

Dress & Diversity in Contemporary Ireland: The hijab in a minority context

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Abstract

In light of the banning of the hijab in France and the debates surrounding the hijab across western Europe, this study sets out to investigate the importance of wearing the hijab for Muslim women in particular towards their identity construction in contemporary Ireland. The study was carried out using qualitative analysis, which involved nine semi-structured interviews with Muslim women living in Ireland. The findings show that the hijab is very important for these women, in particular towards their identity as they are proud to be Muslim. It is a deeply personal choice for them to wear it and as the findings show a complex one. The research found that they face pressures from within their own community and not just from the wider Irish society. In general, the women interviewed spoke very positively about being Muslim and living in Ireland. However, if Ireland were to ban the hijab this could dramatically change their experience living here. It can be concluded that the hijab symbolises much more than just a headscarf and is an important identity marker for these women.

Introduction

In the last decade a large amount of literature has been written about the Muslim community. This research has most notably taken place in America with studies focusing on Muslim women and the hijab (Williams & Vashi, 2007; Furseth, 2011; Abdurraqib, 2006). In this last decade, Muslim women wearing the hijab is becoming more visible in western Europe (Hussain Solihu, 2009). There is very little research done on this area in Ireland especially in relation to the wearing of the hijab (Scharbrodt & Sakaranaho, 2011; Honohan & Rougier, 2011). The 2011 Census results showed there were at least 45,223 Muslims living in Ireland compared to 33,000 recorded in the 2006 census results, 143% increase with Islam now the third largest religious group in the state (Central Statistics Office, 2011). The aim of this research dissertation is to explore the importance of wearing the hijab for Muslim women, in particular towards their identity construction in contemporary Ireland.

Method

The qualitative research used was in-depth semi structured interviews with nine participants who were women from the Muslim Community in Ireland. There were 3 younger participants aged between 18 and 19. The other six women interviewed were older ranging in ages from 25 to 40.

An email was sent to five Muslim organisations and associations in Ireland in which a response was received from two with an invitation to meet with some of the women. From these two sources the researcher generated enough participants to partake in the research. The sample was purposively selected to reflect particular features of the group within the sampled population. An interview schedule was drawn up with major themes identified as important and questions formed under each theme. The interviews took place from the end of January 2014 through to the month of March 2014. Each participant was given a consent form to sign and inform them of the research purpose.

An Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-750 was used to record the participants. This was then transcribed to Microsoft word, from word it was copied over to NVivo 10 for thematic analysis

Results

The main focus of the research was to explore the importance of the hijab in particular towards a Muslim woman's identity. This was achieved and thematic analysis of the data revealed 6 main themes; reasons for wearing hijab, what it symbolises, the influence of culture and fashion on the hijab and also other pressures that Muslim women face within their own community.



Discussion

Some of the findings concurred with existing literature out there most notably in relation to the hijab being associated with modesty, that it is an important identity marker, that commonly women in the west who choose to wear it are educated and articulate. That banning the hijab is taking away a person's freedom of choice. That culture creates variations in how the hijab is worn and that the Muslim population in Ireland has a history of being a positive one. The findings revealed new themes that were not apparent in existing literature such as the hijab being about more than modesty, it is also about encompassing the essence of hijab which is to be a person of good character. The younger participants face particular challenges within their extended family to not wear the hijab. Fashion is something that is more important to the younger participants and is an important theme that arose and also the fact that Muslim women themselves have debates and discussions around it. Cultural reasons come through strong as a theme and the younger participants in particular felt that there are blurred lines between culture and religious reasons for wearing the hijab. It is recommended for a future study to research young Muslim women and teenagers who have grown up in Ireland and the challenges they face within Irish society and within their own Muslim community.

References

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