

**Muḥajababes -meet the new fashionable, attractive and extrovert Muslim woman. A study of the ḥijāb-practice among individualized young Muslim women in Denmark.**

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***Abstract***

*This paper examines how individualization changes young Muslims women's interpretation of the headscarf as a religious tradition in their everyday life. Based on observation and in-depth interviews this paper studies the reflections and considerations that underlie the women's choice to wear the headscarf (ḥijāb), the message they want to send about themselves as a fashionable and attractive headscarf-wearing woman living in Denmark, and last but not least how their interpretations of the headscarf as a religious tradition differ from the theological ones. This study concludes that the individualization changes young Muslim women's interpretation of the ḥijāb by that their choice of wearing a ḥijāb arises not only from their willingness to commit to Islam, but to a greater degree from a desire to express beauty, maturity and individuality as a woman. The hijab gives them the ability to express their beauty as Muslim women, giving them the ability to signal openness, which, according to their beliefs, provides them with easier access to the majority society. Last but not least the ḥijāb becomes a matter of interpretation, not based on the traditional Islamic understandings of the ḥijāb, but on individual reflections and considerations that are largely influenced by contextual conditions characterized among other things by choice, personal autonomy, and authenticity.*

Over the past decade, an interesting transformation in the way young Muslim women in Europe approach the headscarf is to be noticed. Recent anthropological and ethnographical studies conclude that a diversity of interpretations of Muslim dress is visible in Europe, and Muslim women do not wear religious dress solely out of devotion. Further, studies demonstrate that young Muslim women wearing a headscarf in Europe are undergoing major transformations, shaped not only by local and global, social, religious and political forces, but also by issues of personal aesthetics, ethics, fashion, identity and faith (Tarlo 2010, Koskenurmi-Sivonen 2004, Christiansen 2011, Mossière 2012 and others). Young Muslim women born and/or raised

in Europe make it possible to be both *muḥajabah*<sup>1</sup> and look fashionable, without necessarily wearing clothes designed specifically for Muslim women and in accordance with covering restrictions based on interpretations of Islamic texts and/or without buying clothes designed and marketed specifically as ‘Islamic fashion’ (see Tarlo 2007, 2010, Mossière 2012). The practice of the headscarf does not seem to be an obstacle for how these women choose to express or behave, quite the contrary. Nor does the headscarf, whose purpose is to cover their beauty or make distance to the opposite sex seem to (only) be a religious symbol to these young women. While wearing a headscarf, young Muslim women wear mainstream fashion, tight clothes, high heels and makeup in order to achieve a beautiful, feminine, extrovert and sometimes even sexy appearance (Tarlo 2010). Those are the ones who can be called the *Muhajababes*<sup>2</sup>; the new fashionable, attractive, extrovert Muslim women with headscarves.

The constantly new and different styles of tying and knotting the headscarf, along with their overall extrovert and attractive appearances, indicate that Muslim women are breaking with traditional interpretations and giving rise to new individualized interpretations of the headscarf practice as a religious tradition (Moors 2011). Individualization is defined as a social process in which individuals become detached from traditional bonds and increasingly stand alone in the formation of identity. Individualization means that the individual also realizes itself through his/her needs and desires (Sørensen & Christiansen 2012). The intention of this study is to explore this creative approach to the hijab by investigating how the individualization changes young Muslim women's interpretation of the headscarf as a religious tradition.

In the following section, the theoretical underpinning of this study will be explained by means of the concept of individualization in the current research on Islam and Muslims in the West. After that, the methodological approach will be clarified. The findings will be

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<sup>1</sup> Headscarf-wearing woman

<sup>2</sup> *Muhajababes* is the title of a journey book written by a journalist named Allegra Stratton and is an account of encounters with youth under the age of 25, who hold university degrees but no jobs and face quarter-life crisis. Stratton comes across the living embodiment of the region's contradictions: the 'muḥajababe', a type of devout, hijāb-wearing woman who wears tight clothes, loves pop music, and yet follows religious practices. The noteworthy in Stratton's book is that she emphasizes that young Muslim women are having their own revolution; they smoke, wear tight clothes, drive too fast and talk about sex, while maintaining the appearance of being “good” Muslims by wearing the headscarf (Stratton 2006). Stratton manages to bring a new and growing phenomenon into focus, where young Muslims women have a desire to join the modern world and cope with modernity, but with a religious twist. Even though it is not immediately obvious that this phenomenon can be transmitted to Europe, I argue that a quite similar tendency is to be observed in Denmark and Europe; therefore, this phenomenon might not be entirely alien.

presented in three 'issues': the reflections and considerations that underlie the women's choice to wear the headscarf, the message that the women want to send about themselves as a fashionable and attractive headscarf-wearing woman living in Denmark, and last but not least how their interpretations of the headscarf as a religious practice differ from the theological ones. I will try continuously to place my findings in existing research on the issues and literature will be integrated as a further source of data.

### **Individualization in the current research**

In recent years, a significant number of important studies (Jacobsen 2011, Fadil 2005, Jeldtoft 2012, Pedziwiatr 2011, Peter 2006, Schmidt 2004) have identified individualization of religious beliefs as the major development in Europe's Muslim communities. Briefly, the term individualization has been mainly conceptualized in two ways: new practices and reformed ones. The first argues that Muslims make use of the freedom they are given in the West to reinterpret the religious texts and replace old practices with controversial *liberal* ones that can help them integrate in a modern and secular Europe (Cesari 2007). The second view considers these reinterpretations to be reformed practices that are still proper to Islam and do not need to cause questioning of the religious dogma (Roy 2006). The majority of the fieldwork studies made in the course of the last decade to investigate individualization of Muslim beliefs and practices describe the difference between the traditional Islam of the parents and the *new* and *pure* Islam of youths and argue that secularization has an individualistic effect on the Muslim youths (Cesari 2005). The conclusion seems to be that young Muslims are contributing to the creation of a '*new Islam*' by interpreting, debating and transmitting Islamic knowledge in their social contexts (Jacobsen 2011, Johansen 2002, Pedziwiatr 2011, Roy 2007, Jouili & Amir-Moazami 2006).

However, there seems to be a lack of theoretical and empirical clarity of individualization that makes it questionable to understand whether the resulting practices are grounded within Islam and fall within the what are considered acceptable bounds of the tradition or whether individualization leads to new forms of traditional practices informed by the Muslims own rationality and subjectivity. I argue that the individualization process is in need of a definition, rather than being treated as a concept that everyone discusses as an evident truth. This may be true in the sense that new forms of Islam are taking place, Yet, arriving at conclusions based on the nature of these forms is the problematic part, as the attempt to understand the nature of these new forms and explain how they are shaped according to the subjectivities of individuals practicing them and the regulative structures surrounding them is still in the making

The intention should therefore be to fill the literature gap that avoids explaining how individualization occurs and what shapes it, and to learn about the everyday changes in the religious practices by studying how the individualization changes young Muslim women's interpretation of the headscarf as a religious tradition.

### **Methodology**

The empirical approach in this study is based on observation of the everyday practice of the headscarf among five young Muslim women born and/or raised in Denmark combined with in-depth interviews. The interviews in qualitative research are useful starting point to study the various aspects of sense-making through behavior and reflecting on behavior.

The informants selected in this paper are born and/or raised in Denmark. They were all selected and contacted through Facebook, as they all had open profiles with access to photos of themselves posing while wearing their colored headscarves, fashionable clothes, high-heeled shoes and sometimes heavy makeup. Another significant factor in the selection was the informants' age. They are between 18-23 years old. In the one hand I did not want them to be too young<sup>3</sup> and thus possibly incapable of reflecting on their choices. On the other hand, I did not want them to be too old and unable to remember why and how they chose the *ḥijāb*. Pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of the women concerned.

One of the limitations of this study is the small group of five informants, so no firm conclusions can be drawn. However, for an explorative study, it can be considered as acceptable, all the more so because this study will be the start of a larger research.

### **The *ḥijāb*- a reflexive choice**

All the choices we make are in one way or another influenced by the context in which we live. The choice to wear the *ḥijāb* is likely just as much of a free choice like/as so many other choices we make about food, clothing, education and work, etc. The intention is not to discuss whether the *ḥijāb* is a free choice or not for the informants in this paper, as such a discussion is a little futile, since we could ask; what exactly is a free choice? The intention is rather to examine what underlies their choice to wear the *ḥijāb*; what considerations and

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<sup>3</sup> The term “young” is used in this article to refer to those women who have been born or who have grown up in Denmark/Europe. This does not mean that the style of dress and *hijab* worn by elder generations has remained the same.

reflections do these women have in regard to the *ḥijāb*? Is the choice entirely based on the women's wish to commit to Islam?

Mariam started wearing the *ḥijāb* at the age of 12 when she was in the seventh grade in a public school with other Muslim girls. Mariam is born in Denmark. Today, Mariam is 20 years old and wants to study Public Health at the University. For Mariam, wearing the *ḥijāb* started for fun:

“Back then, we weren't as mature as now, we were children, we put the *ḥijāb* on for fun, and one day, we decided to wear it at school. All the girls in my class thought that wearing the *ḥijāb* was beautiful, and to us, the *ḥijāb* represented maturity...”  
(Mariam)

For Amal, the situation is not so different. Amal is a 23-year-old Muslim and came to Denmark at the age of three. She is a trained dental assistant, but has never worked as one. According to Amal, it is very difficult for a *muḥajabah* to get a job within her profession. Today, Amal works in a hardware store. She started wearing the *ḥijāb* when she was 13 years old:

“Well, I decided to wear the *ḥijāb* along with my best friend. Our mothers are best friends as well, and they always bought these beautiful, colored headscarves. We thought that it would be fun to try it on; we really wanted to look like our mothers...” (Amal)

Another informant, namely Nour started wearing the *ḥijāb* at the age of 13 fascinated by how her sisters manage to combine the *ḥijāb* and fashion. Nour is an 18-year-old high-school student who like Mariam, wants to attend the University, but to study psychology.

The fact that wearing the *ḥijāb* makes Mariam, Amal and Nour link the *ḥijāb* with being beautiful and mature is not a new concept as this link is also been acknowledged in other studies. In a study of how Muslim women and teenage girls construct their appearance in the Finnish cultural context, and how they feel about individuality and communality in dress, Ritva Koskennurmi-Sivonen (2004) argues that all women and teenagers consider the *ḥijāb* to be an adult woman's garment. The informants in Koskennurmi-Sivonen's study generally agreed that when they started wearing the *ḥijāb*, it was not so much about religion as it was about attaining the status of an older girl (i.a. Koskennurmi-Sivonen 2004). Regardless of the fact that Koskennurmi-Sivonen's study was conducted almost a decade ago, this link between the *ḥijāb* and maturity still seems to dominate young Muslim women's way of thinking today.

*Religiosity and the current discourse*

Though, I initially did not ask about the religious aspect of the *hijāb*, the informants mentioned the topic themselves, but only to emphasize that they were not religious and that the religious aspect of the *hijāb* was not a crucial element in their decision to wear it.

Nour for instance is aware of the fact that she is inconsistent in her prayers and feels somewhat guilty about it. However, she finds comfort in comparing herself to other Muslims who do not practice Islam at all. Yet, she hopes that the *hijāb* makes her a better Muslim.

“My parents aren’t strict when it comes to Islam. They listen to music and attend parties. They rarely use the word *harām* (she laughs)... However, they pray and fast and they are considering going to Mecca to do the pilgrimage this year. I, on the other hand, am inconsistent with my prayers, and I am not proud of that, but I fast the entire Ramadan month every single year. I know many Muslims who can’t even fast a couple of hours.” (Nour).

Amal prays occasionally, and fasts when she feels like it. Her parents pray five times a day; they fast and have already done the pilgrimage. However, in Amal’s opinion, being a good Muslim is not just about living up to the five pillars of Islam, but also about many other things that Muslims in Denmark are unable to do, simply because Islam is not a given.

“Being a good Muslim is very hard these days, especially because you are forced to do things that aren’t in accordance with Islam. My parents, for example, had to take a loan in order to buy their car. Loans are *haram*, but you cannot live in a European country without taking a loan to buy a car, a house or even to complete your studies. I know many Muslims who procured a fatwa that permits taking a loan. Another thing is having male friends. Islam is very strict about a girl having any kind of relationship with a guy who isn’t a relative, but this, too, is quite difficult to conform to in the Danish society, especially if you don’t want to be stigmatized as anti-social.” (Amal)

Clearly, as Muslims living in Denmark, the informants feel that they have to make compromises. Taking a loan and making male-friendships is considered not permitted in Islam, yet they justify it by claiming that these things are necessary in order to function in the Danish society. On the other hand, they are not ready to compromise when it comes to the *hijāb*, even though it is literally preventing them from getting a job within her profession.

Despite the fact that some women choose to wear the ḥijāb for fun, we cannot ignore the implications that this choice may have on their lives. By choosing the ḥijāb, Muslim women are somehow compelled to commit to Islam, even if they do not consider themselves religious. Thus, their attraction to the aesthetic aspect of the ḥijāb does not negate the fact that they commit to Islam by acknowledging the ḥijāb as an obligation and by practicing it. What enhances this commitment to Islam is the fact that the ḥijāb makes them like better Muslims by wearing the ḥijāb.

Mariam, Amal and Nour believe that being a good Muslim is not a matter of individual choice, because Islam, according to them, is not a 'whenever you feel like it' thing. Yet they admit being inconsistent with their prayers and fasting, since they find it difficult to live up to a Muslim ideal in the Danish society in which they live. This might explain why the informants distance themselves from being 'the religious type' and instead feel that they sometimes have to compromise with their religion. In this regard, *believing* in something is one thing and living in accordance with this belief is another thing. Perhaps it is not about making compromises, but instead about creating their own life on their own terms. According to sociologist Ulrich Beck, this is exactly what characterizes the individual in reflexive modernity. The individual stands as a social unit that has greater freedom to choose who he or she wants to be (Beck, 1992). Apparently, religion is a matter of (*compelled*) choice for these informants, as they choose to practice some elements of Islam while ignoring some other practices. In this way, the informants create their own personal version of Islam in their everyday lives. This version is based on the informant's own individual understanding and interpretation of what, why, when and how to practice a certain element in Islam in her everyday life.

The informants own statements suggest, the decision to wear the ḥijāb can, but does not necessarily have to, be based on the Muslim woman's desire to commit to Islam and become a better Muslim. Common to the informants is that the decision to wear the ḥijāb was not solely about becoming better Muslims; in fact, their decision had more to do with them being able to express their individuality, outer beauty and maturity. This contradicts with argument stating that the decision to wear the ḥijāb has to be *entirely* based on the woman's commitment to Islam or her wish to comply with Islamic obligations (Johansen 2002). I therefore argue, in contrast to such statements, that the decision to wear the ḥijāb can include both the woman's desire to become a 'better' Muslim and her ability to make her own personal decisions about her religion.

Even though the intention was not to investigate whether the ḥijāb is a free-choice or not, the informants raised the topic by themselves, asserting that the ḥijāb was a self-chosen decision made on the basis of individual stance and reflection.

I think that this assertion on individual choice reflects the women's awareness of the discourse that emphasizes individuality and the individual construction of the self as quite central values of the free and modern person, but also of the liberated woman with a free choice of clothing - as opposed to the oppressed veiled woman (Jeldtoft 2012, Johansen 2002). By emphasizing that the *hijāb* is a free choice, they simultaneously affirm sociologist Meyda Yeğenoğlu's claim that the wearing of the *hijāb* actually has liberating aspects (in Andreassen 2011). In contrast to Yeğenoğlu, B. Koyuncu Lorasdağ believes that the headscarf is a multifaceted and complicated issue that cannot be reduced to Muslim women's oppression or emancipation. Lorasdağ argues that not all Muslim women wear the *hijāb* just because it is their own choice, because this free choice is not always entirely formed by the young woman's own rationality and independency. Usually, religious education and family socialization are determining factors upon which this 'own free choice' is formed (Lorasdağı 2009). Claiming that the *hijāb* is self-chosen is perhaps the informants' way to claim the status as individuals responsible for their own lives and actions. This may be interpreted as a form of resistance to the dominant construction of Muslim women that sees them as lacking autonomy. By choosing the *hijāb*, the Muslim women use the *hijāb* as a strategy to say; I am grown and mature, therefore I am able to make my own choices and decisions. The informants explain openly that for them, wearing the *hijāb* is not just about committing to Islam, but it is also about becoming who you want to be, namely a beautiful and mature woman; an individual informed by modern narratives of individual choice, personal autonomy, and becoming their true and authentic self. In this way, young Muslim women who choose the *hijāb* in a modern society engage in a reflexive process of becoming self-reflective and self-determining individuals from an early age.

### **The *hijāb* is about looking good**

Finding out *why* the young Muslim woman wears the *hijāb* can say much about her. However, to look at *how* she chooses to wear the *hijāb* is, from my point of view, more significant, as it may say a lot about her as a Muslim woman living in a non-Muslim society. This section sheds some light on how these young women make use of their individuality in the way they practice the *hijāb* in their everyday lives, by focusing on their sartorial biographies. A sartorial biography can be seen as an exploration of the self, creating new meanings and interpretations of life through fashion. This exploration of the self is not necessarily born out of an overriding preoccupation with fashion as such, nor out of a desire to promote particular cultural, religious or political views, but rather out of experiences formed by different

aspects that can influence the identity and the image of the self, such as religion, politics, fashion, environmental concerns, aesthetics, and a sense of global awareness (Tarlo 2007, 2).

The aesthetics of the *ḥijāb* is apparently of great importance for the informants. Not being able to dress in a modern and fashionable way like every other woman their age seemed to be one of the main concerns that the informants had when they made the decision to wear the *ḥijāb*. They were concerned that the *ḥijāb* would limit their attire options or prevent them from wearing modern clothes. However, it turned out that these concerns were unfounded, as the strategies that the informants choose in their everyday life are based on aesthetic reflections; they wear the clothes they wear not only because they like them, but also to manage their expression. Some prefer clothes that are simple or not overly decorated, while others want bright colors with glitter and light, transparent fabrics.

To Mariam, looking beautiful and presentable is about being able to wear fashionable clothes that attract attention. According to her, a *muḥajabah* does not need to dress in Islamic clothes in order to be decent:

“...It is important to me to look good and presentable without having to wear Islamic clothing. I have always been interested in fashion and new-style, as well as matching clothes ever since I was a little girl”. (Mariam)

Mariam is aware of the fact that modern and fashionable clothes are not especially designed for women who wear the *ḥijāb*; however, she makes her own strategies to make fashionable clothes fit her as *muḥajabah*. As *muḥajabah*, Mariam does not mind wearing tight clothes that show her body shape and her grace as a woman. Mariam is an extrovert and beautiful woman, who seem to spend a lot of time and money on her appearance. She, like the other informants, has an accessible profile on facebook, so everyone has access to her pictures on the internet. The way Mariam poses in her pictures shows that she is conscious about her feminine body. Although Mariam does not show skin (besides hands, feet and face) in her pictures, she has no objection to dressing in tight clothes that clearly show her proportions as a woman. Aside from the criticizing comments that she receives, Mariam claims that she also receives nice and positive compliments about the way she dresses. For example, she is often told that she is modern and sophisticated, but she also receives comments that contain the words ‘babe’ or ‘sexy’, therefore she has become familiar with such words. When asked about how she feels about being called such things:

“... I don't like being called sexy, especially not by guys. I think the word sexy is a disrespectful word in itself, especially if you are muḥajabah. But of course I cannot know whether the person who calls me that means it in a bad way or in a good way.”

Mariam's response shows her awareness of the fact that she emits signals that might be misinterpreted by some people. She alludes to that she somehow deviates from the norms associated with the ḥijāb. Yet, in order to justify her attire and attitude, she asserts that her dress habits are more *subdued* compared to other veiled women she knows. She chooses instead to enjoy the positive comments that make her feel better about herself.

Looking beautiful is not just about dressing the way they like, but it is also about being able to express themselves like every other woman around the same age. They go in mainstream boutiques and buy mainstream fashion so they then can be part of the youth culture that they consider themselves a part of. Although the Muslim women can have the same taste and buy the same clothes as other young un-veiled women of the same age there is often a difference in the way they put together their attire. Apparently, this has something to do with the fact that women who wear the ḥijāb have to somehow invent different strategies in their clothing habits that meets with their personal perception of how a muḥajabah should behave and look. The strategies that the Muslim woman develops require constant creativity in the choice of clothes. Being creative in choosing clothes and putting it together differs between women in terms of taste and personal perception of covering up and the principle of proper attire. Many would assume that the fact that Muslim ḥijāb-wearing women have to be creative with fashionable mainstream clothes is a challenge, chiefly because mainstream fashion is not designed specifically for this group of women. And the fact that Muslim women have to meet certain requirements, such as not to show skin, I imagine, could make this challenge even more difficult. Yet this is not how the informants feel, because, as they puts it, do not have difficulties finding clothes that fall within their taste in the boutiques. Hanin, who came to Denmark at the age of two and is today 21 years old student, does not seem having difficulties finding clothes and being creative:

“...For example, if we buy a short strapless dress, they wear it as it is, i.e., with bare legs and shoulders, while I will have to adjust the dress to my ḥijāb by putting on a blouse and leggings. So yes, we fall for the same things, but I manage to combine them and adapt them to my ḥijāb. Some find my style inspiring, while others don't”.

In order to meet the requirement of not showing skin, the informants emphasize that their attire often consists of several layers of clothing. For example, when they wear a dress, they usually combine it with a blouse and trousers. And if they wear a transparent item, they wear something underneath it as well. Apparently, they have become experts on how clothes should be combined in order to look modern, sophisticated and presentable, but also in order to comply with their personal perception of how a *ḥijāb*-wearing woman should dress. Beauty work and a good look require not only creativity and ability to choose and combine, but it also requires the right body shape. Some of the informants are incredibly conscious about their bodies and about keeping it in shape by working out daily. As Amal stresses, in order for the clothes to fit properly, the body must be in shape:

“It is important to me to be in good shape, not super thin, but in shape. I usually buy my clothes in a smaller size. I have become used to do that. I think my body looks best in a smaller size, and when the clothes cling very tightly to the body. I do it because I'm not particularly tall, so imagine that I wear great clothes.”  
(Amal)

I believe that it is safe to say that ‘to fit properly’ is an expression the informants use to say that they want to visibly express their femininity. This indicates that young *ḥijāb*-wearing women today are aware of their sexuality. Female sexuality is not a topic that Muslims openly talk about, as sexuality is often associated with the non-Muslim West. Combining the *ḥijāb* with aesthetics associated with the West and sexuality is seen as fundamentally contradicting the purpose of the *ḥijāb*. Wearing the *ḥijāb* is associated with certain norms of how a *ḥijāb*-wearing woman should dress and behave. Apparently, the informants are, to some extent, breaking these norms (Jacobsen 2011, 200). Some of them do not mind wearing tight clothing from head to toe that reveals their grace and femininity as women, while others have some reservations in that regard, like Mirvat for instance. Mirvat is 19 years old newly qualified social and health care assistant, who attends courses about Islam, loves wearing tight jeans and trousers; however, it crosses her boundaries to wear a tight top.

My observations of the informants’ appearances show that, just like other young women of the same generation, young Muslim women who wear the *ḥijāb* can be seen wearing the latest jeans, tops, dresses, skirts, jackets, high heels and sometimes heavy makeup to signal their easy familiarity with the latest fashion trends. Often, the only feature of young Muslim women’s clothing that clearly identifies them as Muslim is the *ḥijāb*, but here, too, one finds much diversity. In fact, the *ḥijāb* is often the most self-consciously elaborated element of an outfit; carefully selected to match or complement other details of a woman’s appearance. Choosing the fabric, patterns and colors of the

headscarves that go with the overall style is not everything. Tying and knotting the ḥijāb is perhaps the part that takes the longest time. Tying the ḥijāb differs amongst women, and so is the case with the informants. They are used to dressing fashionably, and therefore it has become an important part of their everyday lives. These young Danish Muslim women manage to combine the clothes that fit their personal understanding of how a muḥajabah should look and what she must wear in order to look beautiful. In her study of sartorial biographies of Muslim women, Emma Tarlo argues that the majority of Muslim women who wear headscarves (*ḥijābs*) and are born in Britain do not see a tension between “fashion” and “ḥijāb” when it comes to looking modern (Tarlo 2007, 144), nor do the informants in this paper. But some scholars argue that:

“Since veiling is a practice that does not belong to the ‘Western’ space and since fashion...historically belongs to the West, the veil cannot be fashion” (in Sandikci & Ger 2005, 78).

Fashion is seen as a cultural mode of modernity and is therefore linked to the emergence of the modern individual; progress and breaking with tradition (Lewis 2007, 423). In the West, Islam is often presented as resistant of modernity, and therefore the general perception is that Islam and modernity can never meet. This probably explains why the ḥijāb, as Reina Lewis puts it; “*are seen by those who are outside veiling communities, and sometimes by those inside, as a contraction to fashion*” (ibid, 424f).

Since the aesthetics of the ḥijāb are very important to the informants, perhaps sometimes even more important than its religious dimension, it complicates the notion that modernity (fashion) and Islam can never meet. I believe that the fusion between Islam and modernity, manifested in the Muslim women’s practice of the ḥijāb, not only complicates the notion of Islam and modernity being incompatible, but also instead suggests that this notion does not hold.

In their everyday practice of the ḥijāb, the informants in this study make efforts in terms of time and money, which makes the aesthetics of the ḥijāb at least as important as its religious and political dimensions. It is thus interesting and somehow funny that a ḥijāb, which is meant to cover the beauty of the hair, instead replaces this beauty by becoming the woman’s new hair; her personal art.

### **The ḥijāb is about being open**

During the interviews with the informants, I noticed that the fact that they belong to a minority group influences the way they conceive their lives as ḥijāb-wearing women in Denmark. The informants are pretty aware of the negative discourse regarding the ḥijāb in Denmark,

as they are exposed to it in their everyday lives. Although they are ambitious about being acknowledged as part of the Danish society on equal terms with everyone else and refuse to be stigmatized as different, their statements show that they are still concerned about their image and the way they are perceived in the Danish society. They feel that being Muslim in a non-Muslim context is about making compromises and due to their situation as a minority living in Denmark, they have a hard time complying with all the religious duties of Islam. Taking into account that the *ḥijāb* is one of the most debated and controversial topics that have aroused much attention and division in the European public spaces, the informants' worries make sense. Not surprisingly, the media has also played an important, if not crucial, role in the debate about the headscarf. Media researcher Rikke Andreassen has, in her investigation of this representation analyzed Danish news media in particular. According to Andreassen, the news media does not recognize the diversity of the headscarf. The diversity is reduced to only being referred to as 'headscarf'. When Danish media talks about the headscarf, it refers to *the* headscarf, as if there only is one kind of headscarf. For example, the headscarf is worn and tied differently depending on the specific woman's taste, style, fashion, etc. However, the news media tends to reduce the diversity among the *ḥijāb*-wearing women by selecting only one designated 'headscarf' or 'the Islamic headscarf' (Andreassen 2007, 92). Andreassen observes that the *ḥijāb* has been an integral part of the media coverage of ethnic minorities since the 1970s and, like the Danish, other Western media's representation of the *ḥijāb* is primarily associated with negative keywords such as oppression and violence. Muslim women themselves often have very little to say in the debate, as they are often talked *about* rather than *with* (ibid).

Despite the challenges they are faced with and the compromises they feel they have to make, the informants agree that the *ḥijāb* is *the* visible manifestation of the fact that they are Muslims. They somehow feel a responsibility to show the *ḥijāb* in a good way, even if this is not always in accordance with the regulations in the Qurān or other Islamic prescriptions. The informants believe that, together with the overall appearance, the *ḥijāb* functions as some kind of medium between them and the outside society:

“For my part, the *ḥijāb* should not be boring and unattractive. It must be eye-catching, so that others who have prejudices about it can see that we are anything but oppressed. They are allowed to say; Wow, look how beautiful her scarf is. They are welcome to think that our *ḥijāb* is a part of who we are; we can be beautiful, we wear colors and whatever we want, we are attractive, and most importantly, we are free.” (Nour)

The ḥijāb makes one's religious identity more 'visible' to others placing a certain responsibility on the Muḥajabah as a representative of Islam and the Muslim community. According to Christine Jacobsen the ḥijāb is associated with (contested) norms of how a proper muḥajabah should dress and behave; "*being visible they have to be 'exemplary models' both for other Muslims and for non-Muslims.*" (Jacobsen 2011, 200). Even though Jacobsen emphasizes the fact that dressing Islamically correct is a contested issue among Muslim theologians, she still seems to equate an 'exemplary model' with dressing and behaving Islamically correct. I find this equation insufficient, as I ask; what does it mean to be an exemplary model and who decides when one is 'correctly Muslim? Based on the informants' answers, being an exemplary model and representative of Islam seems to be a matter of an individual interpretation. The informants' understanding of how to be representatives of Islam is not directly based on any 'correct Islamic way,' instead it is based on the discourse in which they are part of.

By focusing on the sartorial biographies and the narratives of the informants, it can be concluded that the informants share almost the same interpretations of how 'to look beautiful', in which fashion is a common key element. They buy mainstream fashion and share a love for tight fitting clothes; makeup as well as accessories and high heels that make them look attractive and beautiful. Even though they differ in terms of tying their headscarves and in terms of taste, colors and patterns, they are pretty much alike when it comes to the time and money spent on their appearances. In this way, the Islamic headscarf becomes subject to the logic of fashion and consumerism (Lewis 2007). The beauty work connected to the ḥijāb establishes the self as a modern subject with free choice and gives the subject a sense of being a self-made person, who can take control of her own body. The actual practice of the ḥijāb indicates the individualized nature of it. Thus, individualization and bodywork together create a sense of modern agency that is free to choose and shape (Amireaux 2007, 139). This indicates that the Islamic headscarf can be an expression of modernity.

As modern, self-managing subjects, ḥijāb-wearing women act in accordance with what they feel is ethical, in this case how to be a good Muslim and a part of the minority community. Nevertheless, they also act as subjects who want to a part of the 'normality', as defined by the dominant youth culture in their surroundings (Jacobsen 2011, 202). Through their engagement in fashion and creative dress biographies, young ḥijāb-wearing women feel that they break with the perception of ḥijāb-wearing women as a homogenous withdrawn group. As Tarlo rightly puts it, women who wear a ḥijāb are often blamed for their supposed lack of integration into Western societies (Tarlo 2010, 99). Yet the dress biographies of the informants seem to tell a very different story. Their wardrobes and outfits could, as Tarlo

articulates it, be read as material manifestos of integration in the sense of expanding the frame to include new possibilities. As we hear, the informants stress that they do not want to be rejected by the majority as enclosed and different. When they say they do not want to look different, I interpret it as an expression of an expectation that the majority will stereotype them further if they do not dress the way they do. Almost all of them wear makeup, which further emphasizes their femininity and lives up to the modern construction of what it means to be female. This could be the young hijāb-wearing Muslim women's way of trying to combine a religious practice with a social practice that is recognized in the community. In this way, the dress practice of young hijāb-wearing women functions as a socializing tool that can help decreasing the already existing rift between Muslims and non-Muslims in modern societies (Jacobsen 2011, 201).

In one of her studies, Connie Carøe Christiansen investigates the sartorial practices of eight well-educated Muslim women, who have attracted attention in different forms of Danish media. Christiansen argues that the consumption of styled clothing is viewed as a communicative practice and that the Muslim women interviewed in her study are aware of this communicative capacity (Christiansen 2011, 341). The women in this paper express that they, through their styled clothing, hope to communicate out a message about their conviction as Muslim women, who are not oppressed or isolated, but socialized just like any other non-Muslim women of the same generation.

The sartorial biographies of Muslim women indicate an emergence of new forms of Islamic cosmopolitanism, which suggests something akin to openness toward otherness (Tarlo 2007, 144). Cosmopolitization is definitely a dominant term in Ulrich Beck's analysis of society in reflexive modernity. Beck sees cosmopolitization and individualization as both are different forms of de-traditionalization (Beck 2010, 82). Central to Beck's theory of religious cosmopolitization is the acknowledgment of the otherness of the others. To Beck, the cosmopolitan is a person of double belonging. This is certainly what the young Muslim women express, as they feel like they belong to both a Muslim minority and a Danish majority. They practice a religious symbol that has been contested in Europe for decades, still they consider themselves integrated in the Danish society, given that they have non-Muslim friends and are educated or/and work.

One could say that these young Muslim women are individualized in terms of choosing the way they look, herein their clothes and headscarves. At the same time, they are also cosmopolitanized, because they use their appearance as a tool to express their openness towards others. In other words, young hijāb-wearing woman believe that the hijāb together with their overall fashionable and stylish look allow them easier access to the majority society.

### **De-traditionalizing the ḥijāb**

The individualized and cosmopolitanism behavior of the young women in this study suggest, that a detraditionalization of the headscarf as a religious tradition is taking place, as these women have their own interpretations and understandings of the ḥijāb. Detraditionalization means a detachment from traditional constraints where the individual stand out and make individual choices about one certain tradition (Beck 2010, 82). How these interpretations differ from the traditional interpretation of the ḥijāb and proper dress, is what this final section investigates.

#### *The Qurān on the ḥijāb and modesty*

To summarize shortly, the Qurān only has few verses that refer to the issue of clothing. But these verses are much debated among Muslim theologians and intellectuals, which has given rise to different interpretations. This lack of consensus on what is ‘modest’ and ‘not sexually attractive’ seems to provide freedom to the Muslim woman to express her own interpretation. However, disregarding the fact that proper and modest dress rules are open to a wide range of interpretations, there is a consensus among Muslim scholars and intellectuals that the muḥajabah is instructed not to wear anything that makes her appear attractive, sexy and seductive. Furthermore, theologians stress that the practice of the ḥijāb is an extensive one that not only tells the woman how she should dress, but it also instructs her in how to behave (see Sandikci & Ger 2005, Mossiére 2011, Siraj 2011 and Tarlo 2010).

#### *The ḥijāb- a new understanding*

Only two of the informants, namely Hanin and Mirvat, are directly familiar with the specific Qurānic verses, as they both attend courses about Islam and have heard and discussed the issue of modest dress several times before. They are comfortable with the way they dress, because they think that they are much more decent compared to other women wearing ḥijāb these days.

I asked them to tell me about the women whom they refer to, and explain what it is that makes them *less decent* than them. They emphasized that it is not about the dress, but that it is the behavior which differs. Apparently, the ḥijāb is not the only thing that makes the Muslim woman modest and decent, but that a correct Islamic behavior is also required. According to the informants, having a boyfriend or going out late at night is not how a Muslim woman should behave. This suggests that the ḥijāb is not solely a rule-based practice, but also a disciplining practice as well. If the practice of the

ḥijāb encompasses modest dress and modest behavior, then the ḥijāb can be compared to a package that contains everything a Muslim woman must possess.

The two informants stress that, at some point, they will change their clothing practices, so that they are more in keeping with the religious principles. This indicates that they acknowledge these passages in the Qurān. Yet, I find that they somehow try to dissociate themselves from any literary reading of these passages, as they seem to be aware of the fact that modest and decent attire in Islam is actually a controversial topic. According to Anne Sofie Roald, there is a consensus regarding female covering among Islamic scholars, but there is no consensus regarding the actual form of the covering (Boulanouar 2006, 140). This may explain why the informants allow themselves to make their own interpretation of the proper dress. They emphasize that they are currently more concerned with their beautiful appearance, where the modern twist seems to trump the religious aspect. Once again, this suggests that it is the predominant discourse on femininity that influences their understanding of dress.

The other three informants are not familiar with the specific Qurānic verses that mention the dress code of the Muslim woman, simply because they do not read Arabic or attend courses on Islam. But similarly to Hanin and Mirvat, they make their own personal interpretations of how to be modest and decent. Common to the informants' interpretations is that modesty does not preclude a beautiful appearance:

“To me, the word modesty doesn't mean that, as a Muslim woman, I have to be completely covered or fully enclosed in my attire. I believe that you should dress according to how you feel inside. If you feel beautiful, then you show it by dressing beautifully. I think that I have a decent style, which certainly could be better...But you have to take it step by step. I wear the ḥijāb and I don't show skin.” (Mariam)

Mariam feels that she has taken a huge step by choosing to wear the ḥijāb. She believes that the fact that she does not show skin is enough evidence of her modesty. Similar to Hanin and Mirvat, Mariam also associates a 'better' dress with the future in her response, but she believes that modesty, decency and beauty, as she understand them, are not mutually exclusive.

Nour believes that the definition of modesty and decency is greatly influenced by, or perhaps even originates from, tradition and so is the case with Amal.

“It's funny, because people actually have different opinions on the issue of dress. Some of them quote Qurānic verses to justify their opinions, while others refer to some Muslim scholar who

said something about this. What I can tell you now is that everyone has their own interpretation of modest and decent dress.” (Amal)

Amal and Nour seem to have found a compelling argument with which they justify their clothing style. Actually, this assertion is not entirely off track. In fact, Islam permits the Muslim to be well groomed and neat, be careful about his/her appearance, and enjoy what God has created for the purpose of clothing and adornment, yet forbids arrogance and vanity ( Bonner 2013, Hsu 2013).

Dressing modestly and decently, maintaining your dignity, having a pleasant appearance, avoiding waste in clothing and other consumption are sometimes conflicting requirements that, according to some scholars (see Sandikci & Ger 2005, Mossière 2011, Siraj 2011 and Tarlo 2010), lead to different interpretations of proper dress. It also makes the head covering, along with the proper dress, far from a monolithic practice.

So far, there is a consensus among the informants that everyone has their own interpretation of what it means to dress modestly. In her ethnographic fieldwork conducted with female converts to Islam in France and in Quebec, Géraldine Mossière argues that for these women, being Muslim does not necessarily mean to give in to the consensus among Islamic scholars in regards to female covering.

“By and large, the women with whom I met try to navigate the extensive body of writing and the various Islamic schools of thought by appropriating a dress code that suits their own understanding of its aims.” (Mossière 2012, 120).

Mossière states that the attires of the women whom she met express their personal interpretation of Islam. Mossière concludes that the outcome of this personal interpretation is that these women develop innovative, creative and personalized dress styles, leading individuals to constantly negotiate between modernity and tradition. Mossière further stresses that converts are interpreting Islam in a context where Muslims are a religious minority group. Therefore, they are constructing “*alternative religious and social representations of Muslim identity that accord with their feminist interpretation of the Qurān while incorporating the Western background within which they were socialized.*”(ibid. 115). I argue that Mossière’s assertion does not necessarily have to be reserved for converts, but could include ethnic Muslims as well. Ethnic Muslim women and converts have the fact that they live in societies where Muslims are a minority group in common.

Since the informants of this study were born and raised in Denmark, it is logical to assert that their ties to the society in which they were socialized are stronger than those to the country of their

parents. They went to Danish schools, have Danish friends, and some of them are employed by Danes. Maybe it would not be all that incorrect to claim that they even share the western background with ethnic Danes. This assertion is supported by Nilfuer Göle who argues, that young migrant girls are closer to their host society in terms of youth culture, fashion consciousness and language, than they are to the culture of their parents.

“...These new European Muslims have a double belonging, a double cultural capital. On the one hand they define themselves through their religiosity, on the other they have learned techniques of self-representation in public spaces and gained universal, secular knowledge. Because they have a double cultural capital they can circulate between different activities and spaces such as home, class, youth associations and urban leisure space.” (Göle 2004, 112).

Disregarding the fact that modesty rules are open to a wide range of interpretations, we cannot ignore the fact that there is a consensus among Muslim scholars, intellectuals and even feminists that the Muslim woman is instructed to not appear attractive, sexy and seductive while wearing the *hijāb* (Siraj 2011). Yet, none of the informants live up to these requirements, as they all due to their attractive and sexy appearances, can be called *muhajababes*. All of them have posing-pictures on Facebook and their style is far from low-key.

Mariam is aware of the fact that she primarily attracts men’s attention. She is often called a *babe* and *sexy*, but she does not mind. As we saw in the previous chapter, there is no doubt that the informants are fully aware of the fact that they look attractive. In fact, it is of on purpose. But as they emphasize, they are ambitious about changing the majority of society’s negative perception of the *hijāb* through their style, even if this requires doing exactly the opposite of what Islam demands:

“Looking beautiful and attractive is a need I have, but I don’t mind if I attract people’s attention in this way. Because this attention is good, as it contradicts prejudice about the *muhajabāt* being isolated and enclosed.” (Mariam)

As mentioned earlier, the *hijāb* encourages the *muhajabah* to make distance and not interact with foreign men. In other words, according to the majority of Muslims, the *hijāb* is meant as a protection and as a screen. Many, both Muslims and non-Muslims, who do not see the *hijāb* as a religious obligation, would probably assume that the *hijāb* actually encourages women to closedness and segregation from the rest of the society. However, the informants emphasize that they want

to be open and integrated in the Danish society. Integrated in the sense of being able to dress however they want, getting an education and work, and making friendships with non-Muslims. Through their creative appearances and good looks, they also want to show *others* that they are open-minded and that the ḥijāb does not prevent them from being so. Even though the informants acknowledge the fact that the ḥijāb already is a difference-marker, they believe that by dressing like every other young woman, who does not wear a ḥijāb; they can reduce the already existing difference. What we are dealing with here is the informants reinterpreting the ḥijāb. Instead of choosing to dress in clothes that mark her dissimilarity, the muḥajabah should signal openness and have an accommodating look; especially in a society that generally tends to stigmatize the ḥijāb.

The lack of consensus on what is ‘modest’ and ‘not sexually attractive’ among Muslim theologians and intellectuals, seems to provide freedom to the Muslim woman to express her own interpretation. However, disregarding this fact, there is a consensus among Muslim scholars and intellectuals that the muḥajabah is instructed not to wear anything that makes her appear attractive, sexy and seductive (Boulanouar 2006, 143). Furthermore, theologians stress that the practice of the ḥijāb is an extensive one that not only tells the woman how she should dress, but it also instructs her in how to behave.

The informants wear tight-fitting clothes that highlight their proportions and make them appear attractive and sometimes sexy. Some of them acknowledge the fact that they do not live up to all the requirements of modest dress mentioned in the Qurān, but in general they all seem to agree that, in these days, everyone shapes their own expression of modesty and proper dress. In this way, the informants are re-appropriating the practice of the ḥijāb by putting their autonomous selves at the center of what it means to be Muḥajabah. They then present Muslim identifications that are informed by modern narratives of individual choice and become their one’s true and authentic self. One could say that the practice of the ḥijāb has become a choice for the informants; a choice that is based on personal judgment, rather than on what the Muslim theologians say about it. If we think of the ḥijāb as a package, the informants seem to pick and leave out the elements from this package that, according to their understanding, do not prevent them from becoming their own ‘true selves’. However, since this ‘true self’ is influenced by social dynamics, one might question the authenticity of it (Beck 2010, 16). The ḥijāb, as a religious practice in the informants’ everyday lives, is also detraditionalized one. However, detraditionalization does not necessarily that tradition no longer plays any role – often, the opposite is the case (Beck 2001, 25). The result is an emergence of eclectic forms of individualized religiosity where the individual becomes his own God. What Beck means with a ‘God of one’s own’ is a God one

can choose, a personal God. This personalized God can mean that everyone has their own composition of the religious elements, but also as that each has their own personalized relationship to God in a society with others who share the same or other religious convictions (Mythen 2013, 5).

There is no doubt that the *ḥijāb* as an Islamic tradition plays an important role in the women's lives, however they all agree that everyone shapes their own understanding of proper and modest dress. In other words, they believe that it should be up to the individual *muḥajabah* to determine which elements or aspects of the *ḥijāb*-package (from the tradition) she wants to weigh the most. The choices that the informants make are based on their subjective needs which, according to them, bring them closer to, and not in conflict with, the surrounding others, who do not necessarily share the same religious beliefs. This puts them in the position of being their own God(s), as they choose to weigh their own individual subjective interpretation higher than the collective traditional Islamic interpretation.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated how individualization changes young Muslim women's interpretation and approach to the *ḥijāb* by introducing the new fashionable, attractive and extrovert young *ḥijāb* wearing Muslim women who live in Denmark and who can be called the *muḥajababes*. By focusing on this specific group of visible Muslims, who are neither active nor organized, this study should be read as a contribution to filling the gap that exists in the current research on the individualization of Muslims in the West. The individualization changes the five young women's interpretation of the *ḥijāb* firstly by the fact that their choice of wearing a *ḥijāb* arises not only from their willingness to commit to Islam, but to a greater degree from a desire to express beauty, maturity and individuality as a woman. Secondly, to these women, the *ḥijāb* becomes a matter of the ability to express themselves as beautiful and attractive Muslim women, giving them the ability to signal openness, which, according to their beliefs, provides them with easier access to the majority society. Thirdly, the *ḥijāb* becomes a matter of interpretation, not based on the traditional Islamic understandings of the *ḥijāb*, but on individual reflections and considerations that are largely influenced by contextual conditions characterized among other things by choice, personal autonomy, and authenticity.

### Author biography

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