

Article

'When Have Dolce and Gabbana Ever Cared about the Hijab?' Social Media, Fashion and Australian Muslim Women's Perceptions and Expression of Hijab

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Abstract: The scale of the representation of the Islamic head covering has increased exponentially over the last decade because of a range of factors, including growth in the modest fashion business sector and increased visibility of Muslim women in hijab in the public space. Social media has played a big role in changing perceptions of the Islamic head covering, via promotion and advertising. Meanwhile, the mainstream fashion industry has included options targeting the modest Muslim female market further, adding to changes in the representation and perception of the hijab. This research will examine the impact of social media and mainstream retail on Australian Muslim women's perceptions and expressions of hijab. Using interviews and online surveys it explores the links between the fashion industry, social media, and changes in how Muslim women view the hijab. The majority of Australian Muslim women spoken to followed various hijabi bloggers or influencers although only a small proportion adopted recommendations from these hijabi bloggers or influencers (such as purchasing products, or incorporating suggestions on modest clothing or modest style trends). They believed migration, liberalism, social media marketing, and the inclusion of Muslim women in mainstream fashion has contributed to a form of commodification and commercialisation of the hijab. Furthermore, using hijab models as promotional tools to market the products, as well as the use of social media bloggers and influencers to represent them was perceived as tokenistic and disingenuous.

Keywords: hijab (Islamic clothing); Muslim women; Australian Muslims; fashion; multiculturalism



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1. Introduction

The scale of the representation of the Islamic head covering has increased exponentially over the last decade in the media (Hebbani and Wills 2012) because of a range of factors, including growth in the modest fashion business sector and increased visibility of Muslim women in hijab in the public space. Social media has played a big role in changing perceptions of the Islamic head covering, via promotion and advertising. Meanwhile, the mainstream fashion industry has included options targeting the modest Muslim female market further, adding to changes in the representation and perception of the hijab. In Australia, the percentage of Muslim women in paid work is similar to the national average (Khattab et al. 2020) and organisations launch campaigns and products specifically aimed at Muslim women, who have purchasing power. Upon analysis, some argue the hijab and modest wear have become commercialised (Khan 2017) with Muslims witnessing this commercialisation as the hijab is potentially exploited for profit. The core and meaning of the hijab is centuries old and has generally withstood the test of time; however, the last decade has resulted in dramatic changes to the meaning attributed to the hijab among, and as expressed, by Muslim women. This research will examine the impact of social media and mainstream retail on Australian Muslim women's perceptions and expressions of hijab. It will also demonstrate the key role of social media in facilitating this impact. It uses interviews and online surveys to investigate the topic, to ascertain whether there are links

between the fashion industry, social media, and changes in how Muslim women view the hijab.

2. Islamophobia and Popular Attitudes towards Muslims

Many studies and observations suggest that Islamophobia is rampant in Australia and globally, in the twenty first century. [Awan \(2016\)](#) supports this view, however adding that social media is where an increasingly virulent form of Islamophobia surfaces. [Hebbani and Wills \(2012\)](#) have found through case studies of Muslim women in Australia that Muslim women reported feeling misrepresented by Australian media. They are often portrayed as “the other”, oppressed, a threat to democratic values, and submissive victims. Research conducted by [Dunn et al. \(2009\)](#) sought to explore the concept of ‘inconsistent secularism’ which seeks to prohibit overt religious identification in the public sphere, especially in relation to Islamic dress. [Carland \(2011\)](#) took a different approach, arguing that it is a fear of loss of freedom which actually leads to Islamophobia, and that Islamophobia ultimately leads to a loss of freedom for Muslim women. She uses the example of France banning the burqa due to concerns that some freedoms were being lost by Muslim women wearing the burqa; consequently, leading to its banning. Discussion and debates surrounding this leads to Islamophobia which then leads to loss of freedom as they are afraid to wear the hijab and being subject to abuse. [Akou \(2021\)](#) argues that although the law does not explicitly and specifically only ban the wearing of the niqab or any Islamic face coverings, the context in which it was passed, highlights the ban is largely targeting Muslim women. A commission was formed and was tasked to study the history and evolution of the burqa and niqab. It was this report which prompted discussions around banning the face veil in France; the media ultimately referring to it as the ‘burqa ban’.

3. Hijab, Liberalism, and Modesty

[Ahmad \(2017\)](#) argues that the way modesty is understood by Muslims today is significantly different to how the earliest Muslim communities viewed the original long-established requirements of the religion. Alternatively, [Hassan and Harun \(2016\)](#) believe that the change in Muslim women’s fashion choices are not reflections of changing views on requirements of faith but instead a reflection of consumers being more fashion conscious. [Islam \(2019\)](#) agrees that Muslim women have changed the way they present themselves and in turn, perceived, however, this researcher believes it is due to women using visual media platforms (social media) to reject orientalist imageries of Muslim women. [Nistor \(2017\)](#) challenges these previously mentioned findings, and argues that hijab is no longer solely a symbol of modesty—rather, it is now a way in which Muslim women express themselves, using fashion as an avenue. The author contends that young Muslims now wish to signal affiliation with both their Muslim communities (by wearing hijab) but also connect with wider society. This suggests that edgy and provocative use of the hijab can be considered a form of resistance, which challenges both Muslim and non-Muslim cultural norms. [Waninger \(2015\)](#) rejects this notion, alternatively suggesting that the change in the meaning of Islamic modesty is due to the availability of new spaces for identity making (namely or primarily online fashion spaces) which rely heavily on taste and branding. The approach taken by [Williams \(2007\)](#) differs yet again, stating that while the hijab is religiously symbolic, it is also socially significant. The researcher states that one reason many Muslim women wear the hijab is in order to establish an autonomous personal identity, asserting that the hijab emphasizes the identity of being Muslim, as it is a physical declaration of belonging to a faith community. However, it also gives Muslim women a level of autonomy as they are often able to fuse two very different and oftentimes opposing worlds together being the culture their parents identify with (if they have immigrated) with the new host culture. They remain connected to Islamic or migrant culture with the hijab, whilst integrating with western culture through western clothing ([Williams and Vashi 2007](#)). [Droogsmma \(2007\)](#) deliberately takes a position of distance away from “ascribing” a meaning to hijab, rather the researcher aims to describe the meaning of hijab, directly

from the women wearing it. Through case studies and interviews, this study outlines the perceived functions of the hijab, from the perspective of the wearers. The first function is the defining of Muslim identity as it is a visible marker of faith. The second is serving as a “behaviour check” meaning that it acts as a deterrent to bad or negative behaviours as it symbolizes their faith, which in turn symbolizes many things—among them, good manners—according to the participants in the study. The third function is the hijab is a marker of the resisting of objectification or sexual exploitation by men. The fourth function according to the Muslim women who took part in [Droogsma’s \(2007\)](#) study is the preservation of intimate relationships; because in the religion it is forbidden to engage in sexual activities prior to marriage, hijab is seen as protecting this principle by covering most of the body. The fifth and final function is to provide a sense of personal freedom from societal objectification and the expectations placed on women’s appearance.

[Tarlo \(2007\)](#) believes that a significant and overlooked number of Muslim women do not wear the hijab solely due to cultural and religious upbringing and instead due to living in transcultural cities such as London in the United Kingdom. Living in such a culturally and religiously diverse city has meant that women are exposed to Islam via friendship groups, romantic partners, university circles, workplaces, and even local salons. This has often lead to curiosity in Islamic and cultural practices, and as the case studies in [Tarlo’s \(2007\)](#) research suggest, it has lead to some experimentation in Islamic practices such as wearing the hijab. The issue with this particular study however is that the findings cannot be applied more generally as the evidence cited is based on a very specific case study. It does however introduce a new and less studied reason for Muslim women wearing the hijab and how this reason might impact on how the hijab is worn and expressed. [Hamdah \(2017\)](#) asserts that liberalism is the main driver for the slow secularization in many areas of Islamic life, especially the wearing of hijab. She argues that there are three key factors which are fuelling the change: individualism, autonomy, and public reason. She believes that Muslims living in the United States (and other western countries) have unknowingly integrated notions of liberalism into their own faith in their search for inclusion, and argues that Muslim women have adopted a view and practice of the hijab which contradicts longstanding Islamic principles of modesty due to individualistic notions.

[Gustavsson et al. \(2016\)](#) analysed the role that liberalism plays in negative attitudes towards Muslims and veiling in the Netherlands. Liberalism is a concept generally associated with tolerance and freedom of religion however the writers highlight how in the case they looked at, liberalism played a role antithetical to freedom and contributed to the rise of intolerance towards Muslims. Secularization is an idea that is closely associated with liberalism; it was for this reason that many European countries banned the veil. France is one such country which banned the veil in pursuit of a more secular society. [Gustavsson et al. \(2016\)](#) found the Netherlands in particular had the highest levels of negative attitudes toward Muslims and the hijab. It was found that the people who expressed these views were people who considered themselves liberals however they felt needed to protect their own culture and secular lifestyle. The authors labelled this conservative approach as exclusionary liberalism. The ways in which Islamic practices are expressed has changed over the last two decades. This observation has been made in the existing literature—specifically in relation to how modesty and the hijab are expressed by Muslim women.

4. Brands and Advertising in Multicultural Markets

The role of brands and advertising—particularly to diverse markets, or via social media—has been extensively studied, along with the impact of immigration to Western countries. [Forbes \(2013\)](#) analysed purchases made via social media recommendations. They found in their study that the impact of social media was not overwhelming. They discovered many of their subjects did buy products based off recommendations, however these recommendations were not those of social media influencers. They found the majority of customers looked to reviews before making a purchase. This study indicates that by looking to reviews before making purchases, customers did not make purchases based

solely off the recommendations and advertisements of social media influencers. However, this study may not have the most accurate results due to the small number of participants, therefore the findings cannot be generalized. [Pate and Adams \(2013\)](#) also support the idea that consumers generally do not purchase products based off celebrity or influencer recommendations; rather they rely on the opinions and recommendations of close friends and family. [Purwaningwulan et al. \(2019\)](#) investigated social media as a promotional tool in the hijab/modest wear industry in Indonesia. Their findings confirm that social media is becoming an integral promotional avenue in promoting Muslim fashion. The research has found that Muslim fashion companies utilize social media promotion to maximize sales. They employ numerous techniques mostly centred around creating social media accounts for brands, and utilizing influencers/bloggers which have a large audience. This has been found effective by brands who hire bloggers to promote a product, with numerous cases of the promoted product tending to sell out rapidly.

Because this study looks at the mainstream retail industry's impact on the perception and representation of the hijab, it is important to note that in some contexts the consumers of hijab-related products and services represent an immigrant or diaspora community. Some studies explore whether immigration has prompted Muslims to grasp firmly to certain practices and ideas, and almost relinquish other practices, with hijab being one such practice either continued or discarded by Muslim immigrants. [Henry et al. \(2005\)](#) whose examination of loss and mourning associated with immigration follows the experiences and process of Arab participants who have immigrated to Europe and North America. The study revealed that upon re-settling in the host country, a common response from the participant was to 'cling to' the vestiges of their 'lost' culture. This response was found to have negative outcomes such as isolation and social withdrawal, but lost culture could also mean continuing bonds and traditions in a more positive way. This aids in adjustment and ultimately assimilation. [Arredondo-Dowd \(1981\)](#) maintains a similar thread of reasoning in a study of grief and loss associated with immigration, covering four distinct stages of adjustment: fascination, which is characterized by excitement and curiosity of the new host culture; hostility towards the host culture, which is generally due to the resentment of feeling foreign and the confusion of a new culture; adjustment, which is when the immigrants have found their place in the host culture and begin to feel comfortable; and genuine biculturalism, which could be seen as assimilation when the immigrant adopts parts of the host culture and binds it to their previous culture.

[Voas and Fleischmann \(2012\)](#) investigate the impacts on religious identity, belief, and practice of second-generation Muslims whose parents settled in western countries. The writers concluded from their research that oftentimes migration to western countries "disrupts religious practice" ([Voas and Fleischmann 2012](#), p. 529) which could lead to a weakening in faith. Their study explores the many differences among second generation Muslims and highlighted that second generation Muslims deliberately distance themselves from cultural interpretations and practices of the Islam—often the version of Islam their parents practice. Although their observations cannot be generalized, they found a vast majority of young people are interested in strengthening their faith and learning about Islam. In contrast, there also remains a large population among Western diaspora Muslims who have completely assimilated into secular culture and relinquished their Muslim faith.

Research Question

The literature suggests that the relationship between the individual wearer of the hijab and the hijab itself are contained in a multifaceted interplay of different factors, ranging from the self of the individual, to societal and economic factors. The scope of studies which has previously been conducted in this space cover Islamophobia, hijab and conceptualisations of modesty, liberalism and Islamic views of modesty, the role of brands and advertising, and immigration to western countries. However, there is a lack of research that looks specifically at the links between social media, commercialisation of modest wear, and changes in Muslim hijab wearing women's self-expression and relationship to the

hijab. The literature suggests that the concept of hijab is complex and ideas surrounding hijab which could be attributed to gradual but dramatic changes in the practice of the faith are intertwined. Liberalism is a common theme which seems to overlap with a noticeable number of studies in the existing literature.

The existing body of work paints the image of a topic which is evidently multidimensional. There has not been sufficient research conducted, leading to gaps in the knowledge which would benefit from a study such as this. Therefore, this work of the researcher—a hijab wearing Muslim woman—attempts to address the following overall research question.

RQ1 How do social media and the mainstream fashion industry contribute to changes in Australian Muslim women's religious expression and identity and their relationship to the hijab?

This paper attempts to unpack this overriding question and use it as a springboard to discuss, for example, the effect of social media influencers on young Australian Muslim women's purchases. There is general information regarding this, but not more in-depth research—for examples studies on this specific topic with detailed responses from the target sample. There is very little contemporary research which examines the impact of popular hijab-wearing social media influencers on Australian Muslim women; there are few studies detailing or examining the psychological effects hijabi social media figures have on their Australian female viewers, in terms of influencing their religious identity or expression, or their relationship with a facet of that expression in the form of fashion, such as the hijab.

The research question overlaps with some of the gaps in the existing literature; specifically, this paper aims to address the question by use of an Instagram poll aimed at young Muslim women who follow certain social media influencers and to investigate the level of influence on their purchasing decisions; to further delve into the data the researcher aimed to interview some of the young Australian Muslim women who responded to our poll on social media, to explore the extent of psychological influence on their sense of religious expression and identity and their relationship to the hijab, stemming from social media influencers.

5. Methodology

The topic of this study explores aspects of globalization and migration, as well as the impact of social media. Much of the research which has already been conducted on this topic in other geographical contexts is based around observable examples found on social media; therefore, this is the measurable tool which was used as the basis for the study. Descriptions and references to pictures and videos found on social media are some of the main points of discussion used to support the findings and they are also referred to, by the interview subjects. The researcher chose to utilize a number of methods to collect data for this research, using a mixed methods approach (Williams 2007). The researcher used a quantitative approach for one part of the data collected, which the researcher planned to analyse using simple descriptive statistics. Due to the nature of the topic revolving around social media, online polls were conducted via Instagram which enabled the researcher to access the target group (Muslim women). The researcher knew the Muslim women who were asked to respond to the poll, who were users of the social network on which the questions were being asked (Instagram). Participants were able to answer yes or no to a series of questions. The purpose of this is to obtain initial quantitative data on the topics that were being investigated. The method was effective as it captured the right target audience (social media users) due to the medium being used—that is, a social media platform. It also proved to be effective as it captured the participants' feelings and thoughts towards a question in a numerical fashion. This is impactful in validating an idea or question which can be more generalized and can be applied to masses of people. The preliminary findings from data sourced from an Instagram poll—albeit as responses from real human beings and practicing Muslim Australian women the researcher personally knew—is however limited. For the second part of the data collected, the researcher chose a qualitative approach—interviews—to garner data which described the participants' unique

experiences and individual feelings (Gunter 2000). Five in-depth interviews were conducted by the researcher to gather a more detailed insight into the views expressed through the online polls. The interviewees are all young, Muslim, heterosexual, cis-gender women aged between 21 to 29. They are all university graduates or current university students. All the participants live in either Sydney or Melbourne, Australia, which are both considered to be the highest Muslim populated cities in Australia. The opinions of the participants overlap but also vary due to differences in lifestyle and occupation, and level of parental focus on religion during childhood and teenage years. They were all born into middle class Muslim migrant families. It is also of note that four out of five participants identify as Shia Muslims, which is an additional factor which may impact their views on Hijab. The interviews were conducted during a COVID-19 pandemic related lockdown in Melbourne, using a virtual face-to face setting via Zoom. Written consent was provided for the use and publishing of the content of the interviews. Participants were asked a number of questions about their social media consumption and relationship to hijab. This method was highly effective as it provided necessary in-depth details to aid the research and to complement the data sourced from the online polls. The interviews were conducted at one point in time only; they were not done over a period of time as the purpose was to gain an understanding of the participant's overall thoughts and feelings about the topic in their current life. The researcher found these methods to be effective and suitable for the chosen topic.

Due to choosing a mixed method approach, the researcher was able to capture quantitative and qualitative data. It is vital that these two approaches were used for the research as some aspects of the research question suggest noticeable mass social changes with the target demographic being studied. The best way to confirm or negate this was the use of quantitative data in the form of surveys or polls to demonstrate mass confirmation or mass rejection of the assumed changes. Using a qualitative approach was equally important in ascertaining personal and individual reflections and experiences. This was necessary as it worked to explain and contextualise the numerical data. One possible limitation of the qualitative approach could be a lack of diverse responses from the subjects. The small number of interview subjects could display similar answers due to them all being from a similar demographic. Due to the nature of the study, the participants were required to be of a similar faith background, i.e., Muslim-however this could result in responses covering similar ground.

6. Findings and Discussion

In the first part of our data collection in order to reach our target sample for the study, we used Instagram to find poll respondents who fit the criteria of Muslim women users of social media. The sample was of women based in Australia-Melbourne and Sydney specifically, who are all regular social media users with active accounts. They are all Muslim women of migrant backgrounds, many of them of middle eastern origin. The researcher excluded responses from anonymous accounts or accounts which did not belong to Muslim women users of social media the researcher knew personally. Overall, the online poll posted to Instagram garnered responses from 57 participants, 45 of whom wore the Hijab.

The majority of respondents—forty-one out of the 57—say they followed a 'fair' amount of Hijabi bloggers or influencers; the extent to which these influencers actually influenced their followers is debatable as only twenty-three of the poll respondents say they had previously adopted recommendations from hijabi bloggers or influencers (such as purchasing products or incorporating suggestions on modest clothing or modest style trends). At the same time, most of the poll respondents (fifty-two Muslim women) say they had noticed an increase in the number of online influencers removing the hijab—a process known colloquially as 'dejabbing' (Bekdache 2020), and nearly seventy per cent or 39 respondents felt concerned by Hijabi influencers removing the hijab.

The overwhelming majority of poll respondents (fifty-three Muslim women) believe social media trends have changed perceptions and understanding of modesty. Just under half of the online poll respondents (twenty-six Muslim women) felt that social media

impacted the way they wear the hijab, for example adjusting the way they accessorised their hijab in order to be more on trend or fashionable. Finally, nineteen of the Muslim women who responded to the Instagram poll say they have experienced a negative impact in their relationship with hijab, due to social media.

The second part of our data collection attempted to interrogate some of the concepts which we put up on the Instagram poll, both to triangulate the data and to introduce a qualitative data source to complement and expand on the concepts asked about in the poll. This was done via in-depth interviews with some of the participants who responded to the Instagram poll. The participants which were included in the interview portion of the study were approached with the intention of allowing varying opinions to be represented in the study. The women are of varied ages in their 20s, they all wear the Hijab, however they are all in different stages in their lives. All participants visibly present themselves differently to each other on social media. Varying levels of Hijab, some are more interested in fashion than others, some more interested in Islam and politics, and some are passionately interested in their career and academic pursuit. It was for these reasons these specific women were chosen to be included in the research.

6.1. Fatima

Fatima is a 29-year-old mother of Iraqi background; she has spent the last 10 years working in government policy. She has completed studies in journalism and is currently completing her PhD. Fatima began wearing the hijab at a young age (approximately 10 or 11 years old). Throughout her childhood she felt it was assumed by her family, as well as herself that she would wear the hijab. Her mother and sisters wore it. “I hadn’t been exposed to anything else”. She does not recall having a conversation with her parents in which she was explicitly asked about wearing it, however she does not feel it was forced upon her. Throughout adolescence and her teenage years, she almost felt indifferent to the hijab through not experiencing a significant connection to it. However, in her early 20’s, she started to feel a strong connection to it. “It no longer signified ‘just something that my mum or sisters did, or my upbringing—that’s why I wear it,’” she said. She navigates the hijab by giving herself personal guidelines. “So, for me—always—my neck has to be covered—that’s non-negotiable. My clothes have to be fairly loose fitting—that’s another non-negotiable.” Fatima rejects the notion that the hijab can or should be altered from its ascribed form. “This view that it’s open to interpretation, that the Quran doesn’t make it clear . . . I don’t ascribe to that belief. When we look at the Quran and dressing modestly, the verses in which He refers to it—it’s quite clear cut. So Muslim women can stand up and female advocates can say ‘well we want to dress how we want and it’s our right to wear the hijab or burqa’, or whatever else it may be. And there are some that say we can wear whatever we want, we don’t have to wear the hijab and dress modestly and that’s their right. But at the end of the day, we are from a faith of modesty, and there are very clear guidelines on what we should and shouldn’t be wearing”.

Like many women, she has experienced doubts and struggles in her journey wearing the hijab. “For me I think you can love wearing it but still have an ongoing struggle with wearing it”, she said. She cites a negative experience in job-seeking while wearing the hijab.

“They wanted a series of promotional videos for the company, and the role I was going for was an on-camera role and they were really impressed with my CV and everything, but they suggested it would be more appropriate to do behind the scenes work . . . they were very open and honest that it was because of the visibility of my hijab, and that was shattering at the time because that was my first real experience, where I felt the world doesn’t see and relate to it (the hijab) like I do”.

However, despite these discriminatory experiences, she did not feel compelled to remove the hijab. “But even when I experienced that, it was never ‘oh should I stop wearing it’, it was more like ‘this is going to be an ongoing struggle and something that I have to accept’”. She believes there has been a change in how Muslim women are portrayed

and are portraying themselves, which is a change she is critical of. “I think it’s naive to assume that because Muslim women adhere to a modest sense of dress code, that we are immune to the sexualisation of basically everything that’s targeted to women in general.” She finds modest fashion and the hijab coming across as much more sexualized, even within the modest fashion industry itself. “The models that are used even within our own community look and fit a certain type. I think that goes very much hand in hand on a larger scale with what we see in the mainstream fashion industry”. She believes there’s a positive side to the added exposure of hijab; that is modest clothing becoming more accessible for hijabi women and small businesses can be supported.

Fatima is skeptical of large-scale international companies including the hijab in campaigns for the purpose of genuine inclusivity; she believes it is purely for monetary gain. “Big brands are embracing it, and they’re not embracing it because they care about Muslim women. They’re embracing it because it’s a niche market and it’s there to make them money, and I don’t think anyone can argue with that”. In relation to increased exposure by mainstream media, social media, and the fashion industry, Fatima sees these changes as both beneficial and problematic. She believes the changes are problematic due to the hijab beginning to be commodified and commercialised “where It’s being called hijab but it’s really not”. She finds it concerning that the hijab is being worn in a way to appeal to popular culture. On the other hand, she does see some benefit in the hijab becoming more familiar to society, creating opportunities for Muslim women in the professional sphere to be accepted and recognised. She also believes the change is advantageous for small businesses who aim to provide Muslim women with modest fashion options.

For Fatima, proper representation is women being accepted into different spheres regardless of their religion and Muslim women in hijab being appreciated for their achievements and expertise rather than being limited to only being recognised when Muslim issues arise. She feels empowered to ascribe to and express important parts of her identity, being a Shia Muslim but feels degraded by expectations set by Muslim men in relation to how women should dress, finding the conversations online around this to be disrespectful. She also finds a trend in which hijab is ‘disposable’ (as discarded by well-known bloggers and other Muslim women) to be degrading as hijab is something sacred to her. The rise in Muslim women removing the hijab for (Bekdache 2020) followed a number of well-known hijabi bloggers opting not to wear the hijab. Fatima believes the reasons for ‘dejabbing’ are complex and varied. However, she believes, the reason may be because of pressure to “look better with it off”. She also believes it is a trend in which bloggers have exacerbated and that some women never had a personal connection to the hijab, making it difficult to maintain wearing it.

6.2. Aya

Aya is a 21-year-old Master of Public Health graduate. She began wearing the hijab at a young age, in her primary school years. Her relationship with modesty has changed over time. Previously believing modesty was “a woman’s job to cover her body so men aren’t attracted to her”, she now sees it as a way for a woman to reclaim power in choosing what to show people of her physical self. During her early to mid-teenage years, she had a turbulent relationship with the hijab. She recalls these troubles emanating from her parents’ sometimes rigid approach in applying dictates of modesty. When she was younger, she felt her feelings were rejected by her parents and the hijab was limiting. She explains their mentality is cultural in origin. “In Iraq, dressing the way we do now is unheard of—it’s considered highly inappropriate”. Whilst she does not blame her parents, she does acknowledge that her feelings and mentality have shifted from her younger years, to be more personally connected and empowered by the hijab.

Aya has observed the increase of Muslim women using social media platforms and sees the influx of hijabi bloggers as serving a positive purpose in that Muslim women are not being seen as “homogenic” anymore—they are seen as diverse even though they are a minority within the Australian population. She sees this change as having led to the

meaning of the hijab being lost and compromised; despite this, she believes the increase in hijab exposure is a valuable movement. She argues that one of the biggest contributors to women removing the hijab could be the lack of connection and education surrounding hijab. Stemming from her own experiences, she believes placing the responsibility of social modesty solely on women and “surface level discussions” on hijab is part of the reason behind women wanting to remove it.

6.3. *Khadija*

Khadija is a 26-year-old Melbourne primary school teacher. She, like many of participants of migrant background, began wearing the hijab in her primary school years. “It was a silent expectation”, she said. Khadija is of Iraqi background; she was born in Saudi Arabia before she and her family migrated to Australia when she was three years old. Her mother, older sisters, and cousins all wore the hijab; therefore, she was also expected to, having trouble in establishing a strong connection with the hijab due to “the lack of dialogue” about why she was wearing it. She also recalls feeling her clothing choices were too policed by her parents, and that there was a “huge emphasis on the technicalities of hijab”. This led to her feeling resentful toward the hijab. However, in her early adult years, she says she began to accept her own notions of modesty through studying her faith, noting that she enjoyed learning about the religious justifications for the hijab, rather than the cultural ones she was accustomed to from her parents. Regardless of the fluctuations she experienced with her faith, she says, “it’s an ongoing ever-changing relationship” with the hijab in which she feels the hijab makes up a significant part of her identity.

Khadija cites the Western feminist movement as a possible influence on the shift in Muslim women’s increased representation in public discourse; due to feminism, there is much more emphasis on Muslim women being independent and very career driven. She finds this to be a little dangerous despite being a working Australian woman herself, seeing contemporary views emanating from social media as downplaying the roles and importance of men in society and family life. She also believes that capitalism is another driving force in these changes. “It’s infiltrated our life completely . . . I can’t go a day without being a consumer, every single time I open my phone I see an advertisement”. She thinks that due to popular retail culture/trends, big brands will inevitably seek to cash in on the growing modest fashion industry. Consequently, she sees the hijab as a form of defiance against societal pressures of relentless expectations of women. “I see hijab as a resistance to the dominant culture that’s just trying to assimilate us”.

She does not see the inclusion of hijab in popular culture and the fashion industry in a positive way. “It’s not worn as hijab anymore, it’s basically just a cloth. But it [the increased inclusion in popular culture] could be useful for some women who feel limited and restricted by hijab”. Khadija sees proper representation of Muslim women as being a part of the conversation, arguing that major brands should be including hijabis in campaigns for items or products designed for Muslim women. She would like to see hijabis included “as real people, not just as tokenistic models”.

6.4. *Amal*

Amal is a 23-year-old Melbourne undergraduate doing a Bachelor of Social Work. Her journey with the hijab began at the age of 10. Along with her family, she expected that she would wear the hijab. She recalls almost all the females in her family wearing it and feeling that she would be considered “weird” and “the odd one out” if she did not. Despite her early experiences with the hijab, she feels it continues to hold a huge significance in her life. She also feels a great deal of responsibility associated with wearing it as she feels she represents the religion when wearing the hijab.

Like many young Muslim women, Amal describes her relationship and experience with the hijab as “turbulent”. In her early adult years, she describes experiencing feelings of regret and resentment toward the hijab. She felt she did not experience enough of her teenage years without it, and that it restricted her from attending certain gatherings and

having certain social experiences. Like other women of Lebanese descent with migrant parents in Australia, she felt religion was “thrown” at her, and that this made it difficult for her to form a strong connection with the hijab. She decided to independently learn about religion and the concept of modesty, as well as the purpose of the hijab. She believes this was a crucial step in repairing the resentment she experienced in her younger years towards wearing the hijab. Undertaking independent learning prompted her to love the hijab more than resenting it—she says this is due to the fact that she felt she now understood it. Amal feels more represented by big brands embracing the hijab and finds the increased online presence of hijabi bloggers a positive shift for perceptions of Muslim women.

6.5. Akeela

Akeela is a 24-year-old Melbourne student undertaking tertiary studies in primary teaching. She explains that modesty to her is “how you are as a person as a whole—that includes how you act and present yourself, your mannerisms, etc.”. She began wearing the hijab “full time” in high school after spending her earlier primary school years wearing it intermittently. She describes it as a rite of passage, and that adopting the hijab was completely ordinary and expected with anything contrary to wearing it being seen as “weird”.

Wearing the hijab was not without its difficulties. She has struggled in environments in which she felt she was “the odd one out” such as at Christmas parties, where she has been the only hijab-wearing woman. She says she has not allowed herself to feel resentful toward the hijab as a result of these experiences instead telling herself “the struggle is a part of the journey, this is the commitment I have made to myself and to God”. Akeela has noticed a vast difference in how women are portrayed and represented on traditional versus social media platforms. She does not believe the increased, more heterogeneous portrayal on social media is a step in the right direction for Muslim women and finds the trend to be disingenuous in some ways. She says she has witnessed several hijab wearing bloggers grow their audiences rapidly and market their own products related to the hijab, only to remove it a short time later. She compared the Islamic view of the hijab as obligatory to the view of obligatory prayer, and strongly believes that the hijab is not open for interpretation. She also does not believe big brands are including the hijab for any reason outside of profit. “When has Dolce and Gabbana ever cared about the hijab?” she asks.

She explains that she believes liberalism has played a key role in this change, and that she sees Muslim women as unknowingly compromising the hijab and what it stands for, to make it seem more appealing to the western world. She believes Muslim women are subconsciously always trying to prove to the world that the hijab is not oppressive, by—for example—going as far as saying the hijab is not obligatory. The reason for this, Akeela believes, is not enough Muslim women knowing the true purpose and requirements of the hijab. Akeela says she feels empowered when she sees other Muslim women being accepted for who they truly are and are given “a fair go”. When she sees women in powerful positions, *in companies, and in businesses being appreciated and respected—not just to meet a quota—she feels empowered.*

7. Conclusions

Based on responses from both the online poll and the interviews there was a consensus from the participants that more should be done to support Muslim women who wear hijab, on various fronts.

Our respondents felt misrepresented, not under-represented, by both the mainstream media, and by the fashion industry. Participants agreed that it is crucial Muslim women in hijab are consulted by big brands who are wanting to sell clothing items to hijab-wearing markets. Hijabi women should be a part of the design process, and not just be used as part of promotional material and modelling. An example of this would be giving Muslim designers prominent roles in creating these lines.

The Muslim Australian women we spoke to feel that fashion being sold to them should be reflective of what hijabi women would want to wear. Participants pointed out that many brands have designed clothing items aimed specifically at hijab wearing women, yet they are not aware of the requirements of the hijab and the needs of hijab wearing women. Ultimately this has led to selling clothes which are completely incompatible with the hijab as modest fashion, leaving some Muslim women feeling confused and commodified. This would also be rectified by granting Muslim women prominent roles in the design process.

On a local and community level, the participants thought the issues they discussed need to be addressed and discussed by Muslim leaders or religious figures. The radical shift in the wearing and perception of hijab and its sanctity was a topic raised by several participants as one that Muslim women should be aware of. The topic is complex and it is one in which the voices of Muslim women who wear the hijab should be privileged. The direction of the hijab should not be determined by international fashion houses and high end brands, the participants said—it should be determined through the lens of Islam as practiced by Muslim women themselves. Some of our interviewees felt policy makers should provide more support and preventative measures in the event of workplace and employment discrimination they experienced. Participants described being rejected in workplace settings because of their clothing—for example, from an on-screen role in the digital media industry despite having the appropriate credentials and being qualified. Given that hijabi women do encounter this type of discrimination ([Hashemi et al. 2019](#)), resources need to be devoted to assisting them to combat it.

It is important to note this study cannot be generalised as it was conducted on a small scale, and larger scale studies need to be completed in order to draw more generalised conclusions. The findings and conclusions drawn from the research suggest it is necessary for larger scale studies to be conducted from which findings can be extrapolated. Possible directions for future research include conducting studies similar to this one on a global scale, tracing changes that have occurred in the narrative of the hijab and the commercialisation of modest fashion within the last decade, in contexts where the target group represented by our research is not a minority—for instance, an investigation of these changes in Muslim-majority countries where the shift in perceptions and representation of the hijab is negotiated differently by hijab wearing women due to an existing dominant culture based on Islam. In theory, Muslim majority countries should be immune to the negative impact of these changes, however they are not—a possible reason for this is globalization and the rise of social media.

Participants the researcher spoke to feel the hijab—a sacred religious symbol worn by Muslim women for centuries which has stood the test of time—is being morphed into a fashion item, devoid of its original purpose and meaning. They also felt that understanding of the purpose and application of hijab is also being changed by widespread contemporary liberal views of young Muslims; and that perhaps unknowingly, Muslim women are interpreting the hijab according to their personal beliefs and feelings—downplaying what these participants saw as the obligatory nature of the hijab in order for Islam to be perceived as more attractive and modern. In reality, participants felt that Islam is an ancient religion which is extremely progressive but not transient or liberal in nature, and that hijab was representative of a highly structured way of life regulated by rulings or Islamic traditions. Traditionally and historically in Islam, obligatory decrees are not open for interpretation for a lay Muslim to decipher as to whether they should be followed. Islamic jurisprudence—the study and analysis of Islamic laws—is a space in which only qualified scholars should work; it is reflective of this belief that participants see it as crucial that changes in practice (such as changes in the use of hijab) are observed, studied, and addressed at an academic and community level in order for Muslims to be aware of the changes.

Participants pointed to several factors being behind these changes to hijab. Although the topic is multifaceted, the factors they raised include migration, liberalism, social media marketing, and the inclusion of Muslim women in mainstream fashion. They pointed to big brands beginning to include the hijab and modest wear items in their campaigns,

knowing Muslim women have buying power and that the modest wear market is growing rapidly in monetary value. A vast number of participants in this research believe these companies are playing major roles in the commodification and commercialisation of the hijab. Furthermore, using hijab models as promotional tools to market the products, as well as the use of social media bloggers and influencers to represent them was perceived as tokenistic and disingenuous. In summary, the narrative of hijab has expanded in terms of representation at a rapid rate over the last decade. Whilst this has provided many positive outcomes for Australian Muslim women (such as in relation to not feeling alienated or outcasted) it has also brought outcomes which many Muslim women who wear hijab harbour negative feelings towards. Australian society is now more familiar with the hijab due to increased inclusion of Muslim women in mainstream media, social media, and mainstream fashion. This has led to a change in how Muslim women are perceived, how they represent themselves, and how they are represented.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: This project was assessed as being exempt from the requirement to seek ethics approval on the basis of its work as creative and practice-based research in the discipline of journalism, for which interviews are obtained and the results edited, incorporated, and published on news sites. The relevant legislation is listed below. The Australian Copyright Act (covering the use of copyright material for the purposes of “research and study” and “reporting the news”) <https://www.copyright.org.au/browse/book/ACC-Fair-Dealing:-What-Can-I-Use-Without-Permission-INFO079> (accessed on 23 October 2022).

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