MUSLIM FASHION: STRATEGIES, IMPLEMENTATION, PERCEPTION AND CONSUMPTION

by

AREEB GUL

(Under the Direction of Katalin Medvedev)

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the experiences and sartorial practices of hijabi and non-hijabi Muslim women who choose to wear modest Muslim dress in the United States. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with eight participants. Three major themes emerged from the interview data: 1) The participants form a hybrid identity by negotiating their religious and American identity. This is the case regardless of whether the participants were born in the United States or moved here during their lifetime. 2) Sociocultural factors play a major role in influencing Muslim women's corporeal choices along with the search for community and safety. 3) There is a disconnect between retailers and consumers of modest fashion lines in the eyes of Muslim women. Thus, this study gives U.S. retailers valuable insight into the Muslim experience and helps product developers understand what Muslim women, who choose to dress modestly, look for in apparel products today.

INDEX WORDS: Muslim fashion, Islamic fashion, Muslim women, Hijab, Dress, Muslim, Modest, Islam

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Bachelor of Fashion Design, Iqra University, 2018

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2022

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December 2022

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Introduction

The primary purpose of this thesis is to examine the nuances of the sartorial practices of young Muslim women in the United States as they balance their daily lives with their spiritual convictions and religious morality. Discussions of religious sentiments conveyed by Muslim dress are generally limited to narratives surrounding the hijab (Atasay, 2006; Bucar, 2017; Droogsma, 2007; Ruby, 2005; Vujin, 2009). However, in this study, expressions of religious modesty through sartorial practices are not restricted to the headscarf. Because the accounts have been shaped entirely by my interview participants, they did not necessarily include the hijab. By enlarging the scope of my study, I intend to disrupt the homogenizing narratives of Muslim women. My goal is to highlight their unique ways of sartorial self-expression that demonstrate individuality and not necessarily only various degrees of religious conformity.

Edward Said (1979) has argued that negative perceptions and damaging representations of Muslims and Islamic dress practices originate in 19th Century Orientalism. Prejudice and hatred against Muslims have been prevalent for a long time in the West and have been frequently used to justify violence against Muslims. Islamophobia has further intensified in the post-9/11 era in the United States. Said (1979) in his seminal work *Orientalism* outlines the genesis and history of Orientalist views and the creation of an "us vs. them" rhetoric. He argues that the West has portrayed Muslims in the East as their polar opposite. Where the Western society is described as civilized, the Orient is represented as backward, lazy, and violent (Kerboua, 2016; Said, 1979). This dynamic has been depicted and reiterated through literature, poetry, art, and, more recently, through mass media (Kerboua, 2016; Said, 1979; Shaheen, 2001).

Shaheen (2001) highlights the prominent role of Hollywood movies in popularizing Orientalist stereotypes. He finds that the majority of Muslim characters in movies are either portrayed as terrorists or as barbaric villains. Muslim women, on the other hand, are generally presented as victims of the patriarchal Islamic society (Abu-Lughod, 2013). They need to be saved from the men in their society and their savior is generally a White Western man (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Spivak, 2010). Because of this, Kerboua (2016) suggests that it is especially unlikely for an ordinary American to have an understanding of the East and the people living there that has not been shaped by such narratives. The hostile attitudes towards the "East" or "people from the East" carry on in mundane, everyday interactions with Muslims in America. Muslim women continue to be seen as devoid of agency, regardless of what the case actually might be. Although wearing Muslim/Islamic (modest) dress creates conflicts and can lead to harassment or discrimination in contemporary U.S. society, many Muslim women continue to choose to display it. Because of this, the first research question of this thesis addressed the above experiences. It explored the relationship and motivations of Muslim/Islamic fashion and Muslim/Islamic clothing for the women that choose to wear them against the odds and despite the negative perceptions that they may be subjected to.

According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 3.45 million Muslims resided in the U.S. in 2017 (Mohamed, 2018). However, this number is only an estimate because information about religious affiliation is not collected by the U.S. census. Some scholars estimate the number of Muslims in the U.S. to be way higher, anywhere between 3.4 – 7 million (Padela & Zaidi, 2018). Mohamed (2018) asserts that because of its rapid growth, Islam will be the second-largest religion in the nation by 2040. Despite this, Muslim consumers are often overlooked in the product offerings of the fashion industry, and their needs, by and large, are not

met (Leri, 2020; Lewis, 2015). The integrated creative agency, ODD, surveyed 500 Muslim consumers in the U.K. in 2019. The survey found that 86% of Muslim women did not feel their needs were met by the fashion lines produced by mainstream fashion brands (*Modest Fashion*, 2019).

In order to understand why Muslim women do not feel properly catered for by the fashion industry or mainstream brands, it is important to study their past experiences with brands that, at least, attempted to provide such services. High street retailers such as H&M have come out with modest collections to capture this target market in the past (Leri, 2020). These collections present an opportunity to study the strategies used to market Islamic fashion styles to Muslim women and gather their perceptions about such strategies and the product offerings. Therefore, the second research question explored whether modest fashion lines in the past by mainstream brands were viewed as successful by their target market or not.

Overall, the objective of this study was to assess the state of Muslim fashion in an American context. I scrutinized the importance of (modest) Muslim fashion in the lives of young Muslim women in the United States. I investigated the processes American Muslim women go through to present a fashionable Islamic self. The study also wanted to uncover my research subjects' perception of what a desirable Muslim fashion line should look like by interrogating their past experiences with retailers of modest Islamic dress. In line with the above, my research questions are:

1) What is Muslim women's relationship with, and motivations for wearing Muslim fashion?
2) How have modest fashion lines in the past been perceived by Muslim women?

Justification

In a capitalist economy, if over three million people think that they need Islamic fashions, it is financially viable for retailers to explore this market. Norsham Mohamad-Garcia, founder of Miami Modest Fashion Week, estimates the buying power of American Muslims to be around $170 billion per year (Monsen & Mast, 2021). This means that if brands incorporate Muslim fashion into their lines, they will be able to tap into a niche market that could prove to be quite profitable. However, to be able to do this, brands should first empathize with their target consumer and her needs. My thesis project wants to help fashion merchandisers and retailers understand the current sartorial experiences and needs of American Muslim women that so far have been mostly ignored. Through in-depth qualitative interviews, this study gained a rich understanding of what businesses need to do to satisfy the sartorial needs of this market. This will help fashion companies implement the strategies that the consumers have found to be successful and avoid the ones that they did not approve of.

In order to understand the sartorial practices of Muslim women and provide a context for the research, we also need to understand the importance of Islamic dress items in their lives vis-a-vis Western fashion standards. Lewis (2015) declares that Muslim women have been ignored by the Western fashion industry. Literature on Muslim women's experiences with Western modest fashion lines is also almost non-existent. The various strategies they implement to navigate their relationship with Muslim fashion has also been underexplored. In fact, most studies on the subject only talk about Muslim women that wear the hijab. Therefore, this study is expected to broaden the understanding of Muslim female consumers by incorporating evaluations of fashion by both hijabi and non-hijabi Muslim women thus filling a gap in the current literature on Islamic dress practices and fashion.

Because I interrogate attitudes towards fashion, which is primarily a youth-oriented industry, Gen Z and young Millennials are the primary participants of this research project. Generation Z is the next up-and-coming group of fashion consumers (Hodgson, 2018; Meola, 2022; Parry, 2020). Therefore, it is important to understand this generational cohort's expectations towards Muslim fashion. Because the study wanted to analyze young American Muslim women's perceptions of modest fashion lines of the recent past, my participant pool also included young Millennials in order to acquire information over an extended period. Consequently, the participants' age in this study ranges between 18-30 years. Within the Muslim community in the U.S., this age group makes up around 44% of Muslims in America (Religious Landscape Study, 2014). This means that the conclusions of this study may potentially help to understand a large percentage of Muslim consumers.

To understand the Muslim female consumer market, it is imperative to make sense of their daily experiences in the United States. I attempt to do this by highlighting the importance of dress in Islam. Because Islamic women in the U.S. come from many different countries and cultures, I have been mindful of the cultural differences within the larger Muslim community. Through in-depth interviews with Muslim women, I have explored not only the perceptions of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular in the United States but their perceptions of non-Muslims and the politics of Muslim female dress.

Explanation of Terms

Modesty

Silvestri (2012) describes modesty as "an 'imported' product of the cross-fertilization of popular culture, religious knowledge, and practices in the global religious market" (p. 4). She suggests

that the meaning of modesty varies from person to person. In this thesis, the word modesty is used in a similar fashion.

Hijab

Ruby (2006) argues that the word “hijab” can have a range of meanings. She states that the hijab may refer to headscarves, modest clothing without covering the head, or even just modest behavior in general. Because there is still much controversy over what and how something needs to be covered, according to the rules of Islam, there is a lot of room for interpretation (Siraj, 2011; Yusuf, 2014). However, for the purpose of this study, the word “hijab” refers to a piece of clothing that Muslim women wear on their heads to cover their hair.

Burqa

The word burqa refers to a veil that covers the body as well as the face, except for the eyes.

Abaya

The word abaya refers to a veil that covers the entire body except for the face and hands.

Fashion

Fashion is about constant change and is the reflection of the zeitgeist (Reilly, 2021).

Muslim/Islamic Fashion

The terms “Muslim fashion” and “Islamic fashion” are used interchangeably throughout the thesis, they refer to dress practices that convey a Muslim/Islamic worldview and religious convictions as well as a fashionable, trendy self.

Dress

In fashion studies, the word dress refers to the modifications of and supplements to the body and not to a mundane gendered clothing item we generally refer to with the word (Eicher, Evenenson & Lutz, 2015).

Muslim/Islamic Dress

In contrast to Muslim/Islamic fashion, the terms “Muslim dress” or “Islamic dress,” refer to traditional Muslim/Islamic clothing items and practices. Following the definition of dress, Muslim/Islamic dress includes hair and accessories as well, among others.

Literature Review

Modesty According to Islam

To understand the importance of modest dress for Muslims, many scholars go back to the origin of modesty laid out through the verses of the Qur'an. The following two verses translated by Pickthall (1930) approximate a form of a dress code and are the ones that are referred to most often when talking about modesty:

> Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. That is purer for them. Lo! Allah is aware of what they do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment, save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands' fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons, or their brothers or their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigor, or children who know naught of women's nakedness. (24: 30-31)

> O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, so that they may be recognized and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful. (33: 59)

The first verse refers to modesty not only for women, but men as well. Many scholars point out that these verses focus first on the modesty of men and that it is asked of them to be modest before it is asked of women (Alvi et al., 2013; Davaray, 2009; El Guindi, 2005; Piela, 2016; Tariq-Munir, 2014; Yusuf, 2014). Another important source of information for Muslims is

the *hadith*, the word of the Prophet. According to Alvi et al. (2013), there is almost no mention of modest dress for Muslim women in the *hadith*; it focuses solely on modesty for men whether it is lowering their gaze or instructing them to properly cover themselves up.

Only the second verse above refers to Muslim women and asks them to cover themselves "when abroad" for protection. To understand this, first, it is important to take into consideration the context of the times of writing the verses. Covering one's head was a sign of status and displayed a woman's freedom to outsiders (Davaray, 209; El Guindi, 2005; Piela, 2016). This was the case before Islam when Judaism and Christianity were prevalent. Free women had the liberty to cover their heads, while it was forbidden for enslaved women to do so. The injunction included prostitutes who were not allowed to cover their heads and would have been punished if they did. It appears that during this time men often groped and assaulted prostitutes therefore the head covering was a tool to prevent the women from being molested when they were away from home (Davaray, 2009; Hensman, 2012; Piela, 2016).

As the verses do not give clear instructions on what kind of dress code should be followed, there is ongoing controversy about whether or not wearing the hijab is required, according to the true interpretation of Islamic text (Siraj, 2011; Yusuf, 2014). Because of this, some women in the present day may subscribe to the traditional view of the hijab as a requirement while others follow another interpretation which states that there is not enough evidence in the sacred text for the hijab to be a necessity (Siraj, 2011). Even so, the word "hijab" at the time was not used to refer to veiling or to a piece of clothing to cover the head but as a word for denoting a barrier or for creating space or distance between the wearer and the outside world (Ruby, 2006).

The first time the word “hijab” was used in the Qur’an, it was directed towards the Prophet’s wives. Consequently, many women and scholars in the present day hypothesize that it was directed solely towards them and not the female Muslim population in general (Hensman, 2012; Vujin, 2009). Piela (2016) goes in-depth about how the Prophet had never asked women around him to cover themselves up even though numerous women in his circle went without head coverings, including in the military as it was not common practice for them to do so. In the instances when people critiqued this practice and told him that women were recognizable without head coverings, he would ask the men to lower their gaze instead of putting the onus on women to cover themselves. Piela (2016) underlines that veiling was not imposed during the time of the Prophet. Its enforcement only started under the reign of Caliph Umar (634-644 CE), after the Prophet’s death. During the Caliph’s rule, head coverings became mandatory for women, and they became more secluded. The patriarchal Arab society followed this practice and veiling became associated with Islam (Vujin, 2009).

Different Types of Islamic Dress Throughout Different Parts of the World

The verses of the Qur’an do not give specific instructions on what comprises Islamic dress, so it is left to the interpretation of each society. Because of this, Islamic clothes vary from country to country (Akou, 2004). Culture plays a major part in what clothing items people may consider Islamic (Beckmann, 2014). It also must be noted that not the entire country would follow the same sartorial precepts; people within the same country will have different dress styles based on their location, status, etc. (El Guindi, 2005; Moors, 2007; Sweeney, 2011).

Akou (2004) details the different kinds of clothing that people wear in Muslim-populated regions, including accessories. She mentions the purpose, appearance, and names of all such

items. For example, in the Middle East, men's clothing items are made up of the *ihram*, *dishdasha*, *aba*/*abaya*, *kufi*, *ghutra*, or *agal*. Female clothing items may include *ihram*, *chadaree* or burqa, *abaya*, *chador*, and *niqab*. In Palestine, Syria, and Turkey women's modest clothing may be a *khimar* or *jilbab*/*jelibab*. In Malaysia, Indonesia and East Africa men wear *kaffiyeh* and *agal* whereas the women wear the *jilbab*. In Pakistan and India, both men and women wear *shalwar and kameez*. However, women may complement their outfits with a *dupatta*. In North Africa and some other parts of East Africa men wear *kufi*, b*urnoose,* and *boubou*/*bubu*/*baba riga* and the women similarly wear *boubou*/*bubu*/*baba riga* and may have additional covering similar to the *dupatta* and *garbasaar*. Muslim Somalis did not wear a head covering until the 19th century (Akou, 2004; Akou, 2007). Moors (2007) talks about *sitara* and *sharshaf* being common dress styles among San'a women which then got transferred to the *balto* and then later to the *abaya*. Additionally, she states that the color black was the preferred color but was not seen as a religious necessity. Even with all these different possibilities, not everyone in that area would wear these garments. All these items may be selected and displayed differently based on religious devotion, marriage, etc. (Akou, 2004).

Moors and Tarlo (2007) explain the importance of the tension between homogenization and diversification within Muslim communities by giving an example of some of the above-mentioned clothing terminologies. This means that clothing items that are drastically different from one another may go by the same name in different parts of the world. However, similar-looking items may have very different names. In Britain and America, what is referred to as the hijab would be called a *jilbab* in Indonesia. However, a *jilbab* is a full-length coat in European and Middle Eastern contexts. That garment may be referred to as *balto* in Yemen. This shows

that the Muslim community is extremely diverse and demonstrates that it has many similar or same sartorial items.

Bucar (2018) talks about her experience in three Muslim-majority countries. In particular, she talks about major cities such as Tehran, Yogyakarta, and Istanbul. She states that the clothing in each of these locations differed drastically. She observes that in Tehran one might find something similar to what a college student in the U.S. would wear with an addition of an outer garment and the headscarf. She points out that in Yogyakarta, loose and free-flowing modest garments and head coverings were popular, whereas in Istanbul tailored garments were preferred.

Silvestri (2012) talks about the style of veil common in Europe and calls it the "integral veil" which is a mixture of the *jilbab* and the hijab. She declares that this veil does not have its origin in any Muslim country. Instead, it is a culmination of what was considered appropriate from a religious standpoint in different countries and the popular culture of the area. She concludes that the "integral veil" is purely a European construct.

In addition to the differences in dress practices, cultural exchange in Muslim fashion was also detected as a consequence of various racial and ethnic identities of Muslims (Tarlo & Moors, 2013). Clothing items are merged and incorporated between Muslims from different backgrounds. This is the case in places like the United States where Muslims have to find a way to adapt to a new culture while they also continue to maintain their religious identity (Williams & Vashi, 2007). This results in a modern Muslim dress that is in line with the cultural and temporal context it is worn in (Tarlo & Moors, 2013).

Perceptions of Muslim Women According to Non-Muslims

"Dress is imbued with meaning by both the wearer and the viewer" (Huisman & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2005, p. 3). It is important to study the perceptions of Muslim women by non-Muslim people in order to understand their positioning in society. This is essential because such perceptions may not always align with what the women themselves feel about their clothing. On this account, various scholars have argued that women that wear obvious religious clothing such as the hijab are often subject to stereotypes and labeled as oppressed, weak, and voiceless (Davary, 2009; Droogsma, 2007; Everett et al., 2014; Lewis, 2004; Mir, 2014; Silvestri, 2012; Williams & Vashi, 2007).

In their study, Nadal et al. (2012) discuss various forms of microaggressions that Muslims have to wrestle with as a result of the negative associations surrounding them in Western societies. The study found six common themes associated with the types of discrimination that Muslims have to face. These include the belief that all Muslims are terrorists, that teachings of Islam promote violence, and that Muslims are all the same. They also found that Muslims were represented as exotic creatures and rampant Islamophobic and derogatory language was used in discussions about them. Lastly, they have concluded that Muslims are treated as aliens even when they are U.S. citizens.

Maira (2009) conducted a study on the gendered representations of Muslims and their perceptions in the West. Her study shows that a Muslim woman would only be considered a "good" Muslim by Western standards if she abandons her Islamic faith and discards the veil. Muslim women are expected to promote American liberal values and show off their patriotism and democratic values. Such views help the U.S. justify the War on Terror (Maira, 2009). This

discourse creates a hierarchy of acceptable Muslims. It places abandoning the hijab at the center of acceptability by the "modern" American society. The opposite automatically labels anyone that does not abide by U.S. nationalist practices as a "bad" Muslim and a supporter of an "oppressive" regime and the "terrors" that it produces.

Sweeney (2011) provides examples of numerous art pieces that portray Muslim women in an unusually positive light. While creating such pieces is a bold artistic move, the problem is that to be seen as empowered the women are sexualized in these portrayals. This only serves to reproduce the narrative of the "good" or "bad" Muslim; a Muslim is only "good" when portrayed in a Western light or when doing Western things (Maira, 2009). It also suggests that Muslim women cannot be fully recognized for who they are unless their actions are deemed acceptable from the perspective of a "white feminist sphere of experience" (Zakaria, 2021).

Allen et al. (2013) talk about how some women in Britain felt intense hatred towards them simply because they were Muslim. The research uncovered that they were harassed in various ways ranging from verbal abuse to physical abuse in public. The authors pointed out that these attacks were more common against Muslim women that wore recognizable religious items such as the hijab or veil. Such attacks accounted for nearly 80% of all reported incidents (Akou, 2004; Allen, 2013; Everett et al., 2015).

Everett et al. (2015) conducted research that studied the perceptions of a woman without a hijab and compared it to perceptions when the same woman wore a hijab and when she wore a full-face veil. Through analyzing people's conscious and subconscious thoughts the study found that people had more negative perceptions about someone wearing the full-face veil than about someone wearing the hijab. Additionally, the authors studied how perceptions are affected when

people realize the reason for wearing the hijab or veil, meaning if the woman is forced to wear it or if she wears it of her own volition. The results showed that people were generally more understanding when they learned that a woman *chose* to wear the hijab; this knowledge led to more acceptance towards her. However, the opposite happened when they found out that she was forced to wear the hijab. The latter only reinforced their already existing biases. Everett et al. (2015) compared this phenomenon to the media portrayals of Muslim women and concluded that the constant narrative of being forced to wear the hijab or veil made people less willing to open up to veiled women.

Seggie and Sanford (2010) found that many Muslim women feel as if they do not belong or are excluded in predominantly Christian educational institutions. Such feelings of prejudice and discomfort arise from distorted views held by non-Muslims about Islam and are the outcome of improper education. In these institutions, due to their low numbers, the students felt they were representatives of their religion and that they were constantly in the spotlight. They noted that in the eyes of their peers their individual actions were equated with the Muslim society at large.

Mir (2014) highlights the difficulty Muslim women feel in connecting with their non-Muslim peers when they wear the hijab. She concluded that the visibility of the hijab created a cultural distance that Muslim women had difficulty bridging. Additionally, she found that Muslim women were stereotyped as victims of terrorist Muslim men and simultaneously suspected of terrorist activities themselves. The study underscored that Muslim women that do not wear the hijab often find themselves having to explain their reasons for not doing so.

Some people have peculiar ideas about the reason why some Muslim women may wear certain forms of Islamic dress, such as the burqa. They allege that the burqa allows Muslim

women to be anonymous and not constrained by moral boundaries (Moors, 2007; Simons, 2003). Simons (2003) talks about this by stating that non-Muslims in the past believed that Muslim women used the burqa to hide their sexual gallantry and go about their lives freely without being found out by their husbands. Moors (2007) cites an example of how some people in San'a were convinced that the veil made it easier for women to transgress moral limits.

The Politicization of the Hijab and Burqa

Akou (2004) discusses that people in several countries view Islam and the display of Islamic fashion as contradictory to their democratic point of view. Because the populations in these locations see Islam as a challenge to their way of living, serious sociopolitical tension arises between those who wish to express their religious point of view through sartorial means and those who do not. As a result, many countries have placed restrictions on expressing religious affiliation through visible items such as the hijab or burqa (Akou, 2004; Silvestri, 2012). Silvestri (2012) provides another justification that people had provided for these bans. She cites the argument that the ban was imposed in the name of security because non-Muslims had used the full-face veil in the past to hide their identity to commit crimes. She states that certain Muslims may support the restriction of the full-face veil because they understand that it had been used as a threat to security. The justification of security, however, does not explain the ban of the hijab, which has been imposed in many locations. The politicization of the veil turned a dress item into a political statement rather than a tangible means of religious expression. Many governments have put restrictions on the burqa or hijab because of their belief that Muslim women have been "forced" to wear them by their family or the society at large. Therefore, they surmise that banning it would allow women to practice their "freedom." In such cases, the

rhetoric of “saving” the “oppressed women” is the general justification for the ban (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Silvestri, 2012; Spivak, 2003; Zakaria, 2021).

Vujin (2009) talks about the secularist history of France and how the ban on veils came into existence. The roots of the ban trace back to the French Revolution which resulted in the separation of Church and State. One of the purposes of the revolution was to end the overwhelming power the Church held for centuries and allow people to practice their religion freely as long as it did not disturb public order; religion was seen as a private matter. Consequently, the French did not establish a state religion. However, over time, educational institutions started to ban religious symbols that were visible or big, while allowing the display of smaller ones. This disproportionately affected religious communities that did not have smaller versions of their religious symbols such as the hijab or the Sikh turban. Silvestri (2012) brings up the fact that the anti-burqa law in France was less divisive among the general French population and the Muslim French population compared to the hijabi ban that had been imposed previously. She mentions that numerous Muslims supported the ban on the full-face veil. However, Sweeney (2011) suggests that the burqa ban was just as divisive. It should be noted that Silvestri (2012) assumed that the Muslims that were against the ban were mostly conservative and right-wing even though the evidence did not necessarily support her conclusion. Her assumption was based on the result of a survey that concluded that a majority of Muslims opposed the ban. However, the survey was published on a frequently used French Muslim web portal Oumma.com (2009) and, therefore, she surmised that it reflected mostly the views of right-wing Muslim conservatives. However, shortly after, Silvestri (2012) talks about a BBC News survey conducted with parents of pupils in educational institutions. The parents were polled about the veil ban. She states that 92.65% of the voters were against the ban (*French Minister*, 2007). This

shows that it was not only right-wing conservatives but the majority of the French Muslim population that opposed the ban. Sweeney (2011) underlined that the ban did not allow the police to require women to divest of their burqa; it only allowed the police to check their citizenship. Despite this, asking for one's citizenship harmed the women as it questioned their allegiance to the country and Othered them.

Silvestri (2012) talks in detail about the numerous policies throughout Europe that put restrictions on the burqa or the hijab. In the U.K., when the ban was proposed the majority of people were against it because it not only threatened Muslims but people from other religious minorities. Consequently, the ban was voted down. Silvestri brought up the Netherlands where there was an attempt to impose a burqa ban. However, in 2008, they rejected the plan because it would have violated people's constitutional right to freedom of religion. In 2009, Denmark proposed a similar ban. While it was not enforced, it was left upon individual institutions to decide whether they enforce it or not. Spain in 2010 moved towards imposing a ban. During that period even though it was not official, numerous organizations made it a requirement to remove the hijab at work. The ban was later fully imposed. Germany did not outright ban the veil, however, many public offices banned it for employees. While Austria had initiated a national discussion about it and "condemned the message of oppression represented by the burqa/niqab" (Silvestri, 2012, p.17), they did not ban it in the end because they did not view it as a significant enough issue.

Huisman and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2005) talk about Bosnia, previously part of Yugoslavia. In Bosnia, people were allowed to practice their religion. Still, items showing religious affiliation were considered suspicious. While full-face veils were banned, headscarves were allowed.

Despite this, women would fear wearing it as it publicly displayed their religious affiliation, which was controversial in an atheist socialist society.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Turkey moved towards becoming a “modern” secular state. The unveiled woman became the symbol of modernity that Turkey wanted to project, which, in turn, cast veiled women as the opposite (Lewis, 2015). However, the veil was not outright banned until the 1980s and 1990s. Gürel (2018) highlights that headscarves were categorized into “good” and “bad” headscarves prior to that. However, when the “good” headscarves were adapted, their perceived meaning became negative to the people pushing for a “modern” Turkey. For example, the turban was initially regarded as a “good” form of headscarf. However, when it was adopted by women that wore a headscarf, it became a political symbol. Later, the headscarf was banned completely but many women continued to wear it as a means of resistance.

Davary (2009) compares the contradictory views of two neighboring countries, Turkey and Iran. While Iran imposes head covering, Turkey bans it in education or at work. Sweeney (2011) discusses art pieces and graffiti in Iran that state women who do not dress properly should be “eliminated.” Sweeney (2011) suggests that such statements play a huge part in terrorizing while simultaneously objectifying Iranian women and showing that there is no discursive or literal tolerance for them. Davary (2009) mentions that many women in Turkey may still end up going against state regulations and wearing the veil as a rebellion against the over-westernization of their country. The author further suggests that in places where one’s identity is threatened and policed, performing a suppressed identity becomes an act of courage.

Bucar (2017) talks about the significance of the *chador* (a form of head covering popular in Iran) in her book *Pious Fashion*. She states that the Shah of the Pahlavi dynasty implemented

a dress code that banned head-coverings to modernize and westernize Iran. This turned the *chador* into a highly visible form of rebellion during the 1979 Islamic Revolution when women clothed themselves in it to protest against the Western-leaning Pahlavi dynasty. Bucar (2017) explains that *chador*-wearing women during the protest might not necessarily have shared the same degree of religious devotion but they did share the cause and a sense of commitment to the cause. This shows that even when Muslim women are "freed" from their hijab-wearing requirements, they may actively choose to wear it. If it is not possible to wear it in its traditional form, they might find a way to work around restrictions and create other acceptable forms of head coverings. Sweeney (2011) and Piela (2016) elaborate on the meaning that the hijab holds in such political situations. They state that the veil in places such as France or Iran in 1936 became much more than a religious symbol; it became a tangible expression of an oppositional political stance. Political notions are attached to the hijab in the U.S. where post-9/11 women chose to wear it despite rising Islamophobia to declare religious devotion and show bravery (Piela, 2016).

At present, there are only a few countries where a head covering is mandatory such as Iran and Saudi Arabia (Sweeney, 2011). Still, numerous countries have banned some form of Islamic clothing. Vujin (2009) recounts that in France the ban was imposed in the name of liberation but ended up limiting educational opportunities and economic freedom for Muslim women who had to choose between self-improvement and their religion. The result was not what the government had expected. Many Muslim women stopped going to school because they were not allowed to cover up, which limited their "liberation" the state had hoped for. Davary (2009) hypothesizes that this is likely because the women feel that their perceived spatial boundary had been crossed or their "barrier has been breached." Davary (2009) talks about a similar

phenomenon in Turkey where some women sacrificed their education to follow their religious ideals. This suggests that, ultimately, the ban of the hijab did more to oppress than empower women. On this account, Lewis (2015) suggests that secular states were created in the name of religious freedom but, instead, they ended up focusing more on "freedom from religion."

Silvestri (2012) has scrutinized "whether forbidding a 'symbol' of perceived oppression could actually solve the oppression problem" (p. 19)? Her question allows one to see that nations that enforce such a ban "see the unveiling as equivalent to liberating women, just as the rhetoric of colonialism focused on women's oppression in colonized societies, attaining moral justification for eradicating the culture of colonized people" (Davary, 2009, pp. 64-65). Parsons (n.d.) details the similarities and differences between forced veiling and unveiling. In places where veiling is banned, the unveiling of women is considered a step towards the modernization of society. In contrast, where the veil is forced onto women, the West claims that the society resists modernization and Westernization. However, in both cases, the decision was made by men for women, and men were not affected by the ruling. In the end, the question is not whether the hijab is oppressive or not but that making women unveil is just as oppressive as imposing the veil. These decisions should be left to the women themselves (Davary, 2009; Parsons, n.d.; Piela, 2016).

Reasons Behind Wearing a Modest Dress According to Muslim Women

There are numerous reasons why a Muslim woman would wear Islamic clothing. Some of these are not solely religious even though religion may still play an important role. Davary (2009) argues that it is impossible to generalize why Muslim women wear the hijab. She points out that the reasons differ based on many factors. For example, someone that wears a hijab in

Iran, compared to Turkey, would have different reasons. It is a necessity in one country, but banned in the other (Davary, 2009; Moors & Tarlo, 2007). Still, there is a general understanding of what reasons most commonly compel Muslim women to wear the hijab. These may include religion, Islamization of the society, protection from public gaze, reaction to consumer or pop culture, fashion, style or personal aesthetic, expression of class and as a form status symbol (Haque, 2010; Tarlo & Moors, 2013). Akou (2004) talks about how some of these reasons may include additional factors such as the influence of "climate, cultural aesthetics, economics, trade patterns, and political ideologies" (p. 251).

Droogsma (2007) conducted interviews with numerous veiled women to understand how Muslim women feel about the hijab. She wanted to study their reasoning for wearing the hijab instead of simply sticking to the usual narrative of "oppressed" women that ignores the voices of veiled women. Through in-depth interviews, she explored the reasons and motivations behind each person's decision to wear the hijab. Her study concluded that the hijab allows women to have increased personal control over their bodies and it helped them navigate society with more ease. Droogsma (2007) discussed the roles that the hijab plays in these women's lives. She found that the hijab and Islamic clothing help women define and construct their religious identity. She noted that the women in her study were aware that wearing the hijab often created negative associations of Muslim women in Western media or the general non-Muslim population (Kerboua, 2016). Despite such consequences, they still opted for veiling because the hijab helped women stay in control of their behavior and set a good example for Muslims around the world. Additionally, for many women, donning the hijab appeared to be their means of resisting sexual objectification (Davary, 2009; Droogsma, 2007). Muslim women are aware that men's behavior is often not easy to control and that clothing does not completely eliminate objectification.

However, by displaying a modest appearance they feel that they can, at the least, limit the frequency of inappropriate interactions. Many Muslim women state that Islamic clothing is a product of the patriarchal society. At the same time, they also believe that the pressure to wear revealing clothing is a product of a patriarchal social structure (Droogsma 2007; Piela, 2016). Consequently, they feel that covering themselves through Islamic dress and the hijab allows them to rebel against the patriarchal male gaze.

One of the major reasons that women wear the hijab is because it acts as a source of empowerment and creates a feeling of liberation for them (Davary, 2009; Droogsma, 2007; Gurbuz & Gurbuz-Kucuksari, 2009; Haque, 2010; Siraj, 2011). Haque (2010) and Piela (2016) state that this empowerment comes from the ease the hijab provides for moving freely in society and navigating spaces around non-related men. Davary (2009) talks about the veil as a form of "spatial gender boundary" that allows women to go about their day through the creation of a safe space for themselves (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Davary, 2009; Papanek, 1971, Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2006). Hanna Papanek (1971) uses the term "portable seclusion" to describe the burqa and argues that it acts as a segregated but portable space that allows women to exist in male-populated spaces. Abu-Lughod (2002) uses the term "mobile homes" to refer to them suggesting that women can feel as safe as in their own homes even when they are outside them. For example, Haque (2010) states that veiling in Pakistan encourages women to gain educational and economic independence. Javed (2014) concurs and finds that whereas the common perception is that the hijab or burqa limit the movement of Muslim women, it is the opposite since women do not feel subjected to unnecessary attention.

A common assumption about Muslim women is that they wear the hijab because of their families, societal pressure, or religious authorities (Moors & Tarlo, 2007). However, Hussain

(2019) conducted a study on female college students in Pakistan and found that the hijab was neither forced on the women by their family nor society; they put it on of their own free will. This finding was supported by numerous scholars who found that many Muslim women across the world choose to wear the hijab without any external pressure (Seggie & Sanford, 2010; Tarlo & Moors, 2013; Williams & Vashi, 2007).

Droogsma (2007) points out that while many Muslim women may face discrimination because of the hijab, many state that they gain respect from Muslims and non-Muslims alike at the same time. Atasoy (2006) and Hochel (2013) show that women in Canada and Malaysia respectively found that wearing the hijab allowed them to feel more respected amongst their peers, it also increased self-respect and facilitated cultural identification. Women also felt that the hijab allowed for more intimacy in their relationships because not wearing the hijab around someone signifies their closeness to that person (Droogsma, 2007). These reasons were key to them.

Religious signifiers such as the hijab help women to be more in touch with their religious beliefs, especially in western countries where they might feel a disconnect from it (Piela, 2016). Hermansen and Khan (2009) emphasize the importance of this form of self-expression for American Muslim College students as they try to find a balance between their American, religious, and ethnic identities (Hermansen & Khan, 2009; Williams & Vashi, 2007). They might turn to the hijab to resist traditions expected of them by their families or American culture. Piela (2016) points out that some women start wearing the hijab even though it was not traditionally worn within their culture. “For oppressed, marginalized, or subordinated groups, dress takes on important meanings for individual and collective identities” (Huisman & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2005, p. 4). Huisman and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2005) highlight the importance of wearing cultural

and religious signifiers by marginalized communities in the diaspora. They suggest that they hold important meanings for the people not just individually but as a marginalized group. Sartorial symbols like the hijab unite people, help them find their community, and help them come together as a group (Williams & Vashi, 2007).

Williams and Vashi (2007) notice that in addition to reasons of modesty, many Muslim women wore the hijab to gain "insulation from restriction." The outward display of modesty prevented constant supervision from their parents and allowed them to move around freely. The study found that many Muslim women used the hijab as resistance to cultural assimilation. This was especially important for the women who thought their parents had assimilated to American culture and given up their religious beliefs. The hijab helped these women gain autonomy and create an identity that was distinct from that of their parents.

Piela (2016) discusses the traditional aspects of wearing the hijab and points out that it may simply be the norm in particular settings. This includes examples such as present-day Iran or Saudi Arabia where wearing a head covering is a social necessity. Moors (2007) and Sweeney (2011) point out that within these societies, the type of veil may differentiate the wearer from members of other social groups or classes. It declares the social status of the wearer and is used as a social compass.

Tarlo (2007) conducted an in-depth study of dress practices of three prominent Muslim women. These women were part of different social circles in London and each of them wore the hijab at some point in their public lives for a specific reason. For example, a Muslim stand-up comedian wore the hijab as a way of penetrating spaces where it may not be common at all, such as bars and nightclubs. Tarlo talks about another woman who wears it to adjust her values to the

Muslim community that she was surrounded by. One of the participants chose to continue wearing it in the face of hostility at her workplace. However, one of these three participants decided to stop wearing it because of the high expectations placed on her due to the associations of the hijab. Increased expectations from peers towards hijabi women are supported by the study conducted by Williams and Vashi (2007). However, Tarlo and Moors (2013) establish that numerous other factors guide the decision to stop wearing the hijab. The women do not think that being visibly Muslim equals religious virtue. Many of the women want to blend in (Moors, 2007). They believe that the purpose of Islamic clothing is to deflect attention and the best way to do that in non-Muslim countries is through not covering themselves the way they did in their home country. Other scholars state that some Muslim women may stop covering themselves as they feel unsafe or misunderstood because of personal experiences with Islamophobia (Atasoy, 2006; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003).

Muslim Women and Fashion

Niessen (2020) notes that the existence of fashion is reliant on its opposite; non-fashion. Because of its Eurocentric origins, fashion is equated with Western standards of clothing. Tarlo and Moors (2013) hypothesize that because of this Muslim fashion remains understudied. Fashion is Western and Muslims are not part of the West. Lewis (2015) summarized Muslim fashion as something that is "underrepresented in the style media [and] overrepresented in the news media" (p. 2). She notes that information related to Muslim women's clothing is a recurring topic for the news media. However, media reports rarely discuss how Muslim women express their modesty through the medium of fashion.

Lewis (2013) brings up the modest subculture at large, inclusive of all religious backgrounds. She notes that even though modest fashion is practiced predominantly by young people, it is not recognized as a cultural form of expression of the young, which is often regarded as rebellious and experimental. Niessen (2020) argues that neocolonial discourse plays an important role in the erasure of cultures. She explains that the term "world fashion" includes only dress items worn in the West, which contributes to the erasure of the styles of Non-Western cultures. Lewis (2015) concurs and notes that wearing "traditional" or "ethnic" clothing implies a spatial boundary. Traditional or ethnic sartorial items are to be worn only in specific places or under particular circumstances. They are the opposite of "world fashion" or Western fashion; a fashion that is acceptable throughout the globe and does not have spatial limitations. Muslim women contest such a narrow definition of fashion by displaying fashionable Muslim dress in the public sphere.

Yaqin (2007) provides a discussion on how the ideas of appropriate wear for the private and the public spheres are different within the Muslim community by discussing Razanne, a Muslim Barbie look-alike. Razanne was created as a response to Barbie. She was meant to redefine beauty for Muslim girls and resist Western beauty ideals. Razanne comes with two sets of clothing, an outdoor outfit that includes a hijab and *jilbab*, and an indoor Western style dress. Yaqin (2007) argues that even though the purpose was to reimagine beauty, Razanne relies on the dominant American culture to create a fashionable self. Razanne reinforces the stereotype of what Muslim women look like and thus contributes to the homogenization of Muslim womanhood.

Moors (2013) calls attention to a phenomenon called Islamic anti-fashion among Muslim women. The women that wear anti-fashion reject Islamic fashion by layering Western garments

to be fashionable or donning embellished *abayas*. Islamic anti-fashion critiques fashion for being unsustainable, superficial, undermining the ideals of modesty, and belittling women (Moors, 2013; Tarlo & Moors, 2013). Moors (2013) argues that there is great complexity within that position as well. She cites examples of women that wear the *abaya* or *khimar*. These items may be considered non-fashionable but are worn while keeping the quality of the fabric, cut, and overall aesthetic in mind; they are not completely anti-fashion rather a different version of fashion.

Muslim Women and Body Image

Beckmann (2014) points out that one of the goals of Western feminists was to dismantle patriarchal control. However, their fight became commodified and an image of what a feminist woman should look like was marketed back to them. This image, however, was built on unfair and extreme standards for what an empowered woman and her body should look like. This led to studies that wanted to see whether women that wore clothing that covered their bodies, such as Muslim women, were impacted by capitalist standards of beauty (Dunkel, Davidson & Qurashi, 2010; Mussap 2009; Tolaymat and Moradi, 2011).

Dunkel, Davidson, and Qurashi (2010) conducted research in the U.S. on older and younger Muslim and Non-Muslim women to compare how ideals of body image were reflected in each of these categories and cohorts. Their study found that the younger generation of Muslim women that wore non-Western clothing and a head covering did not strive for achieving Western beauty ideals compared to Muslim women that wore Western clothing. Older Western clothing-wearing women were found to have a lower level of body satisfaction than older Muslim women

that wore Islamic clothing, although they demonstrated limited desire to conform to Western standards.

Mussap (2009) conducted a quantitative study on Muslim and non-Muslim Australian women to investigate how Islamic clothing affected body image, specifically as it related to self-objectification and eating disorders. The study found that Muslim and non-Muslim women did not have a significant difference in this regard. However, Mussap (2009) detected some positive influence on body image as a result of strong religious beliefs.

Tolaymat and Moradi (2011) talk about Muslim women in the U.S. and how the hijab affects their body image and their relationship with eating disorders. Through quantitative analysis, the authors have concluded that cultural standards of beauty get internalized in Muslim women and could play a major role in self-objectification. However, it is notable that the hijab results in lower levels of reported sexual objectification from others.

Muslim Women and Retail

Hwang and Kim (2010) studied women's needs in activewear through a quantitative analysis of several factors. They found that the strongest decisive factor for Muslim women in athletic clothing is perceived aesthetics. This means that even when they are veiled, they want something aesthetically pleasing. They found that perceived compatibility was another important factor in Muslim women's intention to buy modest activewear. Their interpretation of this was that they want something compatible with other modest clothing items that they may wear or have in their wardrobes. The next factor that Muslim women considered in their purchases was the cost of the item. However, surprisingly, price did not significantly affect women's purchase decisions. Hwang and Kim (2010) suggest that this may be due to the scarcity of available

modest activewear on the market, so Muslim women buy whatever exists. Additionally, the authors highlighted the importance of women's subjective norms and desire to publicly acknowledge their religious identity and be recognizable to other Muslims through their dress.

Methodology

This study utilized qualitative research design to explore the perspectives of Muslim women living in the U.S. that wear modest Muslim fashions. A qualitative approach in research helps describe, understand, and explain the experiences of individuals by focusing on their personal feelings and perceptions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Such an approach is especially important to study the narratives of marginalized communities and when our goal is to make sense of their experiences. It is a recommended approach when our purpose is to make their voices heard (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Individuals within the same community may have similar experiences. However, the way they make sense of these experiences can differ significantly as individuals construct realities in multiple ways (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). For this reason, a narrative analysis helps examine how each participant "make[s] meaning out of their experiences, how they interpret them and how they share their experiences with others" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 29). During the interview process, I aimed to make sense of the narratives of my participants without homogenizing them. Homogenizing and lumping Muslims, regardless of gender, class, ethnicity, etc. together based on a single common denominator---- their faith---- has been one of the most problematic issues that Muslims continue to face globally and, in the U.S., specifically where I have conducted my study (Nadal et al., 2012).

I have conducted my research through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are generally conducted by preparing pre-determined questions targeting various aspects of the topic investigated, which are followed up with additional probing

questions during the interview process (Berg, 2017; Roulston, 2010). The interviews started by collecting background information about the participants. The participants were asked questions regarding their age, ethnicity, immigration status, and their educational and professional backgrounds. This was done in order to understand the role these factors may play in affecting their views on Muslim clothing and sartorial self-expression and to examine the relationship of these vis-a-vis their religious beliefs and identity formation. The questionnaire used in the study consisted of mostly open-ended questions in addition to some close-ended ones. In addition to this, visual prompts were used. These prompts included images from H&M's Spring 2018 LTD Collection. The LTD collection was their modest line, available only online in the U.S. (Driver, 2018; Murray, 2018; Torgerson, 2018). Additionally, a few recent garments available in 2022 on H&M's digital platform were included as visual prompts. The particular images selected for the study tended to have a resemblance to cultural clothing items prevalent in Muslim countries. The purpose of using visual prompts was to gain perspective on what is currently being produced and to collect information on how consumers view and evaluate the existing styles. The visual prompts helped me identify and assess the participants' thoughts on pre-existing modest clothing lines and garments. They helped me determine whether my participants would purchase such items as well as the reason behind their decisions. If the interviewee did not provide adequate information to any of the questions, additional probing questions were asked to elicit more information and get clarifications. Through the implementation of this approach, I believe I collected rich data and detailed information from my interviewees. Even though the interviews began with the same set of questions, I used probing questions throughout the interview process to remain flexible and able to modify the original interview questions as themes unfolded in order to get a fuller picture of the nuances of the issues at stake (Berg, 2017; Roulston, 2010).

Data Collection

Participant Criteria and Recruitment

To qualify for this study, the participants had to meet the following criteria. 1) They had to be female, Muslim, and reside in the U.S.; 2) They had to fall within the age cohort of 18-30; 3) Their religious beliefs and faith had to play a significant role in determining or influencing their clothing choices; 4) Lastly, to qualify, they had to have shopped for modest Muslim dress items within the U.S.

Initially, the participants were recruited from my social circle. After that, participants reached out to their friends and family members that qualified for the study and invited them to participate as well. This was done until a total of eight participants have been recruited for the study. Network sampling was the primary method to recruit participants. This kind of sampling is most widely used when participants belong to a smaller population (Lavrakas, 2008) and was selected so that participants could reach out to people within their network. This way they were able to determine beforehand whether individuals within their social network indeed qualified as habitual wearers and/or consumers of modest Muslim fashion. They were able to identify whether potential participants were wearing modest clothing for spiritual reasons, not affiliated with Islam or for another reason. For this reason, network sampling allowed better access to my participants that would not have been otherwise visible.

The Interview Process

The interviews were conducted both face-to-face and over Zoom depending on the participant's preference. The participants were able to set the location, date, and time of the interview based on their availability and liking. An informed consent form was provided to all

the participants a few days prior to the interview so that they had ample time to go through it in detail and ask any questions if needed before the actual interview took place. The consent form described the purpose of the study and ensured the participants that their participation was voluntary. It specified that they could stop their participation in the interview process at any time they wished. In addition, it stated that they did not have to answer any questions if they made them uncomfortable. Once all questions about the process had been answered the participants were asked to sign the consent agreement. The form also listed the contact information of the researcher, the PI, and the Office of the IRB at UGA in case they needed further clarifications or wanted to launch a complaint about any aspects of the research. After the consent form had been signed the researcher asked the participant to choose a pseudonym to ensure anonymity in the study. The contents of the consent form were briefly reiterated at the beginning of each interview to gain verbal confirmation and understanding. The length of each interview was approximately two hours. The interviews were recorded by a smartphone. A digital recorder was used as a backup recording device. In case of an online session, the interview was recorded on Zoom as well as on a smartphone. Additional notes were taken throughout the interview and served as a secondary data source. These noted changes in the interviewees' voice, emotional expression, body language, and other pertinent observations. Once the interviews had been completed, they were transcribed and analyzed for themes.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using the grounded theory model. This meant that codes, concepts, and themes were established by “working ‘up’ from the data” (Bhattacharya, 2017). This was executed this way so that categories could emerge from the data itself instead of from preconceived notions that the researcher may hold (Emerson, 2011). The research did not focus

solely on inductive or deductive methods of analysis but used a combination of the two, i.e., a retroductive analysis (Bulmer, 1979). Inductive analysis approaches the data as a discovery. However, it is important to recognize that the researcher is the one doing the coding, analyzing, interpreting, and making propositions as well (Emerson, 2011). Concepts were not solely developed from observation, but theories, which guided the study to make sense of the data (Bulmer, 1979). In sum, a simultaneous back and forth of inductive and deductive analysis was utilized for this study.

The raw data, which included the transcripts and the notes collected during the interviews, were thoroughly reviewed multiple times. Next, these were analyzed through a process of open coding and axial coding to form categories and themes. The next step was the interpretation of identified themes. Open coding took place by going over the data in detail and writing down keywords or phrases to identify emerging themes and categories. Next, the codes showing similarities were clustered together. This process is referred to as axial coding (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The theoretical properties of the codes were defined to successfully group the open codes together and keep track of what each code represented (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). After axial coding and defining the codes, themes were developed and studied through extensive engagement with the data. The categories were described by highlighting patterns and establishing connections with one another in the findings section. Emerging themes were analyzed, interpreted, and connected to previous literature in the results and discussion sections. These themes were supported by the excerpts or short quotes from the interviews in the findings. Recommendations were provided to the retailers based on the data. Finally, connections between themes and the findings were summarized.

Ethics and Data Protection

As information regarding religious affiliations and beliefs may be sensitive for some people, especially for Muslim individuals, special care was taken to ensure that the identities of the participants and the information provided by them remained protected through the data collection process. This was ensured by asking the participants at the beginning of the study to choose pseudonyms for themselves, which were used for all data reported throughout the thesis. Per the requirements of the IRB, the participants were provided with consent forms before their interview so that they were properly informed of their rights, the purpose, and the benefits of their participation in this study. The recording and transcripts of the interviews were kept on a password-protected computer at all times. All identifiable information was removed and was not accessible to anyone other than members of the research team without the participant's written consent.

Positionality and Reflexivity

I acknowledge that, as a Muslim woman, my religious and gender identity gives me easy access to a group of individuals that likely would not be as comfortable with someone from a different gender or faith background. Additionally, I am aware that my positionality has shaped my personal opinion on the subject matter. However, as a feminist investigator, my primary goal was to make the voices of my participants heard. Therefore, I have made a conscious effort not to disclose my opinions or bring up my personal experiences during the interviews. I recognize that my insider status did not give me complete access to my participants' worlds and emotions. Therefore, throughout the research process I was mindful that other demographic factors such as racial/ethnic background, class, and ethnicity likely had an impact on or influenced our

interactions (McCorkel & Myers, 2003). I tried to be cognizant of such differences to the best of my abilities and be continuously aware and reflective of the impact of my positionality in the project (Linabary & Hamel, 2017).

Participants

All participants in this study were female, between the ages of 18-30, and self-identified as Muslims. All of them were born into a Muslim family and had some background in a Muslim country. Four of them were born in the U.S. while the remaining participants moved here from their home country. Through the vignettes, I hoped to give a brief introduction to the participants' backgrounds and their understanding of the fashion world. By doing so, I hoped to uncover the similarities and differences between their backgrounds and interpretations before diving into the findings of the study.

Hadiqa

Hadiqa is a 25-year-old Pakistani-American woman. She was born in the U.S., grew up in Pakistan and moved back to the U.S. for her bachelor's degree. She is currently pursuing her JD. She sees fashion as an art form. She expressed this by stating: "you use fashion as an art form in the way that art is used to express oneself, one's feelings, one's thoughts, and one's personality." She finds fashion to be important because it expresses the way she perceives herself and because fashion provides a way for others to perceive her. She also noted that taking social class into account when talking about fashion is necessary. She highlighted that not everyone is able to afford what they find appealing or wear it in the spaces that are available to them. She added that sometimes fashion can look like an appreciation of another person's aesthetic or personal expression.

Adeela

Adeela is a 29-year-old Pakistani woman who moved to the U.S. several years ago to start her undergraduate degree. She had completed her Ph.D. and was working as an assistant professor at the time the interview was conducted with her. She described fashion as something that is aesthetically pleasing. It is something that she uses to express herself while looking presentable to others and for the social context she finds herself in. This meant for her being chic yet professional at the workplace, but fun and daring when going out with friends. In both cases, however, she chooses to opt for color. Colors are important for her because she sees them as a way to move past stereotypes about Muslim women wearing drab clothing.

Hunter

Hunter described herself as a 22-year-old Pakistani-American. She explained, “I was born [in the U.S.]. I actually grew up in Canada, [then] moved back here. But I just think that I'm decently fueled in my Pakistani culture. So, I consider my Pakistani [side].” She currently works as a freelancer after graduating with a bachelor’s degree in interdisciplinary art and design. She thinks of fashion as a way to “showcase yourself through any means.” She stated that even though she did not consider herself “the most fashion-forward person,” fashion brought her joy. The joy she experienced came from refusing to put herself in a box and experimenting with various aesthetics.

Leya

Leya is a 21-year-old Muslim woman who moved to the U.S. from Syria at the age of 14. She recently graduated as a computer science major and plans to pursue a Master’s degree in the same subject. She describes fashion as the way people dress that represents them or represents

what other people perceive of them. She finds fashion to be an important element in her life because it is one of the first impressions someone has about her and it may influence the way they interact with her. She acknowledged that this might not be the only factor but still considers it an important one. Another major reason that she finds fashion important is because of the culture she grew up in. She elaborated on the fact that, generally, Syrian women are highly invested in taking care of themselves and their physical appearance. This is especially true for her mother who has been a fashion advisor to her from a very young age.

Layla

Layla is 26 years old. She was born and raised in America. She self-identifies as Palestinian-American. Every few years she goes to Palestine with her family. Her last visit was almost five years ago. She completed her Master's degree in health administration a few years ago and is currently working as a consultant for a biotech company. For Layla, fashion was something she enjoyed partaking in but did not take up too much of her life. So, she defined fashion as something that you were comfortable putting on your body. For some people, this might involve putting on a statement piece, while for others, it might be something simple. For her, comfort came through modesty in her dress practices even though she did not wear the hijab. She added that fashion becomes the way strangers perceive or think of you.

Hira

Hira is a 25-year-old Pakistani-American who was born in Pakistan but moved to the U.S. when she was only a year old. Currently, she is married and works as a software engineer for a tech consulting company after completing her Master's degree in Computer Science. Fashion for her, is the way someone dresses when presenting themselves to world. This means

that what you wear in the comfort of your home does not qualify as fashion. One's sartorial practice and expression in the public sphere is what makes up fashion.

Dee

Dee was 23 at the time of the interview, turning 24 in a few months. She was born and raised in America, but both of her parents were from Palestine. Despite this, she had never set foot in Palestine. She mentioned that as a child, she used to go to Jordan every summer with her family to visit her displaced relatives. She is currently taking a year off after spending two years working towards an associate degree in medical sonography and realizing that she did not want to continue with it. During her gap year, she is doing different things. She worked in retail and most recently, at a diagnostic lab. She thinks of fashion as an expression of oneself and one's individuality. Because of this, she considers fashion to be a "subjective art form." She stated that fashion is dependent on personal aesthetic and interpretation while it is simultaneously influenced by the society at large. Similar to Layla, she considers herself quite involved in fashion, but not to the point where it takes up a lot of her time.

Kaira

Kaira is 22 years old and identifies as black and Syrian. She was born and raised in Syria and moved to the U.S. when she was 11 years old. Currently, she is a biology major. She thought of fashion as "freedom of expression." She elaborated further on this by saying that fashion is a platform that allows you to non-verbally present your point of view to the public. She did not like it though that fashion is a way for society to put labels on people. In addition, she pointed out that not everyone may have the means to express themselves the way they want to. So, in that sense, she argued, fashion is a luxury.

Findings

Interpretations of Muslim Fashion

Within the community of Muslim women that practice modest Muslim fashion, there is a lot of difference in what they find appropriate for themselves. The definition and expression of modesty varies from person to person. For example, the hijab is not practiced by all the women. It is a core element of religious modesty for some, whereas others practice modesty without it. It is important to study these differences because many times, Muslim fashion is seen as a limited form of dress. Hadiqa brought this point up during her interview:

> When we think of Muslim fashion, I think we go to one extreme where it's like a full-length dress that's just very abaya-like and a hijab and stuff. But of course, the way people, even non-hijabis dress, it's not always in a very revealing fashion. A lot of times, they dress modestly and with certain limitations on themselves.

This section explores what makes up Muslim fashion for each research participant. It also describes the boundaries they had set for themselves, the similarities to one another, and the context in which they choose to wear Muslim fashion.

Hijab

From the eight participants that were interviewed, Hadiqa, Layla, and Kaira did not practice the hijab. However, Hadiqa and Kaira had been hijabis in the past. Both of them talked about the Islamophobic experiences they had faced which played a part in their decision to eventually stop wearing the hijab. Kaira clearly stated this:

> If I wasn't in a non-Muslim country, I would be a hijabi. […] The only problem with the hijab here and now is the fact that I don't feel safe or comfortable wearing it. But had I been back home, or had I been in a Muslim country, then then this would have never been an issue for me at all.

Kaira felt deep appreciation for the hijab and wanted to start wearing it at some point in her life. She is preparing herself for that day by getting comfortable with dressing more modestly than before. Layla stated that she knew she would eventually wear the hijab, but the time had not come for her yet. Ultimately, each of the participants were on a different journey within their religion.

Amongst the hijabi participants, Leya, Dee, and Hira opted for a traditional full-coverage hijab that covered everything including their hair, neck, and ears. Hunter, on the other hand, felt that she was "quite open" about her hijab. This meant that she often changed up the way that she styled it and was comfortable showing her neck and the front part of her hair. Adeela's hijab was somewhere in the middle. She wore it in a turban style that covered all of her hair but occasionally revealed part of her neck. She mentioned that she liked to pair her turban with a high-neck top for maximum coverage. The remaining participants that felt comfortable revealing their neck agreed that they did not like to show more skin than one to two inches below their collarbone.

Sleeves

All the participants stayed away from clothing that revealed their entire arm. However, the exact amount that they were comfortable showing can be divided into three levels. The non-hijabi participants said that shortest sleeve they would wear, should still go a few inches below

their shoulder or the mid-bicep. So, around one-half to one-third of their upper arm would be covered. The participants that practiced a more traditional hijab preferred full-length sleeves that extended to their wrist. Hira specified that it could be a hand-length's distance away from her wrist at the farthest. Dee mentioned that she liked wearing band-tees that usually came with a short sleeve. So, she would achieve a full-length sleeve by wearing faux sleeves underneath. The third level was in the middle of the other two. Hunter and Adeela agreed that they were comfortable with a three-quarter sleeve length. This meant that the sleeve would cut below the elbow at its highest.

Pants and Skirts

Regarding pants, almost all the participants said that they preferred something that was full-length. There were slight differences in what this meant for each individual. For example, while most participants agreed that they wanted something that extended to their ankles, Dee mentioned that she liked her pants to "pretty much drag on the floor." On the other hand, Hadiqa stated that she often cuffed her pants, which meant that at least a third of her lower leg would be visible. While Leya preferred full-length pants, she was also comfortable showing one third of her lower leg while wearing skirts. Hunter thought the same way but added that she would pair a skirt with leggings for additional coverage. Kaira and Adeela were comfortable wearing something that was right below their knees. For Adeela, this would be paired with opaque black leggings. She explained that she thought that thighs were "beautiful" and "a sensual part of the body," which is why she did not want to highlight or reveal them.

Fit of Garment

Most of the participants preferred a looser silhouette but this was not always due to reasons of modesty. For example, Dee and Hadiqa found that their personal aesthetic aligned better with baggier clothing. Dee, Layla, and Leya mentioned that they found looser pants more flattering on their bodies than skinny ones and therefore they would often opt for straight or wide-leg pants. Hadiqa, Hunter, Adeela, Kaira, and Layla wore tighter pieces but would balance it out by pairing it with a baggy piece. For example, Layla, Kaira, and Hunter would wear shirts that covered their hips if they thought their pants were too tight. Layla mentioned that she preferred her garments to be tight but not "too tight." She explained:

> It's gotta be within the right range. If it's too tight, I like, will not wear it. […] There's no way. Yeah, if it's too tight around, specifically my chest, if it's too tight around my chest, I don't tend to gravitate toward it. If it's looser around my chest, and it's tight other places, fine.

So, even though most of them preferred baggier clothing, the clothing needed to have some shape to it to accentuate the overall look of the garment and to look right on their bodies.

Sheerness

All of the participants expressed some level of discomfort with sheer fabrics. Many of the participants layered underneath clothing that was sheer. This applied to tops that were slightly sheer and needed a nude tank top or undergarments as Layla and Dee stated. Extremely sheer fabrics like chiffons required a t-shirt underneath to be modest enough, as Hunter and Adeela claimed. Both agreed that in particular cases, sheer fabrics might be acceptable. This was only

applicable to the arms such as when the shape or color of them is not clearly visible. Adeela gave an example for this:

> I'm a little flexible on sheerness, only when it comes to the arms though. So, sometimes you can get away with it being a little sheer. But if you can really see the color of your skin, then to me, that's uncomfortable because I don't want to necessarily show the color of my skin or my arms per se.

Leggings

There were many different perspectives among the participants on how appropriate leggings were depending on color, level of sheerness, and fit. For example, Hira mentioned that she only wears leggings as a layering piece. Because of this, she never wore leggings in the summer because covering it up with a skirt made it extremely hot. Layla stated that she did not like to wear leggings in place of pants. She elaborated the reason behind this by saying:

> [Leggings are] too form fitting for me. I feel like jeans or like joggers for example, provide some kind of looseness or a sense of mystery as to what my body looks like. I don't like for people to know exactly what my body looks like. Anything that's too form fitting, I'm like, "No."

Hadiqa was comfortable wearing leggings but stated that they should not be "too sheer." She clarified that this meant that they should be 100 denier or up. But if she was layering under dresses or a skirt, she would be comfortable wearing a skin-colored pantyhose. Adeela, however, specified that she only wore opaque black leggings. She explained that this was because it might be misjudged by people as skin, and she does not want to take that risk. She elaborated:

> The one thing I will say is, I never ever wear nude tights, mainly because… I have an inherent expectation of the Muslim community to see me in nude tights and think that I am not wearing anything underneath. So, I am not open to opening myself up to that kind of criticism. So [my mantra] with Muslim fashion is that I don't wear anything that looks like skin.

Hunter, however, wore both colors paired with a midi-skirt but specified that it depended not only on the color but how much of the skin was exposed. She provided an example of one of the pieces that she owned:

> I have this dress that has a slit in the middle of it. And with the length, if it didn't have that slit, I would wear the nude tights. [But] because there's that slit, I was like, [people] would be able to see. So, then I'll wear black [leggings] instead, even though the color tone would suit the sheer-nude [leggings] better.

The only other instances where some of the participants mentioned that they would wear leggings was at the gym. But even then, a few of them specified that they would pair a long or oversized shirt with it so that they would get more coverage.

Layering

Layering for modesty was a common practice mentioned by the participants, especially by those that practiced the hijab. For example, as mentioned earlier, Dee wore faux sleeves under her half-sleeve t-shirts, most of the participants wore a tank top or t-shirt underneath sheer tops and a few of them also wore leggings under dresses or skirts that revealed their legs. Additionally, a couple of the participants had very specific requirements around layering. For example, Leya preferred to layer on top of a garment with a jacket or cardigan instead of

underneath it. She felt it was more appropriate to do so especially with certain styles that are not considered modest. She gave an example:

> If [the garment has] straps, then I feel like I wouldn't want to wear something under because I don't think it's modest. It's still kind of showing that you're planning on wearing straps. Or for example, if a dress [is backless], I still wouldn't want to wear something under it. Because it just looks weird that I'm wearing a backless dress. I feel like it's not modest, in my opinion.

For her, it is not only important that the garments are fully covered but that they do not give the impression of clothing that would otherwise be considered “immodest.”

Hira mentioned that some Islamic scholars believed that having a second layer on top of your garment was one of the core elements of modesty. So, she practiced this in her dress and provided examples of what that looked like:

> Some days I'll wear palazzo pants and a shirt with a coat on top that’s almost abaya-type, but it's not closed. So that's one thing that I might do. Or wear a matching set underneath and a coat on top.

She gave examples of office-wear where she layers an abaya or long dress with a blazer to make it work-appropriate. She mentioned that she might reduce layering if she is going to an airport because that usually gets tagged in the machines and results in an additional security check. So, she might wear a tunic with loose pants and add a vest if the tunic is fitted around the waist.

Context

Almost all the participants agreed that they might dress more or less modestly in certain contexts or in particular situations. These contexts were different for each individual. The common spaces mentioned were the mosque, Muslim-populated spaces, gendered spaces, and in between their home country and the American context. The reason behind a changing level of modesty varied from what was deemed appropriate in those circumstances to expectations of the community

Mosque. One of the most common places that the participants dressed up more modestly was the mosque. Many of them, wore an abaya paired with a hijab when going to the mosque. This was the case for Kaira and Layla, who did not wear a hijab outside of that. A few of the participants mentioned that this was because there was an expectation in the mosque that people would not wear clothes that might be deemed "immodest." For example, Kaira stated, "I try to stay away from tight jeans. If I'm going to wear jeans, they're going to be loose-fitting jeans. And if I'm going to wear a t-shirt, it's gonna be a loose-fitting t-shirt."

For some of the participants, the reason behind wearing more modest clothing was the result of respect for the elders within the mosque community. Dee declared it the appropriate attire for the situation. She said, "Just like if you're going to a fancy dinner or a sporting event, there's appropriate attire to wear or to not wear. And nobody seems to have a problem with that." She followed this by stating that contextual dressing is a common practice amongst non-Muslims as well. However, when Muslim women practice it, she feels that it often gets labelled as "oppressive."

A few of the other participants mentioned that they might feel obligated to dress more modestly to prevent themselves from criticism. Hadiqa gave an example of a situation where she had to face such criticisms. She went with her friend to the mosque and neither of them were wearing the hijab because they did not practice it in their day-to-day. She recalled a woman practically yelling at them for not wearing it. To avoid similar experiences, Adeela stated that she is quite conscious of her dress when going to the mosque. She explained:

> When I go to the mosque, I'm aware that the women in the community are going to criticize me if, for example, I'm wearing a blouse or pants. They don't really see that as an appropriate outfit at the mosque. And when I'm praying and bending down, [it might reveal the skin] or whatever. If my arms are showing or if my ankles are showing, I know that they're judging me. And they're gonna look at me, and maybe even gossip about me. In terms of whether or not I'm modest. And so, I take special care when I go to the mosque and make sure that I'm wearing a full-on abaya so that I am not criticized by my people.

Muslim Spaces. The participants reported an increased expectation to dress modestly when they are surrounded by Muslim peers. Hunter recalled that in her middle and high school, Muslim girls would be scrutinized and judged by their peers if they were found wearing anything that was not considered "modest" such as a tank top. The participants were quite aware of these criticisms by the Muslim community and because of this, chose to be more careful within those contexts. A few of the participants bring up the way such rumors would circulate in other organizations such as the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at their colleges. Hira elaborated:

> So, like in MSA, I might choose to dress even more conservatively than I would when I was out in the modest or in the professional area. […] Just because oftentimes some people are more judgmental. Like they are like, "Oh, you're not wearing you know, the double abaya or you're wearing like, extra eyeliner. Like why are you wearing your eyeliner when you're in like a mixed [gendered] environment?" Things like that. I personally have not experienced it a ton. But, I definitely feel like that's more prevailing in some of the Muslim [organizations] like MSA. I wouldn't say in the Muslim organizations, but it's specifically in the MSA communities. I've seen that happen. People are more judgmental.

Adeela shared this view and has been weary of the consequences because "it tarnishes your reputation within the community" if you are not dressed appropriately according to her. This fear causes them to be extra careful with their personal expression of modesty. Other places where they tend to be more careful with their attire include middle eastern supermarkets within the US, according to Dee. It is because such stores are often populated with "elder men from the culture" who constantly stare or judge you if you are not dressed modestly. She explained:

> I just kind of like to just cover up a little bit more just for the sake of my sanity. […] And, also, because everybody knows everybody. And you don't know if they're gonna judge you for what you're wearing, and then go talk about you to their wives. I don't even know what goes on in their heads. But I know it's not good.

Whereas some participants may dress more modestly out of fear of judgement, that is not always the case. Dee and Hadiqa brought up the importance of respecting the presence of others, especially the elders of the community. So, in that case, they might dress more modestly "less

out of fear of judgment but more just out of respect," according to Hadiqa. For example, when she is going to her friend's parents' house.

For other participants, such as Kaira and Hira, it was important to be recognized as Muslim by their Muslim peers. This was because they felt more comfortable in a space where they were around their community members. Kaira expressed this by saying:

> When I'm around other Muslim women [in a modest dress], I'm thriving. Like, I love it. […]. But if I'm around non-Muslims, or if I'm going to be alone, then it's more uncomfortable for me than it is when I'm with a group of people who are also just like me.

Whereas Hira was visibly recognized as Muslim because of her hijab, Kaira felt that she often missed out on that opportunity. She gave an example of this by stating that on multiple occasions she would not receive a response from her Muslim counterparts when she said *Assalam-o-alaikum*, which is a common way that Muslims greet one another. It directly translates to "May peace be upon you." She compared this experience to when she was a hijabi and would typically receive a response. However, she declared that now it only elicits a confused look from them.

Gendered Spaces. It was common for the participants to be lax with their clothing when they were in all-female spaces. For example, Hira mentioned that if she was going to be at a wedding which has separate sections for men and women, which is common in Pakistani culture, she did not wear her hijab. Hunter mentioned that she might not wear her hijab if she was going to be in a private space with her female friends. Hunter, Kaira, and Dee added that they might even choose to wear something "immodest" if they were going to an all-girls party. For example,

Dee might wear a mini bodycon dress with extremely chunky heels, Kaira might also opt for a mini dress, and Hunter might wear a short skirt paired with leggings.

Outside of the private spaces, Hunter added that there are certain outfits, for example modest garments that are a little fitted, which she would only wear around her female friends when in public. She explained:

> There are things that I will buy that I'm like, I would rather wear this when I know I'm only going out with my girlfriends. Not even if it's a girl-only gathering but even if I'm going out [in public] with my girlfriends. Because if any of my guy friends are there, that's just uncomfortable. But at the same time, I'm fine wearing it in public.

She was not entirely sure about the reason behind this but explained:

> Basically, I think it's because when you're with your people, you're more hyper fixated on the people in front of you. Again, I'm not wearing anything that I wouldn't be fine wearing in public or even like, posting on Instagram or whatever. I would still be fine with it. It's more that if I know that that person is in front of me, especially if it's a guy, I just feel like because of my relationship with them, I just don't want that to be a hyper-fixated thing.

So, with garments that she still considered appropriate, she might choose not to wear them in the presence of her male friends. This did not come out of a place of fear of judgement but only to avoid any unnecessary attention. This helps us visualize the nuance that goes into the decision-making of wearing Muslim fashion.

In Between Countries. Hadiqa and Hunter stated that modesty back in their home country looked different than modesty in America. Adeela noted this difference as well and provided an example of the way this shows up in her sartorial practice. She mentioned that whereas she would be comfortable wearing something slightly below the knee in the US, that would not be the case in her home country. She attributes this to the societal and familial expectations back home and says that if she were to ever wear that around her aunts, they would not be complimentary about her choices.

> So, in front of [my mom and aunts], I would definitely dress a little bit more conservatively. But like, it's not […] mainly because I'm around them. I'm in the context of Pakistan so, my dressing is already modest. But I know that if they saw me the way I dress here, they will definitely be like, "oh, what is she wearing? Like, what is she doing? She's wearing too tight clothes… showing skin."

She stated that she would not wear what she wears in the U.S. in Pakistan because of the expectations of what the proper attire there is. For Leya, this looked quite different. She found herself dressing more conservatively compared to other Syrian women. Because of this, she noticed that she often got comments that questioned her sartorial choices. She elaborated that "the expectation is when you get married, you're more modest [because] you already have your husband secured." So, people often made comments about how she should practice less modesty because she is still young.

Based on the interviews conducted with participants for this project, there appear to be many similarities and differences amongst Muslim women's sartorial practices. Within those practices, there are numerous things that can affect their levels of modesty and the way that they

present themselves. This reveals the intricacies of how Muslim women navigate living in the U.S. while maintaining their religious identity. They have to negotiate their Muslim and American identities to find a path of modesty that works for them and fits within their religious boundaries but is appropriate for the American context. This path looked unique for each of the participants even though there were many overlaps between them. Even with participants that choose to dress less modestly than others, the desire to keep their religious identity intact appeared to be strong.

Disconnect Between Aesthetics and Curation

The participants agreed that they did not have difficulty finding Muslim fashion in the United States. Accessibility was not a problem. Because of the large number of options available to them via the internet, they were able to acquire pieces that would fit their modesty requirements. They noticed that because of current trends and microtrends, they were usually able to find fashionable, yet modest items. However, almost all of them shopped from brands or fashion lines that were not primarily catering to Muslims. To determine their view on collections and garments that target modesty, the participants were shown Figures 1-13 (located at the end of the chapter). Figures 1, and 5-13 came out as part of a modest fashion line by H&M and Figures 2, 3, and 4 were H&M pieces that were added because of their resemblance to culturally-specific clothing items. This section discusses the issues that were relevant to the participants.

Cultural clothing

There were several images amongst the ones shown to the participants that reminded them of another culture's clothing. For example, Layla and Leya referred to the clothing in

Figure 1 as a kimono. Those in Figures 2, 3, 4, and 7 were referred to as Pakistani clothing items. Figure 6 was called a “kaftan” by a few participants and Figure 9 as an abaya.

Many of the items that appeared to belong to a particular cultural group, were not wanted by the Muslim women from within or outside of those groups. For example, when looking at Figure 6, Adeela pointed out that she personally would not wear something like that because it was not her style but assumed that an Arab person might. However, when interviewing Arab participants, most of them stated that they would not buy it. A few even said that it would be more fitting as a nightgown or something that their grandmother would wear. Similarly, Leya said this about Figure 7:

> I think this is more Indian-Pakistani. No one wears that in my country or in the U.S. So, I wouldn't wear it or buy it. Unless I'm going to like Pakistani events. And even in that case, I'll probably borrow something from my friend instead.

However, when Hira, a Pakistani participant saw that dress, she stated that she “wouldn't be able to make this work in any way. It's not [Pakistani]. It's not American. It's not like Turkish. It doesn't match.”

In addition to the garments being labelled as unflattering, Hadiqa thought that they were not marketed towards Muslims to begin with. “There is literally a white person wearing this,” she declared when she came across Figure 2. She thought marketing products such as the ones in Figures 2,3, and 4 aggravate the issues of isolation and alienation that people of color face. She asserted that she would not have the same experience wearing these clothing items as a white person would:

> I think it's so interesting that H&M does stuff like this. Because I feel like with brown people in general, like personally, I've wanted to wear kurta and trousers and stuff. But I feel like I can't. Because when I wear it, because I am Brown and I am wearing traditionally brown clothing, that clothing is Othered automatically. Whereas if a white person wears it, it's automatically like, “Oh, look, you're being so ethnic.” And like, “Oh, that's so cute. Where did you get it from?” So, it's just a different experience.

Adeela claimed that she would not wear such clothing within an American context. The only way that she would ever purchase this was if she had to go back home and needed to wear a traditional outfit. Outside of that, she claimed that she would not purchase this from H&M because she could “find better Pakistani clothing in Pakistan.” Layla shared this sentiment and explained the reason she would not purchase such clothing from H&M either. She commented on Figure 9:

> This feels a little racist. There's something about this that feels a little off. You know what? I think if it weren't a giant fashion conglomerate and instead someone who had a modest fashion brand that presented this to me, I'd be more open to it. But because it's H&M I'm like, “No.” […] For me, I think I’m of the perspective that quite a few of these giant fast fashion companies have made a lot of mistakes in the fashion that they provide. I think H&M is trying to fit into a standard of what they perceive is modest Muslim fashion. Because this screams Muslim to me. […] And I think coming from H&M, it feels insincere.

When asked if she would ever consider buying this from H&M she answered:

> I need to know who is creating the collection. So, brands like Uniqlo, for example, have collaborated with, Muslim hijabis who have worn [Muslim] fashion for years and they've curated their own brand within the company, under their name. If H&M was like "H&M made this up", I'd be like, "No. Is there someone who can put their name to this and be like, "I developed this with H&M?" Then I'd be okay.

She added that she liked the garment itself, similar to other participants who though it was modest and appropriate to wear in during Ramadan or to the mosque. However, the issues came from the brand making the dress and their understanding of Muslim fashion. Hadiqa pointed out that the lack of credit given to the original cultures when making such garments aggravates the problem. She said emphatically, "For once, it would be nice if they didn't just post an abaya on a website and call it a dress." She believed that garments should be named appropriately. This meant that their origin, inspiration, or proper terminology should be indicated.

In addition to the garments not being appropriate in the U.S. and conjuring up images of cultural backgrounds without proper knowledge, Layla noticed that different cultures were simply grouped together because of their association with Muslim-ness or because of belonging to non-Western spaces. She explained her feelings with these words when talking about Figure 1:

> I just don't know what culture they're emulating here. I don't know what they're trying to pull here. I don't know what this pattern is supposed to be. It feels like weirdly, like orientalist, which makes me uncomfortable. They're just trying to put all Middle Eastern and [South and East] Asian cultures together and say, "here's something modest that you guys will wear." And we're like, "No, we won't."

Cut and Style

Many of the garments had a cut or style that the participants did not find flattering or appropriate. Figure 6 is such an example. Almost all of the participants expressed their disapproval of it. Leya exclaimed, “This cut, I can’t! I can’t work with this cut.” Hunter expressed that she did not like “kaftan-type items” and neither did Adeela. Dee said that she would only ever wear it to bed whereas Layla thought that it did not look age appropriate. So, even though the cut of the garment resembled something that might be worn in Muslim countries such as Dubai, according to Layla, the participants could not personally see themselves wearing it.

In addition to personal preferences, the skirt in Figure 11 received criticisms for not meeting the modesty requirements of the majority of the participants. The reason was almost the same for everyone; it showed a lot of leg and would split open while performing any action. As it was noted in the first section of the findings, the most any participant was comfortable revealing was still below their knee. However, this skirt revealed past the knee and the cut in the middle, increased the chances of showing even more. Hunter added that “this isn't the type of skirt that would look good with leggings. […] That [cut], that’s going up, if [the hemline] was just straight across, it would have been fine. Like, I’d just put black leggings on and be fine. But this one it's showing way too much leg which makes it too provocative.” Layla agreed that it was “not modest enough” for her because she believed that the skirt would spread open as soon as she started walking. Leya expressed a similar concern even though she wanted to buy the skirt:

> This is really cute. I think if I'm sitting down, I wouldn't wear them. Like, I would probably buy those. But not for outside. I wouldn't wear them outside. Just because the

skirt has a big opening. Because I imagine if I'm sitting down, it will probably be showing more.

Another common issue with the cut was its effect on the shape of the garment, as discussed above in the “fit” section. Hunter expressed this sentiment discussing Figure 5 in addition to other design errors that she noticed:

> That dress cut is unflattering. I'm built like a boy, that would not look good on me whatsoever. And then I think because of the fall, if you look at the skirt half of the dress, it looks very stagnant. Versus if it had a little more fabric, it would at least like flare out a little. I feel like that would look more flattering. This one looks like the type where if you walked a little, it would kind of look like you're wobbling.

On other instances, she felt that all aspects of a garment did not go together. For example, when examining Figure 9 she said:

> I feel like if they were going to make it all loose and open, maybe the sleeve being open would look nice too because then it would like flow together. And it also cuts off [at the waist] and then it's flowy at the bottom. […] And then they made a fake waist band but like what is it doing? Nothing. It's not serving any purpose. The hard thing for this one is that I don't know if I would say to make it more fitted here because if the point is that it's supposed to be loose, then maybe get rid of that waistband thing.

Figure 7 was another one of the garments which the majority of the participants did not like in terms of the cut. Most of these related to the sleeve. The participants said that the length of the sleeve paired with the slit either crossed their modesty requirements or were simply unflattering. Layla questioned, “why are they three quarters and then cut? It could be a long

sleeve and then cut. Because I have clothes that do that; it'll be a very long sleeve, but it has a slit." Kaira added that such sleeves might work for a non-hijabi, such as herself, but would probably be too short for a hijabi. However, while talking to the hijabi participants, there were differences. For example, Dee and Hunter claimed they were too short, whereas Adeela thought that they were appropriate for her.

Another issue with the cut of the garments was the neckline. Some of the garments had a slit that revealed more of the neck than what they thought was appropriate. However, because the participants that wore a traditional hijab used the headscarf to cover their neck, this issue was not reported as commonly as others. For the remaining participants, especially those that practiced other forms of hijab, this was a major concern. The issue was raised throughout Figures 6, 9, 10, 11, and 12. All of these garments shared a similar V-shaped neckline. Some of them had a deeper cut than others. Hunter added that smaller V-necks are easier to cover as compared to the deeper ones such as the ones in Figures 10, 11, and 12. This became the reason why a few of the participants declared they would not buy the garment, even though they might have considered it otherwise.

Fit of the Garment

When describing their "personal boundaries of modesty" in the first section, most of the participants stated that they often opted for baggier clothing. However, while looking at the garments, many of them reported issues with the way some items came off as completely "shapeless." For example, while looking at Figure 5, most of the participants said that it should have been cinched at the waist and if they were to wear it, they would have to tie a belt around it. Adeela explained that even though "it meets all the qualifiers for modest dress, the issue is in

terms of its aesthetics. Because there's no real waist." On the other hand, Hira thought that it might be too tight on the waist. So, it was neither shaped in a way that would look flattering on the body, nor was it loose enough to be deemed acceptable by the participants that preferred their clothing on the baggier side.

When looking at Figures 2 and 3, Adeela claimed that "in terms of fashion, [a garment] needs to have shape" and these were shapeless. Because of this, she did not feel that she would buy or wear these items. The only exception would be if she was back in her home country because she did not mind wearing shapeless garments there. Another element that added to this shapelessness were the way they were paired with a second baggy item. Layla expressed that this combination was "a little too much" for her. She said that it might have looked better if the pants were more fitted. The only participants that claimed that they would buy it, explained that they would style it differently than in the photo. They would wear the top as a jacket with a shirt underneath. This would help add shape and depth to the garment. Other examples included Figure 6, where both Kaira and Layla expressed that they would have to tie a belt around it to add more shape and Figure 7, where Adeela really liked the outfit but wished that "it had more of a waist."

Length

The length of the garment acted as another major reason why some participants did not like a garment. The garments in Figures 6, 7, 8, and 13, and the top in Figure 1, showed more leg than what a few of the participants were comfortable with. Dee complained "I don't know why they always cut it at the weirdest length. This is something that would be perfect [if it were] floor length" after looking at Figure 6. When looking at Figure 1, Layla questioned "If you have to

wear pants with this top, why not just make it slightly longer since its already this length?" The participants who would wear the top in Figure 1, mentioned that they would style it with ankle length pants for complete coverage. The pants in Figures 10 and 12 were a little high for one of the participants as well. The skirt in Figure 11 revealed much of the leg but was regarded as an issue in cut instead of an issue with the length. On the other end of this, however, in Figures 2, 3, and 4, the issue arose from the shirt being "too long." Other than the fit of the garment, most of the participants agreed that the top needed to be mid-thigh to look more flattering.

Sleeve Length. In addition to the length of the overall garment, the length of the sleeve raised concerns for the participants. The reason behind it was that it did not fit their modesty requirement. Hira listed this as the first reason that she would not buy the garments in Figure 6 and 8. However, even in cases where the sleeve length aligned with their modesty needs, they felt that the cut came off as "awkward", as Layla claimed about the dress in Figure 8.

Sheer

The participants reported that a few of the garments were too sheer. This could include the entire garment or certain parts of it. For example, when looking at the shirt in Figure 12, a few of the participants noticed that you could see the body shape of the model under the shirt in the photograph. This meant, that the shirt was see-through and would require a layer underneath. Layla pointed out a similar issue in Figure 4. She expressed that even though it might not seem that the fabric was sheer because of the pants they came with, if the shirt was worn on its own, the shape of the legs would be visible.

When looking at Figure 5, all the participants reported issues of sheerness in the sleeves. Because of this, Hira and Hunter outright stated that they would not buy this. At the same time,

others said that they would wear something underneath, which, as Layla pointed out, might be uncomfortable. Kaira added that this meant it could only be worn in the winter. Layla expressed disappointment that the sleeves were not lined as the rest of the garment was:

> This isn't modest because it's just like, the arms are still [visible]. They're technically covered, but they're not covered. Why not line them? I would line them. I hate things that aren't lined fully. If they're gonna line the whole bodice, then line the arms, too. I would have to wear a shirt underneath this… something to cover my shoulders. A short sleeve maybe. And then that's just uncomfortable. I just think they're not trying [hard enough].

Hadiqa and Kaira explained that keeping in mind the traditional views of modesty, Figure 5 would not be appropriate for many Muslim women, especially hijabi women. Hadiqa explained why:

> Like, for modesty, you can't wear like chiffon sleeves, right? It's just like, if you were going for Muslim fashion, you can't show skin. Unless you have some level of comfortability with non-modesty. […] Or if you have, like non-orthodox views of modesty, or you just simply didn't care, you'd be fine with this. But like, if you have like traditional views of modesty, like a lot of [Muslim] people have, you're not gonna buy this because of that reason.

On the contrary, however, even though the sleeves in Figure 13 were sheer, they were "the right amount of sheer," as Adeela and Layla pointed out. They both claimed that they would buy a garment like this and explained that the sheer sleeves in Figure 13 did not reveal the shape of arms or color of the skin as the sleeves in Figure 5 did.

Color

The participants complained about the color of several garments. While in a few instances this could be put down to personal preference, many of the participants that reported issues with a particular color, provided similar preferences and explanations for why they did not like any specific color. For example, five of the participants claimed that the dress was too "bright" when looking at Figure 8. Layla explained that even though she liked the dress, the color would call too much attention to her and compared it to looking similar to a "traffic cone." In a similar fashion, Hunter claimed that "a lot of these modest collections just put the most out of pocket colors in there." Even though she had expressed previously that she liked to incorporate color in her wardrobe, she explained that they need to be muted for them to be flattering. She provided examples of her sister and mother owning dresses very similar to the one in Figure 9. However, they were executed in a black or champagne color. Five of the participants agreed that they should have used a more "muted" or "neutral" color instead. Dee and Layla added that if it were a deeper color closer to burgundy, it would have looked much better. Hadiqa thought that in America bright colors were not as commonly worn as neutral ones. She explained this when discussing Figure 6:

> You're not going to wear this on a normal Tuesday. The color is so bright. This isn't really meant for American society. One, it's not meant for everyday wear, and two, even at night and stuff like you're not gonna go out with your friends in this dress because it's just so bright. So, you would go to maybe a family dinner or a family function and stuff.

She made a similar comment again when talking about Figure 7:

> You're not going to wear this in American society where people mostly wear black, blues, grays, and like very neutral colors. You're not going to wear those colors. You're definitely not gonna wear it just like up and about like, you'll wear this may be at an Eid party [a religious holiday for Muslims].

However, other participants underlined that the critique of bright colors did not mean that the colors should be dull. For example, Leya claimed that she did not buy garments that were black, because to her, they were not as youthful. Other bright colors such as the skirt in Figures 11 and 13 were appreciated by a few of the participants. However, the color of the garment in Figure 10 received the most compliments from them.

Fabric

The print, embellishments, and material of the fabric for some of the garments received negative responses for some of the participants. This ranged from Dee exclaiming that the print of Figure 1 was “horrendous” to Hira’s personal preference of not liking patterned pants such as in Figure 7.

Hunter claimed that brands often use prints and colors that are quite “out there” and tacky when displaying Muslim or modest fashion lines. Because of this, the garments that would otherwise be purchased, become completely ignored by the target market. For example, both Hunter and Dee said they would not buy the garment in Figure 1 even though they liked it, solely because of the print. If it had been a solid color, as Hunter and Layla claimed, it would have looked much better. A few of the participants revealed that even though they liked the garment in Figure 9, the embroidery used at the waist, neck, and sleeves should have been different. For Figure 5, Leya, Hira, Dee, and Layla complained that the all-over embroidery did not look

flattering. Layla pointed out that it could have been executed better with a different design because she typically loved embroidered sheer garments with linings underneath.

The participants regarded the material of a few of the garments as the reason why they did not like them. For example, Hunter thought that the jersey material used in Figure 1 would not be flattering. While looking at Figure 7, Hadiqa claimed that the material was simply "ugly." As for Figure 1, Leya and Kaira thought that the silk material used made it look like a nightgown instead of something they could wear out.

Navigating Sociocultural Expectations of Modesty and Muslim Fashion

As discussed in the literature review, Muslims wear modest clothing for a variety of reasons. The most important one is the influence of religion as many of the participants expressed. A few additional reasons may include constructing and protecting their religious identity, as a source of empowerment, and to find community (Davary, 2009; Droogsma, 2007; Gurbuz & Gurbuz-Kucuksari, 2009; Haque, 2010; Siraj, 2011; Williams & Vashi, 2007). However, these decisions come from their experience and surroundings. So, within the context of the US, the participants acknowledged the role of their Muslim and non-Muslim communities while making modesty related decisions. They pointed out the role of their family while growing up, influence of Muslim peers, expectations from the Muslim community, and positive as well as negative interactions with non-Muslims.

Ascribed Identity

All the participants in this study were born into a Muslim family. Consequently, their parents played a significant role in their religious upbringing. Peek (2005) uses the phrase

“religion as ascribed identity” as religious identity tends to be foisted onto children through their parents’ beliefs. Parents influence their children’s convictions through their own dress practices as well as through direct conversations with their children. Most participants recalled having discussions with their parents about dressing more modestly when they had hit puberty and were in middle school. This is usually the case because, according to Muslim belief, once a child hits puberty, which for women is marked by the start of menstruation, they become responsible for practicing their religious obligations (Abo-Zena, 2019).

A few participants revealed that having conversations from a young age and seeing their mothers practice modesty made it easier for them to practice Muslim fashion in their own lives. Leya declared that she was inspired by her mother’s dress practices:

> My mom has a really huge influence on me. Because when I was young, I used to think that she dressed so pretty. So, I’ve never thought wearing hijab will make me less pretty. It'll make me look modest, but still pretty, you know?”

Hira laid out the importance her mother had in her upbringing:

> My mom is also someone who wears a hijab and an Abaya. […] Like, she wants to wear very modest clothing because of Islam. And so, she's taught that and instilled that value in me. And that's probably the reason why I follow a lot of the things that I follow.

Even though the participants had mothers that practiced the hijab and abaya, they did not impose it on their children. Hunter made sure to communicate in the interview that the hijab was her own choice. This was the case with most participants. In fact, when Hira first announced to her mother that she would start wearing the hijab, it caught her mother by surprise. She recalled:

> So, seventh grade, winter break, I got my period for the first time. So, I said, “when I go back to school, I'm gonna start wearing a hijab.” And my mom was like, “Are you sure?” Like, my mom told me, “You don't have to if you don't want to. Are you really sure you want to do this?” And I was like, “yeah.”

The parents seemed to approach their children’s wardrobe choices with leniency, but, within a limit. Kaira, had this to say on this account:

> I'm going to be honest; I think my mom is not as strict as I've seen other family friends be to their daughters. I think my mom has the mindset of “get it out now.” Like, if you're gonna take the hijab later on, get [immodesty] out of your system now. So that when you get older, you can understand and appreciate [the hijab] a lot more. But there's definitely an extent to that. She's not going to let me go all the way. Of course. There's a limit to that. But she's still like, “you're young. So, [it’s fine] as long as you're not going too far, or you're not going too immodest, or you're not too revealing.” If it's reasonable; your knees are covered, your chest is covered, your arms up to [the mid-bicep] at least are covered, then she's fine with it. But she does, often remind me to start dressing more modestly and to get more comfortable with it so that I can wear the hijab at one point. Which I do plan on going back to. […] She just wants me to be comfortable. She doesn't want to pressure me, which I appreciate. I think that's a very important thing.

A couple of the participants felt that their transition to modest clothing felt abrupt, especially when they were younger. Hunter remembered a pair of capris she had only owned and worn for a month, before her mother asked her to start dressing more modestly. She was disappointed because she gotten them quite recently. Likewise, Layla brought up a particular

denim miniskirt she owned. They both felt that even though they had conversation surroundings modesty before that, the implementation of it took time to get used to. Layla thought back to that day:

> I think it was fifth or sixth grade, when my body started developing more. And then, you know, you hit puberty, you get your period, and then it's like, “okay, now you gotta, like reel it back. Like, no more little denim miniskirts for you. You're changing.” And so, I was like, this is weird and feels sudden. It wasn't that sudden, but I think for young me, it felt sudden, I was just like, I used to wear this skirt all the time, right? Why can't I wear it anymore? […] And it was like, oh, like, my body looks different. And so now I have to like switch to wearing things that are like, more modest. But for me, I didn't understand it at the time. No one explained to me why I'm doing this. Just that “you have to do this now.”

Leya, on the other hand, felt that her transition was smoother. She thought that the reason behind this was because she dressed quite modestly since she was a child. She believed that when you dress modestly as a child, the transition might not seem as sudden and somewhat shocking. However, shifting from “immodest” to modest clothing can sometimes be quite hard.

Chosen Identity

As the participants grow older and interact with the world around them, they are able to construct their own opinions. The participants mentioned that they interact with peers, find outside resources, use social media, and join different organizations. All of these factors help them have a better understanding of the world and their religion. At this stage, they may choose to participate or reject the instructions of their parents. Peek (2005) describes this as chosen

identity. So, the ascribed identity of Muslim children may or may not become their chosen identity later in life.

Many of the participants revealed that even though they had difficulty transitioning to modest clothing at first, they were able to understand the reason behind it later in life. Layla described the way she came to this realization:

> At first, I didn't [understand it] because I was a kid. I didn't understand that my body looks a certain way and people will look at it in a certain way and point out things about it in a certain way. And then as you become an adult and grow older, you find out about these systems that oppress you, the patriarchy and all these things. No one should judge you for the things that you're wearing, and no one deserves anything based on what they're wearing but I feel like my modest fashion is kind of a protection, that I like for [myself]. So, I think I understood it a little more because I feel a little safer when I look like this.

Dee had a similar understanding and expressed that even though “you're a kid, there's perverts out there. Especially prowling at places like the mall. You have to be careful, and you have to safeguard your children, and what they're wearing and what they're watching and where they're going.” She explained that being young did not matter to people like that. This was why she appreciated her mother’s efforts to dress her modestly as a child. The willing acceptance of their parents’ decision regarding dressing their bodies and the conscious practice of Muslim fashion in the life of the participants as adults reveal that being Muslim became their chosen identity. Although their parents had some influence in the past, at this stage in life, their own relationship

with religion guided their clothing practices. Therefore, they practice Muslim fashion, even when they are not around their parents. For example, Layla recalled:

> Even when I went shopping with friends, I'd be like, “Oh, this is too tight. I don't know.” They would say, “why do you feel uncomfortable? Your parents aren't gonna know if you're wearing anything like that.” And I was like, “It's not about them. It's about me. I don't feel comfortable in this outfit.”

She added that after she had moved out of her parents’ house, she could easily have stopped wearing modest clothing. But because he was not doing to please her parents, she continued dressing modestly. This, however, did not mean that every single element of their parents’ teachings was readily accepted and implemented in the participants’ lives. They were “constantly testing boundaries and pushing limits” of what was previously commonly practiced, according to Hadiqa. She had this to say on this account:

> To me, the way I interpret Islam is that you should believe in God, believe in the Prophet, do the five [pillars of Islam: faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage] and then just be a good person. And so, I don't think that God would really care if I was showing too much arm or too much leg or too much whatever. And in the beginning, I used to wear the hijab, and I used to dress super modestly […] but I don't feel any different or any less Muslim than when I was doing that, versus how I am right now.

These differences in opinions between the participants and their parents, did not come without any pushback. The participants would often have disagreements with their parents regarding their sartorial practices. Hadiqa, Adeela, Dee, Layla, Kaira, and Hunter all recalled one or more instance of conflict. Dee gave an example of her most recent encounter:

> So most recently, and I still don't agree with her on this, but I was wearing these fake sleeves. And I guess they were too tight. And the sleeves on my shirt were like, short enough where a lot of it was showing. So, the entire figure of my arm was too much for my mom. And she was like, “Yeah, no. That's too tight. Go find a different pair.” And I was like, “I don't have one. You're just gonna have to deal with it.”

Layla recalled wearing skinny jeans back in 2009 because that was all that was available to her, and her mother did not think they were appropriate. In most of these cases, the participants often continued to do what they believed was appropriate. So, in the abovementioned instances, all of the participants continued to wear what they were already wearing. Hadiqa outlined all the things that she has had disagreements about and her mindset about such situations:

> With the way I dress, I do show way more than an inch and a half of my leg. [My mother] would not approve. She kind of knows I wear short sleeves, does not approve it. Tights paired with t- shirts? Knows I do it, does not approve. But it's like, what can I do? With certain things she doesn't approve, but then she ignores me. She knows but it’s like, what can she do?

Other times however, they might listen to what their parents believe is more appropriate, especially when they had doubts about it themselves. For example, Layla said that the only times she remembers her dad pointing out that a dress may be too tight or revealing was when she was already on the fence about it herself. Because she would already be rethinking it, her father’s comment would give her the extra push to wear something different. Through instances like these the participants continued to develop their own relationship with modesty. They found a middle ground between what their parents had taught them, the society they were growing up in,

and what they thought was appropriate for themselves. This came from constant learning, “dips in faith” according to Dee, and the willingness to do better overtime, according to Kaira.

Expectations From the Muslim Community

The participants discussed the contextual differences when talking about their clothing practices in the “personal boundaries of modesty” section. They described that they would dress more modestly when they knew they were going to be around the Muslim community. Sometimes out of respect, while other times out of fear of judgement. The participants shared their experiences and the views that led to this practice.

Hadiqa declared that patriarchy within the society is often what leads to judgments by other Muslims:

> Culture and the way patriarchy within culture act and react with Islam pushes certain ideals and certain ideas that it wants to force on women, as a way of exerting power and control on women, that is not necessitated in Islam.

As a result, she argued, one needs to be careful and mindful of one’s actions and bear in mind the power of patriarchal thinking in society. She explained that although it might not have been the intended meaning of the original religious text, the expectations we have now of what Muslim women should look like are only available “after 1500 years of being interpreted by an oppressor.” She added:

> The way hadith and stuff are interpreted, the way the Qur’an is interpreted, and the way Islam is interpreted. Historically for the past 1500 years, it has been interpreted through men and through men's ideology and through the way men want to exert control. […]

> The patriarchy is then imposing this responsibility on you as a woman to dress in a particular way; that you as a woman are responsible for someone else's thoughts, which is just not true.

The idea of modesty is not solely for Muslim women in the Islamic text, as discussed in the literature review. However, Hadiqa thought that "Muslim men typically tend to police Muslim women to a much greater extent that they either police themselves or they police each other. And then women also taking up that role of policing." The participants listed numerous examples of situations when their clothing practices were policed by the Muslim community. Dee gave an example from when she was around 15 years old. She recalled an older lady who was picking up her son from school and commented on her tight clothing. Hadiqa gave an example of a girl she saw on TikTok who was wearing ripped jeans with skin color tights underneath and there were multiple people commenting that that was not allowed in Islam. Hadiqa added that she personally did not see a problem with the girl's clothing because her skin was still covered. Hira provided examples of women in the MSA that were critiqued for their appearances. She noted that such events often have a lasting effect and make people closely supervise their outfits within those spaces. Additionally, even when they did not care about anyone else's opinions, it indirectly affected them. This could be through others around them or even their parents. Layla elaborated:

> What's the common phrase? "People will talk." You don't want anyone to talk about you. So, that's part of the influence that comes from the community. But it's told through the parents, right? Like, "you don't want anyone to talk about you." Yeah well, I personally don't care. But they care very much.

She said that she often had arguments related to this with her parents but now they acknowledge each other's point of views. Kaira believes that the reason parents do so is because "Muslim people will often judge the parents, before they judge the woman herself." She provided an example of this:

> I used to go to a Muslim school, but I was the only non-hijabi girl out of all my friends. And I remember I would go over to my friend's house. One time, I was leaving her house, and her dad was like, "So when are you going to wear the hijab?" Now, I'm like, 12-13 years old at the time. I thought I was too young to even start. But he said that to me, then he turned to my parents and said, "So when are you going to make her wear the hijab? When are you going to talk about that with her?" I think for me to hearing that was like, "Oh, you're not coming for me. You're coming for my parents." And for me, specifically, hearing him question my parents was harder than when he was questioning me, as a person. Because when he was questioning my parents, he was questioning their parenting style, he was questioning their [faith], and how strong in their [faith] they were.

So, the expectations of the community were present from a young age and was sometimes carried through the parents.

Wearing the hijab was often a community expectation. The hijabi as well as the non-hijabi participants agreed on this. The hijab was supported because wearing it made one visibly Muslim and represented Muslims. Kaira provided a comparison of her time as a hijabi versus a non-hijabi:

> I remember, when I used to wear the hijab, wearing jeans, specifically tight jeans was a big no. Whereas now like, as a non-hijabi, I can go out with tight jeans, my parents might

> look at me and be like, “Oh, that may be a little bit too tight.” But if I was a hijabi, I felt like they would be more focused on me not wearing the tight jeans. Or at least wearing something that's a lot longer that would cover them. So, I do remember, that wearing tight shirts and tight pants as a hijabi was a no-go. Everything was flowy. I guess at the time, I didn't understand, but like, now, I get exactly where they were coming from.

She explained her understanding of this difference:

> It's a lot different when you are wearing a hijab, because you are the face of Islam, you are showing Islam itself. But when you're a non-hijabi, nobody can really tell [if you’re Muslim]. […] So, you can't hide as much as you can, when you are a non-hijabi. I think for non-hijabis there's a lot of leeway. Whereas for hijabi women, it's not as much leeway because all eyes are on you, whether that's your parents, or whether that's when you go to the mosque or whether you even come across another Muslim person, another Muslim stranger. All eyes are on you. And you have to represent it all time. Whether you like it or not. So, it's a lot of pressure, I feel like.”

Layla reiterated that she did not think this was fair, but regardless, it was something that would often happen:

> I think like when you're within any kind of non-Muslim community, you're a representative of the Muslim community, whether you like it or not. Not saying that it's fair, not saying that it shouldn't be the case, but it is most of the time the case, really.

The participants felt that they understood this more when they got older. It’s because “you don't want to represent your religion in a way that can allow people who are not from that religion to

speak on it, and act as if they know what they're talking about," Kaira said. These assumptions could include what they think Islam is, that the hijab is forced, or that parents force it, as Layla and Kaira expressed.

The visibility that came with hijab, however, allowed them to find community and a belonging. Kaira, Hunter, Leya, and Hira expressed this as one of the most comforting factors about being Muslim and wearing Muslim fashions. Kaira expressed:

> For me, it's important. I want to be able to show that I'm Muslim. […] I want to be able to familiarize myself with my [Muslim] community, you know. I want to be able to have them point me out and have me point them out.

Leya said that seeing other women in the hijab allowed her to communicate with them with ease because it would show her that they would have a similar relationship with their religion as her. She added that even though she might be on the same journey with Muslim women that are non-hijabis, hijab acted as a visible signifier. In contrast, Hadiqa said that she distanced herself from the Muslim community to avoid the judgements and expectations:

> I wasn't super close with [the Muslim community] during undergrad and I'm not close with them at all in LA. So, I would say that if I was [closer to them], the Muslim community would place that assumption on me. But I stay away from the Muslim community precisely because I don't want certain expectations to be put on me and I just don't want to deal with certain expectations.

Overall, participants argued that Muslim women use the hijab and other types of Muslim clothing as a tool to find and identify with their community. However, wearing the hijab as a

visible signifier led to constant policing of Muslim women's everyday behavior. This policing can come from one's parents, the community, and peers. Some do not like this pressure and choose to distance themselves from the community.

Interactions With Non-Muslims

As discussed in the literature review, Muslims are constantly exposed to Islamophobia. Islamophobia can manifest in the form of physical abuse, verbal abuse, microaggressions, or even social alienation. Many of the participants recalled situations throughout their childhood as well as in their adult life where they had to deal with such experiences. For example, Dee shared one of the oldest ones she remembered. She described that she was with her mom, who wears the hijab, and a person pulled up next to their car at a traffic light. She did not remember the exact words but only that he referred to them as terrorists. On another occasion, a customer at her workplace made an inappropriate comment stereotyping Muslims. She said that she had called him out on it which only worsened the situation. Her manager had to de-escalate the situation while also defending her. Other comments included people telling her to go back to where she came from. However, Dee pointed out that instead of being fearful, she made sure to speak out against such behaviors. She believed that it strengthened her, in a way. Hira shared that even though she had not faced hateful behavior, she was in involved in situations that sometimes made her uncomfortable, especially in the corporate world:

> There are a couple of things that have made me feel uncomfortable. It's almost like feeling like an "Other" or feeling that "No, you're not the same as everybody else." Like, you don't want to go out for alcohol, you don't want to go to the bar, you don't want to go drink, you know, things that are Othering you. And then you don't want to shake hands

> with any random guy. That's something that I personally also follow. And so, that might affect the way that you present yourself. Like, the first time you meet someone if you're not shaking their hand, they'll be like, "Oh my God, this person is rude."

Hira discussed one such instance. She was introduced to someone, and she did not shake his hand. Because of that, she noticed that he was offended and decided to not talk to her after. Fortunately, because he was not her superior, it did not affect her work in any way. Kaira also shared an experience of feeling alienated during her college orientation week. She was paired with a roommate for the week who had set the room up before Kaira had gotten there. However, shortly after Kaira arrived, the girl got a phone call and declared that she had to leave because of a family emergency. She packed everything and left. Kaira said that she had initially believed that but later that night, she saw the girl moving her stuff into another room in the same building. She realized that her roommate had only pretended to get a call so that she could leave and get into a different living situation. Kaira assumed that the reason behind this was her hypervisibility as a Muslim woman at the time because of her hijab. This encounter eventually played a part in her decision to take the hijab off.

Hadiqa and Adeela raised concerns about the approachability of Muslims. They recalled social situations that may not have come across as overtly Islamophobic but were certainly uncomfortable and alienating. Hadiqa expressed this with stating:

> Because of the way America is, [Islamophobia] doesn't really come out super blatantly. It will usually be within microaggressions. And so, when I was wearing the hijab, for example, people wouldn't really approach me and people wouldn't really talk to me. […]

> It’s just kind of like an isolation experience. Like, people stare a lot, they look at you a lot.

On the contrary, Hira turned this into a positive experience. Because of her visible difference as a hijabi, she stood out from her colleagues, which in turn allowed her to have more opportunities. She gave examples of the groups she had formed in college as well as her workplace that provided women with various networking and professional opportunities.

Adeela asserted that the reason Muslims faced negative experiences from non-Muslims was due to the lack of knowledge about Islam, its practices, and Muslims in general in the West. She assumed that many of them probably did not encounter Muslim people within their social circles. So, their information was limited to media portrayals, which has always given Muslims a bad name. She hypothesized that the negative representations and stereotypes associated with Muslims are the cause of such interactions. She provided this example to support her claim:

> I was standing in line at Starbucks and this white man started talking to me. He asked me, “Oh, where are you from?” And I said, “I'm from Pakistan.” He was like, “Oh, have you ever been to Saudi Arabia?” And I just said, “No.” But then he says, “Oh, you know, it must be really nice for you to be out and about.” And I was like, “Yeah, I mean, the weather is great.” And he was like, “Oh no, no. I mean out and about.” I was like, “What do you mean?” He's, like, “you know, without a guardian.” And I was like… “That’s very common in Saudi Arabia. But that's not really common in Pakistan, or here. I don't really need a guardian here.” He's like, “Okay, well, that's good.” […] That's just because my hijab kind of invokes conversations like that; it brings out people's assumptions. Their

> assumptions are oftentimes like, I'm oppressed or, I can't speak English, or I can't be without a man.

Layla agreed that because of the limited knowledge that non-Muslims have about Muslims, they often lumped Muslim communities together, despite their stark differences. So, they will often compare one Muslim person with another, even though there is no other similarity between them outside of their religion. Layla talked about one of her experiences that exemplified this:

> I generally think, when you hang out with non-Muslims, and they know another Muslim person, they compare you all the time, with what you do and how your behavior is. Especially when I was up in New York, I had people being like, “Oh, you're Muslim? You don't drink alcohol?” I'd be like, “No. I don't.” And they'd be like, “She's Muslim but she does.” And I'm like, “But that's not me. Just because one person is doing it, the other person has to or vice versa?” And then you get into a whole debate. Like they'll ask you, “Oh, is she just not practicing this and that?” and I'm like, “That's her business.”

Layla and Kaira believe that such comparisons are especially harmful because they only lead to further assumptions like “that maybe it isn’t as serious for that person or that maybe her parents had forced her to do this which is why she has to dress in such a way,” etc., Layla elaborated. So, because of the limited knowledge surrounding Islam, the participants believed that non-Muslims might often try to put all Muslims in the mold of what they believe to be Muslim.

Additionally, because of the limited knowledge about Muslims within non-Muslim spaces, some participants felt they had to be extra careful with their practices so that it does not affect the image of Muslims in general. So, they become “representatives” of the religion

because of assumptions of non-Muslims and not of their own volition. Hira practiced that in her workplace, being the only hijabi in her firm of almost 2000 people:

> I think it's very important for me to be seen as a Muslim. But, I don't want to be the only representative of Islam for them to ever see. But I also don't want them to never have a representative of Islam in front of them. So, I definitely acknowledge that it's an unfair burden to put on a minority to represent your entire faith or race or something like that. But I also think that it is a responsibility that if it's upon you, you should strive to be the best as you can.

Muslims often become representatives of their religion. This creates increased expectations from the Muslim community or may be felt as extra pressure on the individual, as discussed in the previous section. Some Muslims may make changes in their appearances to fit in better within the Western society. While doing so, they believe they can help expand other people's perceptions of what a traditional Muslim can look like. Adeela, for example, changed her traditional headscarf into a turban. She declared, "I think that it made me more interesting like, "She's not a typical Muslim woman." Because the presentation of myself as a Muslim, didn't really fit the boxes that the people specifically, non-Muslims tend to assume." Hunter achieved similar results by styling her headscarf in many different ways and exploring various aesthetics. Hira did this by experimenting with colors. In addition to appearances, Hunter and Hadiqa felt that they sometimes "overcompensated" with their behaviors. For example, Hadiqa explained this by comparing it with her hijabi and non-hijabi time periods:

> Because of that approachability issue, I felt I had to do more or be more and say more and act more or be nicer and all. Just to be more approachable and just to make up for the

> fact that I was not approachable because of my hijab. And I don't have to do that as a non-hijabi. It was very different in the way that I felt like, I did not feel like I was being true to myself with a hijab, and I didn't feel like I was being myself as a hijabi and didn't feel comfortable in myself.

It is important to note that in certain circumstances, especially around strangers, all the non-hijabi participants believed that they were not actively perceived as Muslims. And so, their experiences might have been shaped differently. Even though they shared similar experiences to their Muslim acquaintances and friends, they acknowledged this difference. However, as noted, this did not limit who experienced bias. Almost all of them had experienced various forms of Islamophobia, regardless. Outside of a few, however, most of the participants felt that their experiences were not as drastic. Other than visibility, location was the major reason cited for encountering Islamophobia. The participants reported more Islamophobic encounters in the southern part of the United States than elsewhere. In fact, the ones that moved out of the South claimed that the isolation and hateful speech had decreased. However, microaggressions were still present, reminding them that social bias against Muslims persists regardless of location.

Figure 1. A model wearing a patterned kimono.

Note. From “H&M Will Debut a Gorgeous Modest Fashion Line This Spring" by R. Torgerson, 2018, Cosmopolitan (https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/a20123221/hm-modest-fashion-line-ltd-collection/). Copyright 2018 by H & M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

Figure 2. A model wearing a black tunic with wide leg pants.

Note. From Jersey Shirt Dress by H&M, 2022 (https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.1004963004.html). Copyright 2018 by H & M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

Figure 3. A model wearing light taupe tunic with creased wide-leg trousers.

Note. From Jersey Shirt Dress by H&M, 2022 (https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.1004963003.html). Copyright 2018 by H & M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

Figure 4. A model wearing plus-size dark green tunic with wide leg pants.

Note. From Jersey Shirt Dress by H&M, 2022 (https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.1037961001.html). Copyright 2022 by H & M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

Figure 5. A model wearing a long green dress with floral embroidery and sheer sleeves.

Note. From “H&M Will Debut a Gorgeous Modest Fashion Line This Spring" by R. Torgerson, 2018, Cosmopolitan (https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/a20123221/hm-modest-fashion-line-ltd-collection/). Copyright 2018 by H & M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

Figure 6. A model wearing a silk-blend kaftan.

Note. From “H&M Will Debut a Gorgeous Modest Fashion Line This Spring" by R. Torgerson, 2018, Cosmopolitan (https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/a20123221/hm-modest-fashion-line-ltd-collection/). Copyright 2018 by H & M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

Figure 7. A model wearing jacquard-weave tunic with flared pants.

Note. From “H&M Will Debut a Gorgeous Modest Fashion Line This Spring" by R. Torgerson, 2018, Cosmopolitan (https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/a20123221/hm-modest-fashion-line-ltd-collection/). Copyright 2018 by H & M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

Figure 8. A model wearing a red jacquard weave dress.

Note. From “H&M Will Debut a Gorgeous Modest Fashion Line This Spring" by R. Torgerson, 2018, Cosmopolitan (https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/a20123221/hm-modest-fashion-line-ltd-collection/). Copyright 2018 by H & M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

Figure 9. A model wearing an ankle-length abaya.

Note. From “H&M Will Debut a Gorgeous Modest Fashion Line This Spring" by R. Torgerson, 2018, Cosmopolitan (https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/a20123221/hm-modest-fashion-line-ltd-collection/). Copyright 2018 by H & M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

Figure 10. A model wearing jacquard-weave dress with matching pants.

Note. From “H&M Will Debut a Gorgeous Modest Fashion Line This Spring" by R. Torgerson, 2018, Cosmopolitan (https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/a20123221/hm-modest-fashion-line-ltd-collection/). Copyright 2018 by H & M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

Figure 11. A model wearing a yellow wrap-around skirt.

Note. From “H&M Will Debut a Gorgeous Modest Fashion Line This Spring" by R. Torgerson, 2018, Cosmopolitan (https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/a20123221/hm-modest-fashion-line-ltd-collection/). Copyright 2018 by H & M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

Figure 12. A model wearing a white top with jacquard-weave pants.

Note. From “H&M Will Debut a Gorgeous Modest Fashion Line This Spring" by R. Torgerson, 2018, Cosmopolitan (https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/a20123221/hm-modest-fashion-line-ltd-collection/). Copyright 2018 by H & M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

Figure 13. A model wearing a flowy blue dress.

Note. From “H&M Will Debut a Gorgeous Modest Fashion Line This Spring" by R. Torgerson, 2018, Cosmopolitan (https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/a20123221/hm-modest-fashion-line-ltd-collection/). Copyright 2018 by H & M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

Results and Discussion

Recurring themes, along with some differences found amongst them, are analyzed and discussed throughout this section with the aim to answer the research questions.

The first and third section of the findings answer the following research question:

1) What is Muslim women's relationship with, and motivations for wearing Muslim fashion?

The second section titled "Disconnect between aesthetics and curation" answers the second research question:

2) How have modest fashion lines in the past been perceived by Muslim women?

Interpretations of Muslim Fashion

The participants in this study had practiced varying levels of modesty and formed three distinct groups. There were participants that wore the traditional hijab, participants that wore a non-traditional hijab, and participants that did not practice the hijab. Even though each group had some differences amongst them, they shared a lot of characteristics. Participants that wore a traditional hijab often preferred complete coverage from head to toe. In contrast, participants that did not practice the hijab were more flexible with their dress practices. For example, they were open to showing some or all of their lower leg, were not against having their sleeves come up to mid-bicep and were comfortable with tight clothing. However, a couple of them expressed that they wanted to dress more modestly overtime. The participants that wore a non-traditional

headscarf were in the middle. They were comfortable wearing garments that showed some part of their lower leg but made sure to add leggings in that case. They wore sleeves that were below their elbows and were comfortable with clothes that were somewhat fitted.

Participants may dress more or less modestly depending on the context that they are in. Additionally, each culture has its own interpretation of modesty. Therefore, in some cases there may be some leniency or differences in what is considered appropriate. The range and flexibility amongst Muslim fashions demonstrate that Muslim fashion is more versatile than it is often made out to be, in fact, it is not uniform at all. It might be visibly Muslim, it might be traditional, or have a modern take on. It might blend seamlessly into Western dress practices while still fulfilling the individual's modesty needs.

The boundaries women set in their sartorial practices help us understand their relationship to Muslim fashion, which answers one part of the first research question. Their relationship to Muslim fashion is formed by navigating between their religious, ethnic, and American identities. Williams and Vashi (2007) talk about the blending of these identities within religious practices of second-generation Muslim women. Hermansen and Khan (2009) and Ternikar (2022) talk about such practices amongst South Asian Muslim American women. These authors discuss in detail the negotiating process between the participants' American and ethno-religious identities. They argue that the complexities of the negotiation process show up in their religious behaviors, interactions with the community as well as in their use of makeup, jewelry, and accessories. A similar observation can also be extended to the sartorial practices of Muslim women in this project, as the findings show.

Muslim women set their sartorial boundaries in accordance with their religious needs while still dressing up in a way that is deemed appropriate in American society. As the old adage says: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” In a Western context, it translates into being inconspicuous or blending in (Moors, 2007). Because of this, many Muslim women adopt Western dress styles within the US. However, they do not completely disregard their religious requirements either. In sum, they aim to consolidate their American and religious identities, which leads to the formation of a hybrid identity. The manifestations of the complexities of a hybrid identity appear to be unique for each individual and situation. This study expands the study of this behavior beyond second-generation participants. It shows that a hybrid identity is not exclusive to American-born individuals. It becomes a lived reality for other participants as well that moved to the United States early or later in their life.

From the findings it becomes obvious that most of the garments that were shown to the participants would not be purchased by them. Participants explained this by stating that so that they would consider these garments appropriate the garments would either need a partial overhaul or complete modification. In light of this, we can provide an answer to the second research question and conclude that there appears to be an obvious disconnect between the consumers and the retailers that are curating modest fashion lines today in the US. The reason for the disconnect likely stems from the homogenization of Muslims and lumping them together regardless of their distinct cultural contexts and traditions. At the same time, we need to note that the participants in this study also chose to incorporate Western elements into their dress practices because they were dressing their bodies within a U.S. context. This suggests that modest fashion lines produced for women residing in the U.S. should be mindful of the consumers’ dual identity and desire to harmonize the two more seamlessly. So that they could achieve this goal, it is

crucial that retailers understand that what Muslims wear in their home countries versus in the U.S. is quite different. However, at present, this difference appears to be overlooked because most clothing items available on the market are similar to traditional Muslim dress styles such as Figures 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, and 10 (located at the end of the previous chapter) suggest. However, the participants clearly communicated that what customers may wear in their home countries, is not necessarily what they would wear in the U.S.

The argument can be made that, as the name suggests, these are "modest" collections, and the target market is not necessarily Muslims, but people that wear modest clothing, in general. However, as the participants pointed it out, Figure 6 looks like a kaftan, Figure 9 resembles an abaya, and Figure 10 is similar to a shalwar kameez. As these items often come from Muslim-majority countries, it is probably appropriate to assume that the garments in the examined collections did target Muslim consumers. If the garments were not targeted towards Muslims, that would bring a deeper issue to because they promoted double standards. The same garments worn on white bodies were readily accepted and even appreciated. However, when worn on Muslim bodies this was not the case and they would be labelled traditional, which suggest obvious anti-Muslim bias and racism. The participants pointed out that if they were to wear clothing items that seemed culturally specific, it would only be inside their homes or in Muslim spaces. This supports Lewis' (2015) assertion that traditional and ethnic clothing has spatial limitations. It is often not considered appropriate for people belonging to particular ethnic groups to wear their clothing outside of culturally specific spaces as it might seem "backward" or shows their inability to adapt. The reason for this is that clothing is considered to be an extension of the body. So, its meaning changes when worn by the people that it was intended for or originated by, especially in a Western context (Tarlo, 2013).

The issues brought up by the participants can help retailers understand the reasons for the disconnect between the current product offerings of Muslim modest dress in the United States and their intended consumers. Therefore, in what follows, some of the participants' complaints are listed that need to be responded to and reconciled in order to grow sales for this target market. Additionally, I compiled some recommendations to help the implementation of their suggestions in the future. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but merely a starting point for retailers, based off of the findings of this study.

1. Retailers should conduct adequate market research before producing a collection. They should include Muslim women that already practice modest Muslim fashion in their team. It would be even better if they collaborated with popular Muslim women to release a collection.
2. The focus should be on producing garments that reflect the hybrid identity of Muslim women living in America. Modest garments that are Western and fashionable at the same time should be available, as these were the ones that the participants gravitated towards the most.
3. Clothes that are a reiteration of popular Muslim clothing items should be labelled as such. Credit should be given by using appropriate terminology for such items.
4. Garments that are loose should still have some shape to them so that they more are flattering. Additionally, making areas, such as the waist, adjustable would make garments accessible for a greater number of people.
5. Bright colors and loud prints should be avoided. It is often not part of the hybrid Muslim aesthetic.

6. To be mindful of sheerness, the garment should be lined at least to the mid-bicep. Alternatively, it should have a color that is opaque enough so that the shape or color of the arms is not visible.
7. The garments' length, cuts, and accompanying features should be mindful of the consumers wearing them. This can be achieved by focusing on one level of modesty. For example, in case of a full-length garment with full-length sleeves, the neckline should be covered. Extensive research of the target market can aid in this process.

Navigating Sociocultural Expectations of Modesty and Muslim Fashion

Other than religious beliefs, familial and societal influences were the top factors that the participants brought up when discussing their religious practices. This supports Peek's (2005) findings on religion as an ascribed, chosen, and declared identity. Early on in their life, the religious affiliation of their parents influenced the participants to practice modesty. After self-reflection and interactions with several aspects of their society, they could choose to accept or reject religion as part of their identity. In the case of such participants, this was acknowledged, and they chose their own identity. Within this chosen identity, other influences such as their presence in the American society played a major part in differentiating themselves from their parents and forming a unique identity.

Peek (2005) described religion as *declared identity* for many Muslims, post 9/11. This has become necessary because participants wanted to spread positive views of Muslims to counter the negative stereotypes that had become widespread. Therefore, their chosen identity was outwardly declared and was consciously used to educate non-Muslims to change the negative perceptions of Muslims (Droogsma, 2007; Islam, 2019; Peek, 2005). Because of this,

many of the participants, especially those that were visibly Muslim, felt that they had become representatives of the entire Muslim community.

Tarlo (2007) and Williams and Vashi (2007) found that Muslims often had high expectations from their Muslim peers, which was supported by the statements made by the participants in this study. A few of the participants believed that even though this might have been unfair, it was necessary, and their behaviors were guided by this expectation. In some cases, this might have been the only representation available to non-Muslims outside of media portrayals. Consequently, the participants used their sartorial practices as a means to deconstruct the image of a typical Muslim and use Muslim dress to provide positive or alternative portrayals.

Additional motivations mentioned by the participants overlapped with those discussed in the literature review. The participants revealed that Muslim fashion was key for them to find community. This is supported by Huisman and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2005) who state that dress acts as a pathway to bring marginalized communities together. Other participants believed that they had understood the need for modest clothing already when they were children because it served as protection and a silent means of resistance against objectification. Droogsma (2007) and Davary (2009) found similar claims by Muslim participants for wearing Islamic clothing. However, it should be acknowledged that sometimes displaying Muslim fashion led to uncomfortable encounters with non-Muslim peers. This supports the findings of Mir (2014) who found that Muslim participants experienced uncomfortable stares from their non-Muslim counterparts, which acted as a non-verbal form of Othering them.

Conclusion

Three major themes emerged from the data collected from the interviews with eight Muslim women. The first theme shows that there is a lot of room for what is considered modest in the Muslim community. It varies based on the social setting, personal religious beliefs, and community expectations. Keeping in mind their religious duties, community, personal identities and the expectations of Western society the participants formed a hybrid identity. This hybrid identity reconciles their religious beliefs with their emerging or established American identity. The participants assumed a hybrid identity regardless of whether they were born in the U.S. or not.

The second major theme in the research was that the upbringing of Muslims residing in the United States plays a major role in why they continue to wear modest Muslim dress outside a Muslim context. They formed their religious identity based on their familial and cultural interactions. Appraisal from family members or members of their communities regarding their modest dress practices resulted in a lasting preference for modest clothing. Additionally, participants cited other reasons for continuing to wear modest dress. These included finding community within the diaspora and, protection from unwanted male gaze and objectification.

The final theme revolved around the decisions Muslim women make when purchasing Muslim fashion. Even though the collection that they evaluated was made for consumers that wore modest fashion, many of the participants declared that they would not buy pieces from it. They thought significant modifications, or a complete overhaul of the garments was necessary in order to make those garments acceptable. These modifications included a change in the overall

silhouette of the garment and its color scheme. They negatively assessed the level of sheerness in the garments as well. They were highly critical of the garments belonging to different cultural groups associated with Muslims and their roles in Othering Muslims. It is important for retailers to acknowledge that young Muslim consumers residing in the United States have a hybrid identity. They need to realize that traditionally-styled Muslim garments do not fully correlate with this new identity and seek solutions to cater to it. Retailers need to empathize a lot more with the Muslim-American consumers, their lifestyle, and daily life in the future. Furthermore, because of expanded definitions of modesty, retailers can venture beyond full-length, loose-fitting clothing. So, incorporating a varying and likely further shifting definition of modesty will allow retailers to cater to a wider variety of Muslims that want to dress not only modestly but fashionably.

For future collections, fashion producers need to hire consultants from the members of the target market to help them along the way. To be successful, it is recommended to do more extensive market research and critically review marketing materials for potential bias. It is essential that brands hire and collaborate with a diverse group of people, especially from the target market they are trying to tap into. Greater attention to details, giving credit to original designs, and doing more in-depth research on the target market will help brands launch collections that can actually serve the Muslim fashion market.

Limitations

A key limitation of this study came from my insider status as a Muslim woman. Because of our similarities, participants could have assumed that I shared their narratives (May, 2014). In this case, rich detail likely was not provided by the participants because of the presumption that

we understand the issues at stake similarly. To avoid this, I have made a conscious effort to identify such assumptions when they were communicated and asked the participants for further clarification or examples. In addition, I likely have assumptions or preconceived notions about some of the issues that Muslim women face due to my personal experiences in the United States. However, to prevent bias, I have made every effort to keep my views to myself during the interview process as well as when transcribing, analyzing, and interpreting the data. A fuller analysis could have resulted from conducting research involving Muslim women that did not have a direct link to a Muslim country such as African American Muslims or by including participants that were not born in a Muslim household such as Muslim converts.

Implications for Future Research

Future research could expand on the sample size of the participants to determine how a larger number of research participants affect the primary themes emerging from this data. This data was limited to Muslim-born participants that had some background in Muslim countries. Future research could expand to include participants that do not have this background as literature on these groups is already limited. This would include African American Muslims or Muslim converts. Another area to explore could be the way the fit of the garment is perceived by Muslims of varying body sizes and the examination of what modesty entails for them. Additionally, this study focused only on one retailer, H&M, to explore views on modest fashion lines. In future studies, it would also be important to study views on modest fashion lines released by other retailers.

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Appendix A

University of Georgia

Consent Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Areeb Gul. I am an M.S. student in the Textiles, Merchandising, and Interiors Department at the University of Georgia completing my thesis under the supervision of Dr. Katalin Medvedev. I am inviting you to take part in a research study.

The purpose of this research is to determine the importance of modest Muslim fashion in the life of Muslim women residing in the US. The study aims to explore how Muslim women acquire or supply themselves with modest clothing items when Muslim fashion items/lines may not be readily available domestically. Compared to other women, Muslim women may face discrimination because of the way they choose to dress. Therefore, the goal of this study is to make their voices heard despite the often negative perceptions of Muslims in the U.S.

I am seeking Muslim women ages 18-30 years old that wear Muslim fashion in their daily lives and have also shopped for these clothing items in the U.S. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview at an agreed-upon location, time and date. In the interview, you will be asked to answer questions related to your experiences of wearing Muslim or Muslim-inspired clothing in the U.S. You will also be asked about the places/specific retailers you shop at for these items. The interview will last approximately 1.5-2 hours. If noteworthy information is uncovered or I need additional clarification you may be contacted again for a follow-up interview. The interviews will be audio recorded. Audio recordings will be used only for the purpose of data collection. Once transcribed, they will be destroyed no later than January 1st, 2023.

Your information will be confidential and pseudonyms will be assigned for use in reports and presentations. Records containing coded IDs that are linked to you will be kept on a separate list that will be destroyed once information has been collected from all participants. The list and any audio recordings will be kept on a password protected computer. Identifiable information of the study will not be accessible to anyone other than members of the research team without your written consent unless required by law. Please note that the information gathered from the study may be subject to use for future studies once all identifiers have been removed, without additional consent.

In the event of an online session, data will be transmitted over the internet. All reasonable effort will be taken to ensure that available technology is used effectively. However, absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed during online communication.

Your involvement in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or stop at any point during the study without penalty. You may also choose to skip questions that make you uncomfortable or do not wish to answer. If you decide to withdraw, the information collected until that point may be kept and analyzed as part of the study. However, you may provide a written request to remove, return, or destroy that information.

The research poses minimal risk to you. However, you may experience some stress or feel uncomfortable while recalling past events or experiences.

Although there are no direct benefits to you, your participation in this study will help shed light on the struggles Muslim women residing in the U.S. face by choosing to wear modest Muslim fashions. The research will also uncover what Muslim female consumers seek from retailers. It will also help us understand how U.S. or other global brands can incorporate such products into their product assortment to successfully capture the Muslim market. Therefore, you may find it beneficial to talk about your sartorial experiences as a Muslim woman and consumer and contribute to change.

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at areebgul@uga.edu. You may also contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Katalin Medvedev, Professor at the University of Georgia at medvedev@uga.edu. If you have any complaints or questions regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 706-542-3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Please sign this form and keep a copy of this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Areeb Gul
areebgul@uga.edu
Textiles, Merchandising and Interiors
University of Georgia
Dawson Hall
305 Sanford Dr.
Athens, GA 30602

Signature of the participant:

…… Date: ……..

Appendix B

Questionnaire

Screening Questions

1. Are you Muslim?
    a) Yes
    b) No
2. What age group are you a part of?
    a) 18-22
    b) 23-26
    c) 27-30
    d) 31 or older

Interview Questions

Background

1. What is your age?
2. What is your national background?
3. What is your educational level?
4. Are you a citizen of the US?

Defining Fashion

1. How would you define the term fashion?
2. Is fashion important in your life?
   Probe: Can you give some examples in what ways and why fashion is important to you?
3. How would you define modest fashion?
   Probe: Are current fashion trends and modest fashion styles different? If yes, how so?
   What are the main differentiating factors?

4. (Introduce this question by explaining the definition of dress and fashion in this field.) Based on this, how would you describe the difference between "Muslim dress" and "Muslim fashion"?
5. Could explain what Muslim fashion means to you and why it is an important concept to you?

Fashion influences

6. Is your dress style/fashion linked to your religious/spiritual beliefs?
7. How important is it to you to express your Muslim identity to the outside world?
8. Can you give an example(s) of how your spirituality or religious beliefs influenced your sartorial decision(s)?
9. When implementing Muslim fashion, what factors were most important in your decision to follow Muslim fashion rules?

   Probes: What role did family/religion/culture/politics play in your attitude towards Muslim fashion?
10. Can you think of particular events, occurrences that made you want to dress modestly?
11. Can you think of someone that taught you how to incorporate modest fashion into your life?

    Probes: How did they do it?

    What exactly did they teach you about?

    Were there any rules that were highlighted as key or ones that were given less attention?
12. Other than that person, where do you think you learned about modest fashion?

    Probe: school/ other socializing agents

Fashion Implementation

13. How do you incorporate Muslim fashion into the way you dress daily?

    Probes:

    - Starting with the head, then neck/shoulders, torso down to the toes.
    - Type of fabric, sheerness, color choices, embroidery, patterns. If color is mentioned, do particular colors have positive or negative connotations? Why?
    - What about accessories and body modifications? Jewelry, nails, tattoos, etc.
14. Do you think you make these decisions consciously, subconsciously or is it a routine?

15. Do you think there are occasions when modest dress is more important than at other times? What are those situations?
16. Do you modify your appearance in a more familiar setting like with friends or around family? How do you modify it?
17. How does it make you feel when you are dressed in Muslim fashion?

Fashion Perceptions

18. What strategies do you have to convey your image as a modest Muslim woman in public?
19. How do people interpret your image of modest fashion? Can you give examples?
20. Can you cite an example when you think your intended expression of modest Muslim fashion was misunderstood or misinterpreted?
21. What do you think makes it clear to people that you are a modest Muslim woman?
22. How does modest Muslim fashion affect your career or education?
23. How do you incorporate modest dress into situations where it may not be as common such as when exercising or at the beach?

Fashion Supply, Acquisition, and Consumption

24. When looking for modest clothing, what are some of the key things that you are looking for?

    Probe: If influencer fashion, what influencers? What about culturally particular influencers? What kind of designers, trends?
25. Where do you purchase Muslim fashion?
26. What brands do you prefer to shop for and why?
    a) What is your price range for purchasing those clothes?
    b) What percentage of your monthly expenditure is spent on modest Muslim fashion?
    c) What about occasion dresses like weddings, for example?
    d) What is the highest price you are willing to pay for a quality modest fashion garment?
    e) Probe: (If non-U.S. citizen) Have you noticed a difference between how you acquire clothing items in your home country versus in the U.S.? Could you elaborate?

27. Do you have any designers that you draw inspiration from when constructing your appearance? Who specifically and why?
28. Do you think major retailers in the U.S. carry a wide enough variety of Muslim fashion?
29. Could you give an example of a time when you had difficulty finding items that fit your modesty requirements?
30. I'm going to show you images of some modest collections created by brands and want you to share your thoughts on them.

    Probe: Could you explain whether you'd buy these items. Could you explain the reason for your decision?

    Probe: Would you modify it in any way?