American Muslim Women's Understandings of Hijab and Modesty

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American Muslim Women’s Understandings of Hijab and Modesty

Amina Ziad

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in Women’s and Gender Studies
Under the advisement of Charlene Galarneau

April 2017
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For my sister, Salma
Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor, Charlene Galarneau for her continued support and encouragement as I worked through this project. My thesis would not be what it is if not for her insightful comments and suggestions. Thank you for pushing me to pursue this thesis project and to do so without compromising my well-being.

I would also like to thank my thesis committee members, Elena Creef and Irene Mata. I am grateful to Lidwien Kapteijns for serving as the honors visitor on my committee, guiding the direction of my research, and reading several early drafts of my first chapter. In addition, I would like to thank Irene Mata for reading an early draft of my first chapter as well. I am grateful to Louise Marlow for her invaluable research advice and reading an early draft of my first chapter. I would like to thank Professor Nadia Hajj for her advice and guidance as I started my research.

I would like to thank the research librarians at the Clapp Library for their help with finding resources and, specifically, Emily Belanger for spending time with me looking through countless numbers of academic journals.

I am grateful to Jennifer Musto, who pushed me to pursue a thesis and this project in particular. Thank you for encouraging me throughout this whole process and believing my capabilities. I would also like to thank Nancy Marshall for her help developing my methodology and facilitating the IRB process. I am eternally grateful to have the continued support of the entire Women’s and Gender Studies Department and their words of encouragement as I worked on this thesis. Thank you Betty for always being ready with kind words, warm hugs, and endless chocolate.

I am deeply appreciative to have had the support of the Jerome A. Schiff Fellowship. Without the support of the Schiff Fellowship, this thesis would not have been possible.

To the American Muslim women who participated in my focus groups, thank you for answering my questions and sharing your stories.

To my friends, Adele, Rose, Caylene, Sarah, Julide, Sara, Suhaily, Ruby, Nisreen, and all the members of the Wellesley Arab Women’s Association, I will forever cherish all the times you made me smile and laugh with your encouragements. Thank you Caylene, Adele and Sarah for reading drafts of my chapters and offering invaluable insights. To my dear friend, Alexa, your support and encouragement means more to me than I can express here in words.

To my thesis tri-fecta, Adele and Rose, I would not have been able to complete this thesis without our late nights in Clapp, filled with laughter, yoga, and love. To the same Adele so oft mentioned, I again say thank you for so creatively coming up with the title of this, my seminal work.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my parents, Zina and Abdelkrim, and my brothers, Youcef and Ayoub, for their support and love throughout the past four years at Wellesley, and especially this past year. Thank you for believing in me even when I didn’t believe in myself. To my sister, Salma, whenever I became frustrated with this project, I would think of you. I hope, someday, what’s written here will help answer some of your own questions and inspire you to ask more.
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INTRODUCTION

Every Muslim girl or woman has a story about hijab, whether she wears it, once wore it, or never wore it at all. For American Muslim women who do wear hijab, this is often called your ‘hijab story.’ On a warm, somewhat muggy day in late August, I woke up at 6 am to get ready for my first day of high school. I followed my usual morning routine, diligently brushing my teeth, washing my face. Unusually, I made sure to wear a long-sleeved shirt. And then I wrapped my hijab. Unbeknownst to my peers, and even my parents, I had decided that today was the day. Thirty-four years earlier, unbeknownst to her parents, my mom made the same decision. I followed a path my mother had walked; she too began wearing hijab on her first day of high school.

This thesis project is a culmination of many of the questions and thoughts I have developed over the past four years, and particularly around American Muslim women.¹ The global Islamic Revival movement of the 1970s and 1980s influenced not only Muslims in Muslim-majority countries, but American Muslims living in the United States as well (Furseth, 2011, p.366). For example, the acceptance of hijab as a norm by Muslim women in the U.S. is directly linked to the debates over hijab in Egypt (Ahmed, 2014, p.240). In 1965, the U.S. changed its immigration policies, making immigration easier for Muslims. In particular, Muslim men from Egypt who resettled in the U.S. played a role in establishing hijab as a norm. Many of these men were active in the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which encouraged women’s wearing of the hijab (Ahmed, 2014, p.245). As founders of mosques, Islamic centers, and student

¹ I choose to use “American Muslim” rather than “Muslim American” as I believe the former emphasizes Muslim
organizations in the U.S., they were able to influence American Muslims’ perspectives on hijab (Ahmed, 2014, p.246).

In this way, the understandings American Muslim women have of hijab and modesty are linked to understandings of hijab and modesty within Muslim communities beyond the U.S. The American Muslim population in the U.S. is comprised of both a longstanding Muslim community and a more recent immigrant diaspora. As such, understandings of modesty have migrated as Muslim immigrants have settled in the U.S. That said, understandings of modesty held by American Muslim women are different from those of women living in their countries of origin.

American Muslim women live at the intersections of multiple communities, namely the non-Muslim American and American Muslim communities to which they belong. In the midst of extreme hostility, fueled by the ‘War on Terror,’ and rampant Islamophobic rhetoric, many American Muslims negotiate living in a moment of fear, struggling to gain a sense of how to ‘be’ in public and interface with others. This negotiation is particularly intensified for visibly Muslim women, as they cannot ‘pass’ as “normal” American citizens. By “visibly,” I refer to a Muslim woman who participates in some form of Islamic covering: hijab (in all its forms), burqa, niqab, shayla.

For a more in depth discussion on ‘passing,’ see Erving Goffman’s *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, and in particular Chapter 2.

2 At the same time, it is important to note that the majority of American Muslim women do not wear hijab regularly; 36% of American Muslim women report wearing the hijab consistently all of the time, and 24% wear hijab most or some of the time (Pew Research Center, 2011).
Though most American Muslim women do not hijab regularly, Kathleen M. Moore, an Islamic studies scholar, argues that resistance to hijab stems from what hijab is perceived as symbolizing (Moore, 2014, p.199). It is well established that hijab is often considered oppositional to Western values (Moore, 2014, p. 187; Haddad et al., 2006, p.3). Women who wear hijab are not only perceived by non-Muslim Americans as oppressed, but also ‘too religious,’ or perhaps the wrong kind of religious within a U.S. context (Moore, 2014, p.199). Moreover, scholars of Islam, like Margot Badran, argue that hijab is mistakenly used, by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, to represent the commonly known ‘veil’ in Muslim communities (Badran, 1996, p.22). The word ‘hijab’ derives from the verb $hjb$, which means, according to the Al-Maany Arabic-English dictionary: to cover, to hide, to shelter, to protect, and to establish a barrier, screen, curtain, border, or threshold (Al-Maany). Over time, many non-Muslim Americans and American Muslims have come to equate hijab with headscarf. (Furseth, 2011, p.368).

These observations alongside my interactions with American Muslim women throughout my life led me to my central question here: how do American Muslim women understand hijab and modesty? This question is especially important given that American Muslims often find their identities and faith being contested by Muslims and non-Muslims alike (Moore, 2014, p.188). To begin answering this question, I draw upon three sources: the Qur’an and Hadith, contemporary academic scholarship, and data I gathered from focus groups with young American Muslim women.

Chapter 1 focuses on what the Qur’an and Hadith say about hijab and modesty. The Qur’an serves as Muslim’s holy book, detailing Allah’s (God) commands. Hadith, alongside the Qur’an, are the most important resources for Islamic knowledge. The Hadith comprise the
Sunnah, the sayings, teachings, and actions of the Prophet Mohammed, *Salah Allahu Aalayhi Wa’Salam*. This phrase translates to Peace Be Upon Him (PBUH) in English. The phrase “Peace Be Upon Him” is a translation of the Arabic words Muslims use whenever mentioning the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) as sign of respect because he is the Messenger of Allah and Islam. Other Prophets are shown similar respect. Muslims use the phrase, *Radhya Allahu Aanhum*, or “May Allah Be Pleased With Them,” when referring to the Companions of the Prophet (PBUH), those closest to him during his life. Often times the Arabic phrase is shortened to the acronym, “RA.” Here, I will use PBUH and RA when referring to the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) and the Companions of the Prophet (RA), respectively.

It is important to note that within Islam, there are two main sects: Sunni and Shia. For the purposes of this thesis, I use Sunni translations and exegeses of the Qur’an and Hadith because the majority of Muslims in the U.S. identify as Sunni (Pew Research Center, 2011). Within the Sunni sect, there are also four madhahib, or legal schools of thought: Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi’i, and Hanbali. These schools of thought have in common most of their legal rulings, but differ in their acceptance or emphasis of certain practices (Bassiouni, 2012). The details of the madhahib, are not the focus of this thesis and as such I will not delve into the particular differences between each school of thought.

In Chapter 1, I include both the Arabic text of the Qur’an as well as the English translation. I use the Sahih International translation of the Qur’an because this particular translation is very accessible and widely used by Islamic studies scholars, academics, and Muslims. I use Qur’anic *tafsir* (exegesis) from *Tafsir Al-Jalalayn*, a classical Sunni exegesis composed by Islamic scholars, Jalal Ad-Din Al-Mahalli and Jalal Ad-Din Al-Suyuti in the 15th and 16th centuries. This particular exegesis is easily accessible because it is one volume in length.
(in comparison to others that are several) and uses straightforward language. According to the
non-profit, academic press, *Fons Vitae, Tafsir Al-Jalalayn* is one of the most popular in the
Islamic world and it is often used in courses on Qur’anic exegesis (Fons Vitae, 2017). Because
the original exegesis is in Arabic, I use the English version translated by Feras Hamza, a scholar
of Qur’an and Islamic history. Hamza’s translation is comprehensive and annotated. For Hadith
sources, I use Sunnah.com, which is the most comprehensive, Arabic-English online source for
Hadith collections. This resource includes thirteen Hadith compilations, including the six major
collections.

I also reference exegeses created by contemporary scholars of Islam and Qur’anic
exegesis, Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud. In more recent times, Muslim women scholars have
approached translating and interpreting the Qur’an and Hadith using feminist frameworks. Barlas
and Wadud argue that historically the Qur’an has been read a patriarchal text not because of its
content, but because of how it is translated and interpreted, based on the socio-historical context.
As such, the methodologies used and exegeses created by traditional *ulama’* (scholars) are
influenced by the patriarchal societies in which they lived. Using both traditional and
contemporary exegeses, I offer a nuanced understanding of how Islamic scholars, over time,
approach understanding what the Qur’an and Hadith say about hijab and modesty.

In Chapter 2, I draw upon the scholarly works of contemporary academics writing about
Muslim women, and American Muslim women in particular, to understand how they examine
modesty and hijab. In this chapter, I primarily examine the works of American scholars Yvonne
Yazbeck Haddad, Jane Smith, Kathleen M. Moore, and Leila Ahmed. All of these scholars are
highly regarded and cited within their respective fields for their work on American Muslim
women. Their work includes some of the earliest research done on American Muslim women.
and is foundational to academic conversations surrounding American Muslims. This body of literature primarily focuses on hijab as modesty, without discussion of modesty beyond hijab and dress. To explore additional understandings of modesty beyond hijab, I draw upon the works of Fatima Mernissi, Saba Mahmood, and Saba Fatima, who focus on modesty beyond hijab and dress. Using both realms of scholarship offers a fuller analysis of how American Muslim women understand hijab and modesty, than either alone does. It becomes clearer that hijab and dress are important to American Muslim women’s understandings of modesty, however, modesty cannot be reduced to hijab alone.

Hijab and modesty are at the center of my thesis, and both are complicated concepts. I use the term, ‘modesty” to mean the “quality or state of being unassuming in the estimation of one’s abilities” and “behavior, manner, or appearance intended to avoid impropriety” (Dictionary.com). As such, when I reference modesty, it encompasses hijab (as a headscarf), dress, behavior, and character. Hijab is one aspect of modesty, but modesty cannot be reduced to hijab. At the same time, it is important to note that some Muslim women reject hijab and prefer to focus on the concept of modesty as one’s behaviors and/or character. For some Muslim women, hijab is purely synonymous with a headscarf. For others, hijab includes a headscarf and dress. And for others still, hijab incorporates the headscarf, dress, and behavior and/or character. Moreover, Muslim women who do cover, when it comes to the way they are physically dressed, cover in different ways: hijab, niqab, burqa, chador, dupatta, etc. (see Appendix A). For the purposes of this thesis, when I use hijab, I refer to hijab as the headscarf some Muslim women wear, unless otherwise specified.

In Chapter 3, I present American Muslim women’s understandings of hijab and modesty, discerned from two focus groups in 2017. I facilitated two focus groups comprised of young
American Muslim women between the ages of 18 and 25 years old, in which I asked participants questions about hijab and modesty, with special attention to modesty beyond hijab. I chose the focus group format because it facilitated conversations between participants in response to the questions asked that might not have occurred during more formal one-on-one interviews. In addition, I selected participants between the ages of 18 and 25 years old because they are a population of American Muslims that is of great interest to me. I hypothesized that American Muslim women in this age demographic would offer an added level of nuance to my analysis because they are exposed to multiple, sometimes contradictory, perspectives on hijab and modesty.

Collectively, American Muslim women’s understandings of modesty and hijab can be separated into three components. First, American Muslim women understand modesty as it relates to three aspects: hijab/dress, behavior, and/or character. Second, American Muslim women’s understandings of modesty are socially shaped and regulated. Finally, American Muslim women resist and critique the social regulations of hijab and modesty that are often imposed on them.

I then discuss the focus group findings in relation to I) one another, II) the perspectives of the Qur’an and Hadith, and III) contemporary academic scholarship. In part I, I analyze the focus group results within three themes. First, American Muslim women speak of an evolution in their understandings of modesty, specifically that as they got older, their understanding of modesty expanded to encompass more than hijab. Second, American Muslim women connect their understanding of modesty with their relationships with Islam and Allah. Lastly, American Muslim women’s understanding of hijab and modesty manifests differently based on their social context. In part II, I compare what the American Muslim women in the focus groups say about
hijab and modesty, to what is written in the Qur’an and Hadith. Finally, in part III, I explore connections and differences between the findings included here and those within contemporary academic scholarship on American Muslim women.

Although the findings I present and analyze are specific to the American Muslim women in my study, they offer valuable insights into how some American Muslim women understand hijab and modesty. Collectively, the data demonstrate that these understandings extend beyond the clothing they wear or how they wear their hijab, but dress nonetheless remains central. Hijab and modesty mean different things to different American Muslim women. In addition, the ways in which American Muslim women understand hijab and modesty do not always reflect their communities’ understandings of hijab and modesty. In fact, many American Muslim women reject their communities’ understandings of hijab and modesty. And ultimately, American Muslim women’s understandings of hijab and modesty are fluid, evolving and manifesting differently in different social spaces. In bringing together the Qur’an and Hadith, contemporary academic scholarship, and the data I collected, I contribute a nuanced analysis to the preexisting scholarship on American Muslim women and their understandings of hijab and modesty.
CHAPTER I: QUR’AN AND HADITH ON HIJAB AND MODESTY

Within the Islamic tradition, ulama’ (scholars of Islam), who specifically train at Islamic institutions such as Al-Azhar University in Egypt, translate and interpret the Qur’an and Hadith. They are trained in Qur’an and Hadith as well as Arabic, Islamic law, and jurisprudence. Their religious training confers upon them an authority that allows them to put forth fatwas, or edicts, addressing Islamic questions and disputes. It was not until recent times that Islamic studies became a field of study in the academic world and contemporary scholars began to engage with translations and interpretations of Qur’an and Hadith. For example, Muslim women scholars and scholars like, Barlas and Wadud, use feminist frameworks to offer alternate perspectives and critiques of past translations. Their methodology and translations often offer exegeses of Qur’an that differ from those of traditional ulama’. The exegeses offered by Barlas and Wadud are referenced throughout the contemporary body of literature on Muslim women, and on American Muslim women.4

In this chapter I explore what the Qur’an and Hadith say about modesty and hijab, using scholarship from ulama’ as well as more recent feminist scholarship. Doing so illuminates the changes in how people have approached reading the Qur’an and Hadith. For the first part of this chapter, I draw on English translations of the Qur’an as well as exegeses from Tafsir Al-Jalalayn. This exegesis is widely used and highly regarded in the Muslim scholarly community. In the second part of this chapter, I turn to Muslim women scholars’ feminist approaches to Qur’an and Hadith.

4 For example: Ahmed, 2011; Haddad et al., 2006.
The English term ‘modesty’ does not have a singular equivalent when translated into Arabic. In fact, there are several Arabic words describing modesty, the four most common are: *haya’, ihtisham, itidhaa,* and *tawadhaa* (Al-Maany). The definitions of each word similarly refer to not only modesty but are also used to describe humility, and unpretentiousness. *Haya’* and *ihtisham*, are sometimes translated as shyness and decency (Al-Maany). Although the Qur’an and Hadith discuss modesty, these particular terms are not used. Thus, for the purpose of this thesis, I use the word ‘modesty’ rather than an Arabic equivalent. Modesty, as I use it here, is the “quality or state of being unassuming in the estimation of one’s abilities” and “behavior, manner, or appearance intended to avoid impropriety” (Oxford Dictionary). As such, modesty encompasses dress, behavior, and character.

The Qur’an

The Qur’an serves as Muslims’ holy book, detailing Allah’s, or God’s, words to the Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him/PBUH). It not only describes the obligations and duties of being Muslim, but similar to the Torah and Bible, also includes the stories and lessons of other religious figures/prophets, both male and female. It is important to note that a gender binary of male/female is assumed in the Qur’an; there are no references to trans-people in the Qur’an. Thus, in this chapter, references to ‘men’ and ‘women,’ refer to cis-men and cis-women.

The Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) via the archangel Jibreel (Gabriel) in the year 610 CE. The revelation of the Quran began on *Laylat-Al-Qadr*, or the Night of Power. The archangel Jibreel revealed the first words of the Qur’an to Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), who memorized the verses. The Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) then taught his followers the verses of the Qur’an. Immediately following his death, the closest followers of the Prophet
transcribed the verses of the Qur’an in chronological order of the revelation (Abdel Haleem, 1999, p.6). When referencing the Quran, it is important to understand that the Qur’an, as a religious text, was intended to be timeless, applicable regardless of the social, historical, and political context in which it is being read, translated, and interpreted.

The Qur’an addresses both Muslim men and women directly. For example, the language used in the verse below demonstrates how Allah’s (God) message is directed towards both men and women:

Which translates to:

“Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women...”
who do so - for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward” (Verse 33:35; Translated by Sahih International)

Moreover, Muslim women and men are held to the same religious obligations as evidenced by verses such as the following in Surah Al-Nisa (chapter of The Women):

\[
\text{وَمَن يَعْمَل مِنْ الْصَّالِحَاتِ بِمِنْ ذَكْرٍ أَوْ أُنْثىٍ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ}
\]

This translates to:

“And whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, while being a believer - those will enter Paradise and will not be wronged, [even as much as] the speck on a date seed” (Verse 4:124; Translated by Sahih International).

The Qur’an, as a whole, addresses both men and women. Nonetheless, the Qur’an also contains verses specifically directed at Muslim women and verses that reference women who are considered important in Islam. Some are praised while others are used as examples of wrongdoing. However, Maryam (Mary), the mother of Jesus, is the only woman referenced directly by name. In fact, a whole Surah, or chapter, of the Qur’an is dedicated to her story and related teachings. Nonetheless, women are regularly referenced throughout the Quran, whether in stories of Prophets or in Allah’s commandments, playing a large role in its messages.

With respect to modesty, the Qur’an first discusses physical modesty with the story of Prophet Adam and Eve. In Surah Al-Araf, the Qur’an states,
“O children of Adam, We have bestowed upon you clothing to conceal your private parts and as adornment. But the clothing of righteousness that is best. That is from the signs of Allah that perhaps they will remember” (Verse 7:26; Translated by Sahih International).

The term used in this verse for private parts is sawa’a, which translates synonymously with the word furooj, used in verses 24:30 and 24:31, both meaning “private parts.” The English equivalent of the Arabic terms is the pudenda or genitals (Al-Maany).

These verses establish modesty of dress as a requirement for both Muslim men and women. In fact, the Qur’an addresses Muslim men first, before addressing modesty with respect to women. Verse 24:30 states, “Tell the believing men to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Indeed, Allah is acquainted with what they do” (Verse 24:30; Translated by Sahih International). Here, Muslim men are commanded to guard their “private parts” (pudenda). The following verse, one of the most prominent verses in the Qur’an regarding modesty, as it relates to women, states:

---

5 “Pudenda,” is not a commonly used word in English to refer to genitals. It refers specifically to the external genitalia. The word is derived from the Latin word pudere, or to be ashamed (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).
“And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their head covers over their chests and not expose their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their women, that which their right hands possess, or those male attendants having no physical desire, or children who
are not yet aware of the private aspects of women. And let them not stamp their feet to make known what they conceal of their adornment. And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers that you might succeed” (Verse 24:31; Translated by Sahih International).

In this verse, Muslim women are also commanded to guard their “private parts.” In addition to this, Allah commands them to draw their head covers over their chests or juyubihuna. Discussions on whether or not hijab, as a form of physical modesty, is a religious obligation often cite this verse first. However, despite consensus from the four major schools of Islamic thought (Hanafi, Shafi’i, Maliki, and Hanbali) that hijab is a religious obligation, controversy remains around the translation and Tafsir, exegesis, of verse 24:31. Specifically, the part of the verse stating, “wrap their head covers over their chests.”

In discussions about whether or not a physical manifestation of hijab is a religious obligation, verse 24:31 (see Appendix B) is often cited. The word used to reference women’s head covers in this verse is b’khamrihina. The religious debates surrounding this verse often focus on this particular word. Some Islamic scholars, for example, Nouman Ali Khan (based in the U.S.) contend that the root of the word, khimar, implies that the head is already covered and that Allah is commanding women to extend their head covering such that it also covers their chest (Redzovic & Khan, 2013). The Arabic word for “adornment,” zinah, in this context refers to two related meanings: bodily beauty and acquired adornment like clothing and jewelry (Badawi, n.d., p.8).

In addition to this verse, verse 59 in Surah Al-Ahzab, states:
"O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their jilbab [outer garments]. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful (Verse 33:59; Translated by Sahih International).

This verse commands Muslim women to “draw their cloaks [outer garments] over themselves” (Hamza, 2016). *Tafsir*, or exegesis of the Qur’an, specifically that of Al-Jalalayn defines *jilbab* as “a wrap that covers a woman totally” (Hamza, 2016). The verse uses the term *jilbab* not in reference to a loose dress as we may commonly think of today, but rather as an indirect reference to *khimar* or headscarf (El Guindi & Zuhur). A nuanced understanding of this verse requires historical context. At the time that the Qur’an is revealed to the Prophet (PBUH), women wore head coverings tied behind their heads, leaving exposed their ears, neck and chest (BBC, 2009). Though while this particular verse does not directly reference a headscarf or *khimar*, it confirms that women were already covering their head (Verse 33:59; see Appendix B). It also adds that Muslim women should use the cloth covering their heads to cover the ears, neck and chest, to enact physical modesty.

This verse also includes, “That is more suitable that they will be known and not abused” (Verse 33:59; Translated by Sahih International). The exegesis of this verse describes that in
covering with a *jilbab*, it is more likely that “they [Muslim women] will be known to be free women and not molested by being approached” (Hamza, 2016). The word “free” in the translation refers to non-enslaved women. This exegesis goes on to explain that enslaved women during the Prophet’s time (PBUH) did not cover in the same way that non-slave women did and because of that, non-Muslims used to harass them. Similarly, the *tafsir* of Ibn Al-Kathir, a scholar in Islamic exegesis, interprets this verse to mean that by covering with *jilbab*, Muslim women will be distinguishable from non-Muslim women and enslaved women (Al-Mubarakpuri, 2003; Verse 33:59; See Appendix B).

The term *hijab*, commonly understood to mean head covering, is used in several Surahs of the Qur’an. In the Qur’an, though, is not used as a reference to women’s head covering, but as a partition. The term first appears in verse 46 of Surah 7:

“*وَبَيْنَهُمَا حَجَابٌ وَعَلَى الْأَخْرَافِ رِجَالٌ يُعْرِفُونَ كُلَّهُمْ يُسِيمَانِهِمْ وَنَادُونَ أَصْحَبَ الْجَنَّةِ أَن سَلَّمُ عَلَيْكُمْ لَنْ يَكُونَ لَكُمْ لِرَيْدَ الْخَلْوَةِ وَهُمْ يَطْمَعُونَ*”

(Verse 7:46; Translated by Sahih International; emphasis added).

Similarly, in Surah 19, hijab is used when telling the story of (Mary) when she became pregnant and secluded herself from her family and outsiders.
“And she took, in seclusion from them, a screen. Then we sent to her Our Angel, and he represented himself to her as a well-proportioned man” (Verse 19:17; Translated by Sahih International; emphasis added).

A reference is also made to a physical screen or partition in the verses detailing how guests should act in the Prophet’s (PBUH) home. The verse orders guests to speak to his wives from behind a partition or curtain:

“And when you ask [his wives] for something, as them from behind a partition. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts...” (Verse 33:53; Translated by Sahih International; emphasis added).
Later verses in the Qur’an use hijab when referencing a connection with the Divine. For example:

“And they say, “Our hearts are within coverings from that which you invite us, and in our ears is deafness, and between us and you is a partition, so work; indeed we are working” (Verse 41:5; Translated by Sahih International; emphasis added).

In this verse, hijab is not used to refer to a physical entity but rather a spiritual barrier. The verses preceding Verse 41:5 illuminate the context of the verse. Non-believers (i.e. non-Muslims) were informed of the Qur’an and its call of Islam. However, they did not accept Islam, citing that their hearts are covered, preventing them from accepting this divine message. As such, non-believers, assert that there is a spiritual partition between them and those who are Muslim. Verse 42 in Surah 51 also uses hijab in the context of interaction with the Divine.

“And it is not for any human being that Allah should speak to him except by revelation or from behind a partition or that He sends a messenger to reveal, by His permission what He will. Indeed He is Most High and Wise” (Verse 42:51; Translated by Sahih International).
Here, Muslims are informed that Allah will not be physically visible to them. Rather, Allah is available to them through revelations. For example, in the case of Prophet Moses (PBUH), he was able to hear the voice of Allah speaking to him, but not see him physically.

The verses incorporated in this section demonstrate several things. First, modesty is a requirement of both Muslim men and women. Second, in addition to the requirement of physical modesty, modesty also has a spiritual component, as evidenced by the use of “righteousness” in verse 7:26 (see Appendix B). In addition, the use of *hijab* in the Qur’an differs in meaning from its current use. In the Qur’an, *hijab* refers to a partition that separates, whereas *hijab* in contemporary times is used to refer to the head covering some Muslim women wear. The Qur’an establishes modesty as a religious obligation for all Muslims, and offers some guidelines for its manifestations. Next, the Hadith, or accounts/narratives/actions of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), offer additional insights about modesty and hijab.

**The Hadith**

Muslims also hold sacred the Hadith, sayings, narrations and accounts of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). Hadith comprise the *Sunnah*, or the “customary behaviors” of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). The actions and behaviors detailed in the Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH) were reported and documented by the *Sahaba*, the Companions of the Prophet (PBUH), who were closest to him during his life. The behavior detailed in the *Sunnah* are not necessarily mandated in Islam, but are strongly recommended because they were performed by the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) himself, and as the exemplar of Islam, all Muslims should strive to follow his actions.
The Hadith were not compiled until after the Prophet Mohammed’s (PBUH) death in the seventh century after which Muslim scholars gathered the Hadith into multi-volume books. There are six collections compiled by different scholars, sometimes overlapping in the hadith they present. Within the field of Hadith studies, evaluating the chain of narration is emphasized in order to establish the authenticity and correctness of the Hadith (Usmani, 2014). Hadith with strong chains of narration are generally considered to be the most reliable since the genealogy of the Hadith can be clearly traced back to the direct Companions of the Prophet (PBUH).

Much like the Qur’an, there are many Hadith in which women are referenced or discussed. Such Hadith range in topics from how women should act in both private and public spaces to what they ought to wear to their legal rights. With respect to modesty, Sahih Muslim, one of the six collections reports the Prophet (PBUH) as saying, “Modesty is the branch of faith,” establishing modesty as a part of Islam (At-Naysaburi, Book 1, Hadith 56). Modesty in the Hadith refers to both physical covering and character.

With respect to the physical component of modesty, the Hadith discuss the concept of awrah, which refers to the physical body parts Muslim men and women ought to cover. Similar to the Qur’an, the Hadith also discuss awrah with respect to modesty. Within the Sunni Muslim tradition a man’s awrah is considered to be the part of his body from his navel to his knees (At-Tirmidhi, Book 42, Hadith 45). With respect to women, the concept of awrah is more complex. It is well accepted by most scholars that Muslim women during prayer are obligated to cover entirely, with the exception of the hands and face, regardless of whether she is praying alone or

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6 Hadith are evaluated on two main criteria: 1) their isnad or the chain of narrators and their reliability, and 2) whether there are discontinuities in the chain of narration. A Hadith that has a strong chain of narration is designated sahih. The beginning of a Hadith lists the narrators beginning from the most recent to the original narrator, typically the Prophet (PBUH) or his Companions (Usmani, 2014).
in a group (As-Sijistani, Book 2, Hadith 641). The following *sahih* Hadith narrated by Aisha is often referenced with respect to this ruling:

“The Prophet said: “Allah does not accept the prayer of a woman who has reached puberty unless she wears a veil [khimar]” (As-Sijistani, Book 2, Hadith 641).

In the presence of other women, Muslim women are obligated to cover the area between the navel and knees. There are no restrictions on what a woman should cover in the presence of her husband (Badawi, 2010; Shavit & Winter, 2011, p.272). Additionally, when it comes to *awrah* in front of a *mahram*, or close male relative to whom marriage is impermissible, there are three main opinions within the Sunni sect. Some scholars dictate that *awrah* encompasses the body parts between a woman’s shoulders and her knees (Shavit & Winter, 2011, p.272). Others dictate it is between a woman’s stomach and knees. Yet others say *awrah* is from the navel to the knees. In front of non-*mahrams*, there is a consensus among Islamic scholars that a woman should cover her entire body except for her face, hands, and in some schools of thought, feet (Badawi, 2010).

With respect to the specifics as to how Muslims should cover, there are four main requirements for both Muslim men and women. Clothing should fully cover the *awrah*, loose enough so as to avoid revealing the bodily outline (Badawi, n.d., p.6), thick enough so as not to expose the skin or the shape of the body, and simple enough so as to not attract attention. For both Muslim men and women, opulent clothing is perceived as vanity, and as such is considered improper by Islamic standards according to the following Hadith:
“Whoever wears a dress of fame in this world, Allah will clothe him with a dress of humiliation in the day of resurrection, then set it afire” (Al-Qazvini, Book 32, Hadith 3606).

As a whole, the basic physical requirements of dress and modesty are the same for both Muslim men and Muslim women. The difference lies in the extent to which each covers. The specifics of awrah for Muslim women are more complex and context-dependent.

In the Sahih Muslim compilation of Hadith, the Prophet (PBUH) is narrated as instructing one of his Companions to tear a silk garment to make head coverings for a group of women. The Arabic word used for “head covering” is khimar, the same as the term used in the Qur’an (Al-Naysaburi, Book 37, Hadith 37). In the Sunan Abi Dawud compilation of Hadith, Aisha (RA), wife of the Prophet (PBUH), reports the Prophet (PBUH) addressing Asma, daughter of one of his Companions:

“Oh Asma’, when a woman reaches the age of menstruation, it does not suit her that she displays her parts of body except this and this, and he pointed to his face and hands” (As-Sijistani, Book 34, Hadith 85).

A Muslim woman should cover her entire body, with the exception of her face and hands, thus she must wear some sort of head covering. However, this Hadith was deemed by Abu Dawaud a mursal Hadith, meaning that the identity of the person who narrated it from Aisha (RA) is unknown. The gap in the chain of narration reduces the authority of the Hadith. Because of its weak chain of narration, this Hadith is often dismissed when cited as evidence supporting hijab as a religious obligation.
With respect to physical covering, the term *hijab* does not appear in the Hadith. It does appear, however, in a spiritual context in reference to a partition or curtain, similar to its use in the Qur’an. For example, the Prophet (PBUH) is reported as explaining that on the Day of Judgment:

“There will be none among you but his Lord will speak to him, and there will be no interpreter between them nor a screen [hijab] to screen Him” (Al-Bukhari, Book 97, Hadith 69).

Similarly, the Prophet is reported as describing that for those who are admitted into Heaven:

“He (God) would lift the veil [hijab], and of things given to them nothing would he dearer to them than the sight of their Lord, the Mighty and the Glorious” (Al-Naysaburi. Book 1, Hadith 356).

In both of these Hadith, hijab is used not to refer to a physical head covering but to a spiritual barrier between humans and Allah that can only be removed by Allah Himself.

Moreover, the Hadith also connect modesty with character. Most notably: “Every deen [religion] has an innate character. The character of Islam is modesty” (Anas, Book 47, Hadith 9). This particular Hadith establishes modesty as a characteristic, beyond the physical dress, that guides the Islam as a whole. If modesty is a character of Islam, a discussion of modesty must also include a discussion on character, about which there are several Hadith. For example, the Prophet (PBUH) is narrated as saying:
“Nothing is heavier on the believer's Scale on the Day of Judgment than good character. For indeed Allah, Most High, is angered by the shameless obscene person” (Jami’ at-Tirmidhi, Book 27, Hadith 108).

In addition to this Hadith, the Prophet is also narrated as stating:

"There are four qualities such that if you were to be given them, you will not be harmed even if the world were to be taken away from you. They are: good character, restraint in food, truthful words, and upholding a trust" (Al-Bukhari, Book 14, Hadith 288).

From these Hadith, good character is an important aspect of Islam, and modesty is integral to good character. As such, modesty, too, is an important aspect of Islam.

As a whole, the Qur’an and Hadith establish modesty as integral to Islam, both physically and as an aspect of character. The use of the word “hijab” in both the Qur’an and Hadith differs from contemporary use of hijab to refer to a head covering. In both, hijab references either a physical or spiritual barrier.

Contemporary Exegesis of Qur’an and Hadith

Though women ulama’ have always engaged with the Qur’an and Hadith, in more recent times, Muslim women scholars of Islam have approached translating and interpreting the Qur’an and Hadith, using feminist and/or anti-patriarchal frameworks. Barlas, a scholar of Islam and Qur’anic hermeneutics, for example, argues that the Qur’an has historically been read as a patriarchal text, not because of the actual content of the text but because of the “contexts and methods of its reading(s)” (Barlas, 2001, p.120). Specifically, the way the Qur’an is translated and interpreted is influenced by its reading in patriarchal societies by “a handful of male scholars
during the Middle Ages” and by states’ involvement in “defining religious knowledge from very early times” (Barlas, 2001, p.120). Barlas, as a “believing woman” argues for an approach to the Qur’an that does not conflate the Qur’an as a “Divine Discourse,” with its oppressive exegesis (Barlas, 2001, p.123).

For example, Barlas, citing Verse 33:35 (see Appendix B), argues that the Qur’an itself does not “distinguish between the moral-ethical behavior and potential of women and men” (Barlas, 2001, p.134). Rather, frameworks that pre-dated Islam shaped its translation and interpretation. The sexual sameness or “one-sex” models commonly associated with the Greeks, for example, established “man as Self and woman as the Other,” lesser than man (Barlas, 2001, p.132). However, the Qur’an does not adopt a view of sexual sameness or difference nor does it ascribe gendered characteristics when addressing and commanding men and women. According to Barlas, who cites Verse 49:13, moral-ethical criteria are the only thing used as a distinguishing factors:

“O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted” (Verse 49:13; Translated by Sahih International).
Thus, the most noble or ranking person is not a man as some exegeses of the Qur’an may claim, but rather one who is righteous. The focus is not on gender identity, but on moral character. The use of righteousness in Verse 7:26 (see Appendix B), which mentions dress, establishes a connection between righteousness and modesty, and as such, establishes modesty as a character trait.

Using a methodology that accounts for cultural and historical context in her translations and interpretations the Qur’an, Barlas explains that in the earlier years of Islam (closer to the seventh century), scholars agreed that men and women could expose non-pudendal body parts (Barlas, 2010, p.39). But by the thirteenth century some scholars deemed a woman’s entire body to be pudendal (Barlas, 2010, p.39). Furthermore, by the seventeenth century, some scholars extended that to include a woman’s face and hands. A similar trend is observed in some Hadith, in which women are constructed as the “greatest fitna [temptation] for men” (Barlas, 2010, p.39). In Barlas’s argument, traditional Muslim discourses render the hijab a tool to protect men from temptation. Thus, instead of representing female virtue, “the veil [hijab] points to a licentious and easily provoked sexuality, especially the male sexuality that can only be kept under wraps by literally wrapping up the female body itself” (Barlas, 2010, p.40). Similar constructions of the female body are found in Christianity and Judaism, and as Barbara Stowasser, a preeminent scholar of women in the Qur’an and Hadith, contends, many “Bible-related traditions” were integrated into Islamic frameworks, particularly into Hadith (Stowasser, 1994, p.23).

This cross-religious influence, Barlas argues, has informed the ways Qur’an is translated, particularly verses related to hijab or covering. For example, verse 33:59 (see Appendix B), in commanding Muslim women to draw their jilbabs over themselves, does not suggest anything about the female body nor does it suggest that women ought to wear jilbab as protection from
Muslim men, but rather from non-Muslim men (Barlas, 2001, p.41). Historically, in seventh century Arabia, veils/hijabs signified “which women were under male protection and which were fair game,” (Ahmed, 1992, p. 15). According to Barlas, this indicates that non-Muslim men would not attempt to harm a woman wearing it, because she “belonged” to another man and doing so would result in retribution. Thus, the veil/hijab represents boundaries between men, not between men and women. Because the veil/hijab was the norm in a particular socio-historical setting, it is not necessarily relevant today (Barlas, 2010, p. 41).

Furthermore, with respect to modesty, Barlas argues that Verses 24:30 and 24:31 (see Appendix B) are of more importance because they focus on both dressing and behaving modestly. Although she acknowledges the ambiguity of the verse, particularly related to the phrase “that which necessarily appears,” Barlas argues that the purpose of that ambiguity is to present a general concept of modesty, rather than just a focus on dress (Barlas, 2010, p. 42). Moreover, Barlas contends, because the verse focuses on action/behavior, namely the lowering of one’s gaze, it signifies that the veil/hijab is “more than an article of clothing” (Barlas, 2010, p. 42). The most significant aspect of this verse is not that it mandates the hijab; in fact, Barlas argues there is no scriptural basis for hijab, but that it establishes a concept of modesty that extends beyond dress, and to both men and women.

Wadud, an American scholar of Islam and Qur’an exegesis, also does not consider hijab a religious obligation, nor does she “ascribe to it any religious value per se,” despite wearing it herself (Wadud, 2006, p.176). She argues, “Over the past several decades, the hijab has been given disproportionate symbolic significance both within and without Muslim communities” (Wadud, 2006, p.219). Specifically drawing upon Verse 7:26 (see Appendix B), “the clothing of righteousness, that is best,” Wadud argues that hijab, a physical article of clothing, is not the
ultimate signifier of modesty. With regard to constructions of hijab as a protection from unwanted sexual advances, Wadud disagrees with this. Hijab does not guarantee protection or respect; women’s bodies will continue to be reduced to their sexuality (Wadud, 2006, p.219).

Wadud critiques exegetes who approach each verse in the Qur’an individually, arguing that such a methodology misses links between themes and principles. As a result, solutions or commandments in the Qur’an meant for a specific situation are generalized (Amirpur, 2015, p.102). For example, with respect to women’s dress, Wadud argues that it is intended to be a descriptive statement. What counted as modest dress in the time of the Prophet (PBUH) has been universalized, leading to a particular interpretation of modesty whereby hijab alone conforms to that understanding of modesty. Specifically, interpretations that equate modesty with hijab are based on the cultural and economic norms of seventh century Arabia (Amirpur, 2015, p.103). As such, these interpretations take the veil/hijab to be universal rather than a particular by-product of a specific time and place. Wadud argues that translations and interpretations of Qur’an ascribe specific manifestations of modesty, whereas the Qur’an puts forth general principles of modesty, Like Barlas, Wadud centers the message of the Qur’an by understanding the context in which the verses of the Qur’an were revealed. In doing so, they believe that the content of the Qur’an can be centered and understood, unlike other approaches to exegesis.

The work of Barlas and Wadud suggests a disconnect between the ‘true’ content of the Qur’an and interpretations of the content. Patriarchal norms that pre-dated Islam influenced how ulama’ following the time of the Prophet (PBUH) interpreted the Qur’an. These early interpretations in turn informed interpretations of Qur’an in the thirteenth and fourteenth
centuries, all the way until present day. Knowing this illuminates and can help explain current understandings of modesty and hijab held by American Muslim women.

The work of Muslim women scholars like Barlas and Wadud reflect a shift in approaches to the Qur’an and Hadith, ones that incorporate anti-patriarchal and feminist frameworks. The incorporation of a historicization methodology that takes into account historical and cultural influence may provide more a complete re-interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith.

Conclusion

The Qur’an and Hadith, as the primary religious texts referenced by Muslims, reveal that modesty is fundamental to Islam. In the Qur’an and Hadith, modesty has both physical and spiritual aspects. The Qur’an, with respect to physical modesty, commands Muslim men and women to cover their “private parts” or genitalia. In fact, the Qur’an addresses Muslim men before addressing Muslim women. Furthermore, the word “hijab” is not used in the Qur’an to reference a headscarf. Rather, it is used to describe a physical partition or spiritual barrier. Ultimately, the Qur’an establishes modesty as a religious obligation for all Muslims, and offers some parameters for what it entails.

The Hadith also establish modesty as a central aspect of Islam. They offer additional guidelines for what physical modesty ought to be. For example, the concept of awrah describes what body parts must be covered for Muslim men and Muslim women. Moreover, the Hadith establish clothing guidelines. For example, clothing should be opaque and not be excessively tight or opulent. The term hijab does not appear in the Hadith, with respect to physical covering. However, like the Qur’an it is used in a spiritual context to reference to a partition between Allah and Muslims on the Day of Judgment. The Hadith also connect modesty and character, namely,
“The character of Islam is modesty” (Anas, Book 47, Hadith 9). This Hadith in particular establishes modesty beyond physical dress, encompassing character as well.

Moreover, in recent times, Muslim women scholars have started to translate and interpret the Qur’an and Hadith using methodologies that differ from those used by traditional ulama’ (scholars). Barlas and Wadud argue that the Qur’an has historically been read as a patriarchal text because the methodology used by ulama’ is influenced by the patriarchal societies in which they lived and wrote their exegeses. Barlas and Wadud approach Qur’anic exegesis with goal of re-centering the message of the Qur’an. To do so, they take into account the cultural and historical context in which ulama’ are writing their exegeses.

Collectively, examining the Qur’an and Hadith using both traditional and more contemporary exegeses, offers a more complete understanding of how scholars, over time, approach reading the Qur’an and Hadith. Understanding the contexts in which hijab and modesty appear in the Qur’an and Hadith is fundamental to examining how American Muslim women understand hijab and modesty. The following chapter explores the discourses about American Muslim women and their understandings of hijab and modesty, as they are understood by American scholars.
CHAPTER 2: CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARSHIP ON AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMEN’S UNDERSTANDINGS OF HIJAB AND MODESTY

Scholars such as Lila Abu-Loghod, Robin Lee Riley, Marcia Hermansen, and Margot Badran, among others, examine hijab and modesty as they relate to the lives of Muslim women are examined in the works of (Abu-Loghod, 2013; Riley, 2013; Hermansen, 2013; Badran, 2009). Within this body of literature, American scholars, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane Smith, Kathleen M. Moore, and Leila Ahmed, have focused on the lives of American Muslim women. These academics are prominent within the field of Islamic studies, and often write on Islam and Muslims in the U.S. Their works include some of the earliest research done on American Muslim women’s lives, and are foundational to the academic discourse on American Muslims. All of these scholars explore American Muslim women, modesty, and hijab, either explicitly or implicitly. To investigate these themes, I first draw upon the work of American women scholars who write about American Muslim women living in the U.S. I aim to understand the ways in which American scholars have engaged with American Muslim women’s understandings of hijab and modesty.

My examination of a whole range of literature on American Muslim women reveals that American Muslim women speak of and understand hijab in three broad categories: hijab as a religious obligation, hijab as identity, and hijab as resistance. This body of literature primarily focuses on hijab as modesty, without discussion of modesty beyond hijab and dress. To explore additional understandings of modesty beyond hijab, in the second portion of this chapter, I draw upon the works of Fatima Mernissi, Saba Mahmood, and Saba Fatima, all of whom write on Muslim women, though not always within a U.S. context. Nonetheless, the literature put forth by
Mahmood and Mernissi is cited extensively in the scholarship on American Muslim women, including in the works of the American academics mentioned above.7

American Scholarship on American Muslim Women, Hijab, and Modesty

Within scholarly work on the lives and perspectives of American Muslim women, three main meanings emerge regarding the ways in which American Muslim women understand hijab and modesty: hijab as a religious obligation, hijab as identity, and hijab as resistance. These meanings are fluid and not mutually exclusive. For example, some American Muslim women understand hijab as both a resistance of Western imperialism and a way of asserting their American Muslim identity. In addition, for some American Muslim women, their religious obligations are central parts of their American Muslim identity.

Hijab as religious obligation. For some American Muslim women, wearing hijab is indeed a religious obligation. Leila Ahmed, drawing upon her observations at the annual Islamic Society of North American (ISNA) conferences between 2002 and 2007, and an interview with Hadia Mubarak, the first woman president of the Muslim Students’ Association, finds that for many American Muslim women, hijab is a religious obligation. At ISNA conferences, Ahmed describes that all the American Muslim women who attended wore hijab (Ahmed, 2011, p.7). Mubarak in the interview refers to hijab as the “mandatory covering” for Muslim women (Ahmed, 2011, p. 252) and believes it is a religious obligation. At the same time, Mubarak also believes that the decision to wear hijab is an individual choice and that forcing Muslim women to wear hijab is wrong, citing, “the Qur’anic spirit of ‘let there be no compulsion in religion’” (Mubarak qtd. in Ahmed, 2011, p.252). Some American Muslim women, as they learn more

about Islam, conclude that hijab is not a religious obligation (Ahmed, 2011, p.283). Other American Muslim women argue that modesty is required of all Muslims and should not simply manifest in the form of hijab for women (Ahmed, 2011, p.283).

**Hijab as American Muslim Identity.** Prominent Islamic studies scholar, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, based upon her qualitative data and extensive literature reviews, argues that post-9/11, the U.S. witnessed an increase in what she terms “re-Islamization.” Re-Islamization refers to the shift made by American Muslims towards the teachings and practices of Islam. One result of the “re-Islamization” movement was the increased wearing of hijab by American Muslim women, particularly among Muslim youth (Haddad, 2007, p.253). Many of the young American Muslim women Haddad interviewed have mothers who never wore the hijab. However, for this group of American Muslim women, according to Haddad, hijab has become a part of their American Muslim identity (Haddad, 2007, p.253). During the post-9/11 “re-Islamization” in the U.S., hijab evolved into a symbol of American Muslim identity and authenticity (Haddad, 2007, p.254; Elver, 2012, p.159). By wearing hijab, American Muslim women assert their identities as American Muslims, particularly in response to a social and political environment that demonizes Muslims.

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8 Ahmed notes that there is a trend among some American Muslim professional women to “de-hijabize,” or stop wearing the hijab (Ahmed, 2011, p. 283). Despite not appearing visibly Muslim, Ahmed finds that these women who decided to de-hijabize, continue to consider themselves committed Muslims (Ahmed, 2011, p 284).

9 Haddad’s research involved analysis of data from her prior research publications, qualitative data from interviews with 30 young American Muslim women, two focus groups, transcripts of focus group sessions facilitated by the American Muslims in Public Space group, literature review of academic works and popular press publications.
According to Ahmed, in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and 9/11, American Muslim women began wearing *hijab*, as a symbol of their commitment to Islam. Hijab became an international symbol of the Islamic revival, including in the U.S. Some American Muslim women reported experiencing a sense of closeness to other Muslim women by wearing hijab, and a sense of collective American Muslim identity (Ahmed, 2011, p.209). For example, one woman interviewed by Ahmed in 2002-3 explained, “For me, wearing it [hijab] is a way of affirming my community and my identity” (Ahmed, 2011, p.211). For Mubarak, wearing hijab is a way of reclaiming her American Muslim community and identity. Ahmed attributes these affirmations of identity and pride in Islam to a phenomenon in which groups scorned because of their affiliation with a particular identity, respond by further claiming that identity (Ahmed, 2011, p.209). For some American Muslim women, dressing ‘Islamically’ (i.e. wearing hijab) is about choosing and expressing their religious identity, both individually and collectively (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p.10).

Furthermore, some young American Muslim women at high schools and college campuses where Muslim Student Associations (MSAs) are present, feel that they must wear hijab to be “cool” or accepted by their Muslim community (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p.11). In the case of MSAs, wearing hijab affords Muslim women social capital within American Muslim social groups. Because hijab is necessary for their acceptance, American Muslim women who do wear hijab can more easily navigate these spaces. Acceptance within the group subsequently facilitates the creation and maintenance of an individual and collective American Muslim identity. It is important to note that in such cases, there is social pressure on young American Muslim women to take on and express American Muslim identity via hijab.
In addition, American Muslim identity is constructed via hijab and dress. According to anthropologist Rabia Kamal, young American Muslims incorporate elements of dress related to their cultural backgrounds with fashion trends in the U.S. (Kamal, 2014, p.427) Because traditional and cultural clothing is often labeled as “authentically Islamic,” younger American Muslims seek to incorporate these elements of dress. At the same time, they also include their American upbringing and culture in their style of dress. By incorporating their cultural and ethnic backgrounds with their American culture, American Muslim women develop not only new understandings of Islamic dress, but also develop an American Muslim identity. These women participate in what Ahmed calls, “the inventive combining and recombining of old meanings in new ways (Ahmed, 2014, p.248).

There is no single interpretation of “Islamic dress” or a clear methodology for identifying what Islamic dress incorporates because Islamic dress varies among American Muslim communities. For example, some South Asian American Muslim communities in the U.S. wear traditional clothing like shalwaar kameez, a long tunic and loose pants, at home or on special occasions (Kamal, 2014, p.428). This traditional clothing, Kamal describes, is both culturally and religiously appropriate. It is modest because it is both loose and covers most of the body (Kamal, 2014, p.428). Conversely, in Arab Muslim communities, traditional clothing is not commonly worn; most Arab Muslims, according to Kamal, adopt more Western style dress. African American Muslims often incorporate cultural and historical fashion choices into their Islamic dress, reflecting their diverse heritages.

Citing ethnographic evidence from multiple studies, Kamal notes that American Muslim women decide to dress in ways that assert their Muslim identity for multiple reasons. According to Kamal, the evolution of Islamic fashion parallels non-Muslims’ growing anxieties in the U.S.
about Islamic dress symbols like hijab (Kamal, 2014, p.426). The evolution of Islamic fashion in the U.S. is also a part of a larger project of constructing American Muslim identity. Because fashion is linked to ideas of individuality and choice, especially in the West, fashion is often assumed to be irreconcilable with Islamic standards (Kamal, 2014, p.427). However, according to Kamal, this is not always the case for American Muslim women.

American Muslim women’s experimentation with hijab styles and clothing options, demonstrates that they do not perceive hijab in opposition to fashion. Rather, American Muslim women seem to actively combine their understandings of hijab with their creative expression in fashion. This suggests that hijab is fluid; changing as American Muslim women express themselves in how they dress and explore their identity as American Muslim women. Thus, ideas around hijab and Islamic dress are not static. Muslim immigrants and young American Muslims bring with them their own culturally-informed understandings of what Islamic dress looks like and orient these understandings within a U.S. context, contributing to the creation of their American Muslim identity.

**Hijab as resistance.** Throughout the literature on American Muslim women, hijab is also understood as a form of resistance. Some American Muslim women understand hijab as a central part of their political resistance. For others, hijab resists sexual objectification. Some American Muslim women understand hijab as a resistance to both Western imperialism/values and conservative Islam, and for some, hijab is a way to resist non-Muslims’ stereotypes about hijab, Islam, and its treatment of women. It is important to note that American Muslim women use hijab to resist in multiple ways simultaneously. For example, some American Muslim women understand their hijab as a way to resist both sexual objectification and Western imperialism.
American Muslim women also understand hijab within the context of political resistance, one that is embedded within their identity as an American Muslim. Some American Muslim women explain wearing of hijab as a call for justice, specifically with respect to gender injustice and the Palestinian cause (Ahmed, 2011, p.211). Ahmed, in her observations at ISNA conferences and interviews with Hadia Mubarak, Zarqa Nawas, a filmmaker, and Asra Nomani, a reporter and activists, reports American Muslim women’s commitments to social justice activism and serving their communities. Ahmed’s findings suggest that post-9/11 women’s reasons for wearing hijab are rooted in a sense of activism and commitment to social justice (Ahmed, 2011, p.211). Mubarak, for example, connects the struggle for justice like the civil rights movement and the peace movement with her American Muslim identity and her political activism (Ahmed, 2011, p.251). In Mubarak’s opinion, American Muslims ought to engage in activism and social justice initiatives to “awaken America’s collective conscience” (qtd in Ahmed, 2011, p.251).

Similarly, Zarqa Nawas also understood hijab as a tool of activism. Nawas’ activism took shape in her documentary and critique of Muslim women’s inadequate spaces in mosques in the U.S. and Canada (Ahmed, 2011, p.248). Similarly, Nomani, in West Virginia, was a public and vocal critic of her mosque’s discriminatory practices against women. Specifically, Nomani called attention to women’s relegation to praying at the back of the mosque and being forced to use the back entrance only, and led a campaign to change these injustices (Ahmed, 2011, p.249). For some American Muslim women, like Nawas and Nomani, activism is embedded in their

10 American Muslim women’s activism mirrors that of Muslim women in Muslim-majority countries, suggesting the globalized nature of the rise of hijab in the mid-20th and 21st centuries (Ahmed, 2011, p.253)
understanding of hijab as well as their American Muslim identity. As such, American Muslim women’s understandings of hijab are not at odds with activism or political participation.

Some American Muslim women also understand hijab as a form of resistance to sexual objectification (Ahmed, 2011, p.252; Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p.38). For example, Hadia Mubarak framed her decision to wear hijab as a way to resist sexual objectification. For Mubarak, hijab gives her freedom from having her body sexualized and judged. As a result, in forcing others to look beyond the physical, people may see her personality and value her intellect (Ahmed, 2011, p.252).

Furthermore, some American Muslim women connect hijab and Islamic dress with protection from male sexuality (Furseth, 2011, p.374). Inger Furseth, a sociologist of religion, reports that some women, particularly those who do wear hijab, understand hijab as a way of de-sexualizing Muslim women.\(^{11}\) Similarly, women who did not wear hijab, saw hijab as a way in which a woman becomes “non-sexual.” Though not all of the participants in Furseth’s study agreed, many understand hijab as a de-sexualizing tool, explain hijab as a protection from “harmful male sexuality” (Furseth, 2011, p.373).\(^{12}\) Similarly, some American Muslim women understand hijab as a sign of purity and chastity, functioning to reduce their sex appeal and negate sexual objectification (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p.10).

\(^{11}\) Furseth draws her conclusions from data collected in 2003-2007 from life story interviews of 26 American Muslim women living in Los Angeles, CA.

\(^{12}\) In Furseth’s study, some of the women rejected the notion that hijab is necessary for helping men control their sexuality and did not feel as though it is or ought to be a woman’s responsibility to wear hijab in order to be treated with respect (Furseth, 2011, p.378-379).
Because of understandings around hijab as a mechanism for preventing sexual objectification, some American Muslim women believe that by wearing hijab they will be safe from workplace sexual harassment (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p.39). For some American Muslim women, wearing hijab is a means by which to subvert the “reductionist gaze” of both Muslim and non-Muslim communities (Kamal, 2014, p.431). The “reductionist gaze” refers to the reduction of women’s bodies to mere objects for men’s viewing pleasure.

Additionally, some American Muslim women understand hijab as a way to resist Western imperialism and its lingering effects. In their understandings, Western imperialism equates Islam with terrorism. Haddad finds that some American Muslim women say that by wearing hijab they are resisting Western imperialism, which they see as a way of expressing their American Muslim identity (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p.10). Ironically, some American Muslim women have expressed that they expected hijab to resist the sexual objectification of their bodies, only to find themselves “‘objects’” of the Western gaze” (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p.10).

Specifically, some American Muslim women perceive hijab as resistance to Islamophobia and efforts to eradicate Islam in the U.S. In an effort to combat Islamophobia, and Western imperialism at the same time, some American Muslim women “try to dress, speak, and live in as close adherence as possible to what they understand to be the dictates of the Qur’an and the traditions of the Prophet” (PBUH) (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p.8). Many American Muslim women reject the social norms of Western, and American culture, particularly those that they believe to be in opposition to Islamic principles (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p.8).

For some American Muslim women, hijab is a way of resisting conservative Islam (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p.10). Conservative Islam, in their understanding, refers to any
interpretations that impose traditional and oppressive interpretations of Islam (10). Smith describes such women as the “new Islamic woman [women].” The “new Islamic woman” “affirms the absolute value of the true Islamic system for human relationships” (Smith, 1987, p.249). The prototype Smith describes disagrees with oppressive interpretations of Islam and is open to educational and career development for both herself and other women (Smith, 1987, p.249). Simultaneously, this woman may also hold beliefs about the certain types of work positions a Muslim woman should hold and is willing to defer to a male family member for decision making in return for security. Nonetheless, the “new Islamic woman” resists aspects of conservative Islam that she believes subjugate women and render them “insignificant to the full functioning of society” (Smith, 1987, p.249).

Some American Muslim women also understand their decision to wear hijab as a way to resist non-Muslims’ stereotypes about hijab, Islam, and its treatment of women. For example, Annia Raja, a college student at the University of Texas, decided to start wearing hijab after 9/11 (Ahmed, 2011, p. 208). Raja wanted to combat the false and negative stereotypes about Muslims, stating, “I need to do all that I can to really show people what Islam really is. Through that [wearing hijab] people are more invited to ask me about it” (Ahmed, 2011, p. 208). Moreover, Kamal, reports that American Muslim women experiment with their Islamic dress, trying new clothing options and wrapping their hijabs in different ways (Ahmed, 2011, p. 432). Kamal argues that this serves to subvert and resist stereotypes regarding what Muslims looks like because it disrupts the predominant representations of Muslim women in mainstream media.

American Muslim women’s understandings of hijab revolve around resistance. For some women, their political resistance and activism is embedded in their understanding of hijab. Others understand hijab as resistance to sexual objectification and/or harassment. In addition,
hijab is also understood as resistance to Western values perceived as oppositional to Islamic principles. Hijab for some American Muslim also serves as a rejection of oppressive interpretations of Islam, and/or prevailing stereotypes about Muslims and Islam. Again, American Muslim women’s understandings of hijab are multi-dimensional.

**Modesty Beyond Hijab**

Throughout the literature, there is primarily a focus on hijab. In some cases, however, attention is paid to modesty beyond hijab. In *Islam in America* Jane Smith, an Islamic studies scholar, asserts that both Muslim men and women are obligated to dress modestly and that the choice of how to dress should solely be a woman’s choice (Smith, 1987, p.108). The tensions lie in defining what modesty looks like. To explore the question of what constitutes modest dress, specifically, Smith observed and interacted with Muslim women living in the U.S. from different communities.

Smith’s findings reveal that some American Muslim women connect ‘dressing Islamically’ with wearing hijab (Smith, 1987, p.109). Specifically, some women explain that they do not wear hijab because they are not ready to dress more modestly at the moment (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p.18). The concept of modesty also arises in the literature when American Muslim women discuss fashion. Some American Muslim women feel conflicted about the increasing presence of brands and stores dedicated to Islamic dress because they worry that fashion and modesty are at odds with each other (Smith, 1987, p.109). Other women are happy

13 Smith notes that some American Muslim women mistakenly believe that the Qur’an specifies how and how much of a woman’s body should be covered (Smith, 1987, p 108).
to have clothing options that align with their ideas of modest dress. At the same time, there is concern among some American Muslim women that modesty and fashion are a dangerous combination because it may draw more attention to their bodies, the very thing they understand hijab and modesty to counteract (Smith, 1987, p.109).

Offering an alternative perspective, some American Muslim women reject the notion of proving modesty via hijab, citing modesty of character and interactions with others as more important aspects of modesty (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p.18). They assert that modesty and character ought to be judged by behavior and not dress or appearance (Smith, 1999, p.110; Furseth, 2011, p.377-378). For example, an Egyptian-American Muslim woman reported feeling pressure to dress a certain way here in the U.S., something she was unaccustomed to in Egypt, as none of her family members wore hijab (Smith, 1999, p.110). She dismisses hijab as a religious obligation, as well as the link between modesty and dress, specifically hijab. In her perspective, a ‘good Muslim woman’ should be judged by her behavior and not her appearance.

Collectively, American Muslim women’s understandings of hijab are complex and multi-dimensional. While some women understand hijab as a religious obligation, others understand it as a part of their American Muslim identity, both individually and collectively within their communities. And for some, hijab is a form of resistance. While some American Muslim women establish and accept a connection between hijab, modesty, and piety, other women reject such understandings, arguing that behavior ought to be the sole determinant of one’s character. The scholarly writings included in this portion of the chapter offer useful insights into how American Muslim women think about hijab and modesty. While they give some attention to modesty, beyond dress, and specifically in relation to modesty of behavior and
character, these works primarily emphasize hijab. This body of literature does not fully explicate the nuances of modesty beyond hijab.

While the American scholars included in the previous sections focus on hijab, other scholars, such as Mernissi, Mahmood, and Fatima, argue for more nuanced examinations of both hijab and modesty, particularly modesty beyond hijab. These scholars conceptualize modesty beyond physical dress, while simultaneously acknowledging that dress, and in particular hijab, is an integral aspect for understanding modesty in Islam. Because hijab is a proxy for modesty, which is inextricably linked with piety, hijab also becomes a proxy for discerning a Muslim woman’s degree of religiosity.14

Although the hijab has come to be synonymous with ‘headscarf’ in the U.S., Mernissi argues that hijab is more than just a headscarf. In fact, hijab is “three dimensional, and the three dimensions often blend into one another” (Furseth, 2011, p.368; Mernissi, 1991, p.93). Drawing from both the Qur’an and Sufism,15 Mernissi asserts that the hijab is simultaneously a visual and spatial divider as well as an ethical tool, protecting one from haram (forbidden) practices (Mernissi, 1991, p. 95). The Qur’an, for example, addresses a concrete enactment of hijab, with the narrative of the Prophet (PBUH) drawing a physical curtain between his wives and a male guest. Sufism offers both a spatial and spiritual understanding. To Muslim Sufis, someone who is mahjub or veiled, is someone who is “trapped in earthly reality” and incapable of accessing the

14 Here, I use piety and religiosity interchangeably. Piety is defined as, “reverence for God or devout fulfillment of religious obligations” (Dictionary.com, 2017). Religiosity is defined as, “the quality of being religious; piety; devoutness” (Dictionary.com, 2017).

15 Sufism, as defined by Encyclopedia Britannica, is the “mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God.”
divine (Mernissi, 1991, p.95). In other words, there is a *hijab* or barrier in their practicing of Islam, blocking them from transcending to a higher spiritual connection with God. The ethical dimension of *hijab* encompasses the visual, spatial, and spiritual. A space that is hidden by *hijab* is a space that is *haram* (Mernissi, 1991, p.93). As such, because *hijab* is more than a headscarf, scholarship on *hijab* ought to examine understandings of *hijab* beyond its physical manifestation.

Mahmood contends that contemporary literature on Muslim women and *hijab* tend to emphasize the physical headscarf and explain the reasons why Muslim women wear *hijab* within a “model of sociological causality” (Mahmood, 2005, p.16). Mahmood critiques academics who use this cause/effect approach and do not consider or analyze religion-oriented language like morality, divinity and virtue because such approaches are incomprehensive (Mahmood, 2005, p.16). This is especially relevant and critical given that Muslim women frequently frame their wearing of *hijab* within these religion-oriented terms (Mahmood, 2005, p.16). According to Mahmood, such approaches are dismissive of women’s realities and understandings of their *hijab* and modesty. A more comprehensive approach incorporates discourses on modesty beyond *hijab*, and explores it in relation to morality and piety.

Studies on Muslim women and *hijab* follow two distinct trends in how they talk about *hijab* (Mahmood, 2005, p.16). Some studies use a functionalist perspective to describe why women wear *hijab*. These studies focus on how Muslim women define the functions of *hijab*. For example, findings that demonstrate that some Muslim women find that *hijab* wards off sexual objectification and harassment (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, p.38; Furseth, 2011, p.377). In this case, *hijab* functions as a tool for preventing objectification and harassment. Other studies identify *hijab* as a physical symbol of their resistance to the commodification/objectification of
women’s bodies and Western hegemony (Mahmood, 2005, p.16). Within works such as these, hijab is emphasized, but analyses of modesty beyond hijab are not fully explored.

According to Mahmood, among Muslim women, there is a consensus that modesty is important and an “Islamic virtue” (Mahmood, 2005, p.23). Modesty is viewed within Muslim communities as a necessity for achieving a certain status of piety. Rather the debate is how modesty ought to manifest, “particularly whether its realization requires donning of the veil [hijab]” (Mahmood, 2005, p.23). Some Muslims (those in what Mahmood calls the “mosque movement”)\(^{16}\) draw a link between modesty, a virtue, and the physical form it often takes, the hijab (Mahmood, 2005, p.23). In doing so, hijab is then the “necessary means through which the virtue of modesty is both created and expressed” (Mahmood, 2005, p.23).

Mahmood presents the idea of “exteriority as a means to interiority” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 134). Drawing on the Aristotelian tradition, Mahmood concludes that moral virtues, of which modesty is one, “are acquired through a coordination of outward behaviors with inward dispositions through the repeated performance of acts that entail those particular virtues” (Mahmood, 2005, p.136). In other words, the external act of wearing hijab has an effect on inward temperament and thought. Hijab, one outward performative behavior of modesty, when worn consistently, serves as the means through which Muslim women can internalize modesty. Wearing hijab thus not only “express [es] the self’s interiority but was [is] the means by which it was [is] acquired” (Mahmood, 2005, p.160).

\(^{16}\)The “mosque movement” refers to part of the broader Islamic Revival movement in Egypt. It refers to Muslim men and women who frequented the mosque and became more involved in religious activities at the mosque.
Other scholars, like Muhammad Said Ashmawi, a professor of Islamic law, argue that modesty is similar to other virtues, like humility or honesty, and as such, does not require a physical manifestation of its enactment (qtd. in Mahmood, 2005, p.23). Ashmawi argues that modesty is not a virtue ordained by God, but a characteristic of all “decent and wise” people (qtd. in Mahmood, 2005, p.160). Modesty is internalized first and then affects outward behaviors, which in this case would be wearing hijab. Ashmawi does not reject modesty as a virtue, but rather the hijab as a tool of modesty (qtd. in Mahmood, 2005, p.160). Modesty remains integral to the ways in which Muslims ought to act.

On the other hand, for the women interviewed by Mahmood, hijab and behavior were inextricable from modesty as a virtue (Mahmood, 2005, p.161). Mahmood’s analysis of these interviews indicates that Muslim women understand modesty as more than just the physical act of wearing hijab. Modesty as a virtue extends beyond the concrete physicality of their dress to encompass their behaviors, movements, and gestures (Mahmood, 2005, p.161). For some, like those in Mahmood’s study, the physical hijab is a necessity for achieving modesty, whereas for others, as Ashmawi would argue, hijab is unnecessary (Mahmood, 2005, p.24).

Extending Mahmood’s argument on modesty and piety, philosopher Saba Fatima, argues that religious discourse with respect to Muslim women, has framed religious piety in terms of modesty (Fatima, 2016, p.606). In other words, for Muslim women, including American Muslim women, modesty and piety are inseparable. Fatima, like Barlas (see Chapter 1, page 30), asserts that the Qur’an and Hadith do not differentiate Muslims’ access to God and worship by gender. However, over time, Muslims have created links between modesty and piety that differ for men and for women. In this process, modesty and piety became inseparable for Muslim women, but not for Muslim men. Fatima conceptualizes modesty as a set of behaviors we ought not do, like
flaunt material wealth or talents or speak loudly. Such actions are considered vices in Islam, and if consistent, begin to define a person’s character. Like Mahmood, Fatima contends that modesty does indeed contribute to one’s piety and that enacting modesty can be “cultivated through habit” (Fatima, 2016, p.613). In addition, the performance of bodily modesty, through hijab, is a way to acquire modesty as a concept, “even though it is understood that modesty itself is a much deeper aspect of oneself” (Fatima, 2016, p.613).

Exploring this body of literature illuminates the complex relationships between modesty, hijab, and piety. Mernissi, Mahmood, and Fatima conceptualize modesty and hijab beyond physical dress, while simultaneously acknowledging that dress, and in particular hijab, is an integral aspect for understanding modesty. Mernissi asserts that hijab ought to be conceptualized beyond its physical manifestation, incorporating visual, spatial, and ethical dimensions. Similarly, Mahmood and Fatima assert that modesty encompasses non-dress behaviors and not just the physical hijab. Fatima also argues that for Muslim women, modesty has come to be perceived as the only way in which they can attain a status of piety. Hijab is only one aspect of modesty, despite the fact that it commonly becomes a proxy for modesty as well as piety.

Conclusion

American Muslim women’s understandings of hijab and modesty are complex. I have drawn upon two bodies of literature to elucidate the nuances in these understandings: scholarship on American Muslim women and hijab, and scholarship focusing on modesty beyond hijab. The diversity of thought and experiences of American Muslim women presented by these scholars draws our attention to the difficulties of understanding modesty and hijab within a U.S. context. American Muslim women understand hijab in several different ways, namely, as religious
obligation, as part of their American Muslim identity, and/or as resistance. Not all American Muslim women believe hijab is a religious obligation. Some women argue that because modesty is required of Muslim men and women alike, hijab is not necessary as a physical manifestation of modesty for women.

In addition, some American Muslim women understand hijab as part of their American Muslim identity. In the wake of the Arab-Israel war and then again after 9/11, Islam and Muslim came under attack and were often demonized. One response to this hostility was the increase wearing of hijab by American Muslim women. Wearing hijab reaffirmed to American Muslim women their sense of individual identity as well as their connection to their American Muslim communities. An important part of constructing their American Muslim identity was the way they wore their hijab and dress. Many young American Muslim women combine their cultural and ethnic clothing with emerging fashion trends in the U.S., contributing to the creation of their American Muslim identity.

American Muslim women also understand hijab as a form of resistance to injustices, objectification, Western imperialism, conservative Islam, and stereotypes of Islam and Muslim women. For some American Muslim women, hijab is embedded in their political activism. Hijab, for them, is resistance to injustices perpetrated both locally and globally. Some American Muslim women understand hijab as a way to reject sexual objectification and harassment. For others, wearing hijab is an act of resisting Western imperialism that often demonizes Islam, and a rejection of prevailing stereotypes about Muslim women, particularly women who wear hijab. In addition, some American Muslim women understand hijab as a way to resist aspects of conservative Islam that they believe are oppressive and subjugate women. For many American Muslim women, hijab is resistance to multiple things.
In addition, scholars like Ahmed acknowledge that reasons given by American Muslim women for wearing hijab are typically individualistic and inventive, combining both old and new meanings of hijab (Ahmed, 2014, p. 248). Though American scholarship on American Muslim women emphasizes hijab as modesty, they do give some attention to modesty beyond dress. Smith’s work in particular indicates that some American Muslim women do in fact draw a link between modesty, hijab, and religiosity. These links are identified briefly in some of the literature on American Muslim women.

On the other hand, scholars like Mahmood argue for more comprehensive analyses of modesty, by attending to moral and spiritual dimensions of hijab and modesty. Hijab, as conceptualized by Mernissi, is not just a physical headscarf, but also visual, spatial, and ethical entity, embedded with spiritual meanings. Similarly, Mahmood and Fatima call for an understanding of modesty beyond dress because such an analysis better elucidates 1) the moral and spiritual dimensions of modesty, and 2) the connectedness of hijab, modesty, and piety.

The literature on American Muslim women offers a comprehensive analysis of why American Muslim women wear hijab, and what they understand hijab and modesty of dress to be. Although the works of American scholars gives some attention to modesty, and modesty beyond dress, the bulk of that discussion focus on modesty as it relates to hijab and dress. The work of Mernissi, Mahmood, and Fatima becomes useful here for understanding modesty beyond dress. Collectively, it becomes clearer that hijab and dress are important to American Muslim women’s understandings of modesty, however, modesty should not be reduced to and understood as dress. The next chapter further examines American Muslim women’s understandings of modesty beyond dress, using data gathered over the course of this project.
CHAPTER 3: AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMEN’S VOICES ON MODESTY AND HIJAB

In Chapter 1, I examined what the Qur’an and Hadith say about modesty and hijab using scholarship from ulama’ (Islamic scholars) as well as the more recent scholarship put forth by academics like Barlas and Wadud. Chapter 1 reveals that examining the Qur’an and Hadith using both traditional and more contemporary exegeses offers a more complete understanding of how scholars over time approach reading the Qur’an and Hadith. In Chapter 2, I aimed to understand the ways in which American scholars have engaged with American Muslim women’s understandings of hijab and modesty. My review of this body of literature reveals that American Muslim women understand hijab in many ways. Though American scholars reference modesty, they primarily focus on hijab as modesty. Other scholars offer an additional perspective; conceptualizing modesty beyond dress, while simultaneously acknowledging that hijab is a central component for understanding modesty. In this chapter, I explore what young American Muslim women have to say about modesty and hijab.

Method

To more fully understand how contemporary American Muslim women conceptualize modesty, and in particular modesty beyond physical dress, I facilitated two focus groups of American Muslim women between the ages of 18 and 25 in February 2017. The first focus group was held on the campus of Harvard University and the second at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, both in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I chose locations based on what was easiest for participants to access.

17 The women were divided into two focus groups, based on their availability. The first focus group met on February 20th, 2017, and the second on February 26th, 2017.
A total of seven women participated, and all of the women were raised in the U.S. and were attending or had attended college in Massachusetts. Two of the participants were in their first year of college; two had already graduated in 2015; and three were in their junior years of college. Of the participants, one was of South Asian descent, two of Somali descent, two of North African descent, one of Palestinian/Tunisian descent, and one of Somali/Yemeni descent. Four of the participants currently wear hijab, two had never worn the hijab (except for purposes of prayer or entering mosques), and one had previously worn hijab. Each focus group session lasted approximately 90-minutes, and at the end of the sessions, each participant was compensated with $25 in cash.

At the start of each focus group session, I informed all participants that the session would be audio recorded and explained to them the risks of participating in my research. I also informed them that the Wellesley College Institutional Review Board (IRB) had reviewed my project and decided that the risk of participation in my thesis is minimal. As such, my project was exempt from IRB review.\textsuperscript{18} I chose to keep the identities of all participants anonymous. In addition, I did not collect any personal identification information and I assured participants that the audio recordings and transcripts would not be shared with anyone other than my thesis project advisor. Furthermore, I informed the participants that they were under no obligation to answer any questions and that they were free to stop participating at any point. I then asked participants to verbally consent to their participation and I documented their consent in the audio recordings. All potential participants consented to participate.

\textsuperscript{18} IRB exemption was approved by IRB chair, Nancy Marshall on February 8, 2017.
I chose a focus group format because it facilitated conversation between participants in response to the questions asked that might not have occurred during more formal one-on-one interviews. I selected the 18-25 years-old age demographic because American Muslim women in that age range were the most easily accessible and are a population that is of great interest to me. Additionally, women in this age range have often been exposed to multiple, sometimes contradictory, perspectives, academic, religious etc., on Islam and modesty. I hypothesized that this would offer an added level of nuance to my subject.

I facilitated the focus group discussions using prepared questions to gain a better understanding of how American Muslim women conceptualize modesty, and hijab, and particularly including modesty beyond hijab (see Appendix C). Not all participants answered every question. In some cases a participant agreed with someone else’s statement but did not contribute additional comments. The participants engaged in conversations with each other and asked for clarification or that a question be repeated whenever they needed. Following each session, I transcribed and analyzed the audio recordings. After transcribing the audio data, I conducted multiple close readings of participants’ responses to identify common themes in their responses. The following section describes the main findings of the focus group sessions and analyzes the responses collected. For clarity, when writing about the participants’ responses, each participant was given a letter designation (A-G). Participants A-C comprised the first focus group and participants D-G the second.
Results

American Muslim women’s understandings of modesty and hijab can be separated into three components. First, American Muslim women understand modesty as it relates to three aspects: hijab/dress, behavior, and/or character. Second, American Muslim women’s understandings of modesty are socially shaped and regulated. Finally, American Muslim women resist and critique the social regulations of hijab and modesty that are often imposed on them.

American Muslim women and modesty. The American Muslim women in my study understood modesty in both physical and non-physical ways. Specifically, some understood hijab and dress as components of modesty, others emphasized behavior and/or character. All participants understood modesty to encompass more than just hijab and dress.

Modesty, hijab, and dress. American Muslim women mentioned hijab and dress consistently throughout their responses to my questions about modesty. As a whole, their responses indicate that hijab and dress are important aspects of modesty. With respect to hijab and dress, Participant D explained that growing up, she related modesty “to the hijab and covering yourself up.” Participant G echoed her experiences, explaining that she too, “associated modesty with how much you cover up.” Moreover, several participants described modesty as culturally informed, shaping how one dresses. Participant A, explained that identifying with both Yemeni and Somali cultures, she experienced different standards of modest dress. In Yemen, the standard was for all women to wear a black abaya (long, cloak-like garment), whereas in Somalia, the traditional clothing loosely covers the whole body but is transparent. Thinking about the U.S., Participant A stated that Arab American culture predominantly shapes modest dress:
“I think in the U.S. from my experience, it’s the Arab culture that dominates most of cultural modesty and so even though people are from different ethnic backgrounds, when you go to a mosque it’s predominantly Arab for the most part. And so they do follow that dress code from what I’ve seen.”

Hijab and dress remain central to these American Muslim women’s understandings of modesty.

When participants were asked to describe the meaning of hijab, several struggled to articulate an answer. As a whole, participants described hijab as one expression of modesty. Participant A explained,

“To me, I think the meaning of hijab to me is a somewhat physical manifestation of your modesty. Not to say it is your modesty, like you’re wearing your modesty on your head, but more so that you appreciate the modesty that Allah has told you to do so much that you choose to show it. Now, you don’t necessarily have to show it and so that’s why it doesn’t dictate whether that makes you a good or bad Muslim but it’s just another option, another category for you to show your modesty.”

In her understanding, wearing hijab is one manifestation of one’s modesty, yet one can still be modest without hijab. Relatedly, Participant B shared her sentiment, stating, “I think wearing it [hijab] is definitely a way to show the utmost devotion to your faith.” Both participants quickly added that wearing hijab does not indicate one’s piety.

Participant D stated,
“Hijab falls in line with ideas of modesty…so you put it on for modesty in order to go in line with Islam…I believe the meaning of it [hijab] is to maintain your modesty, maintain Muslim values, and just goes in line with being Muslim woman.”

Her statement indicates that hijab is not only a way of being modest but also encompasses Islamic values. She suggests that hijab is a central part of following Islam and being a Muslim woman. Her understanding of hijab, like that of participants A and B, extends beyond the physical dimension of covering your hair and body, to incorporate it as a tool for being a better Muslim.

Unlike the other participants, participant C referenced the Qur’an, specifically the story about Maryam, when describing the meaning of hijab and modesty. In her understanding, hijab is a way to create a “boundary from the outside world in terms of materialism, people’s judgments, what I think others think of me, how I want to impress other people…I think it’s all about creating a boundary.” Participant A agreed, elaborating that hijab creates a boundary to non-verbally communicate to others to not “overstep their limit.” Thus, this indicates that for some American Muslim women, because hijab creates a boundary, it does protect from certain things, though it is unclear what those things are. Moreover, it functions in this way only when others understand what hijab is and what it is associated with.

Several participants also spoke of the hijab and modesty but focused on purpose of hijab rather than its meaning in relation to modesty. Participant G, for example, explained that in high school she understood the purpose of hijab differently than she does now. In high school, she considered wearing hijab to “force people to care about my personality” and described it as a “shield” from her peers’ comments about her appearance. Ultimately, however, she decided not
to wear hijab for the purpose of “distracting people less” because “I [she] felt that shouldn’t be the purpose.’ Participant G’s statement reveals first, that are specific understandings of the purpose of hijab, and second, to her, using hijab to prevent others from fixating on her appearance was not an “appropriate” or “acceptable” reasoning.

**Modesty and behavior.** Some participants also understood modesty in relation to behavior, understood here as non-dress behavior. Participant C, for example, explained that modesty is “about your relationship with God.” Participants D and G both spoke of modesty as a value, emphasizing that modesty is not only the way you dress, but also how you behave. Similarly, participants E and F, described modesty as how you act and “how you carry yourself.” At the same time, some participants understood hijab and dress as a part of modesty. Participant D explained that growing up, she related modesty “to the hijab and covering yourself up.” Participant G echoed her experiences, explaining that she too, “associated modesty with how much you cover up.”

When discussing modesty in behavior and action, participants referenced the importance of intent. Participant B explained that a “big part of it [modesty] is your intentions.” Participant A, describing her thought process when evaluating the modesty of an action stated,

“I think in terms of my actions, it’s all about the intention behind the action. So I know that I’m digressing from modesty when it’s going into the flirting zone. So that’s when you know to back up if you choose to. And I think basically the intention behind what I’m saying or what I’m doing and if it’s going to lead to any good or bad. And I think that’s how I judge my modesty in my actions. Where do I want this to end up? And if it’s good, then I would say it’s pretty modest. If my intentions are bad and I know what the
outcome of the action or me going to a certain place or hanging out with a group of people will lead to, I know that I’m passing that zone where I don’t think I’m being modest anymore.”

This passage reveals that some American Muslim women in the focus groups do in fact think about modesty in their behaviors and decisions on a day-to-day basis. Some assessed modest behaviors by describing immodest actions rather than modest actions. For these participants, immodesty and behaviors that are haram (forbidden) in Islam are aligned. For example, when describing immodest behaviors, several participants cited things like drugs, alcohol, partying, and sex (Participants B, D, E, and G). Participant D explained, “refraining from anything that is haram is in line with modesty.” Participant E agreed, stating,

“Modesty to me is stay away from or not getting too far away from the rules/guidelines of Islam… I don’t want to be around like boys, smoking, alcohol and so that’s how I live my life in terms of modesty.”

Despite citing religious rules for determining modest behavior, participants also described immodest behaviors as ones that if seen by fellow Muslims, and especially their parents, they would be judged or reprimanded for. Participant G’s parents, for example, would not approve of and would reprimand her if they saw in the presence friends who smoked and/or consumed alcohol. This suggests that the ways in which American Muslim women assess their behavior take into account both Islam’s guideline and potential familial and/or social consequences.

**Modesty and character.** Throughout both focus group sessions, participants emphasized modesty beyond physical dress, connecting it specifically to Muslim character in addition to
behavior. Several described modesty as a value, and focused on aspects of modest character. For example, participant D very explicitly differentiated modesty of dress from modesty as a value. She explained, “You can have modest values. Modesty doesn’t only come with how you’re dressing and how you’re physically perceived to the world.” With respect to character, participants described humility and humbleness as part of their understanding of modesty. Participant A, for example, explained:

“I tie modesty with being humble and what one’s intentions are…so aside from clothing, I think it depends on what you’re trying to portray, who you’re trying to be and how you’re trying to have people think of you. And I think that’s how it ties into humility and humbleness.”

Participant C shared similar sentiments explaining that when it comes to Islamic character, “you want to be humble, you don’t want to bring attention to yourself…and I think that’s part of the non-physical aspect of modesty…” This suggests that American Muslim women make connections between their understandings of modesty and Islamic character more broadly.

As a whole, the American Muslim women in these focus groups have multi-dimensional understandings of modesty. At the same time, it is important to note that not all of the women incorporated all three components into their understanding of modesty. For some of the women, behavior and character were more important than hijab and dress. Thus, while all participants described hijab and dress as one component of modesty, they simultaneously emphasized non-physical components like behavior and character.

**Social expectations and regulation of modesty.** A second theme identified in the focus groups, the social expectations and regulation of modesty and hijab, can be broadly categorized
as originating from either non-Muslim Americans and from within the American Muslim communities.

**Non-Muslim Americans.** With respect to non-Muslim Americans, Participant B, explained that hijab is in fact a marker of religiosity. Participant B, who no longer wears hijab, described that for non-Muslims, “There’s an assumption that you are a certain way. Even though you’re a Muslim, that because you don’t wear hijab your boundaries are less.” When she stopped wearing hijab, her non-Muslim peers and co-workers began to treat her differently. Her colleagues began including her in conversations she had previously been excluded from, like those about sex, partying, and alcohol.

Participant G, who does not wear hijab, described that one of her high school teachers did not accept the fact that she is Muslim because she “didn’t look Muslim.” Because her teacher associated hijab with being Muslim, he assumed that all Muslim women must wear hijab. Participant D experienced a similar situation with her work supervisor. Upon finding out that she is Muslim he remarked, “But you’re not one of those Muslim who like prays five times a day, right?” In this case, her work supervisor seemed to assume her level of religiosity based on the fact that she did not wear hijab.

When it comes to how an American Muslim woman wears her hijab, Participant F asserts that it does not matter to non-Muslim Americans. In the case of airport security officers, typically non-Muslim Americans, she described, “There were times when I was wearing the big hijab and times when I was wearing the small hijab. And the trouble is no less, you still go through the same amount of trouble, it doesn’t matter.” “Big hijab” refers specifically to a style of long, loose hijab worn by some Somali American Muslims (see Appendix A, *khimar*).
Similarly, participant E believed that to non-Muslims, “as long as you have something covering your hair, they’ll consider you a hijabi.” In her understanding, it does not matter whether one’s hijab is long and loose, covering more of the body, or whether it is a turban-style hijab that covers less of the body (see Appendix A).

**American Muslims.** Within American Muslim communities, the women in the focus groups report different types of social expectations and regulations around hijab and modesty. Some of these expectations and regulations are described as coming from all members of American Muslim communities, while others are specific to their mothers, older community members, American Muslim men, and their peers.

Several participants described expectations set and regulated by American Muslim communities for how American Muslim women ought to wear their hijab and thus act modestly. For example, participant E explained that modesty is

> “…the way you act and how others see you, especially within the Muslim community. My mom stressed more the modesty in ‘act appropriate, act like a Muslim girl, act kind of modest, shy in a way…like be not too out there, control yourself…”

Participant E elaborated, “no one actually defined what that meant but you just kind of knew.” Stating, “act like a Muslim girl,” indicates that there exist expectations of how Muslim girls and women ought to behave, reaffirming that American Muslim women’s understandings of modesty are socially regulated.

Participant B, who used to wear hijab, remarked,
“I feel like that those [expectations] are so overt in the Muslim community. Like hijabis are always expected to act a certain way, to not be in certain places, to not dress a certain way. Those expectations can sometimes be impossible to uphold and as a former wearer of hijab myself, that was something I struggled with.”

She explained that sometimes she wanted to partake in activities that were held in places “that weren’t necessarily the most Islamic” but that she felt comfortable doing so because she knew she would not transgress her boundaries. Nonetheless, participant B feared judgment from fellow Muslims for being in those spaces and regulated her behavior accordingly. Participant B’s struggle was shared by several women in her focus group and are a consequence of the standards for Muslim women that have been constructed by American Muslim communities.

Participants also reported feeling judged by others based on whether or not they wore hijab. Participant C described knowing “people who’ve been hurt or humiliated that someone called them out for not wearing a scarf.” Participant B, who no longer wears hijab, explained that “hijab is such a strong marker for Muslims and non-Muslims, of your level of faith…and people use hijab to make a judgment about how religious or non-religious a person is.” People assumed she was not as religious as someone who does wear hijab and treated her differently. Several participants felt judged by American Muslim community members, based on how they wore their hijab. Participant D, for example, finds that “the Muslim community is pretty critical.” Participant B explained, “People are judged based on how tight their clothes are, or loose-fitting, or how much hair they’re showing…” Several participants described this shaming of Muslim women and worried it might divide Muslim communities and turn women away from Islam.

Participant A explains:
“I have a few friends from college who choose to cover up a lot, more than the typical hijabi. So they wear skirts and on top of their skirts they wear longer shirts so that they are covered up to the fullest extent… And I think even between the Muslim community in itself… I’ve seen those women get treated differently than a hijabi who dresses less conservative. So the hijabi that wears leggings or has her hair showing is treated much more casually and taken less seriously than someone who covers up even more.”

Her comment reveals that how American Muslim women cover and the extent to which they cover shapes how others perceive and interact with them. Participant C elaborates on her response explaining that “approachability” is a key term for understanding how American Muslim women who wear hijab are perceived.

“I think that we have for example this whole group of women for example, beauty vloggers and they’re in hijab but then they’re doing lip plumping and you know they’re promoting Victoria’s Secret… versus the women who wear a black abaya and black covering almost the whole forehead and covering everything but their eyes, I think they are treated very differently. I think people might assign things like austerity and materialism … like the women who want to have hijab but also beautify... those women might be seen as not taking it seriously. I’ve seen people call out other women and hate on other women and say things like ‘This is not hijab.’”

Participant C asserts that American Muslim women who present themselves in ways that are similar to beauty vloggers, people who use video blogs to discuss or promote beauty products, are perceived, and thus treated differently. Certain ways of wearing hijab are recognized and validated by American Muslim communities as ‘proper’ hijab and others are not.
American Muslim community members, and in particular, American Muslim men also regulate hijab. Participant A described,

“I definitely wanted to echo the shame and humiliation a woman might feel when someone calls her out on her hijab, especially by male members of the community because I never really thought of it as shame, I’d just be like why are they being so annoying, why is someone calling me out on my hijab. But now when I think about it, yeah, it’s embarrassing because they’re tying your hijab into modesty. Just because someone wears it better than you or, if they’re a man, their wife or daughter might wear it better than you they’re putting themselves at a higher pedestal than you just because you have a strand of hair showing or you’re not wearing it up to their standards when, in reality, it’s not their standards, it’s Allah’s standards and they’re trying to shame you so that you can forcibly make yourself better or like you said, turn you away from the religion.”

Here, she offers a critique of the standards American Muslim communities have regarding how Muslim women wear their hijab. In her experiences, American Muslim men regulate these standards. In her opinion, fellow American Muslims, and in particular men, ought not judge each other’s dress choices since individual Muslims’ standards may not reflect Allah’s standards. Her use of the phrase, “wears it better than you,” suggests that there are in fact ways to wear hijab that are ‘better.’ This quotation reveals that there is a socially constructed hierarchy of hijab that is in part regulated by American Muslim men. Within this hierarchy of hijab, showing part of your hair, for example, would not rank highly. American Muslim women are judged by fellow American Muslims based on how they wear hijab, and this judgment is based off of their expectations of what hijab ought to look like.
When explaining their understandings of modesty and of hijab, the women in the focus groups, consistently referenced their mothers. For example, when discussing their exposure to hijab, participants often told stories about their mothers. All of the participants had mothers who wore hijab in some contexts, and five had mothers who wore hijab all of the time. In this sense, hijab was normalized for all participants. In addition, when the participants spoke of modesty, they referenced things they had learned from their mothers. For example, participant E explained that her “mom had never emphasized ‘wear the hijab to be modest,’” but rather her mother had focused on the way she acted.

Furthermore, mothers served not only as teachers of modesty but also as regulators of modesty. Specifically, participants deferred to what their mothers would say when they would assess whether or not certain clothing or behaviors were modest. Participant A stated:

“For me I think baseline level modesty is what would be appropriate to wear when I go out with my family… I would consider baseline modesty, just like is it okay to leave the house like this, if my mom sees me will she tell me to change [clothing].”

This was the case not just for clothing, but participants referenced their mother or parents when evaluating the modesty of their behaviors. For example, participant F explained that she stays away from things that are haram, and “things [that] if my mother was here and saw, that she wouldn’t be happy about.” This indicates that some American Muslim women’s behaviors change given their social context.

Participant G explained that though she does not participate in actions that are haram, she does not mind being in situations where people are drinking or smoking, even though she knew her “parents would probably freak out about it.” While her parents might believe that being in
such environments is immodest, she believes that partaking would be immodest. In addition, participant G explained that when she is around parents, “modesty extends to cultural norms.” Because her parents expected her to adhere to North African cultural norms, when around them, she abstained from clothing or behaviors that are considered inappropriate or do not align with the norms of her North African community. Her social context, and more specifically the presence of her mother/parents functioned as external regulators of her modesty, both in terms of how she dressed and how she behaved.

Regulation of hijab and dress comes from peer as well as older members of the community or mothers. Participant B described, “even within our generation…judging each other’s level of faith based on what somebody wears versus what they don’t wear.” Participant A echoed her experiences and described observing how within Muslim communities, and particularly her American Muslim peers, a “hijabi that wears leggings or has her hair [partially] showing is treated much more casually and taken less seriously that someone who covers up even more.” Her response reiterates participant B’s earlier observations that there are expectations around how American Muslim women ought to dress and consequences for not adhering to those expectations. Certain types of clothing or ways of wearing a headscarf are designated as not hijab-appropriate and used to evaluate American Muslim women’s piety/religiosity.

**American Muslim women’s responses to social expectations and regulation.** As a whole, the American Muslim women in my study consistently resisted the social expectations set forth by American Muslim communities. In particular, the women critiqued the assumptions made about their behavior, character, and religiosity, based on whether or not they wore hijab.
Moreover, as a result of these assumptions, several of the women reported experiencing some forms of social exclusion, perpetuated by non-Muslims and Muslims alike.

Participant D explained, “I feel like somebody who was wearing the hijab is already a level up, Islamically, in society.” Similarly, participant G described instances where hijabis she knew would “go off and do wild things, party, all these things that our parents would definitely not approve of.” However, because they wore hijab, “their image is still protected” and older community members are unaware of their actions. This anecdote reveals that in some American Muslim communities, hijab can serve as social capital, shielding one from criticism. It also reveals that there are certain things hijabis, and perhaps American Muslim women more broadly, ought not do, partying being one example.

Accordingly, American Muslim women who do not wear the hijab are often assumed to be more likely to participate in *haram* activities:

“I also think that for people who don’t wear the hijab, people think you’re more likely to go off and drink and party and like date around. And so I just think that there are different expectations for people based on how they cover.” (Participant G)

Participant E echoed her sentiments:

“If there’s a competition between two girls and one girl is wearing the hijab and she might be doing things on the side that no one knows about and then a girl who has all the stereotypical modesty or to the eyes of the adults she seems pretty modest and conservative and respectable. I think the person with the physical characteristics like the hijab wins any day over the girl who’s not. Because I think people see the hijab and
they’re just like ‘wow she’s modest, she's religious’ they think that once you put the hijab on, you’re some kind of sheikh or something even though its probably not the case.”

Her response reveals that hijab serves as a proxy for American Muslim women’s religiosity, however erroneously. An American Muslim woman who wears the hijab is assumed to be more religious than a woman who does not wear the hijab. In fact, participant G described an American Muslim friend’s shock to discover that she prays regularly and fasts during the month of Ramadan, despite not wearing hijab.

Throughout the focus groups, women responded by resisting the assumptions made about their character based on whether they wore hijab, and if so, how they wore hijab. Participants described that both Muslims and non-Muslims made assumptions about their character. For example, participant C noted that during college some friends would not want to hang out with her beyond a certain extent. Participant C she felt as though these friends assumed that she was a prude or would judge them for their actions because she wore a hijab. Participant B noticed similar behavior when she wore hijab; she describes that she felt excluded from conversations about “people’s sex lives, about like drugs, alcohol, partying, all the taboo stuff.” She elaborated that this social exclusion and related assumptions came from both Muslim and non-Muslim friends:

“I remember Muslim friends who would casually, you know we’d be talking about ‘oh what did you do last night’ and my Muslim friends who didn’t wear hijab they’d be really hesitant, like ‘oh I went to a bar.’ Like if they did say that they’d follow it up with ‘but I didn’t drink.’”
Participant B continued on to describe that she felt as though her friends feared her judgment of them, because she wore hijab, which represented to them a higher degree of religiosity. Her friends assumed that because she wore hijab she would disapprove of certain things they did, and as such, felt compelled to make it explicit that they were not partaking in anything haram.

Participant A described similar situations within her American Muslim friend group. In her experience, it was often the case that the non-hijabis would be included in outings with the Muslim men, but the hijabi women would not be invited. By her second year in college, their group had fragmented into smaller cliques. She stated,

“Just because you’re guys and no one can tell how pious you are and you’re non-hijabis and so people automatically assume that you make different decisions than the hijabis when we’re all following the same book. So that’s something that frustrated me in terms of people assuming just because you’re a hijabi you don’t do certain things or can’t understand certain jokes…I don’t know where they're coming from when they decide to segregate into ‘okay these jokes are not appropriate for you’ [hijabis]. Who said that? Or you won’t be invited here because you’re a hijabi. Well, the rest of the girls are also Muslim at the end of the day.”

Her response reveals that members of young American Muslim communities use hijab as a marker of piety. Her male peers made value judgments about American Muslim women, in which hijab is used as proxy for degree of religiosity. The American Muslim women who did not wear hijab were assumed to be open to going out in mixed-gender groups or attending college parties.
Participant A’s statement also suggests and assumption that perhaps because a Muslim woman does wear a hijab, she is not exposed to the taboo material that they joke about. Such thinking assumes the hijabi Muslim women possess a degree of naïveté that non-hijabi Muslim women do not. Participant A’s response also reveals her critique of Muslim men’s treatment of Muslim women who do not wear hijab and their assumptions that they are more ‘open’ or worldly. She further explicated, “It’s the Muslim men that are dictating those divides and how you should treat and how you should act around certain types of Muslim women.” These assumptions, which she describes as created and perpetuated by Muslim men, are then internalized by Muslim communities more broadly, contributing to the hijabi/non-hijabi divide.

Several focus group participants’ responses revealed their concerns about divisiveness within American Muslim communities. They explained that the construction and regulation of certain standards of hijab and modesty lead to and/or reflect the expectations of American Muslim women, many of which are unrealistic and unattainable. These expectations in turn allow for assumptions and judgments to be made about an American Muslim woman’s behavior and character, potentially leading to divides within American Muslim communities.

Collectively, these data reveal that American Muslim women do understand modesty beyond the hijab, and simultaneously, hijab is an important aspect of their understandings of modesty. American Muslim women understand modesty in relation to hijab and dress, to behavior, and to character. Hijab is an important aspect of modesty, but the focus group participants resist equating hijab and modesty. In addition, within both non-Muslim American and American Muslim communities, there exist expectations about American Muslim women’s modesty and how it ought to manifest. Participants reported that American Muslim community members in general, and specifically mothers, American Muslim men, and their fellow American
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Muslim peers, regulate these expectations. At the same time, American Muslim women reject the assumptions made about their modesty or religiosity that are based on their hijab.

Discussion

Here, I discuss the focus group findings in relation to I) one another, II) the perspectives of the Qur’an and Hadith, and III) contemporary academic scholarship. In part I, I analyze the focus group results within three themes. First, American Muslim women speak of an evolution in their understandings of modesty, specifically that their understanding of modesty expanded as they got older to encompass more than hijab. Second, American Muslim women connect their understanding of modesty with their relationships with Islam and Allah. Lastly, American Muslim women’s understanding of hijab and modesty manifests differently based on their social context. In my analysis I found these themes consistently present throughout the results included in the previous section. In part II, I examine the focus group findings in relation to what the Qur’an and Hadith say about modesty and hijab. Finally, in part III, I explore connections and differences between the findings included here and those within contemporary academic scholarship on American Muslim women.

I. Connections between findings.

Evolution of understanding modesty: First, throughout the focus group sessions, participants repeatedly spoke of transformations in their understanding of hijab and modesty as they grew into adulthood. All participants recalled understanding hijab in one way when they were younger, but as they got older, their understandings began to shift. Several participants had previously equated hijab with modesty, in the sense that being modest was wearing hijab. For example, participant G, described wanting to wear hijab in high school as a shield from the male
gaze and objectification. She believed that by wearing hijab others would focus on her personality and achievements more so than her appearance.

Moreover, several participants explained that in the past they equated modesty and hijab, but as they got older, began to understand modesty as beyond dress, encompassing their intentions and behaviors as well as the way they dressed. For example, participant B emphasized that a large component of modesty is your intent. Similarly, participant A when explaining modesty beyond hijab underscored that “it’s all about the intention behind the action.”

Several participants described developing their internal thought processes when evaluating whether something was modest. At the same time, despite understanding modesty to be more than dress, the women in the group used language that implied that they themselves assessed fellow American Muslim women based on their dress. Participant F lamented the inherent connection between modesty and dress,

“This is sad but even though I do connect Islam and modesty, so much, weirdly enough one of the first things I thought of when you mentioned modesty was about clothing and being covered… and that’s sad that that’s what I think of about hijab. There’s more to the word than just pieces of clothing…”

Her reflection reveals her hesitance to reduce modesty and hijab to merely articles of clothing, a concern shared by several other participants.

As the American Muslim women in the focus groups got older, they became more critical of how others around them spoke of hijab and modesty, especially when others defined the purpose of hijab to be a shield from objectification. These participants understood that objectification was unacceptable for *all* women, regardless of what they wore. The participants
as a whole consistently resisted the assumptions made about their character and religiosity based on their dress. In the experiences described by the participants it seems that their communities acknowledge the importance of acting modestly, but emphasize the physical way a woman is dressed. This may be the case because clothing choices are visible, whereas intentions and behaviors are not as visible. American Muslim community members may not know how an American Muslim woman acts, and thus default to the way she is dressed. Similarly, several participants reported that non-Muslim Americans assumed their religiosity depending on whether or not they wore hijab.

**Relationship with Islam and Allah.** Second, the focus group participants also understood modesty as a part of their relationship with Islam and Allah. In fact, for participant F, your “relationship with Allah is all that matters.” Participants explained that their relationships with Allah are extremely personal and because hijab is part of their religious practice/worship, their relationship with hijab is also personal. Participant B explained that she had to re-assess her relationship with Allah after she removed her hijab. Similarly, participant C, first decided to wear hijab when she was at a point in her life where she was evaluating the type of relationship she had with Allah and how she wanted to develop that relationship. Her relationship with Allah informed her relationship with hijab. Participant C described wearing hijab as a way of enhancing her relationship with Allah because she was fulfilling a religious obligation. Participant B explained that hijab is one way for Muslim women to “show the utmost devotion to your [their] faith,” and subsequently Allah.

For the American Muslim women in these focus groups, their relationships with Islam and Allah are important and complicated. Participants spoke of this relationship with Allah as a relationship that is constantly developing. Participant B describes this as a relationship she is
“constantly working on.” Participant C also described her relationships with modesty and worshipping Allah as ones that she is consistently “working on.” Participant A voiced her struggle to navigate “this complex relationship you have with Allah and his dress code,” while simultaneously dealing with judgment from others, both Muslim and non-Muslims. For participant B, the assumptions her non-Muslim co-workers made about her character and personality was one factor that led to taking off her hijab. She resented these assumptions and decided to take off the hijab because she did not want to “end up resenting my [her] religion.” Participant B explained that she is working to improve her practice of Islam and relationship with Allah, hoping to wear hijab again in the future.

Several participants expressed concern that American Muslim community members’ regulation of hijab might turn American Muslim women away from Islam and subsequently impact their relationship with Allah. For example, participant B describes that when she stopped wearing hijab, fellow American Muslims assumed that her practice of Islam and relationship with Allah had diminished. However, the point at which she removed her hijab, which fellow American Muslims interpreted to be a low point in her practice of Islam, was one where she was struggling the most to maintain and develop her relationship with Allah.

The participants in my focus groups rejected the assumptions made about hijab and their relationship with Islam and Allah. For example, participant G explained that American Muslim women who do not wear hijab are more often expected to participate in *haram* activities in comparison to women who wear hijab. Hijab serves as a proxy for their practice of Islam, whereby not wearing hijab makes one more likely to partake in *haram* activities. Several participants dismissed these assumptions, again emphasizing that hijab is not the only way to practice Islam and develop their relationships with Allah.
Different manifestations of modesty. Third, these findings also demonstrate that modesty, both with respect to hijab and behavior, changes depending on social context. Several participants reported wearing different types of clothing based in part on their personal sense of modesty as well as their social context. Part of it is out of respect for cultural traditions or older members of their families, but part of it is also fear of judgment from others. This reaffirms that modesty, both in dress and behavior, is at least in part socially regulated. Clothing that is deemed “more modest,” (often times culturally informed) is worn in specific environments, usually around those whose judgment has the greatest influence. In the case of participant C, she explained that things like exposed hair were considered more acceptable in her community as opposed to wearing makeup. In her community, there is a greater emphasis on wearing looser pants and longer shirts that do not expose the shoulder as compared to covering one’s hair. Because the regulation of elements of dress or appearance varies between American Muslim communities, modesty and how one censors their dress based on social context, becomes even more complex for the women who must navigate these spaces.

Several participants recognized that they may behave differently depending on their social context. When they are around fellow Muslims whom they have assessed as “more religious” than they are, they censored or framed differently the things they would say and how they would act. For example, participant C explained that if she were around someone who wore niqab, which she understood as a more strict form of hijab, she would “talk about things but say it differently.” In the presence of parents and/or relatives, modesty also encompassed cultural norms. For example, conversing extensively with men was something several participants cited as immodest because doing so transgressed their cultural norms. At the same time, participants stated that they would be comfortable doing so in the presence of other people, like their friends
or even fellow American Muslims closer to them in age. For example, participant G stated that she does not think she would be judged by American Muslims of her age if they were to see her with someone who is drinking or smoking.

Additionally, Participant A explained that she censors herself around certain Muslims, not based on how they wear hijab or cover, but based on their social media presence. She would bring up certain topics if they were also things that appeared on their social media accounts: “if I see them posting stuff they’re not afraid to show everyone, then I know I can bring up certain topics.” This type of censorship, participants explain, is in part a way of respecting others’ boundaries and stems from not wanting to offend them. However, at the same time, participant B pointed out that “we might censor ourselves around other Muslims based off of what we know about how they practice but also because we’re afraid of mutual judgment.” Thus, because one does not want criticism for their behaviors, they filter what they share depending on social context. With fellow hijabis, censorship is still assessed via dress and extent of covering.

Throughout the focus group sessions, the fact that there is understood to be a relationship between modesty and dress was consistent despite agreement that the concept of modesty extends beyond dress. As a whole, participants tended to emphasize that modesty is more than just what a Muslim woman wears but also how she behaves. This indicates that in addition to the regulation of dress, there are also expectations and regulations regarding how an American Muslim woman ought to act, many of which are dictated by mothers and/or American Muslim men. The participants in the focus groups often asserted that American Muslim women should not be judged by their clothing choices. At the same time their responses reveal that there are, in fact, guidelines, ones that are socially informed and regulated, that govern their understandings of what is or is not modest. The Muslim American women included in the focus groups rejected
the judgments on their clothing and subsequent assumptions made regarding their character and religiosity, by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

II. American Muslim women’s voices in relation to Qur’an and Hadith. In chapter 1, I investigate the Qur’an and Hadith to elucidate what these religious texts say about hijab and modesty. In the focus groups, several participants referenced the Qur’an when explaining that hijab is a religious obligation. They explained that the Qur’an deems hijab as fardh (mandatory) for Muslim women. One participant specifically mentioned the story of Maryam (RA), in which ‘hijab’ is used to refer to a screen or boundary. Participant C explained that it was this story that informed her understanding of hijab as a barrier, serving as a reminder of her personal boundaries. However, none of the participants referenced the Hadith in relation to hijab or modesty. Because it is often difficult to assess the validity of a Hadith, it could be the case that young American Muslim women rely more on the Qur’an for their understandings of hijab and modesty.

At the same time, several participants had very clear understandings of what is and is not hijab. For example, participant E explained that wearing hijab in the turban style (see Appendix A) is sometimes acceptable, so long as one’s hair and chest are fully covered. Exposing parts of the ears and neck is acceptable. Though there are Hadith that explicate what parts of the body ought to be covered for Muslim women, participant E did not reference them. Related to hijab, Smith reported that some American Muslim women expressed hesitancy regarding the increasing presence of brands and stores dedicated to modest dress. They worry that the need to dress fashionably will supersede modesty. Such concerns around fashion in part reflect dress and modesty guidelines put forth in Hadith. For example, the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) is reported as stating that dress should not be excessively opulent. Simultaneously, as mentioned in
Chapter 1, with respect to Muslim dress code, it should not be similar to the dress of ‘non-believers.’ Most focus group participants did not voice concerns about fashion and its potential tensions with modesty, though participant C did mention beauty vloggers and the criticism they often draw for the way they wear hijab.

In addition, participants did not mention the types of exegeses they reference when understanding the Qur’an. Several participants expressed the idea that Muslim men and women ought to be held to the same standards of modesty, an interpretation of Qur’an that Barlas and Wadud advocate for. Participant A, like Barlas, notes that the Qur’an is ambiguous when it comes to guidelines for what modesty ought to look like, explaining that it generally conveys the sense to “cover up” without specific directions for how to do that. In the focus groups, several participants emphasized that modesty of behavior is more important, similar to Barlas’s argument that because verses 24:30 and 24:31 focus on the action/behavior of lowering one’s gaze, it signifies that the veil/hijab is “more than an article of clothing” (Barlas, 2010, p. 42; see Appendix B). Wadud presents a similar argument, citing verse 7:26, “the clothing of righteousness, that is best.” Like the participants in the focus groups, she argues that hijab, a physical article of clothing, is not the ultimate signifier of modesty. Rather, it is one’s character that is important to modesty.

III. American Muslim women’s voices in relation to contemporary academic scholarship. Just as in the scholarship on American Muslim women, there too exists a focus on hijab in the findings presented here. At the same time, the participants in the focus groups consistently emphasized that modesty extends beyond hijab and dress. Participants, like in Haddad et al.’s findings, reject the notion of proving modesty via hijab, citing modesty of
character and interactions with others as more important aspects of modesty. This also parallels Barlas’s and Wadud’s critique of equating hijab with modesty.

Several participants spoke of modesty and hijab as they relate to their relationship with Islam and Allah. For some, hijab was a way of enhancing their relationship with Allah. This echoes Mahmood’s findings with Egyptian women, in which hijab was a way for them to develop their religiosity. Thus, they did not see themselves as achieving piety by simply wearing hijab, but rather that it was a tool to attain the level of piety/religiosity they sought (Mahmood, 2005, p.134-136). Similarly, the women in my study, in speaking of developing their relationship with Allah, speak to a development of their religiosity, whatever that may look like. Like scholars Mahmood and Fatima, they are critical of fellow American Muslims who simply equate hijab and religiosity.

Some of the participants here understood hijab as a religious obligation. Ahmed, in her observations at the Islamic Society of North American (ISNA) conferences and interviews, also comes to the same conclusion. Though, Ahmed finds that some women decide to stop wearing the hijab as they learn more about the hijab that was not the case with the participants here. Several participants explained that they understandings of modesty evolved as they grew into adulthood. They began to understand modesty as more than just hijab. None of the participants concluded that they did not understand hijab to be a religious obligation as their understanding of modesty expanded.

Haddad, based upon her qualitative data and extensive literature reviews, described that one result of the re-Islamization movement was the increased wearing of hijab by American Muslim women. Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned 9/11 in any of their responses,
which contrasts with Ahmed’s findings that some American Muslim women decided to start wearing hijab to combat Islamophobia (see Chapter 2, page 44). However, given that the participants would have been between the ages of 2 and 9 years old, their recollection of 9/11 and the weeks and years that followed are inevitably different from the women describe by Ahmed who were older. This age demographic is nonetheless affected by 9/11 and the sociopolitical consequences for American Muslims, but perhaps in different ways. It may not be the case for this group of American Muslim women, it may be true for others. In addition, this group of American Muslim women may be affected by 9/11 later on in their lives.

Participants also did not speak of hijab and modesty in terms of forming identity or maintaining ties with American Muslim communities. The American Muslim women in the focus group did not speak of hijab as a manifestation of their American Muslim identity, unlike the findings of many of the scholars in Chapter 2. They did, however, discuss the social consequences of wearing hijab a certain way. For example, participants report that an American Muslim woman who wears leggings or wears hijab in such a way that a portion of her hair and chest are showing, may not be taken as seriously as a woman who “covers up even more.”

Additionally, though the participants were very critical of the male gaze and the role of Muslim men in using hijab as a proxy for piety, none of the focus group participants spoke about hijab as a way to counteract sexual advances, unlike Ahmed, Furseth, and Haddad’s findings. This suggests that perhaps some American Muslim women in this age demographic no longer understand hijab in this way. The women in my study did not understand their wearing of hijab as a form of resistance, whether it is to Western imperialism, or conservative Islam. The participants were critical of the assumptions made by non-Muslim Americans regarding stereotypes of what Muslim women typically look like, namely that Muslim women all wear
hijab. However, the women in these focus groups did not connect their wearing of hijab to Western imperialism or conservative Islam.

Though these findings are specific to the American Muslim women in the focus groups, they offer insights into how some American Muslim women understand hijab and modesty. Collectively, the data demonstrate that these understandings extend beyond the clothing they wear or how they wear their hijab, but dress nonetheless remains central. Hijab and modesty mean different things to different American Muslim women, and the ways in which American Muslim women understand hijab and modesty do not always reflect their communities’ understandings of hijab and modesty. American Muslim women connect modesty and hijab to the development of their Islamic practice/worship as well as their relationships with Allah. Ultimately, American Muslim women’s understandings of hijab and modesty are fluid, evolving and manifesting differently in different social spaces.
CONCLUSION

In the process of writing this thesis, several things have become clearer. First, hijab and modesty have a complicated relationship. Hijab is one aspect of modesty, but modesty cannot be reduced to hijab. The Qur’an and Hadith as a starting point make clear that modesty is fundamental to the practice of Islam, for both Muslim men and Muslim women. While modesty in terms of dress differs for Muslim men and women, the behavioral and character trait components remain the same. The Hadith in particular establish modesty beyond physical dress, encompassing behavior and character as well. Although critiques exist of both traditional and contemporary translations and interpretations of the Qur’an and Hadith, when studied together, they offer a more complete understanding of how scholars, over time, approach reading the Qur’an and Hadith.

Similarly, drawing on both scholarship on American Muslim women that focuses on hijab and scholarship that emphasize modesty beyond hijab, offers a fuller analysis of how some American Muslim women understand hijab and modesty. My examination of a range of literature on American Muslim women reveals that American Muslim women speak of and understand hijab in three broad categories: hijab as a religious obligation, hijab as identity, and hijab as resistance. These meanings are fluid and not mutually exclusive. For example, some American Muslim women understand hijab as both a resistance of conservative Islam and a way of asserting their American Muslim identity. Although there is primarily a focus on hijab, some attention is paid to modesty beyond hijab. Some American Muslim women reject the notion that modesty can only manifest as hijab. They emphasize modesty of character and interactions with others as more important aspects of modesty. Again, as is the case for hijab, American Muslim women’s understandings of modesty are multi-dimensional.
In addition, the findings presented from the focus groups indicate: first, that American Muslim women understand modesty as it relates to hijab/dress, behavior, and character; second, these understandings of modesty are socially shaped and regulated; and finally, that American Muslim women are critical of and resist to these social regulations. Across these main findings, participants speak of an evolution over time in their understandings of modesty, specifically that their understandings of modesty expanded beyond dress. As they grew into adulthood, they came to conclude that hijab is neither necessary nor sufficient for modesty. At the same time, hijab remains a central component of their understandings of modesty. American Muslim women also emphasize the importance of modesty in the development of their relationships with Islam and Allah. Lastly, the focus group findings reveal that modesty manifests differently based on their social context. The findings I present and analyze are specific to the American Muslim women in my study. At the same time, they offer valuable insights into how some American Muslim women understand hijab and modesty.

Moving forward, the connections between American Muslim women and their understandings of hijab, and modesty require further exploration. For example, American Muslim women often defer their enactment of hijab and/or modesty to regulators like their mothers or fellow American Muslims. However, the Qur’an and Hadith articulate modesty as a central aspect of being Muslim: “Every deen [religion] has an innate character. The character of Islam is modesty” (Muwatta Malik, Book 47, Hadith 9/1644). As such, does regulating modesty based on social context, rather than religious texts, challenge this?

Furthermore, American Muslims perhaps understand hijab differently than Muslims in Muslim-majority countries. Of course, American Muslims are not a monolith and do not interpret hijab in the same ways. The participants here were hesitant to judge fellow American
Muslim women’s hijab, but at the same time several participants very clearly explicated what is or is not acceptable hijab. But, does what counts as acceptable hijab change based on social context and in what ways?

An added dimension to this line of inquiry is the role of the Internet and social media in shaping American Muslim women’s understandings of hijab and modesty. In the age of the Internet, hijab and clothing styles are readily accessible on social media, and have perhaps influenced how American Muslim women understand hijab and modesty. A simple Internet search reveals that some American Muslim women actively participate in the creation and development of online fashion communities. They create new styles of hijab and promote modest clothing options; some even found their own clothing collections marketed to Muslim women seeking modest clothing selections. At the same time, some American Muslim women express concern about the compatibility of modesty and fashion. In what ways, and why, has the rise of the Internet and social media created new understandings of hijab and modesty?

*   *   *

Eight years later, I still wake up every morning and wrap my hijab. Hijab and modesty are part of my daily routine, as they are for several of the participants in the focus groups. In the process of writing this thesis, several things have become clearer. First, hijab and modesty have a complicated relationship. Hijab is one aspect of modesty, but modesty cannot be reduced to hijab. Modesty, as a concept, is difficult to define. As I reflect on its meaning, I find myself identifying a list of behaviors and character traits that are not modest, but still struggling to explicate what is modest.
As a visibly American Muslim woman, the questions I explore in this thesis project are questions I often ask myself. Over the course of this project, I have grappled with my own understandings of hijab and modesty, and how they have evolved. Unlike some of the American Muslim women in the focus groups, I learned about modesty before learning about hijab, and subsequent conversations about hijab encompassed behavior and dress. As such, I equated hijab with modesty because I understood hijab to include my behavior and character. Through the course of this project, I have come to realize how differently American Muslim women learn about hijab and modesty. Ultimately, I have learned that the ways in which American Muslim women conceptualize hijab and modesty are as diverse a group as we are, and as such their understandings of hijab and modesty are critical to any contemporary discourses examining their experiences.
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**Appendix A: Types of Islamic Coverings**

![Image 1](image1.jpg)

**Image 1.** The above image depicts several ways that Muslim women cover. The *shayla*, is a long and rectangular scarf that is wrapped around the head and tucked into place at the shoulder. The *hijab* is a scarf that covers the head and neck entirely, leaving the face uncovered. The *Al-Amira* consists of two pieces of cloth: a tight-fitting cap and a loose, tube-like scarf that is worn over the cap. The *khimar* is a longer scarf that covers the head, neck, and shoulders, leaving the face uncovered. The *chador*, is a long, full-body covering. It covers the head, neck, and shoulders, and leaves the face uncovered. The *niqab* covers the head, neck and face, except around the eyes. The *burqa* is a long, full body covering. It covers the head, neck, and face, with a mesh fabric around the eyes. (BBC News, n.d.)

![Image 2](image2.jpg)

**Image 2.** The above image depicts a *dupatta*, a long rectangular piece of scarf that is worn across the chest and back over the shoulder, most commonly by women of South Asian descent. (Oxford dictionary, n.d.; Kanz Scarf India)
Images 3-5. The above image depicts a turban style some Muslim women wear. The amount of hair and neck showing differs based on personal preferences (Modanisa, n.d.; Branded Girls, 2017; Torkia, 2015).
APPENDIX B: QUR’AN VERSES AND HADITH EXCERPTS

Qur’an Verses

Qur’an and Hadith excerpts are listed below in the order that they appear throughout this thesis.

First, I list the verse in Arabic, followed by the English translation.

1. Verse 33:35:

"Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who
do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so - for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward” (Sahih International; 33:35).

2. Verse 4:124:

> وَمَن يَعْمَلِ مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ مِن ذَكْرِهِ أَوْ أُنثِىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَٰئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ نَفْرًا

“And whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, while being a believer - those will enter Paradise and will not be wronged, [even as much as] the speck on a date seed” (Sahih International; 4:124).

3. Verse 7:26:

> يَبْنِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ أَدَّمَ فَأَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْهُ لَيْسَةً تُؤْرِى سُوءَ تَكْمِيمِ وَرَيْشًا وَلِيَبْسَ

> الْتَقْوَى ذَلِكَ خَيرًا ذَلِكَ مِنّي أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُنَّكَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَذَّكَّرُونَ ١٥

“You children of Adam, We have bestowed upon you clothing to conceal your private parts and as adornment. But the clothing of righteousness that is best. That is from the signs of Allah that perhaps they will remember” (Sahih International, 7:26).
4. Verse 24:30:

“Tell the believing men to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Indeed, Allah is acquainted with what they do” (Sahih international, 24:30).

5. Verse 24:31:
“And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their head covers over their chests and not expose their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their women, that which their right hands possess, or those male attendants having no physical desire, or children who are not yet aware of the private aspects of women. And let them not stamp their feet to make known what they conceal of their adornment. And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers that you might succeed” (Sahih International; 24:31).

6. Verse 33:59:

“O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their jilbab [outer garments]. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful (Sahih International, 33:59).  

7. Verse 7:46:
“And between them [companions of Paradise and companions of Fire; believers and non-believers] will be a partition, and on elevations are men who recognize all by their mark. And they call out to the companions of Paradise, “peace be upon you.” They have not [yet] entered it, but they long intensely” (Sahih International, 7:46; emphasis added).

8. Verse 19:17:

“And she took, in seclusion from them, a screen. Then we sent to her Our Angel, and he represented himself to her as a well-proportioned man” (Sahih International, 19:17; emphasis added).
9. Excerpt of Verse 33:53:

“...And when you ask [his wives] for something, as them from behind a partition. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts...” (Sahih International, 33:53; emphasis added).

10. Verse 41:5:

“And they say, “Our hearts are within coverings from that which you invite us, and in our ears is deafness, and between us and you is a partition, so work; indeed we are working” (Sahih International, 41:5; emphasis added).
11. Verse 42:51:

“And it is not for any human being that Allah should speak to him except by revelation or from behind a partition or that He sends a messenger to reveal, by His permission what He will. Indeed He is Most High and Wise” (Sahih International, 42:51).

12. Verse 49:13:

“O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted” (Sahih International, 49:13).
Hadith Excerpts:

1. “The Prophet said: “Allah does not accept the prayer of a woman who has reached puberty unless she wears a veil [khimar]” (Sunan Abu Dawud, Hadith 641).

2. “Whoever wears a dress of fame in this world, Allah will clothe him with a dress of humiliation in the day of resurrection, then set it afire” (Sunan Ibn Majah, Vol. 4, Book 32, Hadith 3606).

3. “O Asma', when a woman reaches the age of menstruation, it does not suit her that she displays her parts of body except this and this, and he pointed to his face and hands” (4104; Book 34, Hadith 85; Book 33, Hadith 4092).

4. “There will be none among you but his Lord will speak to him, and there will be no interpreter between them nor a screen [hijab] to screen Him” (Sahih al-Bukhari 7443; Book 97, Hadith 69; Vol.9 Book 93, Hadith 535).

5. “He (God) would lift the veil [hijab], and of things given to them nothing would he dearer to them than the sight of their Lord, the Mighty and the Glorious” (Sahih Muslim 181a; Book 1, Hadith 356; Book 1, Hadith 347).

6. “Nothing is heavier on the believer's Scale on the Day of Judgment than good character. For indeed Allah, Most High, is angered by the shameless obscene person” (Jami’ at-Tirmidhi, Book 27, Hadith 108/ Vol. 4, Book 1, Hadith 2002).

7. "There are four qualities such that if you were to be given them, you will not be harmed even if the world were to be taken away from you. They are: good character, restraint in food, truthful words, and upholding a trust" (Al-Adab Al-Mufrad, Book 14, Hadith 288/Book 1 Hadith 288).
APPENDIX C: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

During the focus group sessions, I asked the following questions; indented questions were follow up questions, as needed. The questions were not necessarily asked in this order, but in order of relevance to the conversations happening between participants.

1. What does modesty mean to you?
   a. What do you define as a baseline level of modesty?

2. How did you come to wear or know of hijab?

3. What does hijab mean to you?
   a. How do you define hijab?
   b. What is the purpose of hijab?

4. What does it mean to you to live modestly, in addition to/other than hijab?
   a. What are the actions you take on a daily basis that you see as being your way of living your modesty?

5. Do you ever feel as if you’re pressured to be modest in certain ways?
   a. Where do you think this pressure comes from?

6. Does the way a Muslim woman wear her hijab matter?

7. Do you find that there is connection between what you’re physically wearing and how people treat you, both Muslims and non-Muslims?
   a. Is the way that you think about modesty aligning with the way the Muslim community thinks about modesty?
Appendix-Specific References


