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Original Article

# To Wear or Not to Wear the Hijab Online (A Study of the Identity Performances of Muslim Canadian Women on Facebook)

Fatemeh Mohammadi

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**Abstract**

This paper looks at how Muslim women with an Iranian background and now living in Canada perform their identity through wearing the hijab. This was achieved by observing the behavior of six members of this community on Facebook using Erving Goffman's stigmatization theory. The observation reveals that women who wear the hijab are more likely to identify themselves as Muslim-Canadian while those who have abandoned the hijab after immigration are more likely to identify themselves as Iranian-Canadian. Moreover, the results show that while Goffman's theory is very useful in trying to understand the stigmatization of the veil after the 9/11 attacks as well as other extremists' attacks, the pressures that this created on Muslim women, as well as the behavior of some women in dropping the veil in order to 'pass' such stigmatization, his theory is of limited use in understanding the more complicated performance of women who kept their hijab in spite of the challenges they faced.

**Keywords**: Erving Goffman, Facebook, Hijab, identity performances, Muslim women.

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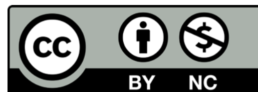


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## Introduction

There are 842,200 Muslims living in Canada according to the 2006 census This includes 121,510 Iranian-Canadians living in the country (Riley, 2011: 6). In 2010, the Pew Research Center estimated that the number of Muslims in Canada had increased to 940,000, making it the largest non-Christian religious group in the country. Canadian Muslims, both male and female, are more educated than the general public (Riley, 2011: 2). For example, one in three Muslim Canadian women have university degrees compared to one in five for the general female population. Muslims females also specialize in many leading edge technologies such as IT and biotechnology. Statistics show that nearly 37%, compared with 31 percent of all Canadian women, specialize in a field directly related to the Internet, biotechnologies and health care. However, many Muslim women are unemployed or underemployed in Canada. More than 16% of Canadian Muslim women are unemployed, which is more than double the national average and three times the number of unemployed female Jews in Canada (Hamdani, 2004: 4). One of the most important issues facing Muslim women living in Canada has been the issue of veiling in a secular society. This subject however has been remarkably under-studied in North America. Homa Hoodfar, professor of Anthropology at Concordia University explains: "The veil in Canada plays a crucial role of mediation and adaptation for many young Muslim women, something the literature has totally overlooked" (Hoodfar & Alvi, 2003: 38).

It is also important to note that clothing is a significant social institution through which important ideological and non-verbal communications takes place (Bullock & Nesbitt-Larking, 2011: 74). As such, studying the adoption and abandoning of the *hijab* (covering the hair using a headscarf) by Muslims in Canada is an important avenue to decipher the identity of this group of people. The narratives of Muslim women living in Canada can also help us reach a better understanding of the issues that they face in present-day Western metropolitan societies and suggest how Islamic female identity is made and performed online and how it may be constructed and performed elsewhere (Khan, 2002: 7).

This paper examines the online identity performance of a small group of young Muslim women who immigrated from Iran to Canada. This was achieved by studying the behaviour of six members of this community on Facebook for three months using Erving Goffman's stigmatization theory. Using the identity performance of Muslim Canadian women in Facebook as our case study, we can analyze the limits of Goffman's theory. His theories are very useful in trying to understand the stigmatization of

the veil after the 9/11 attacks, the pressures that this created on Muslim women, as well as the behaviour of some women in dropping the veil in order to 'pass' such stigmatization. On the other hand, Goffman's theory is of limited use in understanding the more complicated performance of women who kept their hijab in spite of the discrimination they faced. The next two sections will briefly explain this theoretical framework and the methodology of the selection process on Facebook. This will be followed by a brief summary of the results obtained after three months long observation period. Subsequently the paper analyzes the results and uses them to demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of Goffman's theory.

## Theoretical Framework

Erving Goffman was a renowned Canadian sociologist who made important contributions to social theory and symbolic interaction. The Times Higher Education Guide has listed Goffman as the 6th most-cited intellectual in the humanities and social sciences, ahead of other famous sociologists like Jurgen Habermas and Max Weber (The Times Higher Education Guide, 2007). Goffman's most famous book is *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which is widely cited in the sociology discipline, particularly in the areas of individual behaviour and social order.

Erving Goffman defines social interaction as a theater in which people are actors on a stage, each playing a variety of roles. He defines the behaviour of individuals in society as a *performance*, explaining that a performance is "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman, 1959: 15). Goffman is the first scholar who used the term *impression management*. He argues that when an individual comes in contact with other people, that individual attempts to control or guide the impression that people might have of him. He or she achieves this by manipulating the setting as well as his or her appearance and manner. This means that people are constantly expressing themselves to others (Goffman, 1959: 20-24).

Goffman argues that people put time and effort in their daily lives to construct a favourable impression in the minds of other people. This is similar to the role an actor has on stage where he has to act and pretend in front of an audience and is only relieved of this burden once he reaches his private space. It is only this *private area* where people can be themselves and get rid of their public role and identity (Goffman, 1959: 26-27). This *acting* in front of other people

is especially acute for people who are considered outside of the *norm*. Goffman's labels these people, whom society does not consider *normal*, as *stigmatized*. These individuals do not have full social acceptance and are constantly striving to adjust their social identities in order to fit into society (Goffman, 1959: 28). The kind of stigma Muslims faced after 9/11 is characterized by Goffman as "group identity stigma", in which the stigma comes from being of a particular ethnicity, nationality and religion. Moreover, Goffman explains that stigmatization usually involves stigma symbols (Goffman, 1963a: 3-6). Depending on the circumstance, many things can act as stigma symbols, which differentiate the *normal* people from the abnormal ones. These symbols are "signs that convey social information and are frequently and steadily available" (Goffman, 1963b: 17). This includes skin color, hearing aids and even a wheelchair (Goffman, 1963b: 18). In the case of Muslim women, one of the most important stigma symbols has been the hijab. Not only does the hijab allow the easy identification of Muslim women, but also because Islam instructs them to continuously wear it when in public, thus it is difficult for these women to distance themselves from this stigma even for a short while.

**Methodology**

To analyze the online identity performances of Muslim immigrant women in Canada, I chose six females from my circle of friends on Facebook. For the sake of this research paper seven people were chosen whom, six of them agreed to be in this project. These individuals were selected based on their profile pictures. Three of the selected individuals wore a hijab in their profile pictures. These individuals will be categorized as Group A from this point forward. On the other hand, the remaining three selected individuals did not cover their hair in their profile pictures. Before immigrating to Canada however, all three of these individuals had used pictures with the hijab for their Facebook page. Thus, unlike the first group, these individuals changed their online religious performance after moving to Canada. This second group of people will be labeled as Group B from now on. It is important to note that all six studied individuals were born in Iran and later immigrated to Canada. Also, all selected individuals are active members of Facebook, meaning that they post messages on their Facebook walls roughly every two days. Moreover, the selected individuals are all in the 21-28 years age-range. The online behaviour of these six individuals was studied every day for three months, from the 29th of August to the 29th of November 2019.

The methodology used for this research paper is observation alongside of participation. Participation observation is an established methodology in Anthropology. Participant observation produces rich qualitative data, which the researcher can see, experience and participate at the same time. This methodology helped to gain empathy through shared experience with the participants. Also, in order to conduct research among youth, participant observation methodology eases the process of gaining their trust. Participant observation methodology is also known as *ethnographic methodology* and it is a well-known methodology in social sciences especially Anthropology (Kawulich, 2005: 43). Barbara Kawulich explained this methodology in a sentence: "Active looking, improving memory, writing detailed field notes, and perhaps most importantly, patience." Danny Jorgensen argues that this methodology requires the researcher to be an active participant. He further elaborates that this methodology is suitable for a wide range of scholarly problems and the researcher has an insider viewpoint. Participant observation or the ethnography is open-ended and flexible (Jorgensen, 1989: 23). The participant observation and firsthand experience helped to better understand the online religious and cultural identities of these young immigrant women. The field notes were divided into two sections (Groups A and B) based on their profile pictures. Then the activities of the six Facebook users were monitored based on their profile pictures. The field notes were analyzed based on participant observation methodology and online ethnographic research.

We must also point out the limitations of this paper's approach. The design of this research only included six Muslim women living in Canada, all with Iranian backgrounds. As such it is difficult to generalize their behaviour to the larger Muslim community living in the country. Moreover, even among Iranians living in Canada, there is a greater diversity than that presented in this paper. In fact, the behaviour of many members of this community might fall somewhere in between the two categorise presented in this paper. Moreover, to better understand the motives behind the behaviour of these individuals, in-depth interviews are recommended.

## The Impact of 9/11 on the Muslim Community in Canada

Before analyzing the results of the above case study, we must briefly examine the effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Muslim community. Since the tragic events of 9/11, the Muslim community living in Canada has been under a national security spotlight. Security

officials from organizations such as the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police), CSIS (Canadian Security Intelligence Service) and local police have been visiting and talking to Muslims. The Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relation (CAIR-CAN) has conducted a national survey on this issue. The result of the survey shows that 8 percent of the 467 respondents were questioned by security officials, with 46% of them reported feeling fearful, anxious or nervous and 24% of them felt harassed and discriminated against. Many reported that the officers were aggressive and threatened them with arrest based on the Anti-Terrorism Act. Many problematic questions were asked, such as their loyalty to Canada, their level of commitment to the Islamic faith and its rituals, as well as questions asking their opinion about the word *jihad*. CAIR-CAN also conducted a study on death threats, assaults, harassment, discrimination, vandalism, racial profiling and attacks on Muslims and their institutions and places of worship in the year following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (Hamdani, 2004: 2-5). The results indicate that 56% of respondents reported anti-Muslim incidents at least in one occasion in the year after 9/11. Thirty three percent of these anti-Muslim incidents were verbal abuse; other highly reported experiences included racial profiling and 16% included workplace discrimination. Also, 56% of respondents indicated that they felt media reporting on Islam and Muslims in Canada had become increasingly biased (Hamdani, 2004: 6).

To analyze the effect of 9/11 on Muslims in Canada, Baljit Nagra conducted in depth interviews with fifty Muslims, including 26 women. These women reported that they had experienced resentment of Islam and the wearing of the hijab in Canada before 9/11; however, this discrimination significantly increased after the event. One of the interviewees who was born in Canada but comes from an Indian-Fijian immigrant family explains, "...before the (discrimination) was mostly to do with my skin colour and not to do with my religion. Now it is definitely more to do with my faith than with my skin colour. The times have now changed" (Nagra, 2011: 39). These events are not isolated cases either. There was a sixteen-fold increase in the number of hate crimes experienced by Muslim between September 2001 and September 2002. Meanwhile the Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC) reported a seventeen-fold increase in the number of complaints it received by Muslims who had been the subject of discrimination. Also, the Toronto Police Service Hate Crime Unit reports that 57 hostile acts were committed against Muslims during 2001, compared with only one in 2000 (Helly, 2004: 30-33). Nagra reports that 60% of his

interviewees indicate having experienced discrimination since 9/11. Even the ones who had escaped such treatment were very concerned about it with only one interviewee out of the fifty saying that he has no concerns facing discrimination.

Katherine Bullock, a lecturer at the University of Toronto and editor of the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* from 2003–2008, explains, “Muslim women in Hijab are regularly told by Canadians: ‘This is Canada. You’re free here. You don’t have to wear that thing on your head’” (Bullock, 2011: 10).

**The Abandonment of Islamic Symbols in Group B**

From the above discussion, it is easier to understand why a group of Muslim women abandoned public symbols of Islam such as the hijab. In the case of the women in Group B, out of the 140, 201, and 90 photos that persons 1, 2 and 3 posted respectively, not a single one image had any relationship to Islam whatsoever. On the other hand these individuals posted pictures of Halloween gatherings, Christmas parties and ‘liked’ the pages of Hollywood films and actors. As Goffman explains stigma symbols prevent these individuals from being accepted into society and people around them would not interact with them based on *equal grounds* (Goffman, 1963b: 7). Thus, these women had to modify how they presented their identity to the public in order to better assimilate into society. Another important aspect of this behaviour that can be analyzed using Goffman’s theory is the concept of shame. It can be argued that some Muslim women stopped displaying public symbols of Islam because they were ashamed to show their Muslim identity, an identity that was associated by the media and the public with terrorism and violence. To negotiate this shame, these individuals had to manage their words, gestures and dress to project an impression of themselves that was acceptable to the norms of society. Therefore, these people had to please the audience in order to produce a particular image that protected them from discrimination and ridicule. Goffman calls this process *normification*. Normification is an effort the stigmatized individual makes in order to present himself/ herself as an ordinary person (Goffman, 1963b: 31). This can be a major reason why 1, 2 and 3 women from Group B, all carefully avoided posting anything remotely religious on their Facebook walls. Research data shows that Muslim Canadian women who do not wear the hijab feel more integrated into society and more *Canadian*. These women are also twice as likely as their veiled counterparts to have more than ten non-Muslim friends. On the other hand over a third of Canadian women who wear the hijab

reported to have only one to three non-Muslim friends (Hoodfar & Alvi, 2003: 96-98).

The issue of stigmatization is even more amplified in this case, since the virtual world of Facebook is a social network where wide varieties of people are able to view your profile and can even save your pictures and share it with other people. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe who studied the Facebook behaviour of Michigan State University undergraduate population, point out that the Facebook activity of students had a major impact on their social capital in college. Moreover, the social network acted as an important bridge between the student's offline and online connections (Ellison et al., 2006). It should also be noted that pictures and messages posted on Facebook could be saved and recorded. This heightens the need to manage one's identity performance according to the norms of society. Thus, it can be concluded that members of Group B carefully stayed away from all Islamic symbols in a bid to escape being stigmatized by society. This argument is confirmed by numerous scholars who have studied Muslim communities living in the West in the post 9/11 era such as Khan (2002), and Hoodfar and Alvi (2003).

**Muslim-Canadian or Iranian-Canadian?**

The results also show that while group A emphasize their religious identity online, members of the second group publicize their ethnic identity. None of the three individuals from Group A mention in their profile the country they are originally from. On the other hand, all three members of Group B publicized their Iranian background. Furthermore, all three of them specified which part of Iran they were from. This distinction is also apparent in the wall posts and *Likes* of the two groups. Members of Group A wrote many posts and liked many pages that were directly related to Islam. Members of Groups B however stayed away from projecting a religious identity on Facebook and instead wrote posts and liked pages that were related to Iran as a county, Persian as an ethnicity, as well as Iranian art and culture. These results confirm the research of scholars such as Reem A. Meshal, who conducted a nationwide survey of Muslim women in Canada and concluded that the percentage of veiled Muslim women who identified themselves as Muslim-Canadian is more than the number of women who didn't wear hijab and identified themselves as Canadian. The latter group identified more with their ethnic backgrounds. Meshal however argues that generally speaking, most Muslim immigrants in Canada cast aside their original culture and take a different identity

and see themselves as Muslim-Canadians. She adds that Muslim women "are no longer identifying with their country of origin, but are indistinguishable from their co-religionists under the common label of Muslim," implying that assimilation has already occurred and that ethnic identity is not as important to Canadian Muslim women as their religious identity (Hoodfar & Alvi, 2003: 96).

Olivier Roy, a Professor at the European University Institute in Florence and research director at the French National Center for Scientific Research, characterizes this development as the creation of a *new Umma* or Muslim community. He argues that Islamic revival or what he calls *re-Islamization* is shaping among Muslims communities living in the West. Roy asserts Muslims in Western societies have learned to be *true believers* in the context of secular societies. Re-Islamization is part of acculturation and not against it. This means that a new identity is shaped for Muslims living as a minority that is influenced by the construction of a *deculturalised* Islam, which expresses a religious identity that is not linked to an inherited culture and is able to fit in every culture (Roy, 2005: 23). According to this doctrine, the Islamic *Umma* in Western societies is not attached to a specific territory or culture. This leads to the notion of a *universal Islam* that is valid in any cultural context.

The results of this case study, however, only partially confirm Roy (2005) and Meshal's (2003) arguments. While members of Group A clearly emphasized their religious identity over their ethnic heritage, members of Group B publicized their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Thus, it seems that Roy and Meshal are overgeneralizing the identity formations of Muslims living in Western societies. Members of Group A can be considered Muslim-Canadians who are members of a new *Umma,* however members of Group B clearly project an identity that is better characterized as Iranian-Canadian. It is interesting to note that even among members of Group A, one can find wall posts and *Likes* that are about Iranian art, cinema and culture, even if they are sidelined by the larger amount of posts and Likes relating to Islam. Thus, the process that Roy (2005) and Meshal (2003) talk about is not complete even among members of this group.

### Publicizing Islamic Symbols in Group A

The results of the current case study also show that the abandonment of Islamic symbols by Muslim women cannot be generalized to the entire community, and there are individuals who are not shy about displaying their Islamic faith and background. Indeed, members of

Group A not only avoided managing their profiles in order to better fit into Canadian society but also publicized the much stigmatized symbols that Goffman asserts they will abandon. Various scholars, who have studied the identity performance of Muslim women living in the West, have also reported this kind of behaviour among a large segment of this community's population. Baljit Nagra reports that out of the 50 people who were interviewed as part of his study, only one indicated that she stopped telling people that she was a Muslim after 9/11. Fifteen people indicated that their Muslim identity was a focal part of their identity before and after 9/11. The remaining majority (34 people) indicated that they identify themselves more strongly as Muslims in the post 9/11 era (Nagra, 2011: 116). This re-assertion of Muslim identity is the driving factor behind the publicizing of Islamic symbols such as the veil. These symbols have also acted as weapons of defiance and resistance against stereotyping and misrepresentation by society. Radi, a veiled Canadian woman, explains, "After 9/11, I was more proud to be recognized as a Muslim than before. When I would be with Muslim sisters who would wear the headscarf, I would want to be recognized as a Muslim compared to anything else. I was proud. I wanted people to know that I was not going to be drawn away from the faith. I wanted people to know that this is not Islam. The true Islam is not what happened with 9/11" (Nagra, 2011: 101). Even more interesting, Nagra describes a Canadian Muslim family whose textile business sales plummeted by 30 percent after the wife, who represented the company in sales meetings, decided to wear the hijab. The woman, who had not worn a hijab before 9/11, indicated that she would continue the practice regardless of the economic loss (Nagra, 2011: 62). Surveys and interviews by Meshal (2003: 94), Gurbuz and Gurbuz-Kucuksari (2009: 388), Ryan (2011: 1050) have also reported a reassertion of Islamic identities through symbols such as the hijab among Muslim youth. A major weakness of these studies however, is that none of them point to the existing theoretical gap in explaining such behaviour.

**The Need for a New Theoretical Framework**

This paper has so far discussed how Goffman's theory of social interaction can be effectively used to understand the stigmatization of Islamic symbols in Canadian society after 9/11 and how this created a strong pressure on Muslim women to abandon symbols such as the hijab in order to join *normal* society. However, while Goffman's theory is very useful in analyzing the behaviour of the members of Group

B, the framework is of limited use when examining the performance of women in Group A. In fact, Goffman predicts that stigmatized individuals attempt to *repair* their perceived defect by attempting to eliminate the stigma symbol in order to re-enter society, even if such assimilation is partial: "Where such repair is possible, what often results is not the acquisition of fully normal status, but a transformation of self from someone with a particular blemish into someone with a record of having corrected a particular blemish" (Goffman, 1963b: 7). As discussed earlier however, members of Group A not only did not abandon such symbols but also publicized them through Facebook. Based on such a framework, why would a Muslim woman who is outside of *normal* society after 9/11 adopts the very stigma symbol that allows the public to identify her? These individuals clearly do not fit inside a framework that stresses that individuals marked by stigma attempt to *pass* or conceal such stigma.

When analyzing the public performances of women who held onto religious symbols after 9/11, there seems to be a theoretical gap in academic literature. Several scholars have used Goffman's theory to understand the social interactions of Muslims after 9/11 in both the United States and the UK; however none of these scholars have noted the limitations of the theory. Shabana Mir examines Muslim American undergraduate women's performances in Washington DC from 2002 to 2003. Mir explains that unless Muslim women "disavow [their] Muslim identity and use disidentifiers such as being 'cool' with alcohol, they may be seen as religious and/ or ethnic 'outcasts'" (Mir, 2011: 548). Nevertheless, she reports some Muslim women indicating that they would not abandon their public religious practices in a bid to *join in* with society. Her only and very brief explanation of this behavior, which goes against the assertions of Goffman, is that "Stigma, resistance and symbolic violence join forces to spoil the identities of Muslim American youth, the outcome remains shrouded in mist, along with the future of the nation" (Mir, 2011: 563).

Mustafa E. Gurbuz and Gulsum Gurbuz-Kucuksar also use Goffman to understand headscarf practice in American colleges. They conclude that Muslim girls "torn in between dominant secular norms in the society and values of Islamic faith, most American Muslim college girls see their headscarf practice as 'liberating' and 'empowering'" (Gurbuz & Gurbuz-Kucuksar, 2009: 387). Gurbuz and Gurbuz- Kucuksari argue more directly than Mir that Muslim girls have not abandoned the hijab after 9/11; however, they too do not discuss how this fact contradicts the assumptions of Goffman. Louise Ryan also uses a Goffmanian framework

to examine the performance of Muslim women in Britain in the post 9/11 and 7/7 eras. She comes to the conclusion that these women resist stigmatization "by asserting their moral integrity and laying claim to 'the normal'" (Ryan, 2011: 1045-1050). As with the previous scholars, Ryan does not attempt to reform Goffman's theory.

Using the identity performance of Muslim Canadian women in Facebook as our case study, we can analyze the limits of Goffman's theory. The root cause of the theory's weakness is that it assumes that the stigmatized individual accepts the same identity and values as that of general society. Goffman states, "The stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we do. This is a pivotal fact" (Goffman, 1963b: 7). As discussed earlier however, the women in Group A did not accept the identity prescribed to them by society. Another important limitation of Goffman's theory is the presentation of society and its norms as all-powerful. This approach sees the structure, society in this case, as dominant and the individual as subordinate. Thus, individual members of society must constantly act and perform in a certain way that is acceptable to common norms. The problem of such a view is that it robs individuals of agency. The case study presented in this paper demonstrates, on the other hand, that people react differently to societal pressures. Some adopt dominant norms in order to be part of normal society. Others resist such pressures and continue with their stigmatized behavior. Finally, some individuals go as far as voluntarily and consciously adopting stigmatized symbols in a bid to defy society and resist its prejudices. Thus, agency should not be subordinated to structure and as such the individual should not be seen as subservient to society.

Goffman's framework also discusses human interactions as if a single hegemonic discourse exists in society. It is this hegemonic discourse that decides what is considered *normal* and what is stigmatized. While it is true that some discourse and narratives are more dominant in society than others, Goffman commits the mistake of seeing such narratives as absolute. In the context of this paper's topic, there was indeed a powerful stigmatization of Muslims and their visible symbols after 9/11 in Canada; nevertheless, such stigmatization has never been complete. An example will make this argument more clear. A poll of the Canadian public shows that 95% of Quebecers and 75% of Canadians support laws that would ban women wearing the *niqab* or *burqa* (a gown that covers the entire body including the face) from working in the government, receiving government services, hospital care or university instructions (Scott, 2010: 1820). However,

another poll found that two out of three Quebecers in the 18-24 age-ranges have a favourable opinion of Muslims, compared with only 37% of people 65 and over. Also, three out of four of the younger group said they had no problem with women wearing the hijab in public, compared with 50% of people 65 and over. Fifty five percent of the younger age group indicated that they had no issue with the wearing of even the burqa in public (Heinrich, 2007: 53). These numbers demonstrate there is no hegemony of what *normal appearance* should be. Interestingly the polls also show that public sentiment in Canada on Islamic coverings whether the hijab or the more extreme burqa, is more favourable among young adults. The point of this example is that there is no absolute consensus on what is normal and what is considered a stigma, unlike what is presented in Goffman's work. As a result while there have been several surveys, as discussed earlier, which report Muslim women feeling pressured by the general public, there is also survey data that demonstrates that some Muslim women report "tolerant," "respectful," and "highly supportive" reactions from the Canadian public (Hoodfar & Alvi, 2003: 85).

Another important point to make is that there might be diverging views on what is acceptable behaviour among different segments of society. Thus, while a particular act might be seen negatively among the general public, the same act might be seen positively among one's peers or one's local community. In the case of the hijab, while important segments of the general public stigmatized it, inside Muslim communities it was seen favourably. Indeed fellow Muslims, in contrast to the general public, encouraged the wearing of the hijab and frowned upon members who had abandoned it. Nearly three quarters of veiled Muslim Canadian women and 61 percent of unveiled women say that wearing the hijab earns the *trust* and *respect* of the Muslim community. At the same time, 58 percent of veiled Canadian Muslim women question the spiritual integrity and moral fibre of women who abandon the hijab. According to one veiled woman, "they are weak and have low self-esteem. No faith" (Hoodfar & Alvi, 2003: 91). Maybe this is why 25% of unveiled Muslim women have indicated that they felt pressure to wear the hijab by the Muslim community (Hoodfar & Alvi, 2003: 86). As a result, the *shame* that Goffman talks about runs both ways. Thus, while some Muslim women felt ashamed of performing their Muslim identity in society through the hijab after 9/11 and other terrorist attacks, others who had abandoned the hijab felt ashamed when they interacted with members of the Muslim community. Therefore, while the online behaviour of the members of group A might intensify their stigmatization by the general

public, at the same time it might increase their standing among fellow Muslims. On the hand, the three individuals of Group B, who posted pictures of themselves without the hijab on Facebook and who carefully avoided the mentioning of Islam online, might increase their chances of assimilating into secular society, while hurting their standing among fellow Muslims.

**Conclusion**

To understand the religious identity performances of Muslim women on Facebook, we must comprehend the pressures and incentives faced by these women from society as well as from their own religious communities. As noted earlier, in most instances Muslim women are torn between the pressures and reactions of the Canadian general public on the one hand and the Muslim community on the other. For example, three quarters of parents of Canadian Muslim women, who wear the hijab, support the practice. On the other hand, only a third of the parents of unveiled women support the wearing of the hijab (Hoodfar & Alvi, 2003: 82-83). The reason for raising this issue is not to further complicate an already complex picture, but rather to show the difficult, contradictory and multifaceted pressures and support Muslim women receive and how this affects their behaviour in the virtual world.

These complexities limit the use of Goffman's theory in analyzing the public performances of Muslim women on Facebook. His theories are very useful in trying to understand the stigmatization of the veil after the 9/11 attacks, the pressures that this created on Muslim women, as well as the behaviour of some women in dropping the veil in order to *pass* such stigmatization, as was done among members of Group B. On the other hand, Goffman's theory is of limited use in understanding the more complicated performance of women who kept their hijab in spite of the discrimination they faced as was done among members of Group A. Members of Group A not only avoided managing their profiles in order to better fit into Canadian society but also publicized the much stigmatized symbols that Goffman asserts they will abandon. Goffman's theory is unable to account for such diversity because it overgeneralizes and oversimplifies the reaction of individuals to the pressures of society. The theory also assumes that there is a single hegemonic discourse on what is considered *normal* and what is considered a stigma. Moreover, *society* is presented as all-powerful and dominating over the individual, robbing the individual of his/her agency to resist and fight back.

**Appendix**

*Results*

| Names | Group A | | | Group B | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Profile photo | Picture of her wearing a headscarf in a forest | Picture of her wearing a headscarf with flowers in the background | Picture of her wearing a headscarf with one of her friends | Picture of her without a headscarf with colourful leaves for the background | Personal photo without headscarf | Personal photo with her brother without a headscarf |
| Cover photo (Acts as the template of your Facebook time-line and is only visible to your friends) | It was Persian calligraphy but was later changed to a picture of a religious shrine | The name of an Islamic saint written in Arabic calligraphy | Painting of an old house drawn by her. This was later changed after November 22 to religious calligraphy | It was a picture of nature but she changed it to a picture of herself at a Christmas party | Picture of herself and a girlfriend | No cover photo |

| | Group A | | | Group B | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Names** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **1** | **2** | **3** |
| Photo album | 80 out of 186 photos have religious connotations. Many are pictures of Islamic shrines and the rest are religious calligraphies. Thirty of them are pictures of her personal photos, all of which are with the headscarf. Seven pictures are related to the Iranian New Year and Iranian historical sites. The rest are pictures of Canada's nature. | 30 out of 145 have religious connotations. There are three photos of her in nature while wearing a headscarf. The rest are pictures of nature and historical sites from Iran. | 8 out of 16 pictures have religious connotations. These include pictures of Islamic arts, calligraphy, mosques and temples. There are four personal photos of her wearing a headscarf in the forest. The rest are pictures of nature and beautiful landscapes. | Out of 140 photos, not one is remotely related to any aspects of Islam. All of them are either a picture of the profile owner without a scarf or pictures of beautiful landscape from both Iran and Canada as well as pictures of Iranian historical sites. | Out of 201 photos, none of them have religious connotations. All of them are pictures of the profile owner without a scarf. | Out of 90 photos, none of them are religious. All of them are pictures of the profile owner without a scarf and most of them are at Halloween parties. |

| | Group A | | | Group B | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Names** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **1** | **2** | **3** |
| Visibility of her friends (this can be manipulated via Facebook's privacy settings) | All her friends are visible. | Only our mutual friends are visible to me. | Only our mutual friends are visible to me. | Only our mutual friends are visible to me. | All her friends are visible. | All her friends are visible. |
| *Likes* (of Facebook pages) | 15 out of 91 are religious. One of them is an Islamic community organization in Montreal. Four are Islamic figures. The remaining 76 *Likes* are of movies, books, and actors. There are five pages related to Iranian culture, poets and actors. | Her *Likes* are not visible. | 24 out of 225 are religious (including religious figures, temples, quotes, etc.). The rest are mainly pages of Iranian architecture and art. | Her *Likes* are not visible. | None of the 86 *Likes* have any relations to any religion. They are all pages of Hollywood and Iranian films, singers, books and TV shows. She likes a page of Iranian-Canadians and Iranian-Americans. | None of the 49 *Likes* have any relations to any religion. Three of the *Likes* indicate her Iranian heritage but are not related to Islam. The rest are of Hollywood and Iranian movies. |

| | Group A | | | Group B | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Names | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Wall posts | Posted many religious quotes relating to different Islamic ceremonies, religious poems and clips. She also posted a part of an Iranian movie. She also posted Happy Iranian New Year. | Most of her posts are either a quote from a religious figure or parts of religious documentaries. She also asked two questions relating to medical engineering (her field of study). | Most of her posts are either a quote from a religious figure or parts of a religious documentary. She also posted pictures and clips of Disney cartoons. | Posted clips of some Iranian singers, a Halloween clip, artistic pictures of nature, a picture that condemns sanctions towards Iran, pictures of her trip to historical sites and ancient villages of Iran. No sign of her religious past. | Posted a clip of a concert, posts regarding the Iranian New year and other holidays. No sign of her past religiosity. | Posted some scientific articles about biotechnology, Iranian music, Iranian new year, a clip on how to teach Persian to someone else, a 'status update' about going back home (to Iran), but no sign of her religious past. |
| Personal information visible on her profile | Four pieces of information are available: where she works, studied, her relationship status and her current city. | Two pieces of information are available: her gender and relationship status. | Three pieces of information are available: her gender, birthdate and name of high school. | Four pieces of information are available: where she studies, her current city, the city in Iran she is from and her full birthdate. | Four pieces of information are available: where she works, the university she graduated from, current city in Canada and where in Iran she's from. | Four pieces of information are available: where she works, her birthdate, current city in Canada and where in Iran she's from. |

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