

## **Fashioning hybrid Muslim women's veiled embodied geographies in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand: #hijabi spaces**

Anoosh Soltani,<sup>a</sup> Lynda Johnston<sup>b</sup> and Robyn Longhurst<sup>b</sup>

*<sup>a</sup> Independent researcher, Bordeaux, France; <sup>b</sup> Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato, University of Waikato Aotearoa New Zealand*

Anoosh Soltani, PhD, Email: [As347@students.waikato.ac.nz](mailto:As347@students.waikato.ac.nz), Tel: +33635180995,   
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5092-7961>

Anoosh Soltani holds a Ph.D. in Human Geography from the University of Waikato, Aotearoa New Zealand. Her Ph.D. thesis explores Muslim women's embodied identity (re)constructions and negotiations in the spaces of employment, leisure, and social networking sites. She is a social and cultural geographer, with expertise in the areas of feminism, gender, migration, the body, and inequality.

Lynda Johnston's research interests centre on the challenges and spatial complexities of inequality. Specifically, Lynda draws attention to the exclusionary ways in which various forms of marginalisation and discrimination – such as sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and racism – shape people's places and spaces.

Robyn Longhurst has a long-standing interest in gender, equity and social justice. She researches in the broad areas of social and cultural geography, with a particular interest in embodiment. Robyn has carried out work on pregnancy, mothering, migrant women, body size and shape, and disability.

## **Fashioning hybrid Muslim women's veiled embodied geographies in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand: #hijabi spaces**

In this article, we foreground the intersection of hijab and fashion as multiple expressions of Muslim women's gendered identities and geographies in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand. Muslim women use their bodies to express adaptations of femininity, religion, and nationalities. Using an embodied geography lens, this article grapples with mutual intersecting identities, including gender, religion and nationality and wider relations of power. Drawing on interviews with 30 participants and their social media images, we show how participants trouble a modesty and fashion binary. They do this in – and through – the city of Hamilton in both online and offline spaces. There are three findings. First, we show the complex relationship between identities, hijab, fashion, gender and religious power relations in and around their bodies. Second, Muslim women have conflicting emotions when wearing a veil and engaging with fashionable clothing and accessories in Hamilton. Finally, we focus on the ways that Muslim women use Facebook and Instagram and an array of fashion hashtags to illustrate the intersection of hijab, clothes, place and Western fashion. In doing so they negotiate online and offline spaces to construct hybrid fashionable-Islamic bodies and places. In each of these findings, we highlight the ways participants understand their Muslim-Kiwi identities.

Key words: veil, fashion, hybrid, Muslim women, embodied geography, Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand

### **Introduction**

This article explores the ways in which Muslim women challenge and conform to gendered and cultural norms about modesty and fashion through the use of fashionable clothing and accessories while living in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand. Muslim women create multiple and hybrid - seemingly contradictory - elements of hijab, femininity and beauty in and through place. 'Fashion' is a contested and multi-dimensional concept as it is constructed through culture, economy, and conceptualization of authenticity, time and place (Crewe 2017). For the purposes of this article, fashion refers to complex social processes related to stylish looks and clothes as well as places, politics and emotions around everyday practices (Almil 2019). Clothing is one of the core constituents in any form of fashion (Dwyer and Crang 2002, Longhurst 2005; Sandikci and Ger 2010). Focusing on Muslim women's fashion is an example

of the right to legitimately appear in – and define – fashionable bodies, spaces and places while wearing hijab (Asad et al. 2013; Butler 2015).

Within conservative Islam, the hijab works as a means to hide femininity and to prevent Muslim women's bodies from men's sexual gaze (Dwyer 1999). In contrast, fashion, including fashionable clothing, pieces of jewelry and make-up are designed to draw attention to bodies (Lewis 2007). The majority of Muslim clergies discourage Muslim women's engagement with fashion and beauty practices as this may draw attention towards Muslim women's bodies, femininity and sexuality, and therefore transgress conservative Islamic principles of modesty.

In the West, the hijab is an over-determinant of Muslim women's identity, and messages from popular culture construct the hijab and veiled body as backward, rural, ugly, and oppressed rather than progressive, fashionable, urban and free (Abu-Lughod 2002; Dwyer 2000; Said 1978; Sandikci and Ger 2010). Veiled bodies are deemed to be a visible marker of women's oppression and disrupt the standards of beauty and/or liberal values of the West (Humphrey 2007; Young 2005). Further, Western hegemonic discourses and popular media ignore Muslim women's various forms of hijab, including the fact that some Muslim women do not wear a veil. Our research contests the portrayal all Muslim women as a homogenous group with a pre-determined and fixed religious identity (Dwyer 2000; Gökariksel and Secor 2014). Employing intersectionality that is attuned to place, we stress in this article that gender and / or religion cannot be considered as single category that develops in isolation from age, culture, ethnicity and class (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff 2008).

Thus, from both sides - conservative Islam and some Western perspectives - fashion is not usually associated with Muslim women who wear hijab and cover their bodies. Rather, they are seen to be intrinsically 'inimical to fashion' (Lewis 2007, 424). This binary discourse leaves

little room for Muslim women's agency, participation, hybridity and multiple expressions of beauty, femininity and religion. It is essential to study Muslim women's diverse experiences rather than to focus attention solely on religion and to be aware that they are not passive in receiving ideas and guidelines, but are active social actors (Read and Bartkowski 2000).

Contrary to orthodox readings of modesty and fashion as inherently inimical, a growing number of hijabi Muslim women are becoming consumers of fashion while, at the same time, holding up to their religious values (Dwyer and Crang 2002; Göle 2002; Kılıçbay and Binark 2002).

Following Mahmood's (2012) critique of the binary between agency and normative Islam values, we see hijabi fashion as having strong symbolic value that mobilises hybrid views on gender, place and religion (Berg and Lundahl 2016; Butler 2015). Mahmood (2012, 22), building on Butler's (1990) theorising of gender subversion, claims that norms 'are not only consolidated and / or subverted ... but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways'. We agree and our research is also focused on the way norms are lived, inhabited, challenged and constructed in social and cultural geographies. We theorise Muslim women's agency in and through their capacity to create hijabi fashion spaces and places in Hamilton while drawing on – and reinterpreting - religious teaching and cultural practices (Mahmood 2012). It is important to note here that participants vary in their performances of hybrid identities, with some using the hijab to depart from normative Islamic identities.

Drawing on ethnographic research, we show the ways in which respondents challenge - and conform to - existing gendered, social and cultural norms about modesty and fashion as they negotiate their gender, religious, ethnic and national identities in the postcolonial and Western context of Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand. We make visible the tensions between anti and pro discourses on the veil, fashion and bodies by examining the visible, spatial and material

articulation of participants' identities. Muslim women's experiences in Hamilton show how they embody Kiwi (Aotearoa New Zealand) national sensibilities as they construct hybrid embodied and place identities that are both online and offline.

In what follows, we first review literature on embodied geographies of Muslim women, place, power and fashion. We then discuss the methods and context of the research. Three research findings are presented: the diverse meanings of the hijab for Muslim women; conflicting emotions of Muslim women when wearing a veil and engaging with fashionable clothing and accessories in Hamilton; and, the intersection and negotiation of hijab, clothes and Western fashion to create hybrid fashionable-Islamic bodies. In each of these findings, we highlight the ways participants understand their intersectional Muslim-Kiwi identities.

### **Embodied geographies of Muslim women's fashion**

Muslim women's embodied geographies, in this article, incorporates an understanding of gender, place, hijab, fashion, religious and national identities at the level of the body. The relation between hijab, modesty and fashion has attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines such as cultural geographies, marketing and politics. In their separate studies in three different environments - Dwyer (1999, 2000) in the United Kingdom, Göle (2002), Gökariksel and Secor (2014) in Turkey, and Lewis (2007) in London fashion shops - stress the importance of hijab and spatial context in shaping Muslim women's expressions and experience of fashion.

In their research, Dwyer and Crang (2002) consider the ways that young British South Asian Muslim women actively create fashionable clothing reflecting the possibilities of intersecting Western and Eastern cultures to form alternative cultures. They reveal how the entanglements of their religion, gender, ethnicity and age inform young Muslim women's

understandings of fashion. Dwyer (2000) argues that young Muslim women's identities are a combination of various cultures and values. In her pioneering work on young Muslim women in the United Kingdom, Dwyer (1999, 2008) shows how, along with gender relations, the economic power of Muslim women shape their everyday life practices, such as dress styles, going to school and age of marriage.

In Turkey, Göle (2002) describes a new generation of Muslim women who reflectively adapt contemporary youth and fashion cultures, and map them upon their bodies with their clothes, leisure and work practices. Gökariksel and Secor (2014) found that veiling fashions in Turkey complicate post-colonialist and Orientalist conceptualisations of Muslim women. They argue that being religious does not necessarily mean being opposed to being modern, fashionable and politically active. Their research reveals, in detail, how young Muslim women and girls express and incorporate their religious identities with alternative versions of fashion.

Findings by Gökariksel and Secor (2014, 180) show that fashionably veiled women constantly 'navigate the multiple social and cultural signification of their clothing, which has been variably associated with politics, aesthetics, fashion, and class status'. Their Turkey respondents use fashionable clothes and other materials such as jewellery and accessories and try to inspire some 'looks', as 'fashion is designed to be looked at' while subverting disparaging gazes (Gökariksel and Secor 2014, 182).

Sandikci and Ger's (2010) study shows Muslim women compose diverse Islamic fashion trends by drawing on the Quran and hadiths- the collection of traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad revered by Muslims as a major source of religious law and moral guidance -which encourage Muslims to look 'beautiful' and clean. These Muslim women re-construct the veil as 'a fashionable consumption choice' (Sandikci and Ger 2010, 19). In her research on fashion and

Muslim women in London, Lewis (2007, 425) describes a group of young Muslim women, who draw on discourses of Muslim revivalist scholars and ‘try to reverse the values ascribed to the opposition between Islam and commerce, tradition and modernity, modesty and fashion’.

Lewis (2015) focuses on the role of social media in construction discourses on modest fashion. She argues that social media facilitates multiple transnational debates among Muslim and non-Muslim groups on the topic of modesty and fashion. Such online debates have pushed the boundaries and embodiments of hijab and modesty. Gould (2014) uses Marxist feminism to interrogate the ways in which ‘hijab-as-commodity’ is permeated by capitalist norms. Gould (2014) observed that in Iran, a group of young middle-class women engage in ‘misveiling’, that is, wrapping scarfs loosely around their heads in order to show, for example, dyed blond hair. Misveiling, alongside wearing fashionable jewellery and fitted clothing, is an example of contesting Iran’s state mandated veiling. Yet here, Gould (2014, 233) argues, the missveiled body is part of the ‘same patriarchal project of co-opting women’s agency, marking out female difference publicly and ineradicably, and reinforcing male authority’ (Gould 2014, 233).

In her book, *Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress*, Elizabeth Bucar (2017) explores contemporary meanings and styles of veiling across three case studies; Tehran; Yogyakarta; and, Istanbul. Applying a comparative lens, Bucar’s (2017) research foregrounds that Muslim women’s dresses, veiling styles and expressions of modesty are diverse and simultaneously (re)constructed through the interplay of religion, capitalism, authentic discourses, body politics and modernity. One crucial contribution of her research is to reject the limiting, yet dominant, discourses that reduce Muslim women’s dress only to veiling. Instead, she adopted a more critical ethnographic lens and revealed diversity of sartorial and embodied practices that constitute Muslim women’s clothing. Intersections of embodiment, clothing and power

This literature shows the importance of body, clothes, power and discourses in the ways Muslim women express their femininity, religion and beauty within particular spaces. Building on these studies, we employ three concepts - the body, identity and discourse - to explore the ways in which Muslim women use clothing and accessories to subvert and redefine stereotypes around hijab and fashion, femininity, religion and nationality.

The body is the very first medium through which people experience - and create identities with - physical environments and other people. It is 'a primary tool through which all interactions and emotions filter in accessing' (Longhurst et al. 2008, 208) and understanding geographies of everyday life. The body is a crucial site reflecting socio-economic, political and sexual meanings (Johnston and Longhurst, 2010). A focus on fashionable Muslim women's bodies, then, brings to the fore –embodied agency, social and cultural identities within both online and offline spaces (Bhimji 2009; Mansson McGinty 2012, 2014). The body, then, is a politicised site that cannot be understood outside of political, cultural, religious and gender discourses. The history, geographical location and particular norms of places play a major role in the extent to which a body can resist, conform to or subvert hegemonic discourses and norms (Longhurst and Johnston 2014; Young 2005).

Yuval-Davis (2011, 13) contends that 'differently embodied signifiers, such as the colour of skin, clothing, accent and modes of behaviour' mark different locations for individuals. Visible embodiments, such as skin colour, clothing, language and gender, are essential and inevitable grounds for categorising people (Blumen 2007). Feminist geographers have long advocated that identity is embodied, hybrid and fragmented (Dwyer 2000; Dwyer and Crang 2002; Johnston and Longhurst 2010; Longhurst 2001). Hybrid identities refer to simultaneously holding several socially constructed dimensions of being, including, but not limited to, gender,

religion, and migrant status. Embodied identity is an emergent process with a multifaceted nature, which is individual, social, place-based and discursive (Dwyer 2000; Johnston and Longhurst 2010).

Holt (2008, 261) conceptualises embodied identity as a dynamic material process of becoming that intersects with broader social, cultural and economic relations emerging on the individual to global scales. She further argues that embodied identities are sites of materialisation, reproduction, and/or transgression of dominant discourses. Holt underscores that embodied identities are (re)constructed in relation to broader power relations, and ‘axes of privilege and exclusion in a variety of interconnected cultural, social, political arenas; including, crucially, access to economic capitals’ (2008, 241). Acknowledging interconnections between embodied identities and power relations brings forth the principle of intersectionality.

Crenshaw (1991), an African American legal scholar, was the first to develop the theory of ‘intersectionality’ to challenge the dominant single categorical approaches that conceptualize social categories such as gender and faith as separate, non-overlapping identities. Drawing on this theory, geographers, such as Mirza and Heidi (2013) and Hopkins (2017) agree the fluidity and intersectional constructions of embodied identities of Muslims in relation to space and place. , previous research found that Muslim women negotiate their embodied identities not only to conform to, but also to resist and subvert cultural norms (Dwyer 2000).

Clothes are an important aspect of people’s embodied identities, particularly in public (Johnston and Longhurst 2010). Bodies, for the most part, are covered and decorated with clothes, accessories and make-up. As such, we do not wear clothes to hide our bodies but create and develop a particular sense of ourselves and reveal selected aspects of our identifications (Crewe 2017; Longhurst 2005). In terms of Muslim women, Secor argues that any analyses of

dress must take into account the issues of ‘spatialised norms of dress’ (2002, 5), gendered bodies and people’s movements. Secor (2002) underscores an immediate and intimate relationship that exists between embodied expressions of the veil, Muslim women’s everyday movements and place. Listerborn (2015) observes that veiled Muslim women often experience being avoided, excluded and marginalised by non-Muslim white women in Malmö, Sweden. She found several links between the global anti-Islamic discourses and local expressions of fear and hatred toward Muslim women in Malmö. Within this discursive perspective, Muslim women and their religious practices are construed as signs of gender inequality, passiveness and threats to Western ideals (Listerborn 2015; Said 1978).

Islamophobia has had degrading and adverse effects on the everyday lives of Muslims, particularly veiled Muslim women in Muslim minority countries (Dunn and Hopkins 2016). Within this frame, some bodies, including veiled bodies, are marked as signs of special meanings prompting feelings of docileness, oppression and horror (Tolia-Kelly 2006). These marked bodies are created and recognised universally through mass media and political discourses. Discourse is conceptualised based on feminist geographers’ perspectives and refers to a set of powerful statements, images, religious and cultural values with a common theme of thinking, which mobilises various verbal and non-verbal means to structure social practices, attitudes, embodied practices and meanings based on that thinking (Johnston and Longhurst 2010; Rose 2007).

Based on Foucault’s (2002) book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Waitt (2010, 218) defines discourses as groups of processes that centre around ‘the production and circulation of particular knowledge’ and that function as systems to ‘convince people about what exists in the world (meanings) and determine what they say (attitudes) and what they do (practices)’ (Waitt

2010, 218). Research has shown that the intersection of orientalist, gendered and anti-Islam discourses with the ‘war on terror’ climate constructs their veil as ‘out of place’ and a sign of Othering, in opposition to Western norms (Dwyer 2000; Mirza 2013).

Paying attention to the connection between discourses and bodies, this article focuses on embodied identity constructions and negotiations of Muslim women in relation to dominant gendered discourses of modesty, fashion and nationality in post-colonial city of Hamilton. Muslim women bodies are conceptualised as both discursive and material. The physicality and the clothing of Muslim women’s bodies are shaped and contested through dominant discourses about femininity, modesty, fashion and nationality in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand. Muslim women are active agents in adopting and expressing (or not) their gender, religious, and place-based identities.

### **Methodology and research context**

This article draws on a subset of qualitative data (involving a total of 44 participants) produced from a doctoral study on embodied geographies of difference for Muslim migrant women in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand (2014-2019). Their ages ranged between 19 and 50 years. Only three participants had less than five years in school. The reminder of the participants were well educated (many with multiple university degrees) and were comfortably ‘middle-class’. Participants self-identified as Muslim and as one of the following ethnic/national groups: New Zealander; Asian; Kurdish; Malay; Maldivian; Pakistani; Arab; or, Middle Eastern.

All but three participants wear hijab. It is of note that participants’ ethnic and cultural origins intersect with religion and fashion. Hence participants’ clothing, expression of modesty and their make-up differs depending on where – and what cultures – they come from (Lewis

2007). For example, we observed that Indian and Pakistani Muslim participants wear colorful and decorated headscarves with sari (three pieces traditional clothes worn by south Asian women). Nonetheless, they negotiate their saris in a way to not reveal their arms, belly, legs and shoulders.

Much research on Muslim women has been conducted in large urban areas in Europe, the United States and the United Kingdom (Dwyer 2008; Hopkins 2011; Valentine et al. 2009). This project is based in Aotearoa. In Aotearoa New Zealand compared to other Western countries, including the United Kingdom, France and the United States of America, the Muslim population remains a small minority that comprises only 1% of the whole country's population (Ministry of Social Development 2008). In contrast to the United Kingdom and many cities in Western Europe, residential segregation is not a characteristic of Muslim communities in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand (Kolig, 2010).

It is generally felt that the majority of New Zealanders have a 'racially tolerant attitude' (Masgoret, Ward, and Vauclair 2011, 2) and encourage multiculturalism. Nonetheless, New Zealand's social and political climate is not immune from the global wave of Islamophobia. Governmental reports and several incidents show the rise of Islamophobia following 9/11, which contributes to negative public emotions and perspectives on Muslims in Aotearoa New Zealand (Kolig 2010). Not long after we began writing this article, on 15 March 2019 Aotearoa New Zealand experienced a mass killing of Muslim New Zealanders as they prayed. A white supremacist man, filled with hatred and violence, killed 50 Muslims and injured another 50 at the Masjid Al Noor and Linwood mosques in Christchurch (Stephens et al., 2019). Following this attack, the Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern wore a hijab when visiting Christchurch and when

addressing the nation ‘in New Zealand’s darkest day’ (Whyte 2019). This was widely interpreted as a gesture to convey care and acceptance of Muslim New Zealanders.

Hamilton is the fourth largest city in New Zealand with a population of 170,000 in 2019 (Hamilton City Council 2019). This inland city is surrounded by dairy farms as it is located in the Waikato region where farming is the main industry (Morrison 2010). According to New Zealand Statistics, in 2013, 2,445 Muslims lived in Hamilton. Using Hamilton as the research area, this research contributes to a growing literature on the importance of understanding of emotional and cultural geographies of Islam and Muslim women’s experiences in smaller cities beyond the metropolitan and Eurocentric cities such as London, Brussels and Paris (Mansson McGinty, 2013; McLean, 2014).

Three interconnected methods - semi-structured interviews, digital participant observation through their social media, Instagram and Facebook, and self-directed photography - were used to explore Muslim women’s embodied negotiations of hijab, fashion and agency. Recruitment of participants was conducted using snowball sampling, beginning by locating key informants who were working with Muslim women and girls.

The interview questions were guided by geographical studies on Muslim women’s geographies (Dwyer 1999; Hopkins 2011, 2017; Mansson McGinty 2012, 2014). The interviews covered four themes for discussion: 1) meanings of being Muslim; 2) everyday lives and hijab; 3) employment; and 4) leisure. At the end of each interview session, participants were invited to take part in another stage of the research and take photographs of their frequently visited places, gatherings, and clothes, and send the photos via email. Photos have the potential to illustrate how participants combine and assemble their embodied geographies and hence modify their

appearances in various places. Self-directed photography allows participants to document knowledge from their point of view (Dodman 2003; Harper 2002).

Twenty-three respondents agreed to take part in the photography stage. They, however, suggested using their Facebook and Instagram profiles since it would be more convenient for them, and they posted their photos on those social media regularly. The photographic results therefore represent what the research participants want to communicate about themselves online. Posted photos from these participants formed a significant data resource for this study, as they offered a new window into the everyday lives and spaces of participants. When participants posted photos on social networking sites, they often accompanied the photos with emojis, texts and geo-referencing.

These posted photos also provided us with data on the places participants frequently visited, people they interacted with, things they interacted with, activities they did, clothes they wore, and hashtags they used (short descriptions next to photos). Hashtags and emojis reflected the Muslim women's feelings and impressions of the places where the photos were taken (Ahmad and Thorpe 2020, Madge 2007). Tracking their photos on social media on a regular basis for three years allowed us to record any (dis)continuities in their embodied expressions relating to different places and times (Rodó-de-Zárate 2014). Along with interviews, this digital observation was particularly useful in eliciting the agency of Muslim women and in destabilising pervasive Islamic and anti-Islamic discourses about the hijab of Muslim women (Bhimji 2009; Dwyer and Davies 2010).

The participants were assured of confidentiality and were informed that the research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of the University of Waikato. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms

have been used throughout this article except if the participant, herself, wanted us to use her actual name and photos.

Lynda and Robyn have lived and worked in Hamilton for several decades and recently supervised Anoosh as she conducted her PhD. Anoosh shared many things in common with the participants, for example, being young (in her early thirties), single, highly educated, middle class, and Islamic upbringing, and from Iran. These were crucial factors that helped create mutual understandings between participants and the lead author. Anoosh kept a diary in which she recorded her thoughts, ideas and reflexive observations. Paying particular attention to emotions, clothing and identity, she observed closely how her body and identity as a woman with a Muslim upbringing influenced research participants and herself during the research process. Anoosh became friends with several of the research participants, particularly the younger ones (see Basnet et al. 2018; Kwan 2008; Morrison 2010).

Being a young and a single woman from Iran were crucial factors in constructing feelings of friendship and mutual understandings between the younger participants and Anoosh. An important process contributing to the development of these friendships was sharing memories of childhood and adolescence, as well as personal private stories of life-based on growing up/living in Islamic cultural contexts. The development of these friendships influenced different processes of this study, including data collection and analysis. For example, several participants invited Anoosh to their social gatherings, weddings, family dinners and religious ceremonies. These unexpected moments of eating and going out together with participants, their friends and family provided in-depth and useful data regarding the everyday experiences of embodied identities and clothing styles of Muslim women in different social settings (Basnet et al., 2018).

Being a researcher and friend of the participants also created challenges as there were moments when the boundaries between research relationships and personal relationships were blurred (Morrison, 2010). For instance, there were some cases of conflicts between different Muslim communities during the course of the study. At times, much of what Anoosh's Muslim friends talked about over a coffee or a meal were issues and conflicts concerning different beliefs. Anoosh found herself feeling uncomfortable during these 'friendship' conversations, consciously monitoring her comments and reminding herself of her dual role as researcher and friend.

Visibility of the veil, collective Muslim identity and diversity emerged as central themes while discussing Muslim women's engagement and attitudes toward fashion and beauty. Thus, the data were categorised with reference to meanings of the hijab, engaging with fashion, modernity and beauty discourses, as well as simultaneous embodiments of Islamic teachings and fashion. We now turn to the diversity of Muslim women's experiences of hijab.

***'Hijab means a lot of different things to me': Diversity, religion and patriarchy in Hamilton***

Dwyer (2008) suggests that exploring the meanings of the veil for Muslim women expands the understanding of practicing hijab while engaging with different forms of stylish dress and fashion discourses. Participants' head-coverings are important symbols that reflect their spiritual belonging and inseparable religious and gender identities.

Hijab means a lot of different things to me. The most important meaning for me is that as someone who proclaims to be a Muslim, I submit to the rules and will of Allah as stated in the Quran. I believe a Muslim is someone who claims to follow the religion of Islam and therefore is a citizen of Islam. Every citizenship has a set of rules/law. I believe in following the rules of Islam since

I am a citizen of Islam. It is my identity as a Muslim woman and essential to me (Farah, medical doctor, 42 yrs, Malay, Malaysia citizenship).

When Farah (who was born in Malaysia) speaks about being a migrant to Hamilton Aotearoa she refers to Islam as a feeling of belonging. She compares her feelings of being a Muslim woman to being a citizen of a country. Farah conceptualises that each citizen of a country is obliged to follow that nation's rules and laws, so similar conditions apply for Muslim women. In the same vein, Dwyer (1999, 11) argues that dress is an important marker in 'constructions of belonging', and is a crucial element that Muslim women use in (re)creating boundaries to signal their social and cultural identities. Arguably, a discussion could be raised here that in democratic countries rules and laws can be critically questioned and contested by citizens, but some Muslim clergies and Muslim people consider questioning of the Quranic rules as forbidden. Take, for example, Najmeh's reason for wearing the veil:

As a believer, wearing hijab is like any other rule that we have to obey in Islam. It is Sami`nā Wa `Aṭa`nā [we hear, and we obey]. I believe that all the rules that Allah has asked us to obey are just for our own good, so no more debate or questions in doing them (Najmeh, PhD researcher, 37 yrs, Asian, Indonesian citizenship).

Like many other Muslims, Najmeh (who was born in Indonesia before coming to Hamilton) believes the holy book, the Quran, contains the actual words of God and therefore does not question these obligations.

The above examples show these women's agency in wearing a veil to signal their gendered religious identity and commitments to their God. Their reasoning behind wearing hijab

challenges the pervasive assumptions that the veil is only a patriarchal tool used to hide women's femininity and beauty. The women add other interpretations to this practice, they assert that wearing the veil is part of their faith, a commitment to God, and they wear it based on their 'free' will yet intimately linked to social and political dimensions as a symbol of embodied identity and belonging in Hamilton (Mahmood 2012). Considering the persistent political discourses around the veil and Muslim women's oppressions, the participants reframe their reasoning of practising hijab to combat those discourses. Consider Marjan's different interpretations of the veil.

Personally, hijab is not important to me. It is not something that you keep forcing me to do it. This is because I believe an individual's actions should define who they are, not what they are wearing. Also, why is it that women have to alter their appearance and hide from the public, and not men? Just feel, look because the main purpose of hijab is that the men not get attracted, right? So why do we have to do everything? It's their fault for looking. Why cannot they just not look? Why do we, women, have to make all the sacrifice (Marjan, post-graduate student, 22 yrs, Pakistani, New Zealand citizenship).

Marjan sees hijab as unnecessary and refutes the view that women should cover their bodies to deal with 'natural masculine hyper-sexuality' (Read and Bartkowski 2000, 408). The latter idea of masculine hyper-sexuality is derived from patriarchal gendered discourses that aim to naturalise differences between men and women, in favour of men. Such interpretations are based on religious scholars' readings and analyses of the meanings of the hijab. They claim their interpretations are extracted from the Quranic verses and Hadiths, which set the fundamental principles and guidelines for the dress code of Muslim women in the Islamic world (Ternikar 2009). The majority of these scholars, however, were and still are men, which makes it relevant

to question the gender-neutrality of interpretations and religious guidelines related to the veil and dress codes for women. Marjan, like some other Muslim feminists, expresses her stance against these patriarchal readings of gender differences. Thus, she does not agree with the rationale that hijab serves as a remedy for sexual differences between men and women. Marjan also rejects the idea that because men do not have control over their sexuality, women are obliged to bear the responsibility by covering up themselves. Most participants, however, consider the principals of hijab and modesty as signs of value and respects for women in Islam. Consider Asman and Mona:

Asman: No one is allowed to touch the queen. Islam treats every Muslim woman like a queen. No one has the right to see her body or touch her but the man who won her heart (accountant, 38 yrs, Moroccan-Arab, Morocco-New Zealand citizenship).

Mona: I wear hijab because it is my religious statement. Besides the religious state, I guess it [the veil] makes sense to me. It sounds logical to me because I found so much more respect for wearing it than not wearing it [laughing]. It didn't take away anything from my freedom. At the same time, I thought, like, people spoke to me more respectfully. I respect myself more ... when I go out with my friends, who don't wear it, I don't feel like people focus on them on their character. I feel like they just, I think in their mind they're not really focusing on their intellect (post-graduate degree in communication, 30 yrs, Arab, New Zealand citizenship).

These narratives reflect that wearing hijab in everyday embodied spaces of work and leisure in Hamilton constructs various emotional responses in Muslim women and others. For Asman and Mona, wearing a veil leads to the creation of a particular embodied space for them in which they feel respected and intellectually valued (Mansson McGinty 2014). Mona understands her body, or at least her hair, as a means of temptation that distracts attention from her intellect. Therefore, she tries to avoid becoming a sexual object by covering her femininity. This statement recalls discourses that correlate women's styles of clothing with sexualisation. For these women, 'proper' covering and modest dressing – de-sexualising women's bodies – is a means of protection and safety against possible sexual assault and rape (Lim and Fanghanel 2013; Mahmood 2012).

The common point among the participants is to consider the diversity of veiling practice in contrast to the perspective that they wear hijab because they are forced to do so by other people, for example, their parents or husbands (Mansson McGinty 2014). Nonetheless, people's choices about clothes and behaviours do not develop in a vacuum but through discursive formation within places and spaces (Rose 2007). In this sense, we argue that participants' lived experiences of hijab as a 'respectable sign' are partly shaped through those Islamic teachings that associate the image of 'ideal' Muslim woman with the veil and partly shaped with living in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand.

### ***Emotionally (re)fashioning the veil***

The visibility of hijab provokes emotional experiences, and further, may create a sense of responsibility to hijab wearers. In (re)fashioning the veil, Muslim women create multiple expressions of dress as embodied agency. For example, Nurul is the first veiled woman in

Aotearoa New Zealand to participate in the Miss Universe New Zealand. She explains the way she participated in a pageant:

I hope to break those stereotypes that beauty pageants are at odds with our faith and the Koran's edicts. As Muslim women, we need to be modest and we shouldn't be chasing validation or approval from others by trying to look beautiful. But, it was important for me to enter with the intentions that I wanted to pave a way for girls to look beautiful and fashionable but be modest at the same time. I also made sure that I'm not entering for validation or approval. People might think that it's a contradiction for Muslim girls to be in pageants or fashion photoshoots. But, it's better that there is someone that other Muslim girls can look up to and relate to - if not, the only people these girls are looking at in social media are those that represent Westernised ideals of beauty, which mostly consists of beautiful free hair and the exposure of a beautiful body. I personally have nothing wrong with it, but of course, in Islam, women are supposed to cover their hair and to cover their body too. Therefore, I think that it is a contradiction for Muslims to condemn those who are trying to be a role model to other Muslim girls as now they can feel beautiful and confident too (undergraduate student, 22yrs, Malay, New Zealand citizenship).

Nurul says that her intention in participating in the pageant competition was not to receive approval from others on her beauty but to be a fashion role model for other veiled Muslim women. In this way, she is using her Muslim identity in an effort to open up discursive space for other Muslim women (Harris and Hussein 2018). Nurul's participation in a beauty contest is a

political and emotional action to challenge the meanings of hijab as defined by patriarchal and religious institutions (Mahmood 2012). By the use of fashionable clothes and other materials such as jewellery and accessories, Nurul tries to inspire some ‘looks’ for her Muslim peers who are interested in wearing fashionable clothes and make-up. She creates an alternative version of fashionable clothing and ‘look’ that embraces both fashion criteria and Islamic modesty (Figure 1).

[Place Figure 1 somewhere near here]

Figure 1 Nurul in the Miss Universe New Zealand beauty pageant at final show  
Source and permission: Nurul’s Facebook page

It is crucial to consider the liberal context of New Zealand as an enabling space for Nurul to participate in the Miss Universe New Zealand competition while wearing a hijab. Although New Zealand is founded on bicultural laws, multiculturalism is encouraged by policies (Dobson 2013; Masgoret et al. 2011). The everyday effects of these policies are felt at the level of the body. (Lead researcher) and some of her peers, felt comfortable either wearing or not wearing hijab, depending on particular places as well as social, cultural and fashionable practices. Voluntarily adopting a hijab has come to represent embodied agency and a deep consciousness of a historical moment (Mahmood 2012).

‘Being a role model and responsible Muslim woman’ was a recurring theme articulated by participants. Several participants indicated within the climate of ‘war on terror’ and increase of Islamophobia, their veil constructs them as a hypervisible Muslim in Hamilton where Muslims comprise a small minority. For some participants, this produces a sense of responsibility as representatives of the Muslim community. Yalda is an undergraduate student and one of the participants that consciously designs diverse stylish looks to challenge incompatibility of hijab,

Islam and fashion. She explains the reasoning behind being socially active with stylish and contemporary dress styles:

At this specific political time, I feel I have much more responsibility as a hijabi Muslim woman in New Zealand. I find out I have to present who we really are, modern, educated. I feel like I have to act in a really good manner. I wonder even though I was raised here and I have a New Zealander accent, to people here I'm not really a true New Zealander. Oh, I do not like bus stops here in Hamilton; the bus stop is the place where as a hijabi, I get most asked about myself, [and] very serious questions [about the veil and being Muslim] (Yalda, undergraduate student, 21 yrs, Middle Eastern / Arab, New Zealand – Jordan citizenship).

This narrative highlights the significance of a place – the bus stop in Hamilton - in the construction and importance of different aspects of Muslim women's identities, and the critical role of clothing in prompting particular emotional and social interactions for Muslim women. Yalda explains how wearing hijab creates a sense of responsibility that encourages her to participate in social activities and watch in order to challenge stereotypes and biased information about Muslim women. She points out that her hijab makes her a visible Muslim in the non-Islamic context of New Zealand where Muslims are a minority group and practising the hijab is not common. Hopkins (2007) argues that especially post 9/11, markers of 'Muslimness' often subject Muslims to having to engage in a 'constant process of clarifying what they see as the true meaning of their religious faith' (2007, 1129).

Yalda's and Nurul's examples show that the body is an influential and important political medium in space and place (Mansson McGinty 2012). Participants reported different emotional responses depending on the veil's styles. For example, Mina explains:

People really don't care like if you are wearing a hijab or not. I used to wear a massive scarf and even then nobody cared. But niqab (a headgear that covers the head and face, with a slit for the eyes) does tend to get a lot more staring. People really stare I remember walking down the street with my friend who wore a niqab that was different, people really stared at her all the time (Dentist, 28 yrs, Arab (Palestine), New Zealand citizenship).

Mina points out a critical aspect in terms of Muslim women in Hamilton. She often wears a gauzy white scarf, which she wraps loosely around her face and neck. She usually uses black eyeliner and shapes her eyebrows carefully. The importance of clothes and other embodied attributes have been recognised in structuring social interactions in public (Mansson McGinty 2014). Although the niqab is associated with a higher level of piety and modesty for some Muslims, wearing it in Hamilton can create strange and awkward encounters. A discursive space emerges here between bodies according to different types of covering. Mina's hijab and her friend's niqab are both used to cover their hair and connect them to Muslim communities. Each kind of headgear wear, however, creates different fractured fashion geographies, which, in turn, determine who is an insider and/or an outsider. Although, both the headscarf and the niqab are associated with meanings such as gender inequality and danger, according to Mina's experience, the niqab tends to grab more attention and create negative feelings in Hamilton's public places. Veiled women who reveal their face while wearing some other Western-inspired styles of clothing, for example, jeans and tops, produce an image of themselves that is deemed to be more

‘transparent’, and therefore more reliable, relatable and familiar for non-Muslim sectors of society (Gökariksel and Secor 2014).

Muslim women in Hamilton often deploy markers, such as clothing, particular pieces of jewelry, their education attainments and New Zealand accents to engage in social and political activities. Many participants underscore the importance of social media - Facebook and Instagram - to facilitate a public acceptance for diverse ways of wearing hijab and stylish clothes. In the next section, we elaborate on such visual strategies to create various fashionable Muslim women’s multiple social (de Souza e Silva 2006) online and offline identities.

### ***#Hijabifashion***

Facebook and Instagram are prominent mediums that Muslim women use to create and expand intersectional expressions of fashionable hijab and fashionable Hamilton. Their photos, clothes, hashtags and geo-referencing on Instagram and Facebook are chosen specifically to stress their embodied agency and gendered identity. Nurul considers social media to be an important resource to raise awareness as a Miss Universe New Zealand finalist:

Social media is an important part of the Miss Universe journey. We have to interact with our supporters and sponsors, and we need to get as many people to vote. I try to post every day so that I am ‘active’ on social media and to let people know what my Miss Universe journey, as a Muslim, has been like. I use Facebook to make events, to raise awareness and to keep people updated about my life (in the most humble way possible). I think Facebook is great to raise awareness for many causes. With groups in Facebook, you can even interact with people you have never met or keep in touch with people on the other side

of the world, it has helped me be a part of many different types of communities. However, some issues with Facebook could be unwanted comments or messages (undergraduate student, 22yrs, Malay, New Zealand citizenship).

She uses Facebook to increase awareness about her journey as a Muslim woman participating in a New Zealand beauty pageant. She explains that Facebook is an enabling platform that facilitates her access to potential supporters and sponsors by increasing her visibility, which is crucial for her to get more votes. As such, Nurul uses social networking sites including Facebook to amplify her voice in breaking stereotypes and refusing a binary opposition between hijab and fashion. Through these digital ‘Aotearoa New Zealand’ spaces, she shares her identity as a veiled Muslim woman who embodies Islamic modesty and beauty pageant discourses simultaneously.

Several of the young women who were interviewed for this project use Facebook and Instagram to produce contents showing the limits of those discourses on the incompatibility of hijab and fashion. Figure 2 displays the way Yalda negotiates her femininity and religious requirements through clothing to express her tastes for fashion.

[Place Figure 2 somewhere near here]

Figure 2 Yalda negotiating her hijab as an element of a ‘fashionable look’  
Source and permission: Yalda’s Instagram

This photo, posted on Yalda’s Instagram, displays how in public – Hamilton’s nature spaces - she negotiated her hijab to materialise her wish of going out with braided hair. She wrote: ‘When you really wanna braid your hair but you’re a hijabi’ and used hashtags of #NOLimits and #DontLetNothingStopYou. The negotiation of her headgear as substitute of braided hair reflects Yalda’s creativity to navigate her hybrid identities and transgress religious requirements. The

hashtag accompanied with this photo stresses the possibility of being a fashionable Muslim woman in public spheres. For Yalda, these aspects of identity are intermeshed with each other and coexist, as do the representations of Hamilton. Here Hamilton is constructed as fashionable, urban and full of green nature spaces. Fatimah is a good example of an embodied expression that challenges ideas of incompatibility of hijab and fashion. She is nominated as one of ‘kiwi hijabis to follow on Instagram’ in Ayesha’s Space blog. According to her posts, she considers hijab as an element of beauty. Fatimah describes herself as a ‘Muslim-Kiwi’ and ‘fashion enthusiast’:

I’ve had a very Kiwi way of life and also very Islamic life and also like a cultural life. So I feel that ... I didn’t find myself as just like, a Muslim living in New Zealand. I and my parents were born here, I feel like a Muslim-Kiwi, who is also a fashion enthusiast. We [referring to her family] value religion and culture. I embrace my Kiwi culture, my passion and my religion (Fatimah, undergraduate student in Law, 21 yrs, Indian, New Zealand citizenship).

This narrative along with posted photos of her on social media communicates that Fatimah does not see contradictions between being a ‘good’ Muslim woman and appearing with stylish clothes, make-up and jewellery in public places and on social media. (Lead author’s) participation in this research project, as well as her own everyday experiences of living in Hamilton, confirms this intersection of Kiwi culture, fashion and religion. Hijab can, and does, become a salient part of everyday life and a conscious construction of the self and social spaces through the process of veiling (Brenner 1996; Mansson McGinty 2012). Fatimah wears her religious identity and passions for being stylish on her body (Figure 3).

[Place Figure 3 somewhere near here]

Figure 3 Fatimah's expression of stylishness, religion and Western through clothing and hashtags  
Source and permission: Fatimah's Instagram

These figures show the ways Fatimah mixes the concepts of Islamic modesty and fashion in accordance with her conceptualisations of the 'ideal' Muslim woman, which are linked to her individual life history and ethnicity. The images are taken in Hamilton Gardens (public botanical and themed gardens) as well as in a private home. In most photos, Fatimah wears her hijab with Western clothes such as skinny-cut trousers, and ballerina or hi-heeled shoes. She wears makeup and matches the color of her veil with her lipstick. Her tight jeans and her pose are inspired by so-called Western fashion. This fragmented fashion is reflected in the choice of Hamilton backdrops to her fashionable body, creating multiple expressions of place as well as embodied identity.

For most of her photos (Figure 4), Fatimah uses hashtags of modesty such as #modestfashion and #modestymovement and #hijabifashion. Using these hashtags is common among young participants to enable them to link their photos to particular ideas and movements, both at the local and global scale. These hashtags are used by growing numbers of young Muslim women globally and linked to transnational movements aimed to popularise and normalise hijab in spaces of fashion. Such visual representations of intersectional identities and hashtags emphasise myriad possibilities of hybridising fashion and Islam. Visualising being a Muslim and being fashionable are not two distinct paths that Muslim women are required to choose between.

[Place Figure 4 somewhere near here]

Figure 4 Using hashtags as a political action to challenge inimicality of fashion and hijab  
Source: Fatimah's Instagram

Using these hashtags to accompany photos reflects Muslim women's bodies as spaces that reflect myriad possibilities for intersections of Western, Eastern and Islamic cultures and values both

offline and online (Dwyer 2000). Here, place is reflected as ‘edgy’ as Fatimah poses in front of a red garage door on an urban Hamilton street, yet her body and the accompanying hashtags create another reading of place. Street space and social media space expand to accommodate multiple fashionable styles. There is playful posing with many different dress styles and make-up along with head coverings. These women look confidently and directly into the camera lens as the city frames them. Representing their bodies as such, these young Muslim women push the boundaries of Western beauty standards, and create alternative definitions of beauty that are multicultural, performative and spatial.

## **Conclusion**

Matching fashionable clothing along with the veil in the public spaces of Hamilton, Muslim women draw on embodied agency to negotiate dominant norms and religious doctrines in order to reconcile two perceived inimical ideas of Islamic modesty and fashion. We found three major findings in our study. The findings provide a counter-understanding to dominant Western discourses that construct Muslim women’s identities as homogenous and static. The results show multiple and dynamic ways that Muslim women express and hybridise their gender, religious, national and cultural identities and fashion in Hamilton’s online and offline spaces.

First, participants’ intersectional identities show complex relations between gender, hijab, fashion, religion and power in and around their bodies. Their modest, yet, fashionable clothing shows that they conceptualise their gendered religious requirements in relation not only to Islamic teachings but also to dominant - and trending - ideas around beauty, fashion and multiculturalism. This can be seen in the women’s statements that while they wear the veil to avoid looking sexually attractive to the opposite sex based on Islamic teachings, they spend

plenty of time and have financial resources to ‘work on’ their appearance and clothes. Similar to Mansson McGinty’s (2014; 2014) research, our results show that Muslim women in Hamilton wear the veil not only for the spiritual, social and political ends, but also for establishing their intersectional hybrid identities as committed, fashionable and middle-class Muslim women.

Second, our findings support the arguments on dynamic, political and spatial constructions of the body, veil and fashion (Dwyer 2000; Göle 2002; Gökariksel and Secor 2014; Lewis 2007). Considering the global rise of Islamophobia, one of the first priorities of participants was to address the stigmatization and categorization of Muslim women as oppressed, unfashionable and out of date beings. The respondents draw on discourses that have emerged among Muslim revivalist scholars and Muslim women, who ‘try to reverse the values ascribed to the opposition between Islam and commerce, tradition and modernity, modesty and fashion’ (Lewis 2007, 425).

Third, drawing on Mahmood’s (2012) arguments on embodied agency, our results show that participants consciously use their bodies to create hijabi fashion spaces and places in Hamilton (both online and offline). Narrow definitions of being Muslim, fashion and beauty is challenged by these women’s actions, such as participating in the Miss Universe contest with a veil and modest dress, and wearing a veil with Western-style fashionable dresses, shoes and pieces of jewellery along with the use of hashtags such as #hijabifashion, and #modestfashion (Mears 2010). Participants demonstrate multiple and hybrid ways in which gendered, Muslim identities and place-based identities are performed in and through the hijab. Far from a binary categorisation of the oppressed and the oppressor, their simultaneous expressions of fashion and being Muslim signal spaces in which Muslim women hybridise their faith and piety with, activism and consumerism.

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