"Just Say No" to Compulsory Hijab:
Exploring the Motivations and Meanings of *Bad-Hijabi* in Iran

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Background. According to the law in Iran, wearing hijab is mandatory for every woman in the country (Erdbrink, 2018). Consequently, women must wear loose-fitting clothing covering their arms and legs and have their hair covered when in public (Sharma, 2014). Hijab, in general, refers to "the entire ensemble a woman wears in front of non-intimates that cover her whole body - except for her face, hands and sometimes feet - in loose, opaque, non-distinctive clothing typically to conform to Islamic standards of modesty" (Faraz, 2008, p. 9). However, not all women in Iran wear hijab in the same way. While some women adhere to the strict guidelines and cover much of the body when in public (except for the face, hands up to wrists, and feet) many women in Iran do not (Asr-e Iran, 2018). Instead, they wear hijab only to the extent that they avoid breaking the law. Within Iran, these individuals are identified as *bad-hijabs*. Indicators of *bad-hijabi* include allowing the hair to show under loosely wrapped shawls, wearing tight-fitting tops under open-front manteaus, or wearing short pants. These examples violate the guidelines of hijab according to interpretations of the Quran by the Iranian government and its domestic media.

Recent studies have explored Iranian women's perspectives on compulsory hijab, and in some cases, their willingness to dissociate from hijab through their social media activities (e.g., Hamzehei, 2014; Koo, 2016). Total detachment from hijab in the country, however, is not easy. Organized campaigns such as "My Stealthy Freedom" or "White Wednesdays", and certain daily life practices have surfaced as forms of protest against compulsory hijab (Asgari & Sarikakis, 2019). In Iran, the consequences for such protests are particularly harsh, as those who speak out against compulsory hijab can face prison sentences of up to 15 years (Iskandarani, 2020) and "hijab/morality police" are positioned in the streets with orders to look for women who do not adhere to hijab. Although there are many studies on hijab in other Islamic countries, including Saudi Arabia (e.g., Quamar, 2016) and Malaysia (Grine & Saeed, 2017), studies that examine the opposition to compulsory hijab in Iran are limited to either activism that takes place online or through social media. Few studies have focused on *bad-hijabi* as a form of resistance. Thus, the objectives of this study were (1) to examine the ways that women in Iran resist hijab through the practice of *bad-hijabi*, (2) to understand their motivations for doing so, and (3) to explore the individual and social meanings of *bad-hijabi*. Specific focus was placed on understanding *bad-hijabi* through the lens of compensatory consumption and symbolic self-completion theories.

Theoretical Framework. Compensatory consumption can occur when there is a discrepancy between the ideal and the actual self (Higgins, 1987). According to Mandel et al. (2017), self-discrepancy can arise from a variety of domains. When self-discrepancy is perceived, negative responses arise. To reduce the unpleasant consequences of self-discrepancy, individuals become motivated to engage in compensatory consumption behavior such as symbolic self-completion, to help minimize the aversive consequences of self-discrepancy (Rucker & Galinsky, 2013). According to Cutright (2012), when individuals feel powerless, they engage in symbolic self-completion to reduce self-discrepancy. In this study, *bad-hijabi* is framed as a form of

ITAA Proceedings, #78 – https://itaaonline.org

compensatory consumption, and particularly symbolic self-completion, which positions *bad-hijabi* as a strategy that women in Iran use to deal with the self-discrepancy caused by compulsory hijab. **Method.** Because there is limited research on *bad-hijabi* in Iran, a qualitative approach was employed, with interviews as the method of primary data collection (Bryman, 1999). With IRB approval from the researchers' university, participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Recruitment occurred via the first author's public Instagram page. A total of twenty in-depth virtual interviews (30 to 90 minutes) were conducted with Iranian women aged between 22 to 36 who had experiences with both compulsory hijab and *bad-hijabi*. Interviews were recorded and conducted in Farsi by the first author who is fluent in the language. Recordings were transcribed and then translated to English. The transcripts were analyzed through the process of comparing similarities and differences across the data and relative to the theoretical framework (McCracken, 1988). Four themes emerged to structure the interpretation: *Hindrance vs. Help*, *Placing Blame*, *Pretending*, and *Towards a Change*. Pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality.

Results. According to the government of Iran, hijab preserves women's safety while it protects the country's moral fiber. However, the participants of this study did not agree. As MP explained, "They say that if you wear hijab, there will be less corruption in the society, but now we see that we have corruption not less than other non-Islamic countries, but even more." Many participants talked about hijab as a hindrance rather than help to them, and even an "insult to their intelligence" (FA) as well as a symbol of gender inequality. Contrary to the study of Saudi women by Quamar (2016), the participants of this study saw hijab as a barrier. Several wanted to discuss who was to blame and pointed to the belief that hijab was used as a tool to distract Iranians from the current "regime's totalitarian actions" (MA) and "what's really going on in the country" (NY). However, participants did not just blame the government. Similar to Hamzehei (2014), the workplace and even families were seen as sources of pressure to comply with hijab. As HK stated, the topic of hijab has caused many "arguments and tensions with my family."

Some participants chose to engage in *bad-hijabi* in response to the undesired messages of hijab, including being religious when one may not actually be. Thus, as compensatory consumption, *bad-hijabi* is about being loyal to one's true self, or addressing the self-discrepancy caused by hijab. As NA described, "Iranians learn to behave in a way they don't believe…By my *bad-hijabi* I want to show people around me that I am not [pretending]." Many hoped that *bad-hijabi* would ultimately bring about a change, noting, "Society is much more accepting now" (BA) and "the norms are changing" (TA) to the extent that some believe that "this gradual change will go toward the cancellation of the compulsory hijab" (BS).

Conclusions and Implications. Findings of this study illustrate that women in Iran, where hijab is compulsory, can experience self-discrepancy due to their inability to wear what they want in public. Thus, some engage in *bad-hijabi* to represent a more realistic picture of their true selves and escape from meanings that are associated with hijab. That is, Iranian women use *bad-hijabi* as a form of compensatory consumption and as a symbolic action to overcome the self-discrepancy. Due to the closed nature of Iran, there is limited research on the experiences of Iranian women in general and on *bad-hijabi* in particular. This study provides initial exploration of the topic, however, more research is needed and especially studies that examine the varying degrees of *bad-hijabi*, which may convey different messages, the extent to which *bad-hijabi* can prompt political change in Iran, as well as views of *bad-hijabi* among those who are devout in their religious views.

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