difference now was that she wore a headscarf.

Aleena has a strong interest in playing competitive sports and often times her refusal to wear shorts caused tension and awkward moments during games. She reports that she has had to justify her choice more often before she began wearing a headscarf because people did not always recognize her as a Muslim. After she began wearing the headscarf, she was surprised that she did not get questioned as often as before. She assumes it was because many referees now saw her scarf and recognized on their own that wearing shorts would compromise her veil.

Veiling also helped her gain more trust and independence from her parents. She is now allowed more social freedom because her parents assume that veiling means she was in good company and less likely to do something unIslamic. Although in her case it was accurate, Aleena disagreed with this presumption and explained that there is a huge generation gap between parents and second generation Muslims. “I find that now-a-days the parents don't really know their kids” shares Aleena, “because they don't know what it's like growing up here.” She feels that second generation Canadian Muslims struggle with their identity as Canadians and as

Muslims. While Muslims like her were striving to stay connected with religion, they were also drawn to the mainstream activities they see many of their friends doing. Aleena explains that she knows many girls who veiled who are engaging in activities that are considered taboo in the Muslim community such as dating and experimenting with drugs. “Veiling does not guarantee that you won’t do something bad” said Aleena, finding it difficult to negotiate the different expectations that existed of veiled woman. Her parents and community members often regard the veiled woman as the epitome of Islam; a modest woman who did not fall prey to the temptations of the “western world.” This of course puts a heavy burden on youth as they struggle to live up to these impossible expectations. In contrast, many non-Muslims view the veiled woman as oppressed. Aleena struggles particularly with this perception because she does not relate to it nor do any of the veiled women she knows. Aleena is looking for a middle ground; one where she can continue to veil and not have it charged with anyone else’s mis-perceptions.

Acting Hijabi

Aleena reports that the commonly held image of the veiled woman was that she “dresses from head to toe in black, sits in the back and stays quiet.” This misinformed image is, according to Aleena, due to the images projected by the media: “I think the media really influences people, whatever they see on TV, like if you watch TV they show the Arab world and you see women and you can’t even see their eyes.” Yet, Aleena argues, this is not the norm of veiling in Canada. The norm is to see “all different styles of *hijab*.” Aleena also worries that people are often under the impression that girls like her are the exception and only “liberated” because they were raised in North America.

Aleena wants to spread awareness that most veiled women in the West are like her and

veiling is an option they chose themselves. She told me she understood to an extent the discomfort some individuals had with the veil stating, “I feel like those people think it looks wrong, especially with what’s happening in the world, I think they must feel like we are preaching.” Overall Aleena believes media coverage of Islam related topics contributes to the negative perceptions some people hold of Muslims, saying, “the media is putting fear in them, like they should fear Muslims and everything we do looks bad to them, so I guess if you’re scared of something you kind of want to stop it.”

When I asked Aleena if she had any stories to share about encounters she had with non-Muslims and her veil, she chose to not share any negative stories. From Aleena’s perspective enough negative stories already exist and she wants to focus only on the positive interactions she has had. For example, people often compliment her style and admire her scarves. Non-Muslims had even asked her for tutorials on how to tie a scarf. It is moments such as these that keep Aleena motivated to continue veiling. She sees her style as a way to inspire others; she especially wants to play a positive role in the lives of other veiled women. This is actually one of the reasons Aleena wanted to participate in the study, “to help other *hijabis* out.” Aleena wants to share her story in the hopes of creating a brighter future for other veiled women. She feels the responsibility to advocate for other veiled women in the hopes of not only creating equitable rights for them, but also to inspire them saying, “I feel like I can help them change; they can look at me and say ‘oh, look she does all this stuff and she’s *hijabi*.’” Aleena wants to be a role model for other Muslim women and hopes that sharing her story will do this.

Overall, Aleena believes her experiences as a veiled woman are unique. Having been a *hijabi* for only a year, she often reflects back on what her day to day life was like before she began veiling. While most of the experiences with the veil have been positive, she is still

reflective about her decision to wear it. She said she may even take it off the headscarf someday, but for now, she concluded her story with: ``I know what it's like to not be *hijabi* and how people treated me and now what it's like to be *hijabi* and how people treat me. I can evaluate myself at the end of the day and be like ok, I like being *hijabi* better because I experienced both and learned my lessons from both.``



Figure 16: Aleena after her first soccer game wearing the veil. Staying true to her fashion flare, she matches her scarf perfectly to her uniform.

Synthesis

Aleena largely sees her veil as a means of agency. Within the Muslim community, her veil serves to offer other Muslim women, veiled or not, an example of how the veil does not impede upon any parts of a healthy, social, Canadian lifestyle. For those she considers as outsiders, the spaces she veils in, such as the gym or the soccer field, prove the flexibility of the hijab. Aleena is aware that her veil serves an educative purposes and it is in part what motivates her to continue veiling. She also feels veiling asserts her identity as a Muslim by binding her to a community of other women who veil. Being part of a community is meaningful to her. This reinforces what many studies illustrate about subcultures and why individuals are drawn to them (Baxter & Marina, 2008; Park, 2011; Perho, 2000; Zine 2000). Feeling like one is part of something bigger or that one belongs somewhere is of great importance to those who are part of a subculture.

Aleena makes no clear distinctions between what counts as showing ‘too much hair’ and ‘just the right amount’ of hair. This in itself is a perplexing aspect of veiling. Whether or not

showing some hair is appropriate is ultimately left up to the one who veils. In Aleena's case, it demonstrates the ongoing negotiations she faces as she explores her own sense of style as a woman who is fairly new to veiling. She also confronts her own assumptions about the veil as she tries to break stereotypes. Her claims of hijabi women perceived as passive are not necessarily from voiced opinions, rather, her own perceptions of the outsider gaze. The media inevitably influence her bias. She is aware of the way Muslim women are represented in popular culture and how politics influence how the world sees the Muslim world at large. It is partially because of media that she believes many people have gone from labeling her as a 'Paki' to an 'Arab' since she has started wearing the headscarf. Veiling is correlated with Arabic cultures thus racializing her veil as a part of 'Muslim culture' (Al-Saji, 2010).

Despite comments that may give away some individual's lack of knowledge about the vast ethnicities that comprise Islam, Aleena believes her positive attitude creates positive interactions with those around her. Her veil encourages her to mingle with those around her. While community and being part of an insider community is important to her, so is being an active member of the community at large. When she opens herself up in public spaces, she reaffirms her belief that veiling is very much part of a Canadian life.

Case Study 4: Anna the 'ModMuslim'

“Hijab is not my most significant defining feature. Rather, it is an article of clothing with a symbolic attachment that is an extension (but not a definition) of my personality and identity”

-Anna



Figure 17

Anna is one of my most complex participants. She is 21 years old and in her last year of University completing her degree. She converted to Islam just three years previously. We meet on campus and she arrives looking like she has stepped out of a Marc Jacobs catalogue – the Muslim edition. With pale skin and light eyes, she is wearing dark washed jeans with a floral top and casual business jacket. She has accessorized with rings, bangles, a long necklace and a braided headband worn over her headscarf. She has come straight from work and since it was Friday she has “dressed down” – but of course.

Anna had been exploring Islam since the young age of 12 and made the life changing decision to convert when she was only 19. She has been wearing the headscarf since then, and her journey has been a thoughtful one. With roots in Canada tracing back to 1827, Anna is the only Muslim in her family. She explored Islam for 8 years through the eyes of an Indian-Canadian family. Her understanding of Islam and how she chooses to practice it has changed dramatically within the last three years. She went from wearing a *burqa* to how she dresses now – a headscarf and “western clothing.” She describes her style as ModMuslim. It is a name her family has given to her, describing her modesty and her style “a la mode.” She truly has a unique perspective to add to the discussion as she shares what it was like to be a white Muslim.

Identity, Representation and the Body

Identity is something Anna struggled with when she converted to Islam. “The minute I converted, I didn’t fit in completely with this society” she said referring to her Canadian roots and the way she was raised, “I seem to have violated some unspoken rule where I no longer fit in either side and I’m straddling this line.” During this time Anna felt she had to choose a side; was she Canadian or was she Muslim? For Anna ‘being’ Muslim three years ago meant looking like the images she saw on television and in the newspapers. She felt that many converts such as her

felt converting to Islam meant abandoning one's Canadian identity. "You get absorbed into another culture and for a long time I thought that's what I'm going to do" explains Anna who was heavily influenced by South Indian culture when she first started exploring Islam.

I was really keen to start wearing *shalwar kameez* and walk around like I was from India essentially, because that's the Muslim community that introduced me to Islam, so my familiarity with that community is insanely deep.

Anna told me that she also experimented with wearing the burqa in her early days as a convert but soon felt disconnected with the Islam she had come to know and *how* she wanted to be a Muslim:

How do I want to be Muslim? That's a big question and that question ruled my life for five years. I decided that's not how I want to practice Islam because what about Canada isn't compatible with Islam? I challenge people to find something because most of it is compatible and there's nothing inherently wrong with wearing 'western clothing' and most of us make it work. And why is it we're wearing western clothing? Because we're in this society and we're looking to make connections with this society.

By "this society" Anna refers to the things that were considered 'normal' in Canada, such as dressing a certain way and the social skills and etiquettes people followed.

I asked Anna what it meant to be Canadian and how she defined her identity as one. She replies, "As a white Canadian Muslim, there is no back home for me, there is no 'back east', I am west and I am also a Muslim." In her mind, there is no single way of "being Canadian" as she explains, "when I talk about Canadian identity, I mean the way I was raised to be Canadian and that's personal, the way I, on an individual level, believe it to be and that's what I think is great about Canada because every person can define Canadian identity differently." For Anna, it is her

experiences as a white Canadian that made her feel significantly different from those who were born Muslim. “I was aware I was Canadian before I was aware that I was Muslim, whereas, I think a lot of Muslims were aware they were Muslim before they were aware they were Canadian.” Anna felt she had truly experienced ‘being’ Canadian and was much more in tune with this part of her identity because her ‘Canadianess’ was never questioned growing up. In one of her photovoice journal entries, she writes,

“Before I put on a headscarf, I could blend in as I walked through a crowd. I ‘looked’ Canadian. I don’t anymore, not to others.” Anna writes about the first time she celebrated

Canada Day as a Muslim and the pressure she felt to display her nationalism. Anna wanted to show those around her that she was Canadian “regardless of faith or wardrobe.” She took special care to pick out an outfit that displayed her ‘Canadianess’ and also her modesty as a Muslim.

Anna believes that although she still felt just as connected to her Canadian identity as she did before she converted, not everyone around her felt the same way; they saw her veil and her connection to Islam only. She explains that many of her friends who are also white converts faced the same obstacles as she did, noting, “I know a lot of white converts who abandon their Canadian identity when they convert. They abandon their whiteness, they abandon that aspect of themselves because they don’t think they are compatible...I’m striving to be in tune with both.” As Anna continued to experience ‘being’ Muslim and exploring different veiling styles, she became more aware that being Muslim and being Canadian were compatible and that choosing



Figure 18: Anna's Canada Day outfit. The colours symbolize her nationalism while the style reflects her religious beliefs.

one side over the other was unnecessary. She does not believe that factors such as ethnicity or religion could change one's status as a Canadian. As Islam continues to grow as a religion, Anna feels that Canada will face an interesting turn in identity representation. She explains:

I think at this point people don't see much of a difference between white Muslims and converts. They think every white Muslim is a convert and every convert is a white Muslim... something interesting to consider though is that when I have kids, it will be different. There will be white kids out there in the world, white Muslims out in the world who have never been anything except Muslim. Everything will be changing in the next ten to twenty years when there will be white Muslims in Canada who are not converts.

According to Anna, this reality could change the way people perceive Muslims and the way they are represented in the media. Anna is curious to see how this dynamic will unfold and the impact it will have. She wonders if this change in demographics would force a change in Canada, saying, "I think in Canada there is no space for dichotomy; I think there's only space for inclusion."

Anna shares her unique experience as a convert, the connection she feels with both communities, the Muslim community and the non-Muslim community, which she defines primarily as other whites: "I still wear Western clothes because I still have a connection with the people who look like me because I'm Muslim, but I'm still white, I'm still like them." Although Anna initially struggled with this dichotomy, she has learned to use her status as a white Muslim to bridge the gap of understanding she feels exists between Muslims and non-Muslims:

I have a bigger advantage (over non-white Muslims) in that people know how to make a connection to me and that connection is over my white skin, but that's better than nothing especially when it comes to breaking down barriers with groups in society. I'm the bridge

between two communities.

Anna sees her veil as playing a vital role in fostering positive relationships between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities but also in negotiating her own role within both communities. She notes, “If I didn’t wear *hijab*, I don’t think either community would see me as a fitting in either place.” She recognizes her headscarf as “the biggest symbol” on her body and shares that “I never thought about it like that, but my scarf is like a flashing billboard.” She admits that when she first began to wear the headscarf her parents were unhappy with her decision:

They were telling me that I don’t understand the seriousness of the message I am sending across and I have to admit that at the time I didn’t get it, I was like, ‘no come on, no one cares’ but, people do care. Both communities care. The Muslim community cares if a Muslim woman wears *hijab* and the non-Muslim community cares very much what the Muslim community is doing.

She describes her parent’s reluctance in accepting her new faith, referring to it as a “bumpy ride.” Although her father accompanied her on the day she converted, she told me it was difficult for them to accept her decision, particularly when it came to wearing the headscarf:

My parents raised me with a certain set of beliefs and I changed those. My parents who don’t believe in God and I’m telling them I believe in God? That’s a sticking point. And then when you say something like *hijab* you do for the sake of God, they don’t understand the argument because they don’t get the concept of God. So it’s a chain thing.

However, Anna emphasizes that regardless of this, her parents have always been supportive of her decision to convert, whether they agreed with it or not. “They accepted it yes, but it’s still hard.” It is for this reason that it was difficult for Anna to initially explore her identity as a Muslim while living at home. Furthermore, the Muslim presence in her small Ontario hometown

was minimal, making it difficult at times for Anna to experience “being Muslim” at all times, unless she was with her Muslim friends. “I would spend time with my Muslim friends and cover totally and then I’d go back to my regular everyday life and just be a white girl, not a Muslim, so I was exposed to two total extremes.” It was not until she moved away from home to attend University that Anna felt she was able to explore her identity as a Muslim with more openness. “When I moved to Ottawa it took me outside of both contexts and allowed me for the first time to explore what *hijab* really meant.”

In Ottawa, Anna made connections with other Muslim students and met converts who were facing similar struggles adjusting to their new faith while trying to reconcile this with their previous beliefs. While Anna wore the veil full time in Ottawa, she would take it off for her visits home: “We kind of came to an understanding for a couple of years that in Ottawa I wear it and when I go home to my family I don’t; when we travel as a family I don’t and that’s an unspoken rule, I just take it off.” However this rule had recently changed as Anna now wears her scarf full time: “I just decided it was time to take the next step and pursue it and it’s something that I want and it’s something that my parents continue to not agree with but they understand it’s something that I do for myself.”

Anna is amused at the gradual way her parents are slowly coming to accept her headscarf. There were shopping trips where Anna’s mother would suggest pashminas to go along with Anna’s outfits and when they would bump into community members on family outings her mother was known to say, “This is my daughter Anna, she’s Muslim!”

Anna recently organized a family vacation to Morocco to give her parent’s a glimpse into the “Muslim world.” She believed it would help them understand her better and be less intimidated by this new part of her life. It would also be a learning experience for Anna who

continuously emphasized that her journey into Islam was still a process, “I’m new at this too” she said. When she returned she shared pictures of their trip on Facebook. It was fascinating to see Anna in her veil fully covered alongside her sister, whom she had a striking resemblance to, wearing shorts and tank tops. It was almost like looking at an image of Anna before and after she began veiling. It was also interesting to see Anna’s family’s exposure to Islam in this particular way, through another country’s practice of the religion, in many ways significantly different from the Muslims and Islam in Canada. There were pictures of them riding camels and walking through the dessert using traditional shawls to cover their faces to protect from the blowing sand. In these pictures the whole family would perhaps ‘look’ Muslim to an outsider.

Beauty is a concept Anna continues to negotiate since she began veiling. She defines beauty in relation to religion and believes that “because we are all a creation of God we are automatically beautiful.” However, she is also aware of beauty as a commercialized concept and the reality of its effects on women. One of her struggles when she started veiling was the self-realization that wearing a headscarf meant hiding a part of her own ideal of beauty. For Anna, covering her hair was a defining moment. It forced her to critically examine her own self-worth as a woman and how society portrayed beauty: “I go through that struggle on a daily basis”. Anna believes that most Muslim women in North America are just as affected by the images they see through the media as non-Muslim women are, even though women such as herself did not dress the same way:

Women in this society regardless of religion or beliefs are exposed constantly to what they should be and when it comes to this society, I think Muslim women who do cover are trying to navigate. For me it’s navigating the divide between fashion and that world which is so appealing to the people in this society which is the runways and the models

and the toned body and all that is out there and I have to balance that with my beliefs which are strong within me and in doing that I know that I have stylized my *hijab* and the way I covers so it reflects both aspects. It reflects faith but also the society I am living in. Self-esteem is a big issue for every girl in society where we're inundated with images of what we should look like and I think people forget that under the *hijab*, once we as Muslim women go home at the end of the day and take it all off, we still look at ourselves and we still see what other people don't see. We see our whole body and so we still compare ourselves to any other women, to the models, to the actresses, because it doesn't matter what no one else sees what we look like, what we see is important to us.

Anna identifies the differences in beauty standards she feels exist between her Muslim friends, particularly those who were South Asian, and herself. Anna who has fair skin is often using creams and tanning beds to achieve a darker look while many of her Muslim friends display envy of her fair skin and light eyes "because that, in their minds, is the definition of beautiful" said Anna, "all these concepts have been drilled into their minds by the media." Interestingly enough, Anna explains that veiling actually made it easier for her to be seen as beautiful, but predominantly within the Muslim community where she felt certain features were held in high regard when it comes to beauty. If Anna did not veil she thinks she would feel pressure to be a reflection of the thin white models people see on the runway. She explains "I could more easily be compared to the average white model whereas when I'm covering, no one thinks to compare me to those models." However, this does not detract from Anna's own desire to look like the images she sees on the runway. Whereas the other participants do not directly relate to the images they see of models primarily because many of them were white, Anna feels that because she is white, she often compares herself to them. "The way I have been raised in this

society, looking at ads and being a white woman and looking at other white women, those women are my role models, I'm totally informed by them. That may not be true for other cultures, but it's true for me." For Anna, this directly affects her self-esteem and how she chooses to veil:

Part of the reason that I do dress as a Western woman is because I feel like what is beautiful is what is shown to me as beauty for my ethnicity and my culture and I have to work with that concept of beauty. I can't take another culture and do that. I love Indo-Pak clothes but I can only wear them on special occasions because on an everyday occasion I can't be beautiful in those. I need to look at those images as much as possible and I still strive for that and that's me being honest with myself. I still wish that I could transcend that but I can't. For me, my concept of beauty is defined exactly by Victoria Secret and exactly the fashion shows and all these kinds of things where they use white women because those are my role models.

Anna extends these feelings to almost every woman saying "Women who are a part of this society look a certain way and want to look a certain way." She feels that often non-Muslims and even Muslims who did not veil assumed veiled women did not care to look beautiful and therefore did not look at veiled women as anything but a religious symbol. "I think people think we don't fit into the images of beauty and that gives them a reason to exclude us from society." We both shared stories of similar comments we received about how veiling meant "not worrying about looking pretty." Anna disagrees wholeheartedly with these sentiments stating "it seems a little condescending because what makes you think that because I wear this I don't think I'm beautiful? I can assure you that there are days when I get dressed up and I feel amazing. Doesn't every woman want to feel that way? When did that change?" During a focus group Anna made

similar comments stating:

Hijab to me means that in myself I see more value than maybe other women do and I know that sounds very faith-centric, but I don't question my potential for beauty or sexiness; I know I have it and because I know I have it, I don't have to flaunt it or sexualize it or be what other people want me to be.

Anna adds that although Muslim women like herself do not publicly display this side of their sexuality, which she links intrinsically to femininity, it does exist. "It's not that we can't look like that because we can, we just have to do it in a different context." Anna shares stories of bachelorette and other all girl parties she attended with friends saying "we can't walk down the sidewalk in short skirts but you go to a girl's only party and you should see the short skirts and low neck tops."

Anna describes the process of how she prepares for these gatherings in a photovoice journal entry writing "the 3 or 4 hour event is often preceded by at least 2 hours of prep: hair,



makeup, outfits, jewelry...when you get to the location, you whip off the long coat or *abaya* that was hiding what was underneath." This is a side of the veil that people seldom saw; the stark contrast of a fully cloaked woman removing her mysterious robe to reveal barely there clothing.

During a focus group session Anna admits that veiling in some ways affects her sense of femininity. "I am not going to lie, there

Figure 19: Anna preparing to attend an all-girl's party.

are a lot of times where I wish I could just do my hair.” For Anna, hair is a defining feature of a woman and a major component of how she perceives beauty. Her own vision of modesty would enable her to somehow morph the best of both worlds from her pre-Muslim day wardrobe with her post-conversion wardrobe: “It would still be defined as modest by most people but without covering my hair, you know, and a skirt that goes to my knees.” For Anna, hiding all parts of her body, especially since she at one time did show certain parts, informs her sense of beauty and femininity; “I wish people could see that side of me, to know that I am beautiful and sexy.” In an effort to share with her colleagues that this side existed, Anna often invited her female coworkers to the all-girl parties she hosted at her home. “I think it’s important that they know it exists...my mom, my family, my sister, they’ve all been exposed to that side and it makes them see every Muslim girl in a different light.”

When I asked Anna what her thoughts were on veiled woman looking sexy she first clarified that the word sexy has varying definitions. Her definition of the concept sexy was influenced by her upbringing as a non-Muslim and was a reflection of “western standards.” “Sexy in western standards is tight and a little skimpy” she explained, “and there’s a big difference to me between looking beautiful and looking sexy.” Anna defines sexy as “hormone driven,” the act of consciously making your body appear desirable to others and “satisfying someone else’s needs.” Anna feels these moments are to be reserved for private spaces where the one who was looking could be controlled by the person displaying the sexiness. In a journal entry she wrote “Isn’t it wonderful that I can look forward to those moments where I have ownership and control over my appearance, over my sexiness, rather than having such an outfit degraded and usurped by the stares and comments of men on a bus?” This does not however take away Anna’s desire to be looked at in a romantic way, “not lewdly, but like, in appreciation of

our bodies” she stated. Although Anna veils to preserve her modesty she feels that people misunderstand this to mean she was ‘hands off’, not to be approached or looked at with romantic interest. Regardless of one’s faith, feeling desirable was an innate emotion Anna felt every women had, stating “women want men to look at them and I think all those things that they see in the movies, because we see that, we’re still exposed to that, and I have to say on my part that I can’t wait for the day when I get to wear a short skirt in front of a man again.”

Although Anna said she always dressed modestly even before she converted, she recalls her days prior to converting and the “inherit sexual power” she remembered possessing solely through the way she clothed her body, even though there was nothing overtly sexy about the way she dressed. In Anna’s opinion, hiding one’s hair plays a big part in taking away some of this sexual power. She pointed to the images I had shown earlier of famous models and actresses and pointed out that every single one of them had her hair down. Long flowing hair seems to be a sexual symbol. Now, as a veiled woman, she admits that dressing up her veil was on some level a substitute for doing her hair. Anna describes it as an effort to portray the beautiful side of veiling. She also adds that some see her interest in accessorizing and ‘doing’ her veil as a contradiction to the so called modest purpose behind veiling. To this she responds that modesty is not the only factor to take into consideration, she also wants to continue to fit in as she moves around in everyday life:

I care what I look like when I leave the house and I care how other people see me when I leave the house but I think that maybe has more to do with wanting to be seen as a member of society rather than a beautiful person or a



Figure 20: "The sexy that exists underneath the hijab" writes Anna, showcasing a collection of her undergarments.

sexy woman. It has more to do with just being recognized as being a part of here which given that I'm Canadian no one should question but because I'm Muslim, they all do.

While Anna at times blurs the line between being Canadian and being Muslim, when we went over her transcripts, I pointed out a repeated pattern of Anna referring to herself as Canadian while the other girls were referred to as Muslims. This caused Anna to reexamine her own beliefs about who was Canadian. Although she believed the other girls in the study were just as Canadian as she was, she had a tendency to refer to only herself as Canadian. After much reflection Anna shared that she felt the other participants' skin color gave them a different experience as Canadians because in many ways they fit into an image of what was expected of a Muslim while she felt she did not because of her whiteness. The other women also identified with other geographical regions such as Pakistan and Somalia while Anna only identified with Canada. She did not relate to a 'back home' or the concept of being from somewhere else. These factors affected her understanding of 'being' Canadian and did not make her more Canadian but perhaps Canadian differently, because she had experienced it in a way the other women did not.

'Being' Muslim

How Anna defines veiling, and what veiling means to her emerge as two different notions. Anna defines veiling "solely within religious context." She uses her understanding of the Quran to outline the perimeters of what veiling includes, writing in one of her photovoice journal entries that veiling, by her definition, meant "the act of covering at minimum, all parts of the body except the hands, feet and face (although these can be covered) while in public." However, she adds that this is her interpretation of the Quran and she recognized that every individual "comes to it with a different interpretation." Ultimately, Anna sees veiling as sign of

her commitment to God and the way she veils is between her and God only, whether this means following the above definition at all times or not.

What veiling actually means to Anna is a far more personal narrative. She does not look to any Islamic texts to give meaning to the place it has in her life. Veiling is a symbol of her accomplishments as a Muslim over the past three years. “I did have to fight to become Muslim” said Anna “and then once I became Muslim I had to fight my way into the community.” Anna describes the obstacles she endured since taking the decision to convert. While one obstacle was standing her ground and proving herself to the people who do not accept this new side of her identity, both within the Muslim and non-Muslim communities, the other was confronting her own subjectivity, trying to figure out where she stands now as a Muslim, as a Canadian and as a woman. She describes this mental shift in detail:

There seems to be such a dichotomy that exists between Islam and the West. I don't see that. I refuse to see that they are incompatible and I refuse to believe that there is some sort of line down the middle. I consider myself to be evidence that there is no line. You can be both. So veiling, even beyond the veil, the entire way I dress, is my balance and so when I put on my veil, I'm not just the West, I'm also Islam and I can be both and I mean it's significant religiously, it's significant socially and it's significant politically certainly. I'm well aware of all the implications, I do it knowingly. It has significance in so many aspects of my life that to take it off would probably hurt me in the sense that I would feel deprived because like I said, I don't want to put it this way, but it's kind of like my trophy. I've accomplished this. This is the point I was trying to get to and now I'm here, and now that I'm here, I don't want to move away from that. I'm happy here. This was the goal for the past six or seven years of my life and I'm not only content with how I



Figure 21: A sample of Anna's collection of scarves.

practice but I'm content with how I continue to be Canadian in my identity as well, and so veiling is important to me in the sense that it is striking that balance. I know some people see it as incompatible with Canada, but I really don't. I think it epitomizes what this country is about. Striking a balance is a point Anna emphasizes repeatedly throughout the study. She sees veiling as an outward representation of her inner

commitment to God but one that was completely compatible with her lifestyle as a Canadian. Although she often comes across as absolutely confident in her choice to convert and her decision to veil, she does not want this to be mistaken for blind faith. She continues on a daily basis to question and challenge the choices she made, stating, "I'm critical of my own religion...I question everything and I question it daily. I question every morning whether or not I want to put on the *hijab* – it's still a conscious choice you know?" When Anna's family or friends question her decision to veil, she has a signature response, one that helps them to understand that the veil plays a positive role in her life, not a negative one. She states, "At the end of the day, this veil is making me a better person, so how can that be a bad thing?"

Anna proves her commitment to balance by the way she dresses. In an entry of her photovoice journal she defines fashion as "the collection of trends, styles, clothes, accessories, jewelry and 'looks' that are popular in the mainstream of a given society at a given time." For Anna, following the latest trends is important. She emphasizes many times that she believes in taking the time to take care of herself and present herself in a "professional" manner in all

situations. She describes her headscarf as “much a part of your look as anything else.” She describes her desire to match a “fetish” along with her love for shoes. Just as her veil represents one side of her identity, she sees her clothing as an extension of this, an opportunity to communicate without words who she is and what she likes. Anna feels that the color of her headscarf holds particular power in sending a message to those around her; it is for this reason she seldom wears black. In a journal entry she writes, “I have found that my family, non-Muslim friends and coworkers really don’t like black. I think the legacy of it as a color of mourning and oppression lingers.” Her preference was to wear blues to bring out her rosy cheeks, or white to give her the appearance of a tan. “Tans and caramels look the nicest” she notes in a journal entry “because they most closely resemble my hair colour.” She recognizes the power her veil has to send a message, “What’s great is picking the message I want to send.”

It is important to Anna that people know that veiling does not mean conformity. “You can still be a person and you can still be an individual” voicing her concern that many of her non-Muslim friends and her own family members initially thought veiling meant having to give up one’s individual identity. Anna suggests that non-Muslims perceive that all Muslim women had to practice the veil in the same way and she blames the repeated images shown in the news of Muslim women dressed identically in black from head to toe. While Anna admits that at one time she herself fitted this stereotype, she has since “outgrown” this understanding of the veil. Therefore, for Anna, dressing in fashion forward ways is also her way of communicating to people that it is possible to maintain your individual style while practicing the veil.

Anna’s journey through various *hijab* styles, particularly, the way she wears her headscarf, is much like the other three women. Anna started with the triangle scarf, “everyone starts that way” she laughed. I thought back to my own journey and realized it was how I started

veiling also. There seems to be something safe about the triangle headscarf, a good starting place for first time *hijabis*. A year later and more comfortable in her *hijab*, Anna started experimenting with what she described as sheylas; long rectangular pieces of cloth made of lightweight material that she wrapped around covering all her hair. Approximately 6 months ago, she started wearing pashminas. Similar to sheylas in shape, pashminas primarily meant fabric of the highest quality. This scarf is wrapped in different styles depending on the look Anna wants to achieve, including “volumizing” and draping it loosely around her neck to let her earrings show. She also started experimenting with headscarf jewelry and accessories which were essentially ornate headbands such as the one she was wearing that day. “You just have to sit down in front of a mirror and try new things. You just have to experiment once in a while as with anything” she said, explaining how she came to wear her current style.

When it came to her fashion dos and don'ts, Anna describes her taste as *classic*. She sticks to neutrals when it comes to high end pieces such as her blazers, pants and skirts. She then likes to brighten up her look with a printed top or headscarf, “though never together” she clarifies, “I don't like to be overpowering, one bold piece and then everything else compliments it somehow.” She begins any outfit with first picking out a signature piece and working around it. She often begins with a pair of shoes; Anna loves shoes. In fact, that very morning her dilemma had been that the shoes she wanted to wear did not match the outfit she wanted to wear “so I had to switch up my shoes and make a sacrifice” she laughed. “The shoes have to match” she explained, “If my shoes don't match, I feel like the whole outfit is not put together.” Piecing together outfits is a “creative rush” for Anna. The designers she looks to for inspiration including the pricey Chanel brand and Marc Jacobs and the lines Banana Republic and Forever21, stores she shopped at often. Her style icon is the newly titled Duchess, Kate Middleton.

Colleagues at work are impressed with Anna's sense of style, though she often wonders if this is only because they do not expect it from a veiled woman. This is something that crosses Anna's mind every morning as she dresses for work. How does her veil affect those around her? Does the way she veils change their perception of the veil? It is one of the reasons Anna avoids wearing black headscarves. Besides the fact that she felt the color black made her look pale, she also feels it feeds into the stereotypical image of a veiled woman. I asked Anna who it was she was dressing for, since taking her colleagues into consideration affected her wardrobe to some extent. "Almost entirely for myself" she replies. We laugh at her brutal honesty. She explains that dressing fashionably is something she does for her self-esteem but she also recognizes that this self-esteem comes from an unspoken acceptance from those around her. According to Anna, wanting to dress on trend is a reflection of societal acceptance.

One of the biggest struggles Anna has faced since she converted to Islam are the few encounters she has had with strangers who called her "a traitor." She was visibly upset when she told us about these experiences during a focus group. This comment implied that Anna had somehow betrayed and abandoned her loyalty as a Canadian by converting to Islam, again suggesting that the two were incompatible. She is still trying to understand these comments and how she feels about them. As a white Canadian, Anna said these incidences were the first time she had ever experienced "real discrimination." In many ways, Anna feels she understands the root of such comments saying, "A lot of people's anti-Islamic or anti-Muslim sentiment can be linked to things like problems with immigration and terrorism and those kinds of fears," a mentality Anna said she could relate to since she grew up in a community where she heard similar comments made. However, this was before she converted to Islam. Now as a Muslim, a comment such as this not only offends her, it puts her on the defensive. Anna learned to

overcome the comments stating, “Getting caught up in it can be debilitating and I don’t want to be paranoid.” She chooses to regard such negative incidents as single cases of hatred and not the sentiments of most Canadians.

Being around different cultures influences how Anna wears her headscarf, particularly when she wears traditional Indo-Pak clothing such as the *shalwar kameez*. “When I’m around the Indian community and I’m wearing a *shalwar kameez* and I’m wearing a *dupatta*, I’m not in a hurry to make sure my hair is covered, even if a guy comes in. I just put my *dupatta* on my head and then it just kind of sits half on until he leaves then it flies back down” laughs Anna. She demonstrates using her own scarf how much of her hair was still visible during these situations, but given that all the women around her were veiling in similar ways, it seemed acceptable for her to bend the rules slightly. I asked her during a discussion group why space changed the way she veiled to which she replied, “there are different norms about *hijab*” and these norms change with every gathering Anna explains. Covering her whole head in public, especially when going to work and attending University, was partially because it was easier to maintain a headscarf that was securely pinned than to loosely wear a scarf over her head. It is also the way most Muslim women cover while in public. She notes that she has friends who show some hair when they veil, particularly their bangs. Anna’s mother had encouraged her to explore this style, “My mother actually prefers that look because it shows that I *do* have hair...in case people think I wear this because I don’t have any!” Anna was joking but she did believe people sometimes forgot that veiled women had hair. We shared similar stories of taking off our headscarf in public restrooms in order to adjust it. Sometimes, not so subtle bystanders look on in amazement. Perhaps they were unsure of whether or not they were allowed to see our hair or if it was out of sheer curiosity to see what it was that we spent so much time hiding. We both find it amusing and agree that

either way it is interesting because it shows a side of us the outside world rarely saw.

Anna feels it is important that non-Muslims have exposure to veiled women to demystify the image that exists of them. She feels it would help non-Muslims feel comfortable asking questions about the veil, a critical part of building understanding. When Anna discusses the veil with non-Muslims it is important for her to go beyond just the physical representation of the veil. As someone who was once an ‘outsider’ she understands that sometimes the meaning of *hijab* is lost in solely the piece of cloth that covers a Muslim woman’s body. It is important for her to share the concept of modesty in Islam and how in maintaining a degree of modesty, one is in fact submitting to God. When talking about the *hijab* with non-Muslims and as a convert who herself who was just beginning to learn the Arabic language, Anna discussed the importance of using English words to articulate important Islamic symbols such as the veil. “*Hijab*, as with so many Arabic terms that are used in the English language...you lose part of the connotation,” explains Anna “so I’m actually a big supporter of using English words to describe Islamic concepts because it makes it much clearer for people and you can be more conscious of the connotation of certain words.” Anna explains how the term *hijab* had come to mean just the headscarf but this was at times misleading because a Muslim woman could consider herself to be dressed modestly and covered appropriately and thus in *hijab*, which simply means ‘to cover’ yet not be covering her head. Similarly, a woman could be wearing a full *niqab* and also refer to this as *hijab*. Anna feels it is necessary to make distinctions between the types of veil so to not generalize all those who veiled. This would help people understand the complexity of veiling.

Being ‘More’ Muslim

Anna is diplomatic when it comes to defining what she considers ‘proper’ veiling. Although she defines veiling in her written definition, she believes every veiled woman has the

right to veil in accordance to her own definition. Anna understands the courage it takes to veil; making the decision to veil in Canada or anywhere outside a Muslim country is difficult because it is not considered the norm, and post 9/11 it has become the target of much criticism. Anna also feels that in countries such as Canada, the veil has a heavier burden to carry compared with the beard that many Muslim men wear as a sign of their religious affiliation to Islam: “I’m sorry, a beard does not tell the world you’re Muslim, especially if you go around wearing suits.” We discussed at length that many of the Muslim men we knew did not have beards yet interestingly enough, their modesty is seldom brought into question. A Muslim man could have no beard and still be considered pious if he is engaging in the five main pillars of Islam including praying five times a day and observing fasting during the month of Ramadan. This is different for Muslim women who, seemed to pass judgment on one another’s state of piousness based on the layers they are wearing. Anna notes (as did the three other participants) that a woman fully covered is often considered to be more religious than a woman ‘only’ wearing a headscarf or no veil at all, even though this may not be the case. Anna’s own experience spoke to this: “I had to take off my *niqab* and just wear a headscarf to be a better Muslim.” Furthermore, having a beard is actually considered on trend these days as Anna and I did an impromptu search on the internet of male models and fashion blogs. We agreed that a beard did not automatically associate a man with Islam and that Muslim men could actually pick and choose when they wanted to be recognized as Muslim. This is not the case for Muslim women whose veils almost always identify them as Muslims. Therefore, Anna feels that any woman who makes the decision to veil as a commitment to her religion, regardless of how she wears it, deserves respect, not criticism. “I wouldn’t want to be judged, and I know I am, so I really avoid judging other people about it...honestly, of all things to worry about in religion, if you’re worried about a piece of clothing,

you've got bigger problems." She reiterates that wearing the veil is a personal choice and whether Muslim women chose to wear it or not, is between them and God.

Our discussion on what Anna considered "appropriate veiling" leads to her own stories about comments she received on her veiling style. While some individuals support Anna's decision to take off the *niqab* and embrace a more "balanced way of veiling in Canada" as she describes it, others told her that by taking it off, she had taken a step backwards. When the women in the focus group heard Anna used to wear a *niqab*, they were all shocked that she veiled in such an "extreme way". Comments and reactions such as these caused Anna to reflect on the veil and her performance of it. Anna veils because it is meaningful to her but she finds that at times the sole focus is on the veil, not the person wearing it or the inner spirituality it represents: "I don't understand why the West is absolutely obsessed with images of the *hijab*." Anna is not attributing this growing obsession to non-Muslims alone, over last decade Muslims too have begun sharing in the "obsession" over the veil and as a result, perpetuating misunderstandings about it. For Anna, the veil is in many ways a superficial aspect of Islam, something that has significance only in relation to inner spirituality: "You can be the worst Muslim and wear *hijab* and you can be the best Muslim and not wear it." Anna explains that some of her own friends who she regards as deeply religious "but they did not put on *hijab* until last year." Anna encourages Muslim women to contemplate the veil and to make a "personal connection" with it before making the decision to wear it. "I wouldn't enforce *hijab*" she states, "it's a very personal thing." Anna believes that if Muslim women continue to be more critical about veiling, it will result in more critical dialogue about veiling. This would help create a better understanding of the veil globally. It would result in less fear and misunderstandings about Muslims and Islam in general.

While the other girls had discussed the politics that occur amongst veiled woman, Anna shares a similar experience with Aleena. She talks about the instant bond she feels to other Muslim women. There is an unspoken sisterhood that accompanies veiling:

I think there is also an element that hasn't been discussed that should be mentioned and it's the concept of solidarity, like when you're walking down the street and you see another *hijabi*, you tend to smile at each other because you feel even if you don't know them, there's like this unspoken communication that we're both in a similar situation and we're both coming up against similar adversities, but we're also succeeding. I work downtown in the business district and it's really great when I see a woman wearing a suit and her *hijab* and I'm wearing my suit and my *hijab* and you smile and you connect because you understand what each other has gone through to get to that point.

For Anna, this bond is one of the most appealing aspects of veiling. According to her, it puts women on an equal playing field when it comes to their bodies. "The way we dress is not just to look sexy or to find a boy" Anna affirms, "which I think is what a lot of women are doing right now." Anna believes veiling puts women on the same 'side' where they are not using their bodies to compete with one another. While Anna acknowledges that politics amongst veiled women does occur, she feels the bond they shared is more noteworthy. She also feels that this

bond crossed religious boundaries bringing into the discussion the veil worn by nuns belonging to Christian faiths. She shares with me stories of her visits back home where she now openly veiled. While on walks with her family, Anna often passes by a Roman-Catholic nunnery, “Literally every time I walk past them there are always smiles because I think there is this understanding that we’re both veiling for a higher purpose...I think it goes beyond the confinement of a particular religion.” Anna explains that women of different faiths could use modesty as a middle ground to connect with one another. She explains how her grandmother, a Roman Catholic was intrigued by Anna’s veil from the day she started experimenting with it. When Anna first began veiling around her family, her grandmother had even requested to try one on asking, “Do you think it would be offensive if I put it on? Would it offend Muslims?” Anna was more than happy to help her grandmother loosely wrap one of her triangular scarves over her hair. Anna explains that her grandmother admired Anna’s modesty and told of her own stories when it was common for women of Roman-Catholic faith to veil when going out in public. Since



Figure 22: A collection of Anna's short dresses, reserved for all-girl parties.

then, Anna said she has had many stimulating conversations with her grandmother who still considers herself a devout Christian. The two of them often discuss religion and compare the similarities between their respective faiths. “It’s a really interesting conversation to have with your own grandmother” muses Anna.

When it came to the concept of modesty in Islam, Anna feels it is a topic she has to

revisit often. Perhaps because Anna was brought up in a non-Muslim family, her concept of modesty is often much more lenient than her Muslim friends. She describes modesty in relation to professionalism stating:

If you wouldn't wear it to work in front of an important person or someone you're trying to keep the utmost standards for, then it doesn't count as modest...a lot of people seem to have certain standards when they go into the office because you have your reputation attached to it right? Well, why are you not respecting your reputation at all times?

Anna points out that this definition of modesty did not necessarily include covering one's hair or any of the ways Muslim women often veil. Anna firmly believes that there are different ways to pursue modesty and emphasizes that, "people have different interpretation of modesty." One of the interpretations that intrigues Anna is that modesty is meant drawing attention away from oneself. To Anna, "that's not the point of modesty...modesty is about preserving certain elements but it's also about blending in." Anna feels that clothing is a primary marker when it comes to individual identity. While veiling inevitably makes her stand out in some aspects, she does not believe it has to be in a negative way, "modesty does not equal ugliness" emphasizing that veiled women can be modest and represent themselves in a positive way through the way they dressed. Anna's personal understanding of Islam guides the way she performs the veil: "For me, I believe that covering my hair in particular and then ensuring that all the rest of my clothing is modest...and honestly, it [the headscarf] is an important symbol it is a reminder everyday of what I believe and how I want to pursue my faith."

Anna notes that her definition of modesty is always evolving. Aspects of modesty Anna believed in three years ago are not necessarily the same as those she holds today. Her decision to take off the *niqab* in exchange for just a headscarf is an example of this. Anna feels "more

modest” in her current veil because she could “blend in” and to Anna, blending in is an important part of modesty because it suggests that one was a productive, contributing member of society. Once again, Anna emphasizes the importance of veiling in ways that balance with her lifestyle as a Canadian.

Acting Hijabi

Over the past three years, Anna has become the official source on Islam for her family and friends. Although there is much that she is still learning herself about the religion, her visits back home often spark new questions. Many times these questions are based on political events in the news, one such example being the controversy surrounding the *hijab* in France. For the most part, Anna does not mind sharing her opinion on issues such as this because she feels her parents in particular are asking out of concern for Anna and the impact such events may have on her life as a Muslim. However, as a student in International Development, she often faces similar questions from her Professors and colleagues. She is called upon to speak on behalf of all Muslims about some of the hardships Muslims around the world were facing. “People expect me to be the voice of all Muslim people” she stated “and I’m sitting there thinking, I can’t even speak to what the majority think, I’m a minority in the Muslim community!” Anna refers to her status as a convert and the recognition that as a fairly new convert she did not face many of the hardships her Muslim-born friends faced growing up.

I know there’s racism out there and I know many Muslims face it daily, but I really haven’t. I don’t know if that’s linked to the fact that I was able to escape it when I was younger because I wasn’t Muslim...but sometimes I wonder if maybe it’s because I’m white and if I was a black convert it might be different.

Anna recognizes many of the privileges that came along with being white stating, “I can speak from my perspective of my religion and my experience as a Canadian Muslim but I don’t think that’s a fair representation of what most Muslims go through.”

Anna often chooses to stay quiet when issues surrounding Muslims came up during class. She feels this actually gave others an opportunity to reflect critically on important issues such as the veil and women’s right in Muslim countries. The only time Anna does intervene is when she feels religion is being mixed up with culture: “The only thing I find myself speaking up on is the clarification between the religion and the culture because that’s something that is a foreign concept to a lot of non-Muslims, that there are many Muslim cultures that have little to do with Islam.” She feels this is an important distinction to make because many of the misconceptions her peers have about Islam are about cultural practices that have no basis in Islam.

While Anna does not want the burden of representing all Muslims, she does acknowledge that representing Muslim women is an automatic responsibility that accompanies wearing the veil. Whether she likes it or not, many individuals make generalizations about *all* veiled woman based on their interactions with one. Anna accepts this responsibility to a certain extent and uses her veil as an opportunity to break stereotypes about the *hijab*. According to Anna, her clothing plays an important role in breaking stereotypes because it gives non-Muslims a chance to relate to her in a personal way, rather than to notice only her headscarf. She describes in detail the connection she sees between the way she veils and breaking stereotypes:

I seem so much more approachable because my coworkers can comment on my jeans and the jacket I’m wearing. I’m approachable and I’m relatable and I take pride in that because what good does it do to be a member of the community if you’re not going to connect to other people? I want to contribute to society and if that’s the case then I need

to be relatable. I need to be approachable and people need to see me as someone they can trust and talk to, so, the way I dress is the first indicator of what my personality is...I want to put people at ease and for them to feel comfortable enough to ask me questions. It doesn't offend me. Why am I wearing a green headscarf today? Why, because it matches, there's no hidden significance, it matches *laughs* so I feel that the way I dress puts people at ease way more so than other styles of Muslim dress out there.

Because the veil makes a Muslim woman easier to spot than a Muslim man, Anna believes that Muslim women have a greater responsibility to spread awareness about Islam and the peaceful role Canadian Muslims such as herself play in society. She explains that "the comfort level the non-Muslim community has with the Muslim community is pretty much directly proportional to the Muslim women and their ability to encourage comfort." Anna firmly believes that the future of Islam in the West lies in the hands of Muslim women. "I am the face of this religion" she states and she suggests that her ability to balance the veil while living in Canada is proof that Muslims were just as Canadian as anyone else.

Anna also believes that she challenges stereotypes in the Muslim community about converts. According to Anna, many converts "got sucked into the radical end of the spectrum" but she sees herself as "somewhere in the middle" balancing both her identity as a Canadian and a Muslim. When she first met many of her friends, they were surprised to learn that at one time she wore the *niqab* but now chooses to wear the headscarf alone. According to Anna, most converts start the other way around, wearing just the headscarf then moving on to the *niqab*. Anna blames this on the tendency converts have to disconnect themselves from their past life as a non-Muslim, not realizing how debilitating this action is. Anna believes such behaviors have far-reaching implications because they continue to perpetuate negative stereotypes about

Muslims, especially Muslim women. She suggests that fully veiling gives non-Muslims the impression that this was the “correct” form of veiling, while in Anna’s opinion; this was more of a cultural practice.

Anna admits that non-Muslims’ perceptions about Islam and those who followed it are important to her. She explains that while living in Canada, it is necessary to care about these perceptions because they directly affect her on a day to day basis:

What other people think, I mean, it’s important to everyone, people like to think it doesn’t matter but it’s as important to me that when I get a smile from someone, a stranger walking down the street, as it is when someone gives me a weird look. All those things affect me.

Anna believes that many negative images are associated with the veil, such as oppression and backwardness, therefore, as a veiled woman, she is very conscious of her status as a Muslim when she is out in public. “We’re kind of a walking billboard sometimes” she said about being veiled, “not some of the times, most of the times!”

In an effort to change the negative perception she feels exists about the veil, Anna makes a conscientious effort to have positive interactions with the non-Muslims around her. This is a deliberate strategy of resisting the stereotypes that exist about Muslims: “Stereotyping is so common” she explains “that I make an extra effort to smile, an extra effort to be generous, and extra effort to be patient, to not be loud or obnoxious or annoying you know?” Her hope is that people will recognize that it is the veil that positively influences her behavior. She wants the veil to shed its present negative discourse and be replaced with more a positive one. Anna understands that this would be a complicated journey but truly believed it is possible. She recognizes that she can only control her own actions and therefore will continue to do her part in

leaving favorable impressions on her community with the hope that it will have a lasting impact on those around her: “I have a strong desire to change this community and change the world by contributing my time, volunteering, going to the soup kitchens and loaning my time there and I’m doing this because I’m Muslim.” Anna was confident this outlook will begin a process of change for the better.

In offering some closing thoughts to our interview Anna reiterates that her veil is informed by her identity as a white Muslim convert who lived in Canada her entire life. “I was born, grew up and was raised here,” she explains, “and I enjoy the fashion from here, but I’m also Muslim so there are certain accommodations you have to make for that.” To Anna, veiling in Canada means sometimes accommodating her own beliefs, but never compromising them. The effort Anna makes to balance her identity as a Canadian and as a Muslim is significant. She does not have to choose one side over the other; it is possible to be both things at once and she is proof of this. It is extremely important for Anna to be considered a member of the larger community and she hopes people reflect on the role they play in fostering feelings of inclusiveness. Anna’s journey is not always an easy one, but one that she is thoughtfully navigating her way through. She reminds the readers that her story is only one perspective and encourages everyone to listen to each other’s narratives as a way of breaking down barriers, “at the end of the day, I do this for me and I understand that there are both advantages and disadvantages to it.”

Synthesis

Anna’s exploration of Islam through different ethnic contexts has profoundly impacted her understanding of the veil. Her experiences speak to the complex nature of how religions are interpreted by different groups of people and how interpretations are influenced by physical

geographies. Over the course of time, she seems to have found her place as a Muslim and how she chooses to follow Islam. She interacts with friends who identify with various geographical locations and she takes on a temporary identity as she wears clothes that are affiliated with a culture distinctively different from her own upbringing. Anna has learned how to navigate in and between these spaces, learning the accepted norms within each. She has learned how these racialized spaces impacts how one veils while keeping in mind that variations still exist amongst groups within the same community.

What makes Anna unique from the other participants are her experiences of ‘being’ white and being recognized as a Canadian by virtue of her skin color. She is able to contrast this experience with her identity as a white Muslim, whereby her recognition as a Canadian has somewhat been taken away from her. Anna’s skin color highlights an intricacy that only other racialized white Muslims encounter. By wearing the headscarf, Anna clearly marks herself as a Muslim. If she chose to not veil her experiences would be significantly different because her identity as a Muslim would be optional. Anna would have the choice of disclosing her status as a Muslim at her own discretion. Depending on the space Anna is in, this disclosure could have implications. This tension of ‘being’ Muslim and ‘looking’ Canadian, leaves Anna with a sense of un-belonging. She is left in a new in between space where she is not always accepted as a Muslim within Muslim spaces and not accepted as a Canadian within white spaces. By veiling, she becomes part of the hijabi community, one that still looks at her with curiosity from time to time; her pale skin a marker of her ‘white’ non-Muslim past. However, Anna brings up a profound consideration. Society collectively will have to re-map their grid of common knowledge over the next generation as racialized white Muslims are born Muslim. Of course this overlooks the fact that even today there are white Muslims who are born Muslim who are not

commonly represented in society.

Anna also grapples with her understanding of femininity and beauty as she is able to compare how she performed these constructs before converting to how she performs them now. More than the other participants, popular cultural representations of femininity perhaps have the biggest impact on Anna. She is able to mirror the images she saw on television and in magazines and as a result affirm her identity as a woman. Now as a veiled woman, the inability to wear the same clothes she once wore influences her identity. She continues to negotiate the tensions of performing femininity in the way it is often represented in the mainstream and the contradictions of doing so while veiling.

Chapter 6

A Semiotic Reading

The images shown are presented in the order in which they were discussed during our focus group sessions. While the women were shown several images under each category, due to space constraints, I have only included a few here. Participants and I decided during the analysis stage which images would be part of the thesis. A semiotic analysis was done to add a layer of dimension to how the women make meaning of the veil. The images are divided into three main categories. Veiling in the Media, (ab)Norms and Veiling and Defining the veil. Images are presented, followed by the discussions that took place.

Veiling and the Media

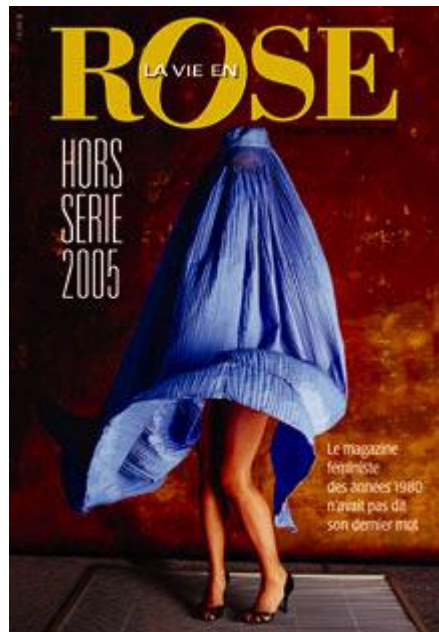


Figure 23: La Vie En Rose (October, 2005). Photographed by Suzanne Langevin.



Figure 24: “Miss July: 2004” - Painted by Makan Emadi.

I chose the original series of images because it re-presents the veil in a manner that is rarely represented. To me, these images challenge the viewer to acknowledge the sexuality of the women who veil. The images are indeed provocative and thought provoking. They show women who are being represented as Muslim from the waist up by virtue of the veil but the lower half of their bodies are exposed contradicting what many individuals ‘know’ of the veiled woman. I ask the women what these images mean to them.

Anna commented that these images represent one of “extremes” stating:

You’ve got extreme coverage and extreme not coverage and that I think creates a dichotomy where I think there doesn’t really have to be one...I think all these images are speaking to something very real which is the hypersexualization of women but in two different discourses. In the west, you have the hypersexualization of the female body resulting in less and less clothing whereas in the east you’ve got people manipulating that hypersexualization to the full coverage of women. You’ve got the same problem of hypersexualization resulting in two different approaches as how to control that. It creates

a concept that there are only two answers: you are either a prostitute or a *burqa* wearing person.

Anna's own journey from the 'extreme' of wearing the *nikab* to how she dresses now exemplifies her dissatisfaction with the dichotomy shown in the images. Finding a middle ground between the top halves of the images and the bottom halves is what she aims to achieve.

Mina's thoughts on the images resonate closely with my own. She sees the bold images as "trying to portray the sex appeal under the veil." She observed that Muslim women who veil completely in the *burqa* and the *nikab* are perceived by others as a-sexual. Images such as the ones above depict a different side of the Muslim woman. Mina noted, "These head to toe veiled women are wild from the inside and under the veil – even if they appear to be religious from the outside." Aleena shared similar sentiments stating that these images force the viewer to reconsider the veiled woman as an object of desirability and question "what is under there?"

Like Mina, Imaan also challenges the notions of sexuality that the images illustrate. She takes on a different perspective however and sees the images as a representation of how some Muslim men, who she described as "puritanical or ultra-conservative," regard women. She asserted that to these men "women should have no voice, no face, no identity. Women are objects to control and are subservient to males in every possible way – physically, sexually, mentally." To Imaan, these images illustrate how the *burqa* is used as an oppressive tool, valuing women primarily for their physicality and ability to satisfy the sexual needs of a man.

I chose the images because I admire both artists' boldness. It illustrates a dimension that perhaps individuals seldom reflect on. The women who cover from head to toe are more than the cloth covering their bodies. Underneath the fabric are women who, arguably, are in more control of their bodies than those who do not cover in this way. They have the power to show their body

to whom they chose.

Or do they? The debate of whether or not these women have autonomy to wear the *burqa* was under constant scrutiny in our focus group discussions. Mina argued:

Maybe it is men who are forcing them to cover in the burqa, and that's wrong, but it's just as wrong for people to say you can't cover in that way. In both cases, someone is telling them how to cover and both groups think they are right and that they are liberating these women in some way.

Mina's comment caused me to pause and reflect on the word 'liberation'. The word has played a significant role in the discourse around the veil. Those who contend the veil and those who support it have often done so in the name of liberation. It was interesting then to consider that throughout the interview and focus group process none of the women used the word 'liberation' to describe their veil. This did not mean they did not gain a sense of sovereignty from it. Anna mentioned in one of her journal entries that veiling gives her the "freedom" to decide who can or cannot have access to her body while Aleena described veiling as giving her a sense of "control." While words such as 'freedom' and 'control' can be interpreted as synonyms for liberation, the women never alluded that the emancipation they experience while veiling includes a sense of being saved or that they need to be liberated by some other individual or group of peoples. It is their own actions as veiled women that reinforce their identities as Muslims.

The (Ab)Norms of Veiling



Figure 25: Top grossing supermodels (from L to R): Gisele Bündchen, Kate Moss and Heidi Klum. Image from: www.newfaces.com. Photographer(s): Unknown.



Figure 26: Actress Jennifer Aniston on the cover of UK Cosmopolitan (June 2009).

Vs.



Figure 28: Singer, songwriter, Yuna Zarai from Los Angeles sharing her hijabi fashion sense with followers on www.lookbook.nu

I showed the participants images of women that who are regarded as desirable in North American society. These images were selected based on top grossing models and actresses in North America and thus assumed desirable based on this fact. Participants compared the images to those of women who veiled in similar ways to them, meaning, pictures of women who wore just the headscarf along with items of clothing they considered ‘western’. They noted that all of the women represented in popular culture such as in fashion shows and television, share common characteristics: they are fair skinned, able bodied, tall, and thin. They also all dress in clothing that reveals their figure and showed plenty of skin. Out of all the women, it is Anna who feels she relates to these images the most. She pointed to her fair skin and said “they’re all white, just like me; of course I compare myself to them. I do want to be like them. These women are my role models.” For Imaan it is the whiteness of these models that reminds her that she does not need to look like the women shown in these images. Again, she commented on their body type and how showing skin is not the only way to look sexy.

The women all agreed that showing skin and accentuating certain features such as one's legs, waist or bust (or all three) are norms in North American culture. One conversation that particularly highlighted this point was when Aleena commented on the images she saw in magazines. She noted, "Just look at ads in magazines and the women on the cover, they are almost always scantily clad. The men usually have on suits and the women are half naked showing cleavage." To this Imaan added, "Showing skin has become so normal, like, we are desensitized to it now; it doesn't faze me anymore because it's everywhere." These taken for granted norms are used by individuals at certain times to express ideals of femininity and beauty and as a way to express 'sexiness'.



Figure 29: Toronto Fashion Week, Fall 2011. Photographed by Jenna Marie Wakani.

Vs.



Figure 30: The Sheila and Abaya Fashion show in Dubai, the Summer 2010 line, showcasing “traditional couture.” Photo courtesy of: www.dubaichronicles.com.

The second set of images are similar, focusing on the types of women shown on fashion runways in Europe and North America (Figure 29). The women were then asked to compare and share their thoughts on the ‘Muslim world’s’ equivalent as I showed them images of women showcasing *abaya* fashion (Figure 30). The images are stark in contrast. The abaya fashion shows seems limited in colour (black) and style. Mina commented that the image of the Western runway models has an impact not only on Muslim women, but women in general. She described the portrayal of models as “overhyped.” By this she means women are often sensationalized with the use of makeup, hair and glamorous clothing. She elaborated that “even non-veiled women have the pressure to try and look like them.” However, Mina felt that veiled women face additional pressure when they see such images stating, “Since we don’t show all these parts of our body that are considered normal, we have to compensate with our fashion sense.” Mina used herself as an example stating how she uses clothing as a way to fit in with what was considered the norm. She described how Muslim women such as herself try to recreate looks they see on other women who are considered fashionable. She added that Muslim women often have to

“sacrifice” by adding layers of clothing to stay within the guidelines of what they consider modest.

Aleena shared that for the most part, she felt images such as these do not phase Canadian Muslim women such as herself. She did not focus on the “cannots” of Islam which she compared to the guidelines or rules that any religion or society has, noting it has nothing to do with trying to control or oppress people, “We all need guidelines; it’s important for the safety and success of any civilization,” she noted. She felt this was particularly true when it came to notions around dressing. Although she recognizes that showing certain parts of one’s body were norms in countries such as Canada, it was not something she dwelled on. She shared that there were plenty of ways of exploring fashion “in ways that are more acceptable in Islamic guidelines.”

Imaan regarded the images of the North American models as oppressive as opposed to the images of the veiled women. She saw these images as dictating to women what they should look like whereas the veil allowed her the freedom to go against these so called norms because as a Muslim woman, she felt no one expected her to look like the images they saw of models and actresses. She explained however that both sets of images influenced her identity deeply:

I think because I veil it’s easier for me to choose what I do and don’t want to wear. I can shape my own interpretation of what it means to be stylish and beautiful because I am free to make that choice. While I work hard to fit the parameters to what it means to be attractive in a western society (i.e. nice makeup, keeping my body in shape, etc.), my veiling protects me from the downsides. To me, any outfit can work with a little ‘*hijabification*’. I can wear a ‘Western’ mini dress with jeggings and sleeves (so, via layering) if I’m going out or if I’m headed to the mosque, I add personality to *abayas* with leather jackets, accessories, etc. Depends on my day and where I’m going and what

I'm doing mostly that dictates the kind of clothing I wear. I also think it easier for me because I grew up here. Individualist societies such as Canada encourage being yourself; you don't have to fit a within certain mould if you don't want to.

Defining the Veil

The discussion on what the women consider acceptable forms of veiling generated much discussion. I selected the images based on the one on one interviews I had with the women earlier. Each of them at different points had mentioned different styles of veiling they did or did not agree with, sometimes even saying “that is not hijab.” Therefore, I showed them the following images and simply asked “Is this hijab?”

The “Camel Hump” Scarf

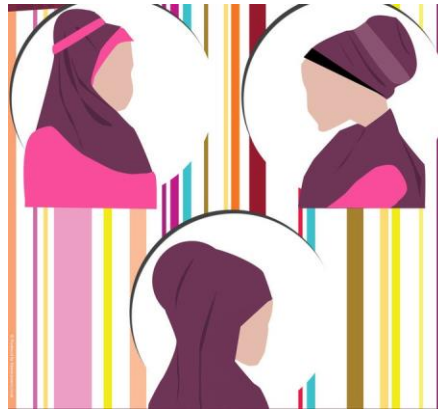


Figure 31: Image courtesy of: www.deviantart.com

This style of veiling accentuated a large bun at the back of the head under the veil. Mina had mentioned earlier that she refers to this look as “alien head.” She feels this particular type of veil symbolizes social status and contradicts the meaning of modesty behind the veil. In a group setting, Mina did not comment on whether or not she felt this style was a ‘proper’ way to veil but

she did say that she personally did not like it. As a fashion statement Mina feels this style should only be worn in Muslim countries where others can contextualize the reasoning behind fashioning the veil in this way; however, within a Canadian context, she feels it sends many confusing messages to non-Muslims, mainly, a growing curiosity that something besides hair is being hidden under the veil.

Mina also feels this particular style of the veil goes against Islamic principles of the veil, Aleena was surprised to learn the controversy that surrounded it saying, “oh really? I never knew that.” According to Aleena, one of the main objectives of the veil was to cover certain parts of one’s body and the picture depicted that the women were covering their hair, regardless of the bump they were fashioning. She defended her view stating “your hair is covered, what else do you want? This is absolutely hijab. Their hair is covered and they are being equally fashionable.” Anna agreed with Aleena, explaining:

Veiling in general is about coverage, it’s not about what the shape of the coverage is. I mean I can’t control, and not to be too graphic, but you can’t control the size of your chest or anything, like, you don’t see resistance that someone should tape them down because it’s too big and will look like camel humps!” she laughed. “You can’t control some factors...and in my opinion, that’s sufficient coverage.

Imaan took a neutral stance on the issue explaining she had heard growing up that a woman’s headscarf style should not resemble a ‘camel hump’ but at the same time she felt this style could indeed be classified as ‘hijab’ and stated, “Religious opinions and paradigms differ, so who am I to say what hijab is and what isn’t?”

Partial Veils



Figure 32: A Model showcases an abaya and headscarf. Image courtesy of: iTechnomedia.com

This image was part of a series of images that were chosen to highlight the style of scarf worn by some women that reveals hair from the front. This is a style I have seen grow in popularity during my travels across the Middle East and on campus in recent years. Out of the group of women, Aleena is the only one who wears her headscarf like this occasionally. She attributed it to her connection with Pakistani culture, her parent's country of origin. Aleena considers this style to be an appropriate style of veiling:

Aleena: In my culture most people wear hijab like that with a little hair showing as long as everything else is covered and you still have it on your head.

Saba: Is there a boundary of how much hair you can show?

Aleena: Well as long as you have it on your head, I'm sure not all of it's going to show so I'm sure that's a given.

Saba: So what if I have my scarf pinned back here *points to halfway point on my head*

does that count?

Aleena: No, I don't think that really counts. That's too much hair. It shows that you're not that serious really.

It was interesting to learn Aleena's perspective on what she considers to be showing 'too much' hair. She believes that showing some hair does not take away from the intention of modesty nor does it accentuate her beauty in anyway. However, there is a fine line between revealing a little bit of hair and revealing too much hair that compromises the integrity of the veil. Mina shared similar sentiments stating "maybe a little bit of hair from the front on certain occasions isn't as bad but when it's too much the question becomes 'why are they wearing any veil at all?'"

Anna disagreed with this particular style of the headscarf. She responded to Aleena's earlier comments with the following:

These women are knowingly not covering their hair...the intention behind it is to cover and something like that is a deliberate intention not to cover...and something like that for me takes away from one of the fundamental components behind hijab which is intention. According to Anna having an ambiguous line between showing 'too much' hair and 'just the right amount' of hair created an unnecessary gray area. This was problematic for her because she does not feel veiling has to be this complicated.

Anna was also uncomfortable with the notion that culture should have an influence on how one veils. She noted "if you're doing *hijab* for the correct intention with a sufficient amount of sincerity then culture shouldn't play a factor...I know it's naive." Anna recognized that culture and religion were hard to separate. She acknowledged her own daily negotiations of balancing her identity as a white Canadian who previously moved freely within a "white culture" as she described it and now as a practicing Muslim. Her daily actions and thought processes were

heavily impacted by her upbringing as a racialized white Canadian. Nonetheless, when it came to veiling, she felt the primary reason any Muslim put it on was because of religion; any other agenda was secondary whether it be political or fashion. For this reason she believed “ culture doesn’t define religion—religion should define culture.”

I asked the women if showing some hair while wearing a headscarf in some way beautified the one wearing it or perhaps gave onlookers a glimpse of what lay hidden underneath, arousing a sense of curiosity. Anna was able to provide a perspective that was unique to her as a convert; the open and brutally honest opinions and questions of a non-Muslim on-looker, in this case, her mother. She shared that her mother actually preferred that Anna wore her headscarf with some of her hair showing. She said beauty had a substantial role in it noting “hair is such a fundamental component to beauty, that’s why we’re covering it in the first place because our hair in many ways next to our face, our hair is our defining feature.” We all agreed and even admitted that although one could look beautiful with a headscarf on, chances were that a woman looked significantly more beautiful if her hair was showing and moreso if her hair was neatly groomed. As for Anna’s mom, Anna recounted incidents when her mother admired the half-on headscarf and commented “See, that is gorgeous! You can still wear a really pretty scarf with a nice pattern and you still get to see some of that blonde.” Anna admitted it does look nice but added “It looks gorgeous, I love it...but that’s something different. I would never go outside the house like that.”

This discussion sparked uncertainty and some discomfort in Aleena who had shared that she occasionally wore the headscarf with some of her hair showing. She paused frequently as she stated, “I feel like I would do it at parties because...I don’t know...it’s a special occasion...but...like...I don’t know.” I reminded everyone that it was okay to have different opinions. The point of the focus group was to explore issues together. I shared that space seemed

to be a reoccurring theme that affected how we veiled. I used myself as an example stating:

When I go to Pakistan, I'm more lenient too. I only wear a loose scarf over my head and for some reason in that space I feel comfortable doing that but I would never do that here. Maybe because everyone here has only seen me with a headscarf on that covers all my hair. I almost think it would make *them* feel uncomfortable if they could suddenly see some of my hair. I think they would think 'oops, don't think I supposed see that'. It's almost like walking in on someone while they're changing.

Makeup and Hijab



Figure 33: "Yemen Niqab Eye" by Seanbean80. Photo courtesy of www.Deviantart.com.

Next, I showed the women images of women who veil with heavily done makeup. In some cases these were women who wear the niqab. To me, these images present an interesting dichotomy, especially in the case of the *niqabi* women who cover every inch of their bodies but the part of their body that is exposed is beautified. This was an especially interesting topic to this particular group of women since all of them wore makeup often, almost on a daily basis. Did this defeat the purpose of modesty? According to Aleena it did not, in fact, she stated "I don't think makeup even has anything to do with *hijab*." She explained that makeup was used to enhance one's features and that depending on the occasion, makeup was necessary to complete the 'look'.

Anna's immediate response was "I wear makeup so yeah, this is okay." I found her choice of words interesting. I challenged her response asking if it was okay because she did it or if she did it because she felt it was okay? She replied:

I have no problem at all with makeup in general. I won't criticize a girl for wearing it or for not wearing it. It's entirely a girl's decision and when it comes to men's reaction...that bothers me because men still have to control themselves and seriously if a woman is covering how much of her body and she puts on eye makeup and you still can't-- I mean if that's seriously going to be some kind of temptation, you know what? You've got much bigger problems to sort out and me wearing makeup is not the problem I can assure you.

Therefore, according to Anna, wearing makeup did not go against her modest intentions behind veiling. She did not accept the argument that veiling meant looking unattractive. Anna felt makeup had more to do with lifting her own self-confidence as a woman than having to do with looking good for other people. She stated "I don't wear makeup for anyone else. All I know is that when I leave the house I feel more confident...it's not about tempting some guy." This was a powerful statement as the women agreed that the dominant perception seemed to be that Muslim women veiled to protect themselves from the gaze of the male viewer. Although to some extent the women believed this to be a part of veil, they strongly agreed that this is not the only reason behind dressing modestly. Veiling empowered the women to see themselves as more than a sexual commodity as women are often represented in the mass media. The women spoke to this several times, such as Aleena who noted that the women on magazine covers often showed much more skin than their male counterparts and Mina who stated in her interview "I wish I could dress in a certain way, not to attract the attention of a man, but for myself." Imaan stated from a

young age she knew she had a “curvier shape” and did not have to look like the women on the runways to feel beautiful.

In a Muslim context, the women also believe that the word ‘modest’ has taken on an adverse meaning. Along with the veil being charged with an oppressive discourse, they felt modesty in the discourse of the veil has come to mean subservient. “Modesty should be a positive” said Anna, “not a negative.” The women discussed how Muslim women who veil in an effort to be modest are seen as oppressed and intimidating while many nuns who dress in a similar manner, including a headcovering, are perceived as devoted and peaceful. Mina had noted in her one on one interview that veiling played an integral historical role in Christianity and Judaism and once again stated that “Muslim women are singled out because we have made the veil more mainstream.” The women all nodded in agreement. I asked the women to explore this issue further; why did images of Muslim women invoke more intense feelings than images of veiled women from other groups? The onus again turned to the way Muslims were portrayed in the media. To this I asked:

Saba: But how do we resist these images? How can we change that discourse?

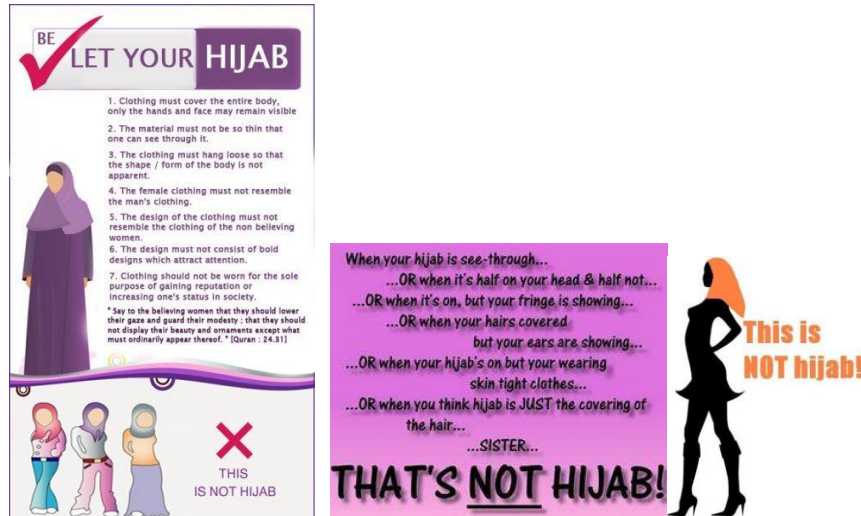
Imaan: By doing exactly what we are doing, resisting the stereotypes. Being the opposite of what people expect us to be. I veil this way because I genuinely like it but I’m not going lie, it’s also to change a lot of people’s minds about what they think they know.

Mina: Like through fashion, our clothing, how we veil. I think I break so many people’s stereotypes.

Anna: Yeah, and I think that is what will make the difference eventually. All the little

changes will add up. All the little day to day interactions with people.

Is this hijab?



**Figure 34: A series of images outlining the 'rules' of veiling. Artists/Authors: Unknown.
Google image search: "This is not hijab."**

The final set of images are of posters I found online outlining regulations on what is and is not considered to be appropriate forms of veiling. These posters did not reference any authoritative text but it is assumed that these 'rules' are based on an interpretation of Islamic principles. These images were fitting to use for the close of our activity as much of the discussions the women and I had revolved loosely around the main question of what *is* hijab? It was also interesting because some of the do nots listed on the poster were ways the women participants veiled themselves.

Aleena was the first to comment asking "You're not allowed to show your ears?" Anna responded that some women show their ears from underneath their headscarf to show their earrings but some schools of thought are of the opinion that the ears and neck should be covered as part of the headscarf. Aleena seemed perplexed by this and said:

I have a variety of styles, I don't just stick to one because for me it depends on the occasion. It depends on my outfit too, like if it looks good with earrings I can tie it back and wear some earrings. I don't think you should take away the whole jewelry concept you know, you have to work with the norms of the culture you're living in.

Anna responded that she used to think wearing earrings with your headscarf was not her personal style but now liked it as well. She stated, "The whole point of this project is to show that veiling is not just one thing" therefore, she was disappointed to see that posters such as these were easy to find on the internet and concerned about the implications of them.

Imaan and Aleena both made similar comments about the context of posters such as these. Imaan stated "this is absolutely ridiculous but only because I don't live in an ultra-conservative Middle-Eastern country." Aleena stated that "these 'guidelines' are acceptable for people living in countries where veiling is mandatory, but if you live here the veil could be worn with more leniency. Both women agreed that in a Canadian context these posters are irrelevant. Veiling in Canada has taken on a meaning that is separate from many other countries. This meaning is created by the veiled women themselves who fashion their veils in a way that blurs the line between veiling and fashion. Anna referred to it as a "good clash" noting "What you get as a result, is us four girls sitting around a table recognizing that there is wiggle room, that there is this individuality that's allowed by the veil."

The semiotic analysis revealed that every image discussed had no final answer. The women ultimately agreed to disagree on many of the topics discussed, recognizing that veiling is something that is quite personal to the one who wears it and that within a Canadian context, they have the right to decide what is or is not *hijab*. They regard this choice as something positive, a source of freedom. Being able to experiment with the veil allows the women to be individuals

and avoid any type of uniformity. This is important to all of them because it means they can use fashion to demonstrate to others that veiling does not mean following rules blindly.

Chapter 7

Stitching Together the Pieces

In this chapter, I use the analysis done in collaboration with participants to independently conduct a meta-analysis of the issues and tensions brought to the surface. I theorize how the veil acts as a sign and how participants negotiate and at times manipulate the meanings behind the veil.

I have broken down the discussion into four overarching themes that attempt to speak to all of the issues that are raised in the thesis. The themes open up to several sub-themes that are prevalent in the study.

The first theme is entitled *Voguing the Veil as Agency/Advocacy*. It explores the role of the veil as a marker of social change. This section examines the responsibility and at the same time the burden the women in the study face as they take on the overwhelming role of representing and re-presenting veiled woman. This includes dissecting the stereotypes that the women are often subject to and how they utilize their bodies as a terrain of resistance, rebellion and change.

The second theme is entitled *Veiling and the Geo/Politics of Space*. This section explores space as a significant element of how the women practice the veil. It takes into account the physical and social spaces the women enter into and the politics that exist therein.

The third theme is *Voguing the Veil as a Performance*. This section explores several subthemes around the individual acts of veiling and the collective performativity of the veil, body, gender, sexuality, beauty, nationalism and religion. In the fourth section, I conclude by theorizing that the women in the study are part of an emerging subculture. I draw on subculture

theory and discuss how this particular subculture bends our present understanding of how subcultures function in society.

The four themes are intrinsically connected, at times blurring any definitive line that may exist amongst and between them. Examples I draw on from the study do not always fit neatly into any one theme. This speaks volumes to how complex the issue of veiling is and how dynamic the women who practice it are.

Voguing the Veil as Agency/Advocacy

One of the most significant ways in which the women make meaning of the veil is by using it as a means of agency and advocacy. The concept of agency is socially constructed. It takes into account that individuals are never 'free' agents rather subject to regulatory discourses that influence their drive for agency. The women's agency in this context is very much a result of being subject to the Oriental discourse that surrounds the veil and the image of the Muslim woman (Al-Saji, 2010; Hoodfar, 2003; Said, 1978). Agency is understood in conjunction with advocacy as the women ultimately utilize their veils as a way to embody change and bridge the gap of misunderstanding that shrouds the veil.

Although the women are consciously fashioning their veils in ways they acknowledge contests the dominant discourse of the veil, they do not always recognize themselves as agents of change in any *meaningful* way. They perceive their actions as independent acts of resistance/rebellion as opposed to a collective movement of advocacy. For example, when exploring the Muslim fashion world in our focus groups, the women were just as surprised as I initially was with the sheer volume of YouTube tutorials available about different ways to wear the veil. While they recognized that they consciously fashioned their veils in untraditional ways they did not know they were part of a bigger, global movement; that there are so many other

Muslim women ‘out there’ doing the same thing. Collaborating together for this project and using the research space as an opportunity to explore how other veiled women around the globe (via the internet: pictures, blogs, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) also identify as being fashionable hijabis has created a new awareness within the women. They realize they are negotiating new meanings when it comes to veiling, specifically, what it means to be modest. Anna coined it as the “revitalization of modesty” and I refer to it as ‘modern modest’. Both terms essentially describe how the veil is evolving and how the concept of modesty is (re)formed by a Canadian context.

Representation/Re-Presentation

The women in the study are aware of the stereotypical ways in which the veil is represented in mainstream society. They comment several times that the common perception many people have of the veil is that of a symbol of oppression. Aleena commented that many people thought veiling automatically means one was “really shy and really quiet and...really strict.” She also commented that the way the media portrays the veil essentializes the women who wear it as ‘Arab’. While she put on the veil as a way of removing her previous label as a “Paki”, wearing the veil re-labels her as an ‘Arab’. While the images of the veiled woman continue to be charged with stereotypes of being illiterate, backward thinking and submissive. Imaan claims that “the majority of Muslims don’t fit into that stereotype.” The assumption that that Muslims do, reinforces the critique many scholars have about the West and its perceptions of the veil (Haddad, Smith & Moore, 2006; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2004; McDonough, 2003; Nayebzada, 2010; Rezai-Rashti, 1994, 2005; Roald, 2001; Ruitenberg, 2008; Said, 1978, 1997; Zine, 2000, 2001, 2006, 2007). This suggests that gaps still remain in understanding the veil and those who wear it despite research that illustrates that many women in the West, such as the ones

who participated in this study, wear it by choice (Alvi, 2008; Hoodfar, 2003; Khan, 2008; McDonough, 2003; Meshal, 2003).

The women in the study implicate the media as one of the most powerful institutions in place that perpetuate ‘myths’ about what it means to ‘be’ a Muslim woman who veils. According to the women, the media consistently portrays the veil as a ‘static’ representation of all the Muslim women who practice it (Said, 1978). Imaan stated that Muslims are the new “other.” She noted that coverage of Muslims often revolves around extremist who are portrayed as the average Muslim. “Again, the majority of Muslim don’t fit into that stereotype” she stated. With regards to the veil, Imaan noted “they depict the veil as only meaning one thing and always meaning *something*.” Here Imaan suggests that the media tends to make assumptions about the intentions behind those who choose to veil. The media implicates the veil as being related to a form of radicalism and those who follow it to be fundamentalists. They seem to ignore other options such as veiling to exert religious freedom or to maintain a personal relationship with God (Aswad & Bilge, 1996; Hoodfar, 2003; Roald, 2001; Zine, 2001). Mina commented that as a Muslim, she feels it is part of her responsibility to disprove the stereotypical representations that exist in the media and to show those around her that “it’s not like that.” Like the other women in the study, she sees fashion as the bridge between *hijabi* women like herself and those who are unfamiliar with the veil.

It is interesting to consider that the discourse around the veil is predominantly narrated from a Eurocentric perspective and involves little to no voice of Muslim women themselves or Muslim women who actually wear the veil. This is problematic for many reasons, one of the most salient being that these static representations continue to produce and reproduce the stereotypes that already exist. The ways in which veiling is represented in texts such as the news

media, inform the women's understanding of how other people perceive the veil. At times the women in the study even 'learn' about the veil through the outsider's narrative of it. In other words, the women become aware of assumptions of the veil through representations they were once oblivious to. This is portrayed in the study through the types of questions non-Muslims ask the women about their veil, like in Mina's case, when an individual asked her if she showers with her headscarf. Questions such as this inform the women's own construction of knowledge about the veil; it gives them insight into the assumptions formed about them. It reinforces Barlas' (2007) commentary on students who attend her class on Islam who "lack any *meaningful* knowledge about Islam since, of course, they know a great deal about it by way of stereotypes (p. 367, emphasis in original).

The reproduction of these stereotypes affects the women in profound ways whereby they recognize that they are seen by many as a representation of *all* Muslim women. The women's consistent use of the term 'we' when speaking on the subject during our interviews and focus group sessions is evidence of this. The 'we' they speak on behalf of is all veiled women and an acceptance of their role as representatives. An example of this is seen in Mina's case study where she commented: "People think *we* wear it when *we* sleep and when *we* shower." She recognizes that the hijabi community is regarded as a collective whole; an extended representation of the other. While this means she represents other *hijabi* women, it also means other *hijabi* women represent her too, which in Mina's experience can be problematic. She referred to Muslim women who veil in "wrong" ways causing her embarrassment because "these women are representing *you* in the wrong way." I cannot help but be reminded of McIntosh's (2005) claim that white privilege protects her from the burden of representing an entire community. The burden the women carry is far more troublesome than 'just' representing a race. The women in

the study are given the overwhelming task of representing an entire religion that consists of numerous socially constructed racialized groups. Although the women are at times aggravated with this responsibility (such as Anna who prefers to listen instead of speak about Muslim issues in class in an effort to resist being seen as “the voice of all Muslim people”) they recognize it as an important one. Dressing fashionably as a way of positively representing hijabi women is the most prominent reason the women chose to do so. Anna sees fashion as creating an “approachable” space for Muslims and non-Muslims to share. Their interactions with her would hopefully carry on to more comfortable interactions with other women who veil. Mina made similar comments stating that the way she fashions her veil encourages dialogue because it does not look “intimidating” as compared to more “conservative” modes of veiling.

It is this self-awareness that facilitates the women’s desire for agency. They accept themselves as being subject to the discourse surrounding the veil. They reconcile that the current discourse around the veil is temporarily fixed (Hall, 1997). Therefore, the women individually agree to become subjects themselves in the discourse to gain some sense of ownership (Thwaites, Davis, Mules, 2002). By engaging in this process of interpellation allows the women to become agents of change, disrupting the discourse by how they fashion their own veils and contradicting the way it is represented in texts.

The women in the study are deeply aware of how they are re-presenting the veil. Their voluntary participation in the research project serves as evidence of this. The women know that being a ‘hijabi fashionista,’ as the recruitment poster called for, is something outside the sphere of simply ‘being hijabi’; it is an in-between space, a kind of ‘third space’ (Ibrahim, 2008). The women are influenced by the fashion trends of the ‘west’ while negotiating their identity of what it means to ‘be hijabi’ in Canada. For Anna, Imaan and Aleena this means being influenced by

high fashion brand names while adding a degree of “hijabification” as Imaan coined it. The women use fashion as a tool to merge together fashion trends from the ‘east’ and the ‘west’ and in doing so, disrupt the negative discourse and stereotypes about the veil. When certain fashion trends compromise their values as Muslims, such as short skirts, the women create their own styles to make it ‘halal’ as they adapt a set of fashion rules to abide by.

Resistance

The women recognize that fashion is a way of strategically resisting the dominant discourse of the veiled woman as portrayed in mainstream society (Rubinstein, 1995). Resistance is very much a defense mechanism resulting from a power relationship that exists between institutions such as the media and the Muslim women they so often represent as subordinate. However, the way in which resistance is performed is distinct in many ways than the subcultures explored in the literature review (Baxter & Marina, 2008; Park, 2011). The women in this study are not resisting in an effort to cope or withdraw from mainstream society, rather, as demonstrated by Mina and Anna’s narratives above, resistance is done in an effort to actively integrate into and be seen as an integral part of society. Another example is Mina who actively seeks friendships with those who are non-Muslims, claiming most Muslims tend to only make friendships with other Muslims, contributing to spaces of exclusion.

However, similar to other subcultures (Willett, 2008, Zine, 2006), the women in this study do use the veil to gain autonomy over their bodies regarding who can or cannot have access to it. This is perhaps portrayed best by Anna who in her photovoice journal wrote “...I have ownership and control over my appearance, over my sexiness rather than having such an outfit degraded and usurped by the stares and comments of men on a bus?” Limiting the outside

gaze in the women's opinion contributed to their sense of femininity. As Imaan stated, it was sexier to "leave things to the imagination."

The media plays an important role in helping the women understand not only how to resist stereotypes, but *what* to resist. The images the women see of Muslim women through various mediums inform how they fashion their veils. The women exemplify this through their conscious decision to avoid wearing black headscarves as they see this being overrepresented in the media. Mina noted that veiling in black closely resembles the conservative look that she feels intimidates so many outsiders. Anna stated that the "legacy of it (black) as a colour of mourning and oppression lingers" thereby deterring her from wearing it often. Aleena avoided wearing black headscarves because of her perception that non-Muslims see it as a religious constraint.

Resisting stereotypes also motivates the women to be active participants in the community whether it be in a political space like Mina who is involved in various political rallies or at the gym like Aleena and Imaan. The women want to break the stereotype of the timid Muslim woman. It was during the analysis stages of the study that I began to recognize parallels between what the women were sharing and my own experiences. Many of my own actions are also informed by the discourse around the veil and my own attempts to resist them. In one of my journal entries I write:

I do exactly what the women in the study talk about so often, that is, I make an effort to break stereotypes about Muslims, specifically, Muslim women who veil. I am constantly 'on' when engaging with my colleagues and Professors at University in an effort to show them I am not what they may expect of a Muslim woman (here my own assumptions are brought to the surface). Although I am conscious of my actions, it has become such a habit, that I no longer realize that I automatically switch 'on'. As I reflect on the matter, I

realize how exhausting it is to feel the need to prove myself, as 'I am not what you expect'.

It is interesting to note that the texts the women resist when it comes to veiling emerge from the same texts that the women look to for fashion inspiration. The media deeply informs the women's construction of knowledge around what it means to 'be' fashionable. They are constrained by fashion as an institution as much as they are empowered by it. The language of fashion dictates what they can or cannot wear, as displayed in the case studies where the women share the fashion faux pas of veiling. The women's construction of dos and do nots when it comes to fashion are guided by the images they see around them. It is also evident through their photovoice journals as the women share preferences for designers and high-end name brands, such as Marc Jacobs and Chanel. Therefore, while they actively resist conforming to the images of the veil as portrayed by popular culture, they continue at the same time, to be influenced by the hegemonic power of fashion.

Rebellion

The women also use their veils to rebel against the discourse around the veil. I differentiate here between resisting and rebelling; the women not only resist the images they see of the veil by not reproducing them, they purposely and consciously challenge what is expected of the veil, thus rebelling against the images. They do this by fashioning their veils in ways that contradict the images that are represented in the media. Imaan demonstrates this by noting her status as a "Western Muslim" means she does not "just wear black hijabs; [she] wear[s] colourful hijabs." Mina and Aleena make similar comments noting that wearing colour contradicts the images often shown of Muslim women shrouded in black. The women also rebel against prejudice images by participating in spaces seldom associated with Muslims, such as Imaan's

interest in Hip Hop music and Mina's participation in photography and makeup artistry. Aleena was one of the few visibly identifiable Muslims on her soccer league challenging the perception that veiling limits participation in physical activities and organized sports. All the women also fashion their veils in untraditional ways. Mina and Aleena braid their headscarves creating the illusion of hair. Aleena also recently started wearing her headscarf in an updo, similar to a turban which she adorned with bows or a headband. Anna also uses accessories on her headscarf such as headbands and pins. All these styles are rarely represented in the mainstream media as a depiction of what the veil can look like.

By actively engaging in these spaces, the women are striving to accomplish two distinct tasks: first, they are trying to perform the veil in ways that are seldom represented in the media in the hopes that it will disturb the space. Secondly, they also want to serve as an example for other Muslim women who wish to veil in different ways or see re-presentations of the veil that they can identify with. Mina said she wants her style to be an inspiration for other veiled women and to show Muslim women considering the veil that it can be stylish. Aleena hoped that by wearing her veil to the gym she would encourage other veiled women to do the same. The women consciously re-present the veil in ways that starkly contrast the way the veil is represented in the media.

The women also rebel against constructed notions of the 'right' ways to veil within the Muslim community. They are not deterred by other Muslim women who judge their styles of veiling as 'improper', even though they themselves are critical at times of the ways other Muslim women veil. In our one on one interview, Mina shared her views on the "un-Islamic style" of veiling many women were adapting as a fashion trend. She titled it the 'alien head' style and consistently disagreed with it as a 'proper' headscarf throughout. Anna shared similar sentiments

when she disagreed with Aleena about the appropriateness of fashioning one's headscarf to show some hair.

Despite these critiques, the women continue to explore new ways of fashioning their veils. All the women explore the boundaries of veiling and at times even push the boundaries as dictated by some of the images we analyzed in the semiotic image analysis. They are seeking ways around the so-called 'old rules' that discourage certain ways of veiling. For example, Imaan uses jeggings (leggings+jeans) as a way to make wearing a mini-dress 'halal'. This allows her to satisfy a particular fashion trend while remaining loyal to her personal beliefs about veiling. Imaan also considers wearing her veil 'loosely' as a way of rebelling, suggesting her awareness of the constructs of veiling 'properly'. These examples of rebellion are particularly interesting because the women are actually rebelling against the images of the veil that exist within the Muslim community. The women reconcile the conflicting views from both inside the Muslim community and the community at large by agreeing that living in Canada or in any Western country permits leniency when it comes to veiling.

Resignification

One of the goals of resisting and rebelling against the images of the veil is an effort to be recognized as part of the community at large. The women mention several times their desire to be recognized as Canadians as much as they are recognized as Muslims. In her introduction, Mina immediately stated that she identifies as a "Canadian Muslim...the two go side by side." Perhaps Anna emphasized this point the most as she negotiated her identity as a Canadian Muslim convert. She often struggles to reconcile her identity as a racialized white Canadian with her identity as a Muslim. Her veil now re-frames her as a racialized Muslim, simply by virtue of her headscarf. Out of all the women, Anna often feels the most pressure to 'prove' herself as

‘still’ Canadian, regardless of her religious affiliations. She stated “The minute I converted, I didn’t fit completely with this society.” Midst internal struggles to come to terms with her identity as a convert, Anna uses her hybrid status as a ‘White Muslim’ to facilitate productive change. She sees herself as a bridge between two communities; the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Furthermore, she believes that voguing the veil is what allows her to move between both spaces comfortably. “I seem so much more approachable because my coworkers can comment on my jeans and the jacket I’m wearing. I’m approachable and I’m relatable” she stated.

As ironic as it may be, the women use their veils as a tool to prevent being seen as the binary other (Said, 1978). While they perhaps cannot separate their headscarves as a marker of otherness, the women are using the rest of the ways in which they fashioned their veils (i.e. their clothes, shoes, accessories, makeup) as a way of bridging the gap of difference between themselves and their non-Muslim peers. By creating new ways of veiling and styling their headscarves, the women are attempting to resignify the veil as a sign. They do this so that the act of veiling will no longer be a marker of difference. By voguing the veil, fashion becomes the tie that binds the Muslim and non-Muslim communities together. I recognize this to be one of the most profound findings of the study. One of the ways the women accomplish this is by styling their headscarves in ways that mimic hair, such as tying it in a bun at the back of their head or braiding it, just as one would style hair. They also style their headscarves in specific ways that help them blend in while moving around in society. Aleena purposely ties her headscarf back when participating in sports or going to the gym. She does this to signal that her veil is not an obstacle. Mina uses hats as a makeshift headscarf to perhaps take away some of the ‘otherness’ that is involved in wearing a traditional headscarf. Using a hat also raises some ambiguity about

her status as a Muslim. It gives her the option of choosing when she wants to 'look' Muslim.

All the women put significant meaning into the colours they choose for their headscarves and wardrobes. They use colours to communicate various things at different times. In the summer they wear light, pastel colours to give the impression of "I am not feeling hot." In general they avoid wearing black headscarves altogether to signal "I am not oppressed." Anna used colour to signal "I am (still) Canadian" when she chooses to wear red and white on Canada Day. Essentially, the women are using their veils to demonstrate that it does not prevent them from being "Canadian" or participating in any aspect of society, such as fashion, national holidays or active lifestyle choices. This strategic use of clothing demonstrates the complex nature of clothing informing one's sense of self (Al-Saji, 2010). It also demonstrates how clothing can inform a subculture's identity as a group and how they use "mundane objects" (Hebdige, 2003, p.2) to assert their distinct presence in society.

Conclusion:

The women in the study engage in various strategies to use the veil as a way of agency and advocacy. They consistently re-present, resist and rebel against the dominant discourse of the veil and in doing so, are active agents contributing towards creating or "winning" a new space for themselves (Barker, 2008, p. 326). Much of this agency is non-verbal as they use their veils and how they fashion them as a way of communication. I recognize their acts of agency and advocacy as a form of emancipation. While the women may not have produced any documented 'proof' of the results of their efforts, participatory research nor cultural studies demand it (McIntyre, 2008). The women's participation in the study contributes towards their heightened sense of awareness about their status as Muslim women in Canada and how their veils inform their sense of self. They demonstrate that they are consciously aware, and throughout the

research process became ‘more’ aware, of how one’s body can be used to create social change.

Veiling and the Geo/Politics of Space

The ways in which the woman veil changes across time and space, reinforcing the veil as a complex sign. As the women enter into different social and physical spaces, sometimes simultaneously, the physical and symbolic nature of their veils alters. The women demonstrate how ‘spaces and places’ change the politics of veiling, sometimes evening changing with and within spaces (i.e. spaces within spaces) (Massey, 1994; Silverstone, 1994). The meaning behind the veil has the ability to change multiple times even within a day. This section explores the different spaces the women enter into and the politics that exist therein.

The Party Veil

The party space is one that is social and physical. This has significant implications for how the women choose to veil. For Aleena and Mina, a party signifies leniency in how the veil can be fashioned. Aleena in particular feels a party is a space that warrants showing some hair as she often does by allowing her side-bangs to show. She feels culture has an impact on the party space as she admitted that at Pakistani parties, she often wears her *dupatta*¹⁴ in lieu of a headscarf, even if it is not secured in place to ensure no hair will show. Although Aleena said she would not veil in this manner outside of this ‘cultural party’ space, she said it is acceptable within it because it reflects the cultural norms of that space.

Anna, who does not identify as being Pakistani, made similar claims. When invited to attend a Pakistani or Indian party with friends, she often wears Pakistani clothes and uses the *dupatta* as a headscarf. Like Aleena, she describes her leniency with showing hair when she is

¹⁴ A *dupatta* is a long, rectangular piece of fabric that accompanies a *shalwar kameez*, a traditional South Asian outfit.

within this space. She attributes the leniency to the South Asian culture and how moving around in this space influences her decision to veil in this manner. Anna temporarily adapts new 'rules' while within the 'Pakistani' space but immediately reverts back to her own veiling rules once she changes into western clothing. In Anna's case, it is interesting to consider the influence clothing has on her subjectivity. The physical changing of her clothing directly affects her actions.

Similarly, Mina shares how visiting her parents in the Middle East influences how she veils. While there, Mina's veil reflects the predominant style of the Muslim women who reside there. This means wearing a long black robe with a matching black headscarf. The image Mina shares of herself veiling in this way reminds one of the stereotypical images seen of Muslim women in texts such as the media. It starkly contrasts the ways in which Mina veils in Canada. Here, she used styles she considers 'liberal' and creative in terms of how she dresses and fashions her headscarf while in the Middle East she dresses conservatively. For Mina, a crucial part of veiling is using it as a tool of assimilation; therefore, she veils in ways that help her 'fit in' with the society she is moving around in. It is interesting how she associates certain styles of veiling with particular countries, how the physical geographies of space impact her social awareness (the spaces within the space) (Toal & Agnew, 2009). Veiling in the West means something completely different than veiling in the East. Both spaces affect Mina's understanding of the veil and how she performs it.

The elusive all-girl parties impact the veil in totally different ways. Spatially, the women see it as a place where they did not have to veil. These parties are considered a private space where the women can reveal parts of their bodies normally hidden in public spaces. Non-Muslim women, who are normally considered outsiders in a public space, become insiders once sharing the same private spaces. Within these spaces, they are permitted to see the Muslim woman

without her veil. These private and public spaces are sometimes separated by only a door or an imaginary line. Institutions such as universities that are considered public by the women who veil transform suddenly into a private space when crossing the threshold of a woman's bathroom. The outsider gaze of a female is allowed access within this domain and just as quickly denied it once again upon exiting this space.

Furthermore, the all-girl parties demonstrate the influence the media has on the women. First, it is a place the women choose to wear clothes from popular brands that are considered 'in' from a western perspective. Secondly, these clothes are often revealing, indicating how the women's definition of 'sexy' changes in this context. While all the women stated that 'being' sexy while veiling is more about personality than a physical trait, they still perform sexiness in typical ways when attending an all-girl's party. Here, the women accentuate the features they note as being focal points in social media such as fashion shows and magazine covers. Their desire to reflect these images suggests that the media deeply affected their sense of what it meant to 'be' sexy and relatedly, to 'be' a woman. Examples of this are seen in the women's focus group activity where they provide images that reflect how they dress at all-girl parties. Anna also shares personal images of the clothing she wears in private spaces.

Veiling in National Spaces

As mentioned earlier, veiling within the space of Canada impacts how the women understand and perform the veil. For the women, living in Canada or anywhere in the 'west' changes the rules of veiling. As Aleena noted, it allows the veil to be explored as a reflection of one's identity. There are no set rules of how one should veil as imposed by some Muslim countries. An example of this is seen in Imaan's narrative when she commented "...we have the option to wear what we like and to express ourselves without fear of being reprimanded." All the

women agreed that the idea of veiling in ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ ways was a product of some Muslim countries, but within Canada, there are many ways to express your identity as a Muslim. During our semiotic analysis of images that preached rigid rules of what are and are not acceptable forms of hijab, the women disagreed with the suggested rules. Imaan called it “ridiculous” stating as a Canadian, no one had the right to tell her how to veil. Aleena felt such rules were only relevant in countries where veiling is the law. Anna commented that our very focus group was a good representation of how the veil functions within a Canadian context. This suggest that the veil as an object can gain or lose power as a tool of agency when crossing geographical boundaries.

The women physically embodied this loss of power as they crossed spaces from Canada to regions they perceive as Muslim regions. It demonstrates how the women give particular spaces fixed meanings (Barker, 2008; Bhabha, 1990). Mina demonstrates this with her complete change in style when visiting her parents in the Middle East, while Anna and her entire family, though not even Muslim, engaged in similar actions when vacationing in Morocco, a Muslim country (even though there are no religious requirements there to dress in a particular way). The women are abiding by the informal rules of the spaces they entered (Rojek, 2007).

In many ways, these actions reflect how the women, although engaging in acts of resistance within Canada, contribute on some level to the reproduction of stereotypes when visiting geographically Muslim spaces. This is an interesting point to consider because many of the images shown of Muslim women in the media are often of women residing in Muslim countries. These women are portrayed as submissive and void of agency, but what if these women are like the women in this study? By this, I mean to imply that the images of the women shown in the media may very well be women who veil in various ways but who conform to a

particular way of veiling when in public spaces. It further complicates the way the media represents the veil and how Muslim women themselves represent (not re-present) the veil.

Veiling in unexpected spaces:

The women recognize when they are veiling in spaces they are not expected in, that is, spaces they are not normally represented in. When entering into such domains, the women are often aware of the stereotypes that exist about them, and recognize themselves as breaking these stereotypes. For Aleena, this means remaining in the spaces of athleticism. She continues to exercise in co-ed gyms and play in soccer tournaments, altering her headscarf style to accommodate her lifestyle. Mina, who identifies as being an artist, was keenly aware that she is more often than not, the only visibly identifiable Muslim woman in her photography club and within her part time profession as a makeup artist. Imaan who is inspired by the British rock music scene also saw her interest in music as challenging other's perceptions about the veil and those who wear it.

Anna complicates matters further; her body becomes the site of some contention. Veiling as a convert, it is her 'whiteness' that confuses many, including Muslims. Within the Muslim community, people often ask if she is Arab, curious about her fair skin. On the other hand, non-Muslim colleagues cautiously ask her "are you Muslim?" unsure of what to make of her veil and obvious 'whiteness'. Both comments reveal assumptions about the veil. In both scenarios, it suggests that individuals believe the veil as belonging on specific bodies. Therefore, in the Muslim community, Anna's fair skin is only connected within the geographical boundaries of fair skinned cultures while outside the Muslim community individuals are unable to make meaning of a white face as a representation of Islam. This is suggestive of the influence of popular geopolitics (Ditmer & Dodds, 2008). Bodies are categorized under geographical

boundaries implicating how sources of mass media affect viewer's perceptions of who 'looks' Muslim. It racializes those who identify as being Muslim the same way the veil racializes those who wear it (Al-Saji, 2010). In all of the above mentioned spaces, the veil has the power to change people's perceptions of what it means to veil and what the veil 'looks like'. The veil as a sign communicates the diversity of the women who practice it.

Time as space

I also see time as playing a role in the question of space. In this context, time represents a contextual space in the women's lives. It demonstrates how with the passing of time, the women's understanding of the veil and how they perform it, transforms and evolves. The women in the study share their journey of how they have come to veil. This includes experimenting with certain types of headscarves and items of clothing. With the passing of time and space(s) the women's preferences also changed. For example, all of the women began veiling with the same type of headscarf, the square scarf. Over the course of time the women began experimenting with other styles, mostly as a way of exploring their femininity. They adapted new styles to look more stylish and more beautiful. For example, Mina stated that she began using her veil as a fashion accessory when she became aware of 'being' a woman. Butler (1999) would argue this is a result of how society engages in the process of gendering individuals. Mina's awareness of 'being' a woman is deeply informed by the way genders are performed to "consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman" (Butler, 2011). Wolf (1991) would inevitably implicate the media for perpetuating myths about it means to 'be' a woman or to 'be' a man.

All of the women share different reasons for the evolution of their veils, though to some degree their reasons revolve around growing older and coming to terms with their subjectivity as women. With this exploration came an increased sense of comfort and self-awareness of what it

meant to 'be' hijabi.

The women also challenge their constructions of knowledge about what it means to 'be' Muslim. Anna described it well by asking herself "how do I want to 'be' Muslim?" The veil plays a crucial component in this reflection process. Anna, who began her life as a Muslim with first adapting the *niqab*, eventually shifted her understanding of the veil to taking off the *niqab* and wearing a headscarf with 'western' clothing that were modest nonetheless. Imaan commented that the way one veils should not be "litmus test" to measure one's level of devotion. 'Being' Muslim or perhaps, being a 'good' Muslim, did not necessarily mean veiling as all the women agreed that one could be a 'good' Muslim and not wear a headscarf or a veil. Mina noted that she knows Muslim women who do not veil who she believes to be "better Muslims" than some women who do. The women rejected the idea that the veil itself or the headscarf as an article of clothing can determine someone's status as 'being' Muslim.

All of the women, myself included, shared how their journeys began with a single, black, square, scarf. It was not until they were comfortable within this space, that they started exploring other ways of expressing their Muslimness. This demonstrates the dynamic, constant changing, never 'static' status of the veil. As the women's identities continue to be informed by various forces and spaces, their preferences as veiled women do too.

Conclusion:

This section examined how space influences how the women veil. The women move between spaces, both social and physical altering their veils for each one, reinforcing the notion that space is never 'empty' rather, always influenced by the social relationships that exist within each space (Massey, 1994). While the veil may signal otherness, fashioning the veil in dynamic ways within different spaces, as the women do, creates in itself, new spaces.

It also implicates space as an important source of power within the discourse of the veil. The women demonstrate how space influences the meaning behind the veil and put meaning into it. Furthermore, the women demonstrate how veiling in unexpected spaces such as fashion contributes towards their own feelings of ‘fitting in’. They illustrate how through fashion they open up spaces for non-Muslims to see the women as part of the community and as ‘one of us’.

This section demonstrates how the women engage in performances (Goffman, 1959). The women are the actors performing on different stages (spaces) and illustrate how a change in costume influences the character they will be playing on stage. Furthermore, the women constantly moving between stages thus requiring them to change costumes as well between various styles of veiling. Therefore, while the party is one stage that requires a particular costume, when the stage shifts they immediately take on new costumes and perform a new act to blend into the scenes they will be engaging in. These performances are not meant to deceive the audience or the other actors, rather to demonstrate that the women can perform and be a part of any stage. How the women engage in performances is further explored in the next section.

Fashioning the Veil as a Performance

The above sections undoubtedly inform the women’s identities in profound ways. The act of veiling as agency and advocacy and the spaces in which the women veil, have implications for how the women perform many parts of their subjectivity. The women demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between veiling in particular ways and the ways in which this influences how they perform their identities as Muslims, their gender as ‘woman’ and their national identities as Canadians. Here the influence of Goffman (1959) and Butler (1999) are felt as I tease out individual performances the women engage in and the collective performativity of how the

women vogue the veil.

Performing Religion

The ways in which Muslim women are represented by institutions such as the media affect the women's identities as Muslims. It also influences how they chose to veil. The images the women see informs their understanding of Islam and how they thereby chose to practice it. Imaan articulated this by referring to the "religibots" who allow the media to distort other's perceptions of Islam and its followers. These are the radical followers who preach a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. The media in return represents these groups as the norms of the religion. These distorted images are one of the driving forces behind the women styling their veils in new and fashionable ways. As Mina put it "it's our responsibility to tell people it's not like that." Recognizing herself as a representation or a "walking billboard" of all Muslim women to outsiders, Anna, like the other women, uses fashion to signify to others that she is part of the norms of society. She follows the same trends and styles that many other fashion conscious women follow.

The representation of Muslims made the women more critical of their understanding of Islam and created within them a heightened sense of awareness of what it means to 'be' Muslim. Their actions reinforce Foucault's (1982) notion of how formal institutions such as the media affect individual identities. The images the women see encourage them to push the boundaries of the stereotypical 'hijabi'. For Aleena this means experimenting with new ways of styling her veil. For Imaan this means exploring different genres of style such as "urban fashion" and "hip hop" fashion. The diverse styles evident amongst the four women demonstrate how 'being' Muslim in Canada is dynamic and varies from one veiled woman to the next. It also demonstrates how they perform the veil through various styles. It is also accurate to say that the

veil itself performs through different modes of style. Through fashioning their veils in different ways, the women demonstrate how the veil as an article of clothing engages in performances.

Furthermore, the primary reason all the women choose to veil is based on their conviction that it gives them a closer relationship to God. They view the headscarf as a significant component of veiling, interpreting it as an important act of modesty. However, they are continuously reflective about how the veil should be worn. They recognized that veiling does not necessarily have to look a particular way, rather, it can embody a variety of styles. They also did not believe that veiling makes them ‘better’ Muslims over those who do not veil.

The women see veiling in fashionable ways as a way of bridging two spaces together, their religious identities with their identities as Canadians. It is in this sense that the veil becomes ‘performative’ (Butler, 1999), in that the women are consciously veiling so to put into motion ‘effects’ that have implications on their status as Canadian Muslim women. By veiling in fashionable ways, the women see themselves as fitting into society where wearing certain types of clothes are considered the norm. The veil is used as a way to reconcile misunderstandings and discomfort about the veil. By re-presenting the veil in fashionable ways, the women feel they are doing a service on many levels. First, it shows those who are not familiar with the veil that those who wear it are not completely different than they are, in fact, veiled women can participate in almost every aspect of mainstream society. Secondly, the women are not only attempting to normalize the veil for non-Muslims, they are also normalizing it for other women who veil. By re-presenting the veil in new ways and challenging spaces that do not usually welcome difference, the women are demonstrating that the veil does not have to constrain or compromise integration into society. Their actions have the potential to inspire other women by showing them new ways of veiling that will not compromise their religious values or principles. Through their

veils, they are addressing issues that seem to be silenced by veiling in traditional ways. The way they veil encourages dialogue and actively transform 'spaces of exclusion' into spaces of inclusion (Allen et al., 2002).

To bring it back to the question of what it meant to the women to 'be' Muslim or a 'good' Muslim, the women in the study do not believe they are 'good' Muslims because they veil, rather, they feel they were good citizens (and therefore, good Muslims) because of what their veil accomplishes. Their interpretation of Islam, which informs their style, helps them integrate into society while never comprising their religious principles. Just as Anna stated "I am the bridge between two communities," the women in the study see the veil as a way to address in a positive way the gaps that exist between the Muslim community and the non-Muslim community.

Performing Gender

One way the women perform gender is through the headscarf. The act of veiling through a headscarf performs the women's gender automatically. This is by the virtue that only women are associated with the headscarf in an Islamic context. Therefore, the headscarf as an item of clothing performs the women's gender to an extent. It signals their recognition of themselves as women.

The veil is also a signifier of gender to onlookers. A primary example of this is demonstrated through representations of the veil in the media. A person, though fully cloaked from head to toe with even a mesh over the eyes, is recognized by most viewers as a Muslim woman in a *burqa*. This image of the Muslim woman is temporarily fixed in the minds of the audience. The *burqa* becomes a sign that consolidates the impression of a Muslim woman.

This study complicates the notion of gender performativity by exploring the other ways

in which the women perform their gender. Primarily, I implicate the ways in which the women veil through the use of jewelry, makeup, accessories and headscarf prints and styles, as revealing their personal constructs of what it means to 'be' a woman. The women used all these things to 'look like' a woman, or in Butler's (1999) terms, to 'perform' their gender. This perhaps is influenced by the women regarding hair as a primary marker of femininity and beauty. Because of their beliefs about covering their hair and possibly even body shape, the women see fashion as a way of "compensating" as Mina put it and asserting their gender as women.

The women demonstrate how veiling affects their constructs of femininity and beauty. They correlate these notions to the construct of what it meant to be sexy. The women note that they cannot perform sexiness in the same ways as other women; however, they can dress in ways that make them comparable to the sexualized non-veiled women by using the same fashion trends but altering them slightly to make them 'halal'. The ways in which the women veil exhibits similar behavior to the women who are portrayed as sexy in the media. This is most prominent through their use of makeup, how they posed in their photovoice journal pictures and the types of clothing they wear at all girl parties. This reveals their desire to be seen as desirable women in society. In the space of the exclusively women's party, they identify as feeling sexy because their clothes is more revealing. In turn, this also demonstrates the power that gender as an institution has over the women (Wolf, 1991). Their constructs of beauty, femininity and sexiness affect how the women performed their veils in public and private spaces.

Imaan suggested that veiling can peak the interest of an onlooker who is curious to know what is hiding underneath the veil. She views this as a positive point, one that gives her an advantage as an object of desire. She is 'hiding' something that is not easily attainable through the public gaze. It builds on the notion of the veil as empowerment that the other women in the

study and previous studies mention (McDonough, 2003; Zine, 2006). The women in the study also claim that wanting to look sexy or beautiful is not necessarily to attract the attention of a man, rather to feel good about themselves and to demonstrate that a woman while fully covered can still possess the same traits as a desirable or attractive woman. Based on this, one can argue that the women are actually dressing fashionably to be noticed by other women, not men. They want to be recognized by other Canadian women as one of 'them'. Anna considered dressing fashionably as an integral part of being "seen as a member of society" and "being recognized as being part of 'here' (Canada)."

The women also strategically engaged in practices that make the veil appear not only less threatening but also a desirable accessory. They do this through beautifying their veils, in particular, the headscarf. The women create unique ways of fashioning and decorating their headscarves through the use of decorative pins such as the ones I share in the introduction. Imaan drapes jewelry across her headscarf to give it further edge. Mina and Aleena both shared that women who are not even Muslim have asked them for tutorials on how to wear a headscarf.

The women are also particular about the fabric and print of their headscarf, suggesting that the headscarf is not simply a piece of cloth for covering rather a statement piece that can attract the attention of people. It is truly another accessory. They also style their headscarves in ways that mimic hair such as braiding it and wrapping it in a bun. They used particular prints such as florals and pastels to show their feminine side. They used body language to communicate their identity as women as seen through their photovoice journals. The women are often posing in soft, feminine ways, similar to many of the images we had examined during our semiotic analysis. These actions all demonstrate how their bodies and the ways in which they perform their gender through their bodies inform their identity as women (Azzarito & Salomon, 2006).

Performing a National Identity

All the women in the study identify as being Canadian; however, they feel that veiling, specifically wearing the headscarf, takes away from other's perceptions of them as Canadian. The act of veiling signals their otherness to non-Muslims, even though all but one of the women were born and raised in Canada. This reiterates what several other studies have reported about the status of Muslims in Canada (Bakht, 2008; Hoodfar, 2003; McDonough, 2003; Meshal, 2003; Todd, 1998). Because of this, the women are constantly engaging in acts to prove their Canadian-ness. The fashionable ways in which they veiled are primary indicators of this. The women use fashion accessories, name brands and clothing that reflect mainstream trends. By doing this, they are attempting to normalize the veil as a sign in Canada. They are using clothing and accessories as a way to relate to other women. Actions as simple as shopping at popular department stores and wearing clothes similar to their peers communicates their desire to be seen as 'like' other Canadian women. For example, Anna admits she uses clothing as a primary way of gaining an initial comfort level with her colleagues. Her perception is that her first impression as a well-dressed woman helps her gain superficial trust from her coworkers until they get to know her more personally to confirm that trust. It demonstrates that the veil is not an out of place object within a Canadian context, rather, something that could espouse Canadian norms. By veiling in fashionable ways, the women are not only trying to create a space of acceptance for themselves, they are also trying to extend it to the inclusivity of *all* Canadian Muslims being accepted as truly Canadian.

Anna's case was particularly complex because of her whiteness. By putting on the veil, she lost many of the privileges she once had as a white woman (McIntosh, 2005). With the veil, Anna's identity as a Canadian was questioned by others as she faced uncomfortable stares and

even accusations of betraying her country. Anna explicitly mentioned several times how she used clothing and the way she fashioned her veil as a way to prove to others that she was 'still' Canadian. She even signaled this through the use of the colours white and red to symbolize her identity as a Canadian.

At times, Anna blurred the line between her own assumptions of what it means to 'be' Canadian. She often referred to herself as Canadian but the other girls as Muslims. She felt she had certain advantages over the other women in the study because she was visibly Canadian; by this, she was referring to her skin colour. In many ways it suggested that the other women's identities as Canadian were justifiably questionable since they were not white, whereas her skin colour served as the ultimate proof that she was 'really' Canadian. However, questioning Anna about these assumptions did cause her to reflect about statements such as these.

Part of the reason that Anna failed to see the other women in the study as exclusively Canadian was perhaps because of the fact that each woman introduced herself as identifying with another country besides Canada. Even though most of the girls were born in Canada, they still identified strongly with the countries their parents were born in. In fact, these countries influenced at times the way these women veiled such as in Aleena's case and her tendency to veil in ways influenced by Pakistani traditions. For Anna, there is no "back home" since Canada has been the only home for her family for many generations. The growing population of Muslims within Canada that include 2nd and 3rd generation Canadian Muslims will force many individuals to acknowledge their assumptions that all Muslims are from somewhere. This inevitably adds yet another layer to the shifting subjectivities of the women who are trying to claim spaces for themselves as Canadians.

Voguing the Veil as a Subculture

This thesis is not just the narrative of a small group of Muslim women who veil in fashionable ways. The research process reveals that the women are not alone in trying to establish a distinct identity for themselves. The women and I became aware through blogs, social networking sites, YouTube channels, private businesses and the like that hundreds of thousands of women around the globe are interested in ‘voguing’ their veils in similar ways. As the women and I continued to explore the world of fashion within the Muslim space, we realized that perhaps what exists is a phenomenon, a subculture of veiled women who ‘vogue the veil’.

I perceive this movement to be somewhat silent in the sense that, I do not think all these fashionable women are really aware that there are so many other women ‘out there’ who are using their veils in similar ways. I certainly was not aware to the extent I am now. However, with the growing representation of hijabi fashion on the internet, the women’s self-recognition of their emerging subculture is inevitable. The internet proves to be a space where fashionable hijabi women can build their social network, like many other emerging subcultures have done in the past (Williams, 2006; Hodkinson, 2005).

Technology and media, the same mediums that can deeply inform one’s sense of self in a negative way, are also proactive tools with which fashionable Muslim women, such as the ones in this study, use to their advantage to gain a sense of cultural capital. They use their knowledge of what is accepted in society as normal (i.e. wearing certain types of clothing and looking a particular way) to make a space for themselves. They strive to be seen as one of ‘us’ and as ‘Canadian’.

The subculture I suggest is quite distinct than the type of subculture Zine (2000) refers to in her study of Muslim Student Associations as a subculture. The students in her study were in

many ways resisting integration by turning to a space consisting only of other Muslims. These students felt pressure to conform to norms that compromised their values as Muslims and therefore resisted in ways that meant separating themselves from their peers. The women in this study are actively trying to integrate into the larger culture of Canada. Although we agreed there are no set boundaries of what defines Canadian culture, the women style their veils in fashionable ways as a method of normalizing the veil within it; in doing so, they are attempting to be recognized as Canadians. While the women are trying to distance themselves from the current discourse of the veil by veiling in unique and fashionable ways, they are at the same time, trying to be a part of the communities they live in through the ways they style their veils. The women do not feel they are compromising their values or beliefs by doing so.

The subculture I suggest is similar in many ways to the subcultures Hebdige (2003) refers to in his work. For example, the women in this study use fashion as a “mediated response” (ibid, p. 73) to the present treatment of the veil. The women are consciously resisting and rebelling against perceptions and assumptions about the veil through the clothes they put on their bodies. Hebdige (2003) implicates history as playing a major role in the production of subcultures. The women in this study demonstrate how the orientalist view of the veil impacts how they chose to veil. The various texts about the veil that the women are confronted with, give them the necessary tools with which to resist the images they see. Furthermore, Hebdige’s (2003) concept of style and the ability it has to “intentionally” communicate to onlookers particular ideologies, resonates with the subculture of these women (ibid, p. 100). The way the women veil signal many things to onlookers, besides just their religious beliefs. To non-Muslims, it signals the women’s desires to be culturally relevant, as depicted through their style. Whether or not onlookers recognize it, the women veil in ways that help them fit into different spaces. However,

while the subcultures explored in Hebdige (2003) and Hall & Jefferson's (2005) text used resistance to segregate from society, the women in this study use resistance differently to integrate into society. Resistance is used as a strategy to resist stereotypes, not to resist mainstream society. Stereotypes are resisted in an effort to be part of society.

The women also shared how their veils affect both Muslims and non-Muslim women. The women in the study revealed how women inspired by the modern yet modest ways in which they veil often approach them. They shared the feedback and comments they receive from many non-Muslims admiring the way they style their veils and even requests for tutorials on how they fashion their headscarf. Again, their stylish ways of veiling communicates to others that donning the veil does not mean they are restricted from partaking in mainstream society. These strategies illustrate how the women's experiences of being 'othered' as veiled women, are encoded in the way they choose to re-present the veil (Hebdige, 2003).

The subculture of fashionably veiled women also differs in some ways from the traditional treatment of subcultures as well, particularly the ones that Hebdige (2003) write about. Hebdige describes subcultures as "potential anarchy" and "mechanism of semantic disorder" (ibid, p. 91). The women in the study are not trying to make 'noise' in any delinquent ways. They are not attempting to distance themselves or rebel in a defiant way from their binary opposite that is the dominant culture; rather, they are using the act of veiling as a way of being in tune with the dominant culture. The women recognize style as a signifying practice and therefore veiling fashionably as a necessary component of their resistance to the representations of the veil.

Image seems to be an important part of subcultures. While the intentions behind the performed images may vary, it seems evident that members of subcultures are to an extent,

always performing. Clothing is a critical component of how members perform image. This is evident in subcultures explored in the literature review, such as Japanese youth subcultures and the North American subcultures that influence them (Park, 2011). The subculture of veiling however is complex in how members use image to perform. While many subcultures use style to assert uniformity and demonstrate loyalty to the subculture (Baxter & Marina, 2008; Park, 2011; Perho, 2000), the women participants in this study use style to contradict this notion. They use the veil in many different ways to illustrate how diverse the veil is. In fact, the women all avoid wearing black to avoid suggesting that the veil is uniform in anyway. They demonstrate their individuality through the ways in which they style their veils. Their photovoice journals illustrate how each woman fashions the headscarf in different ways. As a group, no two women share the same style. They all describe their style in distinctly different ways such as Mina who describes her style as 'avant garde', Imaan as 'British hipster' Aleena as 'chic' and Anna as 'mod'. While their headscarf styles are similar at times, there are still variations among them such as how they pin, drape and accessorize it. Perhaps the subculture the women are most similar to are the ones that Atkinson (2005) writes of whereby he argues that some subcultures are actually a social figuration. The women too are best understood if regarded as part of a social process where the subculture they are a part of is in the process of 'becoming' rather than 'being'. Rather than to assume these women 'are' Canadian Muslims their narratives suggest they are 'becoming' Canadian Muslim as they negotiate new ways to veil in Canadian contexts.

Recognizing ourselves as part of a growing subculture led to a sense of comradery between the women and myself during the course of the study. There was a shift in our understanding of what it means to be a fashionable hijabi. We discussed how seeing other fashionable veiled Muslim women no longer seemed like just individual acts of being conscious

of one's body, but also an empowering consolidation of our own actions. This reckoning further reinforces Rubinstein (1995), Wolf (1991) and Willett's (2008) notion of how the body can signify and thus mobilize an individual's ideology. Understanding ourselves as an integral part of a transformative movement, led to feelings of emancipation and productivity.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Final ramp walk: The closing exhibition of a runway show

The thesis explores the meaning(s) behind the veil and how veiling in fashionable ways informs the identity formation of a group of young Canadian Muslim women. The women demonstrate through personal narratives and shared images how they respond to the ways in which the veil is represented in current discourse. *Voguing* the veil describes how the women fashion their veils to perform in different spaces in society. By engaging in various strategies, the women are ultimately trying to normalize the veil as a sign in Canada with implications globally. I theorize the women (myself included) to be part of an emerging subculture that use the fashion as a way to bridge the gaps of misunderstanding between those who veil and those who see it as an oppressive act.

I have addressed the research questions through collaborative inquiry with the four women who participated in the study. By using a participatory approach, the women and I share our voices and a space to share narratives and images that are meaningful to us. In sharing particular stories and pictures, the women attempt to resignify the meaning behind the veil. They share themes and issues they believe to be significant in redirecting the discourse around the veil. Independently, I take the issues that are most important to the women and contextualize them within the larger discussion in the final chapter as I place the veil as a sign within a cultural studies framework.

The impact the research process has had on the women and myself is profound. I now view the way I dress as not just an effort to *break* stereotypes about the veil, rather, with the possibility that it can *transform* in a positive way what the veil means. This has given me a

new/renewed sense of empowerment. The women's positive stories and powerful images have motivated me to vogue my own veil. The women's narratives demonstrate that the veil as a sign is a complex text. The meaning of the veil changes and shifts across time and space and is particular to each woman practicing it. Therefore, to question what it means to veil is to acknowledge the depth and diversity of those who do so.

The women partaking in the study are affected in different ways. Aleena the 'new *hijabi*' has gained a sense of self-acceptance of how she chooses to veil, regardless of the space she is in. Meeting the other women in the study and exploring the ways they veil has encouraged her to continue exploring new ways of veiling. In fact, most recently, she shared pictures with me of her latest way of wearing a headscarf. She wraps her scarf in an intricate bun around her head and calls it the 'turban style swag'.

Mina, although completing a degree in an unrelated field, has decided to continue pursuing photography, recognizing a need for more re-presentation of Muslim women in this field. Not only is she in a space where Muslim women are rarely represented, but being behind the camera gives her the power to control the types of images being produced about Muslim women.

Imaan recognizes the extent to how powerful her way of veiling is as a political statement. She has gained a heightened awareness of how her style gives a positive impression to those around her.

For Anna, meeting the other women in the study has contributed to her sense of community and sisterhood within the Muslim community. The discussions provoked by the study have affected her continuous critical engagement with 'how' she wanted to practice Islam. She also continues to address some of her own assumptions about what it means to 'be' Muslim

in Canada.

A cultural studies framework has allowed for a creative exploration of the veil as a sign. It questions the role of power and knowledge within the discourse around it, and how this in effect, informs how the women in the study re-present the veil. By using fashion as an entry point, the women in the study are working towards creating a new, positive space for the veil.

The findings of the study contribute in new ways to the current discourse around the veil. It demonstrates that the act of veiling goes beyond religion. It demonstrates that the women who practice it are complex, dynamic beings eager to share their experiences about what it means to 'be' hijabi. It demonstrates that to 'be' hijabi and 'vogue the veil' means a myriad of things. There is no essentialism with the hijab. The women's identities are informed by the same pop cultural influences as their fellow peers; their subjectivity going far beyond religious beliefs. The study illustrates how the women participating moved within spaces of multiple identities. They reveal how the act of veiling informs their identities and how their performativity of these identities influences their style. The women demonstrate how their veils perform and how they use their veils to perform from one stage to the other. As a result, their veils become performative as they enter into spaces that were once closed off, opening them up to create welcoming places. The way the women fashion their veils shows the complexity of 'voguing the veil' and the anti-essentialist nature of 'being' Muslim. The women also demonstrate that while the concept of voguing the veil may have already been present, within a Canadian context voguing the veil holds distinct and at times, politically charged meaning. To vogue the veil in Canada means to encourage a dialogue with those who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with it. It suggests that the women who engage in acts of voguing the veil do so as a mediated *response* to the stigma attached to veiling. While about fashion, voguing the veil is also much more than

fashion. The women use fashion as an entry point into the discourse that surrounds the veil. Their interviews and focus groups demonstrate how they manipulate fashion in an attempt to change the meanings that have entered into the veil.

It is in this way that the women demonstrate how voguing the veil is a form of public pedagogy. A pedagogy that goes beyond the structured walls of any educational institution and in doing so, has far-reaching implications. Through their performances of the veil, the women in the study are engaging in a dialogue that is being enacted through their clothing. The conversations are not always oral, it is the clothing itself and the performance of it that is the dialogue. The women are speaking to those around them through the way they dress and the objects they put on their bodies. They are entering into spaces both public and private where the veil has seldom been welcomed or seen in the past. They are self-aware of their presence but unapologetic. It forces onlookers and outsiders to see the veil in new and perhaps uncomfortable ways whereby the exotic 'other' the stylish Muslim woman becomes more like 'us' and less like the imagined 'them'. It hopefully causes outsiders to pause and reflect on how the veil performs as a sign within a constructed Western context.

At the same time, voguing the veil is a form of public pedagogy that is hardly public at all. While the women attempt to resignify the veil as a sign, it is perhaps questionable whether this is consistently perceived by outsiders as such or if the cultural influences of power succeed in fixing stereotypes of the veil. Are the women in the study perceived to be part of a growing subculture or are they seen just as an exception to the rule? One cannot be certain to what degree these women will encourage others to notice the ways in which veiled women are expressing themselves through clothing, or whether the pervasive influence of power will continue to ensure the stereotype so often seen of the veil will endure.

By recognizing the women as part of an emerging subculture, the study also answers the call for the need to explore female subcultures and in particular, the minimal amount of studies available on Muslim subcultures. As I theorize the women to be part of an emerging subculture, it is important to note that the women in the study differ in significant ways from traditional subcultures, namely, that many of them may not be aware that they are even part of a subculture, and that being part of this subculture is actually an attempt to integrate *into* society rather than to segregate from it.

With respect to the women who participated in the study and our collective coming into awareness that voguing the veil is indeed a growing subculture, the women and myself began to recognize the potential we have to make an impact on the veil as a sign. By using the veil as a fashion statement, the veil as a sign can potentially destabilize or at the very least begin to shake the foundations of the institutions of power that seek to fix the veil as a sign as seen in mainstream discourse. While not all of the women in the study would perhaps consider themselves advocates, the research process opened up spaces for all of us to move from advocacy to activism whereby recognizing ourselves to be part of a movement larger than our own individual acts of fashioning the veil demonstrated that voguing the veil can and does make an impact on those around us. While I theorize that the women and my own practices are a form of public pedagogy – until the space was created for us to discuss the implications of our actions as hijabi fashionistas - we did not make the links to situate and articulate ourselves as advocates. For the women in the study (recognizing myself as a participant), recognizing that they (we) dress in ways that challenge stereotypes and that the other women in the study are doing the same thing, gave them (myself) a growing recognition of being part a subculture. This collective consciousness has led them (us) each in her own way to move from advocate to activist which is

a significant step when working within a cultural studies/advocacy and participatory framework. The women (and myself) gained many of the necessary tools they (we) would need to continue to question the political role power plays in attempting to signify the veil as a sign. Being part of a subculture is one such tool as it gives the women (us) a collective belonging within a group of individuals who are also committed to the same goal – that of being recognized as an integral part of society where the veil is a norm.

Implications and Recommendations

During my proposal seminar, a committee member asked me who my anticipated audience is for this thesis. At that time, I believed it would be aimed at educating those who were unfamiliar with the veil, mainly, non-Muslims. As the study progressed, I began to recognize that this project was informing my own identity as a Canadian-Muslim woman. The women in the study also gained an intimate relationship with their veil that never existed before. The data collection process forced us to explore the ways in which our veils informed our ‘self’ as subjects. I now realize that Muslim women who veil have just as much, if not more, to gain by reading the provided narratives. While I hope that those who wish to learn about the veil will gain a new understanding of what the veil means by reading the narratives provided, I also believe Muslim women who veil will gain a new appreciation of what the veil has the potential to mean as demonstrated by the women in the study.

As I look forward from here, I see the urgency of recognizing Muslim women who veil in fashionable ways, such as the women in this study, as a subculture that needs to be welcomed as part of a Canadian identity. By normalizing the veil as a sign within Canada, it recognizes Canadians as true leaders in anti-racism. This will inevitably spark a dialogue that can create a new and positive discourse around the veil. It will also allow other marginalized groups who

have previously been residing on the sidelines of society an opportunity to explore their own subjectivities and how they can transform perceived differences into tools of change.

This has implications for our responsibility as citizens to question the institutions in place that try to essentialise peoples and spaces. It calls for a (re)visiting of our knowledge of various literacies. We must question our skills as media literate, socially literate and culturally literate peoples. This study calls for the recognition of ‘voguing the veil’ as a form of public pedagogy—one that requires us to open our eyes and our ears to what is being shared from those around us and ultimately, what can be learnt. This implicates us as subjects that contribute to discourses such as the veil. By recognizing and challenging our own assumptions about those around us, we can move towards more positive, inclusive discourses.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

Do you consider yourself to be a

hijabi fashionista?

**Do you veil in a way that
breaks stereotypes
about the hijab?**

Then come be a part of this study!

I am seeking Muslim participants who are:

- 1) Currently in University**
- 2) Veil in some way (headscarf, abaya, niqab, etc.)**
- 3) Consider themselves to be fashionable**

Appendix B: Letter of Information

Letter of Information

The purpose of this study is to explore what veiling means to participants and how it may inform their identity. Through examining these experiences, this study seeks to create a new understanding of the veil and promote awareness about veiling.

The researcher is interested in the experiences of women who veil and how the way they veil may inform their sense of identity as a Muslim women. The study requires participants to meet with the researcher on four different occasions and maintain ongoing collaboration until the study is published. Participants will need to meet twice with the researcher to participate in a face to face interview during which time they will be asked various questions about their experiences with veiling. This may take up to 60 minutes depending on the length of participant answers.

Participants will need to meet twice with the researcher and the other participants of the study for focus group sessions during which time they will discuss the interview questions again as a group. This may take up to 2 hours each time depending on the length of participant answers.

Participants will also need to take photographs that capture their experiences and influences as a woman who veils. These photographs will need to be accompanied by a journal entry. This process is called photovoice and participants will be required to submit at least 5 entries to the researcher via e-mail or hardcopy. This process may take up to 30 minutes each time and will be included in the final thesis.

Participation in this study is optional. It is your right to ask the researcher about any aspects of the study at any time. During the interview you have the right to refuse to participate and answer questions. Consent is an ongoing process and you can withdraw from the study at any time without suffering any negative consequences. If you withdraw, all data gathered up until that time will not be used if you are not comfortable with it and it will subsequently be destroyed.

Please note that all interviews and focus groups will be conducted in English. All the information you share will remain confidential. Your identity will not be revealed to anyone except the principal researcher, her thesis supervisor and fellow focus group participants.