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How do Muslim women who wear the niqab interact with others online? A case study of a profile on a photo-sharing website.

Abstract

This article identifies a gap in extant academic literature on women who wear the niqab and their representations in 'traditional' media: there are few sources that draw from these women's own narratives. In order to address this gap, this paper highlights niqabis' self-representations in the form of photographic self-portraits published in new media and demonstrates a variety of positive ways in which these self-portraits are received by the audiences. The article is based on a case study of a profile of a prolific author who posts and discusses her work on a popular photo-sharing website. It throws light on contextualised and relational interpretations of the niqab and its meaning and at the same time challenges a common perception that non-Muslim audiences are uniformly critical of women who wear the niqab. Data analysis of the data so far indicates that women who wear the niqab exercise their agency by making visual references to the everyday, and successfully establish dialogue and intimacy with their audiences. It is suggested that new media settings are particularly important in relation to researching 'niqab experiences', as they foster a variety of relevant data types and content that is driven by participants, rather than researchers.

Keywords

Introduction

This article looks at new media-based self-representations of British Muslim women who wear the niqab. It responds to socio-political debates and controversies in which the niqab has been uniformly charged with negative associations. Secondly, it aims to sidestep these debates by drawing attention to spaces where the niqab is imbued with positive associations. Data analysed in this article includes online textual interactions between niqabis and viewers that take place in comments sections accompanying niqabis' self-portraits published on photo sharing websites. This approach allows examination of spaces where the niqab is constructed and viewed positively by authors and audiences of different faiths and none, and trace ways in which these women voices are engaged in a dialogue with wider and largely positively-oriented audiences. Furthermore, it also gives insight into mundane, 'ordinary' interactions related to the the niqab which contrast with conflictual frameworks encountered in British media and policy addressing the niqab, Muslim women and Islam. Finally, it facilitates exploring ways in which the transnational reach of the online discourse informs, supports and challenges local niqab practices that are part of divergent understandings and embodiments of Islam.

Background

The niqab continues to attract the attention of politicians and the media in the UK in reductive debates on immigration, assimilation, and extremism (Meer, Dwyer, and Modood, 2010). The question whether the niqab should be banned in the UK as incompatible with 'British values' arises frequently (Kiliç, 2008). The first large controversy in the UK involving the niqab was caused by the MP for Blackburn, Jack Straw in 2006; he said that he preferred his constituents not to wear the niqab when they came to his MP surgeries (BBC, 2006). This statement was followed by a barrage of editorial opinion pieces which expressed resentment towards women who wear the niqab (Khiabany and Williamson, 2008). In that period, British media tended to

report on different groups' views of the niqab; however, voices of women who wear the niqab were ignored. Similarly, prior to introduction of legislation banning the niqab from the public sphere in France in 2010, 'the sidelining of the people at the heart of these debate has been a recurring motif' (Bouteldja, 2014: 115. The mass media frames the debate in a particular way – allowing mostly those in positions of power to voice their views (Morey and Yaqin, 2011). Whilst the media does not exactly determine what we think, it plays an important role delineating group identities, such as nation or society, and it suggests who remains within or outside of these collectives (Bullock and Jaffri, 2000). Those singled out as 'others' are at risk of being stereotyped, vilified, and demonised (Morey and Yaqin, 2011). Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002: 107) write: 'The binary thinking that characterises western attributions of superiority and inferiority both differentiates between the "self" (the same) and its "other" (the different) and actively constitutes a social relationship the 'same' who has the *power to name, subordinate, exclude, or silence* [emphasis mine] the "other"'.

The 'niqab debate' currently engulfing almost entire Western Europe (Afshar 2013) has been framed from the beginning by questions of integration and both literal and metaphorical dialogue with religious Muslim women in such a way that the women concerned were almost completely excluded from it. In addition to Jack Straw's comments, other members of the Cabinet made negative statements about niqab: Prime Minister Tony Blair called it a 'mark of separation'; the Culture Secretary Theresa Jowell described it as a 'symbol of women's subjugation to men'; and Harriet Harman, a minister in the Department of Constitutional Affairs, said she would like to see an end to niqab as an obstacle to full equality (Kabir 2010: 146). In 2010, Philip Hollobone, a Conservative MP who tried to put through a private members bill to introduce a niqab ban was threatened with legal action for refusing to meet his niqab-wearing constituents. (Pidd 2010: np)

Politicians' statements are echoed by journalists and columnists including Muslim female ones writing for national broadsheet press, such as Yasmin Alibhai-Brown: '[niqab] rejects human commonalities and even the membership of society itself...It is hard to be a Muslim today. And it becomes harder still when some choose deliberately to act and dress as aliens' (cited in Meer, Dwyer and Modood 2010: 96). Even some university-based commentators, normally expected by their institutions to support equality and diversity in their prestigious position as higher education lecturers, publicly express their disdain for niqabis. A director of an MA programme in investigative journalism at a London university wrote in her article in *The Independent: Education*: 'I was particularly disturbed by the sight of Muslim female students wearing the niqab, a dress statement I find offensive and threatening. Don't they value the rights and freedoms they enjoy in Britain? (…) I think the niqab should be banned at university' (Waterhouse 2010: np).

Women who wear the niqab respond to media (mis)representations

In the latest 'niqab controversy' in September 2013 the mainstream media coverage changed slightly: women who wear the niqab were occasionally asked for commentary (for example, in Elgot, 2013; Dugan, 2013), and in one instance, published articles commenting on the matter in national press (for example, Al Faifi, 2013). In most cases, unfortunately, such publicised encounters were been framed in such ways that ultimately these women's accounts were critiqued, undermined, and dismissed by many mainstream media outlets (Author). This no doubt exacerbated rather hostile reception of these accounts by readers, evidenced by their many unfavourable and sometimes downright hostile comments.

It has not been researched how women who wear the niqab in the UK navigate or respond to these media representations. Hebbani and Wills (2012) have interviewed eleven Muslim female students: two niqab-wearing women as well as nine hijab-wearing women in

Australia, and experiences of these two groups were different in that the niqabis experienced more harassment and a lower quality of life due to negative stereotyping by the wider Australian society. They all associated most of these problems with the way Muslim women were represented in the Australian media. Importantly however, they went out of their way to mitigate the effect these representations might have on their interactions with others. Consequently, they actively managed the risk of alienation and vilification by displaying behaviour that contradicted the image of a hostile, unadjusted 'other'.

Constructions of the niqab in existing academic literature

This paucity of women's voices also characterises academic literature across the social sciences, political sciences, law, and other disciplines discussing the position of the niqab – and women who wear it – in the contemporary West. The legal literature mostly focused on the appropriateness of women wearing the niqab in the courtroom (Kirk, 2013; Laird, 2014; Murray, 2010; Ogilvie, 2013 Schwartzbaum, 2011) or the legality of burka bans in different European countries (Ferrari and Pastorelli, 2013). Some authors wrote of victimisation of veiled women which intensifies in the aftermath of legal burka bans (Zempi and Chakraborti, 2014). Sociological literature, which could be expected to redress this imbalance, has mostly focused on views of the niqab expressed by people who do not wear it (O'Neill et al, 2014; Shirazi and Mishra, 2010). This paucity of academic literature to date that would engage niqabis themselves is somewhat startling, as post-positivist sociology is not only interested in examining views of social groups, but also promotes inductive and constructivist frames of analysis that promote agendas of participants (Mason, 2006). Feminist research particularly stresses the need to listen to voices of marginalised women (Brooks and Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2007; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). In the UK context, one notable exception is Tarlo's

research (2007; 2010) for which she interviewed women who wear the niqab, and another is a recent edited volume that brings together experiences of niqab-wearing women from different European countries (Brems, 2014).

Critical accounts of media representations of women wearing the niqab (Al-Fartousi and Mogadime, 2012; Hebbani and Wills, 2012; Khiabany and Williamson, 2008 and 2010) stress that the narratives of the niqab/burka have undergone a transformation in the recent years; Khiabany and Williamson trace this shift to the Jack Straw controversy; they argue that his comments have provided the Sun and other tabloids with 'with a new approach to Muslim women; one which shifts the construction of Muslim women from that of 'victims; to their being a central part of the Muslim 'threat' (2008: 84). They also note that in 2006 the number of articles about the niqab grew exponentially; in *The Sun* it increased from six in 2005 to 150 in 2006 (Poole in Khiabany and Williamson, 2008). The 'reverse-victimhood' trope is dominant; those at the receiving end of racism (usually vulnerable) are blamed for the ills of the society, as well as for the prejudice they experience.

Niqab and online research

Due to limited amount of research *with* niqabis, there are few critical methodological accounts of research with this particular group, whether online or face to face. Keeping in mind the reservations about the actual impact of new media on individual and collective lives (Campbell, 2010; Haythornthwaite, 2002), research on online activity (both textual and visual) of these women may provide new data on their actual relationship with Islamic doctrine, and highlight the ways in which they take up the authority over what it means to be "religious" (Cambell, 2010: 43). There is a substantial and quickly growing body of research on Muslim women's online activities, ranging from early descriptive accounts of use of Internet (then 1.0) in the

early 2000s to more critical and evaluative studies assessing the significance of online communication by Muslim women in contexts of identities, migration, multiculturalism, education, and doctrinal tensions in the area of Islamic hermeneutics[1]. However, Nisa (2013) was the first author to use online methods in research with face-veiled women, called 'cadari', in Indonesia. She explored Internet subcultures of cadari women as well as analysis of online businesses that they run; her study was based on online ethnography methods, but it is unclear what role she had in the setting and what position she occupied on the insider/outsider scale. Her the article is helpful in many ways: it contradicts the stereotype of a backward Muslim woman unfamiliar with technology (Eickelman and Anderson, 1999), describing sophisticated ways in which the cadari are able to harness technology to their own advantage and to create their own platforms of communication and sources of income, and it provides a window into the everyday life of these women, thus showing that they must not be reduced to their face veil, but rather accepted as people with day-to-day lives and ordinary concerns, such as earning a livelihood in ways that do not challenge their religious beliefs (Author).

Nisa's article demonstates that new media offer a chance to engage with women who wear the face veil, as 'the Internet [provides] an intimate and legitimate space for interaction' between niqabis and 'people they might otherwise be unlikely to encounter' due to geographic dispersion or cultural differences (Tarlo, 2010: 153, 146). For the online ethnographer, this opens up an opportunity to analyse this interaction, something impossible in the case of using in-depth interviews. As the interlocutors are often strangers, living in different countries and continents, the analysis must consider global contexts and implications of such discussions. In this sense, the focus of the analysis is necessarily different to that applied to data generated through other methods. In the case of the niqab, the global dimensions of the issue are based around varying approaches to 'cultural', traditional iterations of Islam in which the niqab may

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[1] For a more detailed account of this literature, see Author, Author.

be considered as 'indigenous' (as in the Persian Gulf area), or alien (as in the Subcontinent). The niqab is sometimes seen as a symbol of adoption of puritan Salafi Islam, spreading across the Muslim world on the back of 'oil money' that pays for mosques and Islamic study centres in regions where indigenous interpretations of Islam have been developed (Tissot, 2011). Online discussions between niqabis from different regions of the world have the potential to illustrate tensions between these understandings.

Tarlo (2010) makes a further important point in relation to ethnographic research approaches to online settings: people are likely to voice their views much more openly online, compared to being interviewed by a researcher. They are not bound by strict conventions and power dynamics of a research interview. Furthermore, ethnographic research of online forums is based on recognition of participants' own agendas, rather than an agenda imposed by the interviewer (Author). This allows mapping of participants', rather than researchers' concerns, and, in case of feminist research, endorses listening to women's (and men's) voices (Beckman, 2014).

The final point regarding using new media to research voices of women who wear the niqab (and relevant to conducting research with other minority groups) is related to feasibility. Recruiting sufficient numbers for an interview-based project may be difficult because in the UK, apart from a few metropolitan areas where niqab is increasingly popular, there are few niqabi women around. This difficulty is likely to be compounded for non-Muslim researchers who do not have contacts in Muslim communities. Online research may be a viable alternative in such situations; although it generates different types of data, it may well produce insights which add another layer of analysis of the phenomenon.

Method

This article is based on a case study involving visual analysis of photographic self-portraiture work published on a photo-sharing website by a Muslim woman living in Scotland who wears a niqab (whom I refer to as Leila in this article, although I do not reveal her username or indeed do not know her offline name), as well as textual analysis of photo captions and comments posted by viewers (who appear in this article under changed usernames which have been selected to reflect the style and type of the original ones). The photo-sharing website could be described as a type of a social networking site (SNS) according to boyd and Ellison's definition:

> a web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (2008: 211).

The website in question is a platform for different kinds of photography, including more mainstream work as well as niche images. Users can tag their photos, as well as favourite and comment on photos of others. The photographs analysed in this article and associated text belong to a public photostream, and can be accessed by anybody; however, I have obtained Leila's permission to describe and analyse her self-portraits.

Leila has so far published 137 photos, all of which are self-portraits of herself wearing a full veil. She follows approximately 60 other users, of whom approximately 45 appear to be other women who wear the full veil. Some of these follow Leila, and comment on her self-portraits. Some photos attract up to 15 comments, while others do not have any. It is not required to follow someone's work in order to view, favourite, or comment on it. According to web statistics, displayed next to each photo, each of Leila's self-portraits has been viewed between 3000 and 7000 times. Most photos are tagged as favourite by 10 to 40 users. This indicates that Leila's work is appreciated and discussed by a relatively large group of users.

For the purposes of this article, I focus on exchanges that go beyond a single comment, and represent a discrete 'conversation'.

Themes

Self-portraits as constructions of identity and modesty

If these self-portraits were considered exclusively from a fashion theory perspective, they could be understood as Islamic fashion blogs; in the photos we see a modelled 'look' and a brief description of particular clothes that make it up. For example, "My face, veiled with a single-layer niqab, is framed by a thin scarf. I also wear khimar, abaya and gloves. Everything is navy blue." Leila uses some phrases in the captions that invoke associations with mainstream fashion discourse, such as "different look," or "accessorize." However, mainstream fashion blogs (as well as more traditional publications such as magazines) focus on the ability of fashion to "lengthen, fill out, reduce, enlarge, take in, refine" the body's shape so that the ideal body can still be meaningfully signified to readers (Barthes 1983: 260). In fashion discourse, the body shape sought through specially designed garments remains an unquestioned, mostly unattainable ideal. Independent fashion blogs, while rejecting the idea of a single ideal of beauty, still maintain their focus on the visibility of the body (Heffner, 2012).

In niqabi self-portraiture, the body remains largely concealed, with all or almost all skin and body shape covered with fabric. Promoting modest clothing is considered the primary goal, whereas certain fashion aspects, such as combination of colours or cuts may be a secondary (but also important) goal. The function of clothing as helping the body achieve a more flattering look is absent; the shape of the body is supposed to be obscured. Leila follows this rule very carefully; she often mentions in her description of a photo that she is covered fully. For example, she constructs such full coverage (including covered eyes) as a spiritual need: 'The

khimar and 3-piece niqab give me the modesty I need and the abaya covers me right down to the ground'.

Some self-portraits are more normative in a more pronounced way. One caption reads: 'Correctly covered in black abaya, khimar, niqab and gloves, looking at photos of someone else in full proper hijab'. Another states: 'The proper niqab – the eyes should always be covered'. However, the demonstrated examples tend to be positive, i.e. women tend to share images of themselves that they consider as modest, and there are no examples of 'bad niqab', as in some YouTube videos. In one of the photos Leila looks at a small packet she is holding and then comments in the tag line: 'Full navy blue hijab contrasts with the picture on the hosiery packet'. The model on the packet displays her legs clad in the pantyhose, thus presumably becoming situated as at another end of the spectrum of modesty. However, the criticism on Leila's part is only implied as she only mentions the contrast, but does not explicitly express valorisation of either garment, leaving potential judgment to the viewers.

Interactions with the audience

Users commenting on Leila's work represent a mix of nationalities, ethnicities, and languages. The majority of them (about 60 per cent) seem to be other niqabis following strict dress codes, but there are also men whose username suggest they may be Muslim. And people who do not have any apparent links to Islam, based on their username, profile, profile photo, or photostream. They may just be other photography aficionados who initially came across Leila's work randomly. It is important to note that it is very difficult to make any final conclusions about the demographic makeup of these groups; members of this website often have empty profile pages and mystifying usernames, consisting, for example, of just numbers. And so a user with a nickname Helmut, leaving Leila a comment written in German, is likely to be

German, Austrian, or Swiss, but that is far from certain. The social fabric of such a loose, informal community of interest remains an unfinished jigsaw puzzle to a researcher.

A large group of comments expressed appreciation of Leila's outfits in terms of colour, colour combination, accessorizing, or the fabric type. 'You look beautiful' is a typical statement following a photo in which Leila is modelling her all-concealing dress. The significance of these comments is twofold. Psychologically, they construct a sphere where it is relatively safe to express an appreciation for the niqab on a public forum which is probably rare in an offline, non-Muslim majority context. Appreciative comments are posted by both users who seem to be niqabis and those who do not. One example of such an interaction with Leila about her self-portrait is as follows: A user with a nickname Audrey praised the combination of colours of different parts of the outfit and accessories (gloves and a handbag). Then, a user using a nickname Helmut praised the composition of the self-portrait in German. Leila thanked Audrey in English and confessed that those colours were here favourite at the moment, and then thanked Helmut in German. Responding to him in his native language demonstrates an extra effort to build a rapport. Finally, Helmut repeated his compliment, using a polite form of address to say that the outfit suited Leila well. This and many other conversations illustrate the possibility for other narratives and interpretations of the niqab than those infusing the world of mainstream politics and media in the West. This possibility is not obvious at all, as social and national imaginaries have become dominated by the hegemonic discourse of divisions so deep as to doom any attempts at a dialogue. The operation of such an alternative discourse is the second reason why such brief interactions are significant. As Tarlo argued (2010), online spaces do facilitate encounters with niqabis with other people which are not likely to happen routinely offline. For a host of reasons, it is difficult to imagine a similar conversation taking place in the Tube carriage described by Tarlo (2010). Notably, there is a dearth of research on inter-ethnic, inter-cultural, and inter-religious interaction online; any

existing literature on the topic is in the area of distance education, for example Goodfellow and Lamy (2009).

Self-portraits of women wearing the niqab may lead to outcomes that are more tangible than just praises. Under another photo, user Fazila confessed that she loved Leila's look so much that she considered adopting a niqab. This is an interesting comment as it suggests that such a decision may be dictated by aesthetic preferences, in addition to religious reasons usually given by women for starting to wear the niqab (Tarlo, 2007; Bouteldja, 2011; Clarke, 2013). Leila responded to Fazila with rather sensible advice to consider pros and cons of such a decision:

> Thank you for the compliment Fazila. My advice to you is to search for websites advising sisters on niqab. Veiling is a very personal decision that you should reach after considering any problems as well as the benefits.

Notably, she recommended Fazila to consult websites rather than scholars. Tarlo (2010) analysed conversations on Islamic websites containing testimonies from women who wear the niqab and potentially can answer any practical questions about the practice, as well as real life examples of problems or benefits related to wearing the niqab. Leila's comment underlines the way in which pluralisation of authority in Islam, facilitated by the advent of the Internet (Anderson, 1999) continues to influence localised discourses about the niqab. In other words, Fazila may potentially refer to any website that offers a view on the niqab: one that recommends it, using a theological argument, or one that discourages it, using a different theological argument. She may find herself influenced by testimonials on an online forum of ex-niqabis, or converts to Islam who wear the niqab based on their adoption of Salafi interpretations. Such websites may affect her decision whether to take up the niqab, and if so, what particular style.

Some users commented on several of Leila's self-portraits over a period of time. This created a strong sense of intimacy in the comment threads, noticeable, for example, on the basis

of questions about Leila's moods and states of mind during photo sessions when particular self-portraits were made. A user under the nickname Paul asked Leila whether she felt depressed due to looking at the world through a grey chiffon of her niqab, especially as the sky that day was grey (which we can see in the photo as it shows Leila gazing out of her window). This question reflects Paul's interest in feelings aroused by wearing the niqab, and his empathy, as he tries to imagine these feelings. Another user, Sharon (whose profile was subsequently deleted, therefore it is impossible to guess whether she was a niqab wearer or not) challenged Paul's assumptions as well as the prominent belief that the veil impedes interpersonal communication by saying that she could see that Leila was not depressed, but contemplative. Following that, Leila confirmed that indeed she had not been depressed but rather wistful. Paul and Sharon attempt to put themselves in Leila's position whilst she is wearing the niqab; her input allows their 'exploration of difference'.

Discussion

Multiple self-portraiture with a particular object with emphasises the significance of that object for the author. Leila's self-portraits are all created at home – it is a space signified by the presence of household furniture and appliances, as well as some smaller objects of day-to day-use. The house is neat and tidy, and the lack of clutter emphasises the significance of the subject – a female figure wearing a dress that covers her completely. The repeated use of the household space creates a sense of intimacy, as the viewer has the opportunity to observe several rooms in her house: the bedroom, the lounge, and the kitchen. In that sense, a space that would be habitually described as private, is no longer so; the media of digital photography and the Internet have blurred the public/private divide (Papacharissi, 2010).

These records of everyday existence also evoke feminist critiques of the public/private dichotomy (Bargetz 2009). Notions of both the private and the public are undermined in the

self-portraits where niqabis are seen in their own home (usually considered as private spaces), but dressed modestly as they normally would in public spheres due to the fact that the photos can be viewed by everyone. Furthermore, the home becomes a stage for performance of a specific gendered religious identity, from which niqabis assume the position of power and address the audience/public both visually and textually (Goffman 1959: 25). This collapse of traditionally understood private and public categories represents a 'localized and vernacular version of intimate publics in an age of mobile intimacy' (Hjorth and Lim, 2012: 478).

These online settings represent new 'counter publics' (Habermas, 1992) which challenge pessimistic view of the public espoused by Adorno and Horkheimer (Johnson, 2005) who believed that contemporary mass media rendered audiences passive, content, and uncritical of the ideologies that popular culture promoted. The analysed narratives resist and challenge domination by establishing 'discursively connected public spheres', rich in visual and textual data. This data is particularly important in resisting 'mass-mediated' representations of the niqab and women who wear it. New media facilitates such activity; it allows creating tailored, grassroots political interventions. Notably, the analysed discussions betweem niqabis and their audiences challenge Habermas's somewhat downbeat idea of separated counter publics (1990: 120) '[on] the Internet [which] remain closed off from one another like global villages'. This suggests a potential for interconnectedness, even if tentative and temporary, between seemingly disparate groups. In Fairclough's typology of orientations to difference (which can be applied to social events, interactions, or texts), the analysed exchanges would match scenario which Fairclough (2003: 41) describes as characterised by 'an openness, acceptance, recognition of difference; an exploration of difference; as in 'dialogue' in the richest sense of the norm'. This is particularly important in the case of the niqab, where the general public is seemingly antagonised about it - approx 55 to 60 per cent of the UK population would like to see it banned in the public sphere (YouGov, 2013). The Internet offers a rare

chance to interact with a niqabi for many people who otherwise would not be have this opportunity. As a YouGov poll suggests, approx. 40 per cent of the population do not support a 'burka ban', yet their voice is not heard in the mass media. Some of these people may be interested in receiving first-hand information about the niqab and the analysed discussions suggest that they may be using the Internet as a window into 'niqabi experience'. It is important, however, to keep in mind that online discussions themselves may not necessarily lead to tangible results in terms of cross-cultural and cross-religious understanding; Papacharissi (2002: 17) writes that new media communication is fraught by fragmentation and limited knowledge of issues: 'there is a danger that these [new] technologies may overemphasize our differences and downplay or even restrict our commonalities'.

For the women themselves, these counterpublic-fostering settings offer a chance to express and receive support, and mobilise around shared values and beliefs, as well as experiences. Importantly, the narratives describing the experience of 'full niqab wearing' are overwhelmingly positive; this is in stark contrast with indictments of the niqab in the mass media. Geographical dispersion does not impact on readiness of these women to connect with each other. Instead, the analysed groups become vehicles for alternative discourse production with at least some reception beyond the groups of other niqabi women. Downey and Fenton (2002: 194) write: '[Counterpublic] offers forms of solidarity and reciprocity that are grounded in a collective experience of marginalization and expropriation, but these forms are inevitably experienced as mediated, no longer rooted in face-to-face relations, and subject to discursive conflict and negotiation'.

At a different level, Fairclough (2003) links orientation to difference to dialogicality in the Bakhtinian sense: 'a word, discourse, language or culture undergoes "dialogization" when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, and aware of competing definitions for the same things. Undialogized language is authoritative or absolute' (Bakhtin 1981: 427). In this sense, the

hegemonic discourse about the niqab becomes 'dialogised' by the alternative discourse emerging around the discussed self-portraits because it is no longer the only one. The examination of the alternative discourses, both textual and visual, demonstrates that the hegemonic discourse is highly selective and unbalanced; the former challenges the way in which women wearing the niqab are represented as devoid of goodwill and dehumanised.

Publication of self-portraits online and subsequent discussions about them are an important step in the self-identification of women who wear the niqab, as they are then able to create safe spaces for appreciation and positive discussion of the niqab. This is where they are able to resist dominant discourses about the niqab and Islam, and construct their own expressions of religiosity. Furthermore, they act as 'educators in diversity' tailoring interactions with different groups and educating members of the public about their understandings of Islam. Consequently, these actions disrupt the normalised associations of the niqab with passivity, hostility, and otherness. Notably, this is facilitated and fostered by new media which democratise access to information, as well as publishing opportunities (Turner, 2007).

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