Hijab and Muslim religious identity expression among Egyptian women in the Pacific Northwest

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While Muslim dress has been in the news a great deal since 9/11, and the use of the veil has been extensively discussed in both the popular press and in academic literature (El-Guindi, 1999; Haddad, 2007; Mishra & Shirazi, 2010; Tarlo, 2010), the veil is only a part of the proscribed dress code for Muslim women. A few scholars have examined the meanings behind entire ensembles of Muslim dress (Rabolt & Forney, 1989; Daly, 1999 &2000; Furseth, 2011). Recently however, Muslim dress has been analyzed in terms of the integration of western fashion and the veil (Tarlo, 2010; Tarlo and Moors, 2013). However, Egyptian dress in the American diaspora has not been the subject of research until now.

The purpose of this study was to examine the symbolic meaning of modest dress (referred to in a general sense as *hijab*) to Egyptian Muslim women living in America's Pacific Northwest. In the diaspora, where Egyptian garments are not available, the women must mix headscarves with Western fashion, but it must be modest. Muslim women living in the USA need to integrate requirements for religious modesty when shopping for Western fashion which does not place a high value on modesty.

A multi-method approach that included a survey and structured interview schedule was developed and photo-elicitation was included to assess the Egyptian veiled women's needs for modest dress while living in the Pacific Northwest. This qualitative research project focused on how Muslim women were able to continue to follow the proscribed dress code when Islamically modest dress was not easily available. Ten Egyptian Muslim women (representing 83% of the Egyptian women in this region) were interviewed about their experiences in adopting and wearing Muslim dress and *hijab* while living in the Pacific Northwest. All were married; 90% were college graduates (40% of them had graduate degrees). Their mean age was 39.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format, and lasted approximately one hour. They were conducted in either English or Arabic (and transcribed into English). They were audio-recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used for this study; responses from the questions were grouped together by concept and analyzed. The major themes that emerged from the interviews and are listed in order of frequency of the participants' comments: (a) Modesty, (b) Religiosity, (c) Shopping, (d) Adapting to U.S. Norms. A colleague examined the data and themes and an inter-rater reliability index of 98% was calculated.

Using the Symbolic Interaction Perspective and the work of Blumer (1969), Goffman (1959), and Stone (1962), the meanings attributed to *hijab* varied according to the participants and according to their levels of religiosity. Some of the women modified their use of hijab after coming to the US, and while two somewhat reduced the visibly religious appearance of their *hijab*, two others adopted more visible symbols of *hijab*. All of the sample felt that wearing *hijab* was an essential element of their identity as Muslim women and that it was a form of non-verbal communication that visually attested to their religious commitment. Many believed that

although only God can judge a person's faith, they were aware that people do asses each other on the basis of dress. From the comments in the interviews, a typology was developed. Three levels of interpretation of *hijab* (as worn by Egyptian Muslim women) emerged from the interviews; Type 1, Hyper-religious *Hijab*; Type 2, Appropriate *Hijab*; and Type 3, "Immodest" *Hijab*. A member check was done, in which the photos were examined by eight of the ten participants who sorted them in order of conservatism. There was 92% agreement as to the order. This member check validated the typology developed by the researchers. The interviews provided inspiration for the development of an exhibit of Egyptian women's fashions to visually represent Egyptian Muslim women's religious identity (held in March and April, 2015). The exhibit shows the symbolic nature of dress as it expresses different levels of religiosity among Egyptian Muslim women in the Pacific Northwest.

        The main limitation of the current study is the sample size was very small, due to the small Egyptian Muslim community in the local area. However, 100% of the veiled Egyptian women in the area were in the sample. In spite of the small sample, the researcher would argue that their constant uniformity in responses, and in the member check of the images, supports the assumption of validity. Finally, the data shows that there is a need for retail stores to sell modest clothing. The target market could include Muslims, Mormons, fundamentalist Christians, and others. Further research on Muslim women, both veiled and unveiled, is needed to shed light on how ideology impacts dress and fashion.

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