



Her Choice: Identity Formation and Dress Among Iranian, Muslim Women Living in the United States

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The Islamic faith is a growing global religion; the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2011) estimates that globally the Muslim population is 1.6 billion and will increase to 2.2 billion by 2030. As the population of Muslims grows the apparent misunderstandings of the faith among Western societies are glaring. The practice of veiling by Muslim women is often misunderstood by the general public in the United States and propagated as a synonym for oppression. What is often overlooked from a religious and secular viewpoint is that identity is formed and expressed through dress (Davis 1992; Kaiser, 1990). In apparel, textiles, and merchandising very little scholarship exists on the topic of Muslim women's dress practices as they impact identity formation. The present study focuses on identity formation and dress practices among first generation, Iranian Muslim immigrant women living in the United States.

The purpose of the present study was to explore how a first generation, female, Iranian, Muslim, immigrant to the United States forms an identity through dress. To investigate women's identity formation, I used macro and micro-sociological theory as well as feminist theory to guide my understanding of what influences the women's identity to form or reform after immigration to the United States. For each participant in the study, a symbolic meaning of veiling played a prominent role in understanding how individual and societal influences impact her dress on a daily basis.

Four research questions guided the data collection and analyses processes: (1) How do first generation Iranian Muslim women form an identity through faith-based dress upon immigration to the United States? (2) How does the immediate religious and ethnic community of first-generation Iranian Muslim women influence her appearance specifically in terms of faith-based dress? (3) To whom do first-generation Iranian Muslim women use as social referents or comparison groups to assist in identity formation? (4) To what extent, if any, does faith-based dress change for a first-generation Iranian Muslim woman as the length of time spent in the U.S. increases? The researcher employed qualitative data collection and analysis. Guided by McCracken's (1988) long interview approach, 10 in-depth interviews were completed over the course of 9 months and follow up conversations were completed with 5 of the 10 women interviewed. The sample (n = 10) included 7 non-veiling women and 3 veiling women. The interview protocols were semi-structured, completed in person, over the phone, and via Skype. The data analysis process occurred in a three-step process open, axial, and selective coding (Charmaz, 2006).

The primary result from this research study linked identity formation to intentional choice. The women in this study (n = 10) categorically expressed a need to make choices about their dress to better form identity. Azar, a participant in this study stated "I decided not to wear veil once I boarded on plane to USA." She was emphatic that taking her veil off was

unequivocally her choice. Similarly, Iman, another participant in this study is adamant about her intentional choice to veil “Okay, this is my belief, I’m going to keep it. So, I’m like I just got to know my God who, I don’t have any problem thinking that is a symbol for Islam, other people should understand that.” In the present study, “identity” was defined as the social and personal presentation of self in society (Fearon, 1999), and “intentional choice” was defined as a decision made by a woman by her own accord and generally free from direct coercion from others. This is not to say that the women in this study were not influenced by outside factions. It would be shortsighted to neglect the fact that socialization is in many ways the channel for outside influence. Intentional choices made by the women ranged from very simple choices such as color of dress, to very complex choices such as deciding whether or not to wear a veil while living in the United States. Additionally, the women were confident in the choices they made. None of the women expressed uncertainty or articulated any ineffectual feelings toward any choices they made about dress and veiling. Each woman interviewed was steadfast in her explanation of why she was or was not veiling. At no point during any interview did any of the women discuss wavering between veiling choices.

The limitations to this study are a result of the very narrow population and a small sample size. The parameters of the population (Iranian, first-generation immigrant, Muslim, female, and at least 18 years of age) made it difficult to recruit women to participate. 17 women volunteered to be part of this study, but 10 ultimately participated in interviews. This study had a limited representation of women living across the United States. In future iterations of this research a more inclusive population sample, particularly those women who immigrated from the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia will be vital. Additionally, accounting for varying subject positions such as social class, sexual identity, ability status, and size will be crucial. Further studies should focus on men and children from the etic and emic viewpoints of women’s clothing. The topic of Muslim women and the Islamic world in general continues to dominate our news and popular media outlets. Exploration is necessary in scholarship and teaching to interrupt messages of propaganda and create a space for open, dynamic conversation about practices among differing religious groups.

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