

The modification of Muslim women's hijab to meet modern life styles in a Western society

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Introduction. Nearly one-fourth (27%) of the world's Muslim population lives in non-Muslim countries (Hoodfar, Alvi, & McDonough, 2003). Many Muslim women residing in non-Muslim countries choose to maintain their religious, traditional, and cultural practices, especially those representing their identities such as veiling (hijab). These women use the hijab to communicate their beliefs and identities to others (Hatem, 2001). However, women residing in non-Muslim countries have indicated that they have experienced negative feedback from others due to their use of the hijab (Ruby, 2006; El-Ghobashy, 2011). The impact of Muslim women's experiences on their use of the hijab has received little attention from researchers (Tarlo, 2010). Therefore, the purpose of this research was to investigate why and how a group of Muslim women developed and adopted a variation of the hijab, the Multipurpose Modern Hijab (MMH), to wear while living in the United States (Figure 1). The MMH was developed and used by a group of four Muslim women who have lived in the U.S. for more than 20 years and one American Muslim woman who converted to Islam more than 30 years ago. The MMH's construction includes cuts, folds, and snaps that are not found on the traditional, unmodified hijab.

Method. Three research questions were addressed. First, what prompted the women to develop the MMH? Second, what meaning does the MMH communicate to oneself and to others? Third, what factors contribute to the fabric preferences for the MMH? Using a qualitative approach, four of the five women who developed the MMH were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes, were audio-recorded (all but one), and then transcribed verbatim. Data were coded and, through an iterative data analysis process, themes were identified. Note that to establish trustworthiness, a rough draft of the interview guide was reviewed by three of the researcher's peers and was revised according to their comments. In addition, the researcher conducted a self-interview to pre-test the interview guide and to clarify the researcher's bias.

Results and Discussion. When asked about their reasons for developing the MMH, the participants indicated that the traditional unmodified hijab was uncomfortable and not easy to use, as it required frequent adjustment or use safety pins to stabilize it. They wanted a solution that was not only stable on their heads, but also made with one piece of fabric that could cover both the head and face simultaneously. Although participants began modifying their hijabs 20 years ago, they have continued to modify the MMH over time to better meet their needs. The most recent iteration includes incorporating natural fiber fabric in the lining to enhance breathability. When asked what meaning the MMH communicated to oneself and others, participants indicated that the MMH reinforces their commitment to Allah and communicates their religious beliefs to others since it makes covering their face more appealing and comfortable. They felt that the design of the MMH not only made covering easier, but it also was

more accepted by non-Muslims in their community. By using the MMH, they feel that they are expressing to others within the non-Muslim community that they have the freedom to choose their style of hijab and that they are not being forced to cover. In line with findings from previous research (El-Ghobashy, 2011), participants from this study feel empowered because, by wearing a hijab, they can control how they are perceived; they prefer to be judged by their personalities rather than their physical appearance. When asked to discuss fabric preferences for the MMH, participants indicated that softness, drapability, lightweight, and breathability are most important. The participants have experienced difficulties finding all of these properties in one fabric, and therefore the MMH they developed pairs an outer layer of synthetic or blended fabric with a lining of cotton fabric. The participants believe that the MMH provides added convenience and they prefer using solid natural colors that match their outfits; however, some use printed fabrics too. In summary, the participants have developed a hijab alternative that they believe retains its ability to communicate their religious beliefs and commitment to Allah, but also is easier to put on and keep on, more comfortable, and more accepted by the non-Muslim community. One major challenge participants noted is finding a single fabric that meets their needs in terms of aesthetics and comfort; there is a need for fabrics that are designed specially for hijab users. Understanding the meaning of the hijab and Muslim women needs is important for designers and retailers. Although this study provided an in-depth understanding of how and why a group of Muslim women living in the U.S. developed and adopted an alternative to the traditional, unmodified hijab, there is need for additional research. Research should focus on modifications made by other individuals or groups, as well as consider generational, geographic, and occupational differences.

Figure 1: The MMH in Different Width and Fabrics prints.



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