A NARRATIVE STUDY ABOUT THE TRANSFORMATIVE VISUAL CULTURAL
DIALOGUE BEYOND WOMEN’S VEILS

Fahad Aljebreen, B.A., M.A.

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APPROVED:

Joni Acuff, Major Professor
Laura Evans, Major Professor
Terry Barrett, Committee Member
Tyson Lewis, Committee Member
Mickey Abel, Chair of the Department of
   Art Education and Art History
Greg Watts, Dean of the College of
   Visual Arts and Design
Victor Prybutok, Vice Provost of the
   Toulouse Graduate School
In this narrative study, I explore the transformative visual cultural dialogue behind the sight of the veil or veiled women in Denton, Texas as a Western culture. The narrative is constructed from the experiences of three Western non-Muslim women participants who wore the veil publicly in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, especially Denton, Texas, for about two weeks, in the spring of 2014. The main question for this study is: How do veiled Western women incite transformative visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning veiled women? To gather rich data to answer the study's question, I utilized qualitative narrative inquiry to explore the transformative dialogue that the veil, as a visual culture object, can incite in non-Muslim Western women's narratives. The study involves three participants who are non-Muslim American women who voluntarily wore the veil in public and recorded their own and other's reactions. The participants' interviews and diaries demonstrated that the veil incited a particular perceptive dialogue and often transferred negative meanings. For example, the sight of the veil suggested the notion of being Muslim, and consequently, the ideas of not belonging. The reactions the participants received were either negative verbal interactions or physical ones, both of which are limited in this study to face gestures or some form of negative body language that is meant to be a message of disliking. In summation, this study shows that the women's veil is a visual culture symbol that transfers negative meaning in the DFW area in Texas.
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By

Fahad Aljebreen
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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Introduction

In 2006, I was watching a report on the Aljazeera channel entitled, “In French: A Hot Debate over the Veil—To Ban It or Not.” (which I translated from Arabic to English). This report caused my wife, Alia, and me to engage in a debate over the veil. That conversation went something like this:

ALIA: Why do they want to ban it?

ME: It is their country. They can do what they want.

ALIA: No, they cannot. I know that in France, everyone has the right to wear what he or she wants.

ME: They see the veil as oppression against women.

ALIA: What? How?

ME: It says here on the Internet that women are forced by men to wear the veil, so they won’t allow any oppression against women in France.

ALIA: How did they know they were forced?

ME: People usually are afraid of strange things or things they do not know much about. You remember the first time Saudis knew about the TV, radio, and even jeans? Some scholars prohibited even the radio.

ALIA: Yeah, but there were no laws passed to ban them. It was just the scholars’ opinions. I can accept it or reject it. But with the law in France, I have to follow it or get punished.

ME: Why you are bothering yourself? It is in France, not in Saudi Arabia.
ALIA: What if I decide to go to study, conduct business, or even vacation there? What if I am a French woman who lives there, and I am practicing wearing my veil?

ME: You are right. But we do not have any authority to do anything. It’s the politicians’ authority.

ALIA: But politicians listen carefully to the trends of normal people.

ME: Yeah, that is right.

Through that conversation with my wife, I came to realize the problem of banning the veil, which I naively thought was not my concern, since I am a man, and it is in France. Because of that conversation, I started to reflect more on how my own thoughts about the veil issue compared to my wife’s thoughts. I wondered why I saw it as a matter for the French while she thought it was a more universal concern. I wondered how many people did not care about the problem just because the law banning the veil would not affect their lives. Also, I came to believe that regardless of gender differences, I was responsible as a human being to help in whatever way I could. Therefore, as an artist who wanted to engage with current issues, I chose the veil as the subject of my master’s thesis in 2007.

At that time, I researched the veil’s role in art. I wanted to know how artists dealt with this issue. Finding artworks depicting the veil, however, was not as easy as I thought it would be. Since I was not able to read English at that time, it was hard for me to find articles linking art and the veil. Instead, I found a great deal of debate about the veil both within and outside Saudi Arabia. Most of the insider’s debate was rooted from the Islamic viewpoint, whereas the outside debate focused on women’s rights and the
idea that men forced women to wear the veil. All I could find about the veil was written from a religious perspective; some scholars said the veil is required for women to cover their faces, whereas others had another interpretation—namely, that the veil is just for the head and not for the face. I tried to see how artists represented the veil in their artwork. Surprisingly, I found a few artworks depicting the veil, but the veil itself was not the main subject. In sculpture, my area of interest, there was nothing.

Due to the lack of evidence of the veil in sculpture, I believed I had been presented with a good opportunity for me to represent the veil as an important and respectful sign of women in my culture. Additionally, I was missing a lot of information about one of the most important icons in my culture, the veil, so I wanted to use art to understand that icon’s significance as best as I could.

As a way of addressing this scholarly and artistic need, I made many artworks for my veil sculpture project and held an exhibition of fourteen artworks depicting the veil. I received a great response from visitors. My experience practicing art has widened my gaze, filled my gap of knowledge about the veil, and has also given me many opportunities to interact with people. That art project led me to question many things about the veil that I had never thought about before.

A couple of years later, in 2009, I was studying in the United States, and my experiences forced me to think again about the veil on a daily basis. Below is a narration I wrote at the time about the personal experiences of me and my wife, who is veiling her face, while I was studying here in the United States:

*In Washington D.C., in 2009, the family was arriving from a long flight that took almost 24 hours. They were enjoying every single moment of their journey, especially as it was their first time travelling overseas. At the airport’s checking point, the family waited for a long time until their names were called. The officer*
examining the passports seemed quite active; he talked with everyone about everything as he checked, wrote and stamped the travelers’ papers. But then he looked at the mom’s face and everything changed instantly from activity to ignorance. The mom felt that ignorance, while the dad felt awkwardness. The family passed the checking point without any further comment.

Outside of the airport, while they were walking to find a taxi, the mom realized that most people were looking at her in a sort of wondering or awkward way. In fact, some kids were even pointing at her while speaking to their parents; others seemed to speak about her, which was obvious when one of them suddenly gave her a quick look. She became scared and moved really close to her husband. She said, “I do not feel relaxed, do you?” “Do not worry; we will get the shuttle right now and take it directly to our hotel. Then you can get relaxed as much as you like,” the husband replied. “Oh, that is not what I meant…” she began.

“That is the shuttle; let’s go…” her husband interrupted.

When they entered the shuttle, a 40-year-old man wearing a grey suit and holding a novel in his left hand started to stare at the wife’s face. The wife noticed his staring, which made her nervous, so she tried desperately to look any place as far away from him as her eyes would take her. In the back, there were two chairs beside a young lady, who was busy searching for something in her handbag. The wife headed toward the two empty chairs while holding her little son. Her daughter and husband were not far behind following her. She could sense the energy of everyone staring at her face, but she tried not to make her feelings obvious. As she sat down, the young lady gave her a peek, and then stood up to find another chair. The wife thought the lady did that to make more room for the family, so she thanked her, but there was no response.

In front of them was a young black male wearing a yellow shirt with jeans and with headphones in his ears. He tried to sneak some peeks, but he did not want to draw too much attention, so he wore his sunglasses while doing so. Then he tried to take a picture with his cell phone, pretending he was playing a game. The wife realized what was happening, so she turned her face to her husband, and whispered to him, “Honey, I still feel nervous.”

Husband: “Nervous about what?”

“Don’t you see how people are looking at me?”

“Yeah, I did notice, but what can I do to people? People usually are curious to see abnormal things.”

“But not trying to take a picture of my face, like this guy.”

“Well, people take pictures of great and beautiful things; you should be happy…”

“Yeah, but at least a smile would appear on their faces if that were true.”
After reaching the hotel, they grabbed their stuff, and proceeded to the front desk to identify their reservation. The family was waiting in front of the elevator’s door to get a ride up to their room, which was located on the eighth floor. As the elevator door opened, a young woman inside, who was holding her daughter’s hand, saw the wife facing her and immediately shouted, “JESUS!” Everyone freaked out. The woman said “sorry” as she left with her daughter who was still staring at the wife’s face. The wife almost cried. The husband tried to make her relax, by saying, “Do not worry my dear; with time people will get used to seeing you as normal...especially in Denton, where we are going to live. Just bear with me, honey.”

Well...While I am writing this narrative, it has been almost six years since I told my wife, “Don’t worry...people will get used to seeing you in this way.” Unfortunately, nothing has changed, except that we are the ones who have become used to seeing people staring with uncomfortable faces--not all of them, of course, but so many. Every day when we go to restaurants, malls, parks, etc., we face these embarrassing situations when many people speak, peek, or stare at us, not giving even a smile. Therefore, we just decided to ignore people who are staring at us and try to look at the sky instead. Sometimes we can see the curiosity in people’s faces, as many may like to ask what happened to my wife’s face. Actually, nothing happened to her face; she just wears the veil for a religious purpose.

It is ironic sometimes when you realize what different perspectives humans have. In Saudi Arabia, where we came from, it is the norm to see a veiled woman, even though there are many unveiled women living there. I may even lose my wife among hundreds of veiled women while shopping. However, here in the United States, it is rare to see a woman covering her head, and it is extraordinary to see a face veiled woman like my wife. Another ironic thing here in the USA is the reaction that we see on people’s faces when they see my wife. Sometimes we try to figure out what they are thinking or whispering. We would love sometimes to speak with these people to see what they think and to give them the opportunity to ask us if they wondered. However, it is hard to build a bridge with someone who has some negative expectation about you.

Some people would assume that my wife has a facial deformity and so she covers her face. Other people would assume that she was trying to scare people. Another groups would assume that she engages with evil spirits and so that she looks like that. Yet other people may have preconceived ideas of Muslim terrorists who are extremely dangerous, and think that she may have bombs on her body so she is covered from head to toe. However, we still find a few people who are so open-minded with whom we end up making good friends, and who come toward us and start a conversation, trying to discover a new culture.

Although the veil is not banned here in the United States, it has been linked to
negative perceptions among Americans (Hasan, 2007). Additionally, according to Coger (2011), “September 11 had a particularly significant negative impact on hijabis in the United States” (p. 23), which makes me realize why many American people look at my wife’s veil in a negative way. For example, when I go out with my wife, some people peer at us as if seeing a ghost. Other people act indifferent, as if we are not even there. We have to be enterprising all the time and show others that we are human beings just like them. We see the fear in some people’s eyes, so we try to counter that fear by speaking with them and laughing. Sometimes we experience awkward moments when people ignore us. We live this life everyday: walking, shopping, or going anywhere with my veiled wife complicates even further the cultural issues surrounding the veil that I had encountered and studied earlier,

Interestingly, though, the subject of the veil also has helped me start conversations with some of my American colleagues. I have noticed that they seem interested in the subject matter of my Master’s thesis. Time after time, I have found that colleagues like to speak with me and ask more about the veil. We have become more comfortable speaking with one another, and our dialogue has become easier as we speak about our personal thoughts. Because of these conversations, I have felt more recently that our anxieties about the veil have decreased as we examine and expand our knowledge together. Sometimes, the dialogues challenged me, but also, sometimes they enhanced my understanding and tolerance for other’s opinions. I have been more challenged to listen, read, and put myself in the position of those who are critical of the veil, and doing so enhanced my understanding and comprehension of the other issues relevant to the veil. Therefore, as I have been living in a culture that sees
the veil differently, my dissertation research has focused on helping others and myself understand the real issues that surround the veil. First, I studied ways to open the conversation and discuss the veil in a peaceful environment. Second, I followed and recorded the experiences of my research participants who wore the veil to illuminate how the veil works as a representation in visual culture.

Statement of the Problem

The meaning of the veil is relevant to my family life. My wife, who wears the veil, and I experienced great challenges living in the United States. We started to see the veil and all its associated problems from an insider's perspective rather than merely hearing about them like we did before. Because of the veil, we have at many times faced the problem of being ignored in the United States. We feel the ignorance, fear, and stress when we go shopping, go on vacation, or meet new people. Sometimes I am afraid that people’s reactions may be violent, which has been documented by Daraiseh (2012), who reported that from the beginning of 2000 to the end of 2001, which was after 9/11, the outrage against Arabs and Muslims increased rapidly by 1600% (p.2). Moreover, he stated that “Muslim women were specifically discriminated against all over the country. In particular, the Muslim women in Chicago reported having their headscarves pulled off their heads and being spat at on the street” (Daraiseh, 2012, p. 10). Hence, it is clear that the veil might play an important role of giving these women a vivid visible identity that without doubt prove the target for these haters to react.

Subsequently, the veil has become a hot topic in many Western and Muslim countries (Fournier, 2012; Khiabany & Williamson, 2008; Pocock, 2008). It also has become a powerful political issue (Scott, 2007). But discussing the veil anywhere is not
a new matter, as the debate over its defense or vilification has been present for centuries (Haddad, 2007). Kantarci (2005) also noted that in many European and Scandinavian schools, there are no laws against headscarves, and the debate about the headscarf is becoming more influenced by ideology. After 9/11, however, the media took the discussion about the veil to a new level, and the propriety of the veil has been a topic of some controversy (Fournier, 2012; Haddad, 2007). According to Kantarci (2005), the recent veil debate has started mostly in schools before entering political debate.

Politically, some countries are still debating about the veil, while others, like France, have banned it already (CNN, 2010). I argue that people who want to ban the veil have their own assumptions, and people’s assumptions about the veil are the core of the issue that leading to ban the veil. Some people behind the veil ban assume that women are forced to wear the veil; therefore, they want to fight to give women the right to take it off. For example, former French president Nicolas Sarkozy said of the French ban that “the ruling is to protect women from being forced to cover their faces and to uphold France’s secular values” (Shahid, 2010, para. 7). Moreover, in an interview with Rose (2007) on PBS, Sarkozy warned that

If you come to France and the older brothers prevent the younger sisters from dressing as they want, you’re not welcomed. If you come to France and you wear a veil and you go to one of the administrative buildings, then that’s not acceptable. If you don’t want your wife to be examined by a male doctor, then you’re not welcomed here. (para. 4)

Such attitudes about banning create difficulties for many people who believe in the right to wear the veil, including me and my wife, especially because we know that it is difficult to convince many Westerners that women are not forced to wear the veil.
Even though I think debating is a dialogue, I think political power can kill the dialogue by way of unreasonable laws that force women to wear the veil or not to wear it. Therefore, using dialogue with my art education colleagues might give me the power to open a space for people to think about and discuss from different perspectives issues that matter. As an art educator and visual artist, I assert as Hubbard (2010) described that art can serve as a vehicle to open the discourse on many subjects. Moreover, I agree with what Barrett (2012) asserted, which is that visual art has a unique spirit; it allows artists to deliver their ideas because “images carry ideological messages, which cumulatively shape the culture’s ideas, values, and attitudes” (p. 173). As a practicing visual artist, I choose visual culture as my primary approach to such interactions, and I subscribe to Hubbard’s (2010) idea that conversations generated by artworks are excellent ways to build positive and meaningful communication across cultures.

Furthermore, dialogues can usually help to fill the gaps of knowledge and understanding among humans. For example, while speaking with some of my colleagues and Western friends, I became aware that most people do not know much about the veil except how the media represents it to them. As a result, I as agree with Byng (2010), who argued that the veils of Muslim women have been represented and understood in aggressively negative ways. Moreover, it has been my experience that many Americans are hesitant to talk about religious and political concerns. For example, I led a discussion concerning the religious and political aspects of the veil with University of North Texas (UNT) colleagues in the spring of 2012, but at that time, the participants were quite reluctant to speak their minds about the veil. I asked my colleagues at that time why Americans do not talk about politics or religious issues, and
one of my classmates indicated that it’s because they are sensitive areas to speak about, and they have been told not to talk about politics or religious matters since they were in school. I was surprised by my other colleagues’ agreement with his answer because I thought everything could be discussed here in the United States.

Research Questions

This study attempted to understand the visual cultural dialogue and concepts of Western women in relation to the veil. Specifically, the main question for this narrative study is: How do veiled Western women incite transformative visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning veiled women?

In investigating this question, I also sought answers to several sub questions:

1. As a Western woman, what does it mean to be veiled in a Western culture?

2. What kind of verbal or physical interactions result from the experience of wearing the veil?

3. What understanding do Western women have about the veil or veiled women before and after the experience of wearing one in public?

4. What possible narratives might emerge from the three non-Muslim women participants’ experiences?
Significance of the Research

This research is significant to ongoing controversies about the veil, which have contributed to conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims in countries where banning the veil has been proposed. It is also significant for me personally because my wife and I have had negative experiences with attitudes toward the veil in the United States. One may wonder why the veil has become a problem. It might be because, as Renteln (2004) suggested, that the veil is a visual symbol linked with religion, which gives it power and “evokes strong emotional responses, particularly those that are visual” (p. 1573). Because my family has been on the receiving end of some of these strong responses, my family and I have faced many difficulties living in the United States in similar ways that others who practice veiling have experienced. Notably, Western hostility toward the veil has forced some Muslim women to give up the veil to avoid isolation, persecution, or violence (Gehrke-White, 2007; Wagner, Sen, Permanadeli, & Howarth, 2012).

The audience for this research includes art educators who want to use art education to address cultural issues, including Muslims and non-Muslims who are interested in knowing more about the veil. Muslims who want to practice wearing the veil in Western countries are also part of the intended audience. My hope is that a further use of the veil subject in art will create a path for Muslims and non-Muslims to both enhance their understanding of the veil and share different points of view or at least let the veil to be a familiar object to be seen. Such a mutual understanding can help Western people to look past their biases when they see veiled women, and it can
also help veiled women to know what others think of the veil, which may help them to adapt to non-Muslim cultures.

In this study, I incorporated themes that touched my life every single day. The veil is a cultural and religious part of my family’s life because my wife wears the veil and my daughter will wear it in the future if she wants to. Moreover, the project is rooted in my daily memories as an artist, teacher, and researcher in that it is designed to inform my actual practice of pedagogy and communication through narrative. As a researcher, I believe that the narrative offers a powerful opportunity to collect data through communication that mediates conflict and cultural misunderstandings. I see the experiences of three non-Muslim women wearing the full veil and interacting with the public as an art experience for all contributors; the participants wearing the veil are actually performing art in some way, and also, viewers who interacted with the performing women contributed to a state of affairs that provided an opportunity for discussion or a transformative experience.

The research project is framed around two common perspectives on the veil: political and religious. The veil as a visual culture phenomenon sometimes provokes the fears and hidden thoughts that non-Muslims often have about the veil, which make them think of related ideas like violence, radical group, or terrorist suspicious. Further, Muslims’ religious and political experiences have been documented by many in the literature. Since most of the Muslims in the United States are immigrants, many of them experience alienation. Additionally, immigrants are usually minorities, and Safipour, Schopflocher, Higginbottom, & Emami (2011) have documented that the feeling of alienation is increasing among minorities in the U.S. Accordingly, I sometimes think that
Muslims might have a sense of alienation that makes them sensitive toward native citizens, which in turn might lead them to assume that others’ staring is negative. Therefore, I utilized non-Muslim Western women in my research study to avoid both of these prevailing religious and political biases that have been associated with being an immigrant. Additionally, conducting the veil experiment with non-Muslim women might also help bridge other cultural gaps between the immigrant’s veil-wearing experiences and the Western perspective. To make it clear, I refer to the Western woman as the woman who is an American and has not been exposed to the community of women who wear the veil. By utilizing Western women, I offered viewers an opportunity to develop broader perspectives on the social, political, and personal meanings of and thoughts about the veil. My analysis and interpretation of the project’s research data focused on the varied individual responses of participants and casual viewers as they viewed or interacted with each participant. Since fear can easily lead to hatred and the rejection of unfamiliar customs, I argue that making the meaning of the veil known is a powerful educational initiative.

Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of this study was gender. Even though some men wear the veil in cultures such as Tuareg, Morrs, and Hausa (Murphy, 1964; Rasmussen, 1991; Van, 1992), women who wear the veil were the core focus of this project because theirs is the gender that usually wears it. In addition, women face many difficulties related to being veiled. Because Muslims are most likely to know the veil, try it on, or see it as a part of their culture, this study was limited to working with non-Muslim women. To avoid any associated feelings of alienation from being immigrants generally (Safipour,
Schopflocher, Higginbottom, & Emami, (2011) or Muslim immigrants specifically, I asked Western women to do this experience to reach the Western voice and perspective. Another limitation of this study was its confinement to the Dallas–Fort Worth community and UNT students, which limits generalizing these experiences with the experiences of other non-Muslim Western women in different communities in Texas and elsewhere in the United States. Another limitation of this study was the limit in finding volunteer research participants fitting the criteria of being an adult female, from the Art education program, and non-Muslim resides in a Western area with a significant minority of women wearing the veil, such as Dallas Fort Worth in this study.

Also, from the limitation of this study is that the three participants, MENA, EEMA, and GEWA (not their real names), were very kind and respectful and tried not to say something that they assumed might offended me, which generally resulted in them attempting to avoid making any sharp or direct statements against the veil or veiled women. To increase the chances of initiating a frank discussion, I tried to repeat the questions in different ways. For example, I asked them what they thought about the veil or veiled women, and then I repeated the question by asking them how they thought other people felt about the subject. The participants demonstrated their understanding best when they were talking about other people’s perspectives or when they were reflecting on their experience with wearing a veil.

In addition, this study was limited to investigating the full veil as a visual symbol of Islamic culture, and the results of this study should not be generalized to bear meaning with regard to other Islamic symbols. Moreover, the study’s sample size of three participants was a limitation because it was hard to find volunteer participants.
The time of veiling and interacting with others was limited to a maximum of two weeks, and the minimum experience was limited to one full day of wearing the veil and five additional separate, but shorter periods, of wearing it. The study participants were instructed to wear the veil during busy times, such as school days or weekend shopping so their chances of interacting with others would be higher. The color of the full veil was limited to black because that is the most common and accessible color of the veil.

Definitions of Terms

- **Veil** - The veil is defined as “the dress that covers the whole body of the woman including her head, face, hands, and feet” (Abdullah, 2006, p. 30). In *Merriam-Webster* the Veil is defined as “a length of cloth worn by women as a covering for the head and shoulders and often especially in Eastern countries for the face” (Merriam-Webster, 2013). I define the veil as a piece of cloth used usually to cover a woman’s face; it can be seen with or without a hole for the eyes, long or short, in black or other colors. It has many other names, such as burqa or burkah, niqāb, and khimār.

- **Hijab** - According to Gehrke-White (2007) hijab is “the veil or the covering of Muslim women’s head, with usually hair completely hidden” (p. 295). I define the hijab as a cloth that covers a woman’s head and neck without obscuring her face. The basic meaning of hijab in the Arabic language, however, is curtain or cover.

- **Abaya** - This is “a Muslim woman’s outer garment or gown that is long, loose and modest” (Gehrke-White, 2007, p. 295).
• Burqa - The burga is “a severe head-to-toe outer garment that completely covers a woman except for her eyes” (Gehrke-White, 2007, p. 295).

• Western Woman: The Western woman is one who has lived and was raised in the United States and identified herself as a Western woman. According to dictionary.com Western woman in terms of government, politics, and diplomacy, is a woman “relating to, or characteristic of the Americas and the parts of Europe not under Communist rule” (Dictionary’s online dictionary, n.d.).
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The framework of this study draws on society, feminist studies, critical theory, visual culture studies, narratology, and art education. The veil may be seen as a topic marginal to the field of art education, but I argue that it is central to it, especially because I attend to the relationships between the veil, art, and society. Societal matters frequently evoke artists and art educators to interact with what they encounter on a daily basis; as Van Laar and Diepeveen (1998) suggested, artists create their ideas out of social action. And furthermore, the public usually reads about artists’ social situations to better understand their art. Therefore, I reviewed how artists utilized the veil in their artworks and what meanings they ascribed to the veil. As the veil is a visual cultural object representing a specific cultural heritage linked to identity and nationalism, such as Arab or Muslim (Saleh, 2010), for example, it also has roots in the fundamental Muslim social development that is widely accepted in Muslim cultures (Saleh, 2010).

Art education is a way of teaching through art practice, and all art subjects are rooted in social life, reflecting cultural practices, beliefs, and dreams. Ways that art education has addressed such aspects of social life have been suggested in Smith’s (2007) work, which explored how, “interpretations of culture are significant for the pedagogical practices of art teachers working with students in a culturally diverse society” (p. 29). Similarly, because the veil is deeply connected to cultural practices, beliefs, and identities and has become a central point of interaction between cultures, art educators might play an important role in addressing this issue, encouraging people to think about it from different points of view.
The literature review supporting this study is divided into sections that illuminate the significance of the veil in social, political, artistic, cultural, and educational contexts, some of which overlap. First is an examination of the history of the veil and its recent emergence as a political and social issue. Because proponents and opponents of the veil have developed their beliefs into political agendas, I also present a general theorization of political art, which is followed by a specific examination of representations of the veil in political art. Finally, I researched the visual culture in which the veil is seen as an icon.

The Veil Historically

Many studies examine the veil historically, establishing its importance to diverse cultures and religions. The veil is one of the oldest forms of clothing; in fact, the first record of women wearing veils is in an Assyrian legal text from the 13th century BC (Kantarci, 2005). In addition, many religions’ followers have worn the veil in various eras. In most Christian art, for example, the Virgin Mary is represented wearing a veil, an indication of the artist’s respect for the subject. Osenga (2009) noted, “we can indeed say that Mary’s veil represents her personal virtues of modesty and faithfulness (to her son)” (p. 24). In addition, Jewish women wore head coverings when going out in public, and they sometimes covered their whole faces except one eye (Azeem, 1995). Today, Westerners associate women’s veils with Muslims, but it is clear that when Islam arose in Mecca in 610, the veil was already common across a number of cultures. The coming of Islam transformed the existing Arab culture in many ways, but it also absorbed and adapted to existing social and cultural groups (Walther, 1993).
Historians have also documented diverse social connotations of the veil in various eras and regions. As a social custom, the veil most fundamentally conveys a state of honor. In the Tannaitic era, for instance, it was an outrage for a Jewish woman if her veil was removed, so the veil signified the dignity of noble women (Azeem, 1995). Moreover, in Assyrian law, women who were considered unrespectable were required to uncover their heads (Kinias, 2010). That is how the veil was seen before Islam, so Islam kept the same honor state by encouraging women to wear it for the sake of God. However, other people think that the veil went deep into the Arab and Muslim culture to transform from the Islamic way of wearing clothes to a strong traditional way of living for Arab women (Fernea & Bezirgan, 1977). Even though the veil was worn by different religions, presently, the veil is associated almost entirely with Muslim women; however, there are many Muslims who do not wear it. In the Western nations, the veil almost disappeared from the culture until some people saw it as bizarre and even became frightened by the sight of veiled women. For example, Valles (2005), in explaining her old feelings when seeing typical Muslim women wrote, “the image of those women dressed like the Grim Reaper . . . made me feel sick to my stomach” (p. 1).

Other Perspectives, Feminists, and the Veil

Global society has become closer and more intimate because of an increased international human interaction and communication supported for a long time by nations, civilizations, and human efforts. This increased communication helps individuals see, know, and visit whatever interests they have anywhere in the world and in a very short timeframe. In fact, events in the East can be known in the West in moments, and vice versa, which is quite a technological development. On the other hand, this global
interaction has forced cultures around the world to face difficult issues with respect to different religions, cultures, thoughts, or ideologies. As a result, on one hand, people are able to sum up time and space; but ironically, on the other hand, some people are still struggling to be tolerant and sum up the human thoughts and arguments. In many ways, people around the globe have become more sensitive about “us” and “others,” not just to control goods and wealth, but also to control identity. Accordingly, identity has many types of meanings or forms, some of which are visible, such as the identity issues embodied by the veiled Muslim women.

Further, the veil has many definitions in various languages, but in this study the veil refers to a female’s head cloth. According to Abdullah (2006), the veil is defined as “the dress that covers the whole body of the woman including her head, face, hands, and feet” (p. 30). I define the veil as a piece of cloth usually used to cover a woman’s face and body; it can be long or short, in black or other colors, and with or without a hole for the eyes. It has many other names, such as Burqa or Burka, Niqab, Hijab, and Khimar.

The veil has become a subject of argument among people. Even though the veil has been worn since the time of the Assyrians in the 13th century BC (Kantarci, 2005), it has increasingly become a topic of public interest in the West (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2002; Parker, 2008). After the discussing of the veil increased, the veil became a worldwide issue attracting personal and government concern. Also, almost everyone has a different opinion about it. However, I think a useful way to begin examining the subject of the veil is to look at it from the standpoint of feminist theory. This theory offers a great way to garner a deeper understanding, since the vast majority of those
who use the veil are women, particularly Muslim women. Moreover, the feminist movement has a solid, rational standpoint to explain what the veil means, and whether people see it as positive, negative, or otherwise.

According to Loftsdóttir (2011), feminist theory refers to a contemporary movement seeking gender equality, embedded in the widespread atmosphere of issues with identity and other social matters. Loftsdottir argues that the matter of gender equality in feminism is a political issue, therefore making it "volatile and dynamic" (p. 199). But gender equality can be hijacked by politics, as happened in the post-9/11 landscape (Loftsdóttir, 2011). Furthermore, Coleman and Ferreday (2010) agree with Loftsdóttir in terms of politics, but they see feminism as a “politics of hope, a movement underpinned by a utopian drive for full equality” (p. 313). In general, the focus of feminist theory is mainly on equality and women’s rights. The full equality is also a key to women’s autonomy, which Howard-Hassmann (2011) argued should be protected more by international law.

In the beginning according to Grosz (2010), “feminist theory began as an analysis of the ways in which knowledge discriminated against women and helped to develop and perpetuate harms done to women” (p.49). Accordingly, the feminist theory attempts to analyze the status, roles, and experiences that both men and women undergo in society, and use that knowledge to better the lives of women. Ultimately, the contemporary feminist theory “directs itself to the question of change” (Grosz, 2010, p.48). And I argue that feminist theory can play an important role to change the negative attitude toward the veil.

According to Huisman and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2005), feminist theorists often
assert that dress matters, since dressing is a daily practice of both genders, which should be equal. Also, Grosz (2010) agreed that the theory observes differences between genders, and “for men and women, all subjects are material objects” (p. 50). Feminist theory encourages feminists to focus on removing the real barriers to becoming effective members of society that women encounter every day (Grosz, 2010; Saleh, 2010). The idea of a barrier could also apply to the veil: if the veil is creating a real problem for women and becoming an absolute barrier for them in terms of reaching their goals, then feminist theory might suggest that women become active against the negative attitudes towards the veil.

Accordingly, Silvey (2004), explored through gender differences theory how the natural location of women in society and their experiences of social situations are different. For instance, different values and beliefs about womanhood cause women to experience different social attitudes, which applies to the subject of the veil where it receives a respected attitudes at the Muslim culture yet negative attitudes at the Western culture.

Interestingly, the theory of gender inequality asserts that the position of women in society and their experiences of social situations are different from, and not yet equal to, those of men. In the view of liberal feminists, moral reasoning for both men and women is the same, yet in societies that support patriarchy, male chauvinism and dominance have historically vanquished the opportunity for women to practice and express their rights (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010). Instead, men might have isolated women to their households and rendered them voiceless in the public domain. Therefore, Saleh (2010) argued, and I agree, that feminists should have their say: “...Most of the Western-
centered feminist literature emphasized that women, once given the opportunity, would seek to become an effective member of the workforce, and focus on means to facilitate and empower women’s decision to work” (p. 31).

In practice, some feminists think that most societies perceive women as second-class citizens who should be submissive to the demands of men. Accordingly, Read and Bartkowski (2000) argue that the idea of being submissive is linked to the veiled Muslim women in today’s society. In fact, many feminists, including some Muslims, used to “reverse the sacralization of the veil by linking the hijab with oppressive social hierarchies and male domination” (Read & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 401). Therefore, the structural oppression explains that incidences of oppression and inequalities against women might originate from class differences. For instance, this accompanies critiques against the veil as “an unambiguous symbol of discrimination and gender inequality imposed only on women (but not men) regardless of their freely chosen personal beliefs” (Ssenyonjo, 2007, p. 701). This leads to the conclusion that there is no one solution for all genders and societies as Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2007) acknowledged:

Just as we cannot reduce all women to one group with a uniform experience, race, class, or culture, there is no one single method, methodology, or epistemology that informs feminist research. Feminist researchers hold different perspectives, ask different questions, draw from a wide array of methods and methodologies, and apply multiple lenses that heighten our awareness of sexist, racist, homophobic, and colonialist ideologies and practices (p. 4)
In sum, feminism movements are looking for the change to have better live and right for women, and veiled women should take the advantage of such movement to represent their perspectives and rights to be as they like without the influence of anybody.

The Islamic Veil: Issue and Thoughts

Ssenyonjo (2007) described the veil as a female Islamic dress intended to cover part of the head or the whole face. The Hijab is generally the used style, even though other types are still worn like the Khimar, Niqab, Sitar, and Jilbab. The Niqab covers the hair and face, leaving only the eyes visible. The Hijab is common among observant Muslim women for covering the hair, neck, and ears, but not the face. The veil is most common among women of Middle Eastern Muslim origins, even though it can be found in other places and other groups. I like to call it Islamic, since its fundamental roots are in Muslim social development; and the views of influential Muslim religious scholars are that “the veil was a fundamental requirement in Islam” (Saleh, 2010, p. 98) and the veil is widely accepted in Muslim cultures today. Also, I maintain that the Islamic philosophy is the only reason that the veil still exists and continues to be worn today.

Even though the veil has been an issue during different eras in some countries like Iran, Turkey, and Egypt, it has also become a big issue in this era, especially since April 11, 2011, when France passed a law banning it. The French government assumed that women were forced to wear the veil; therefore, members of the government wanted to fight for equality and give women the right to remove it. Also, as French president Nicolas Sarkozy said of the French ban, “the ruling is to protect
women from being forced to cover their faces and to uphold France’s secular values” (Shahid, 2010, ¶ 7). However, I contend that the president’s justification is obviously not about women’s rights, but more so about protecting French identity and values by humiliating others. The actions of the French government with regard to the veil are vividly reminiscent of Said’s (2003) statement about colonialism: “Every empire, however, tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate” (¶ 4). Therefore, in regard of the veil’s issue, I argue that France government has been doing what Said stated previously about colonialism.

A 2011 British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) report stated that the veil ban is not just active in French, but actually many other countries following the French, or trying to do the same procedure to ban the veil. Many of the European countries, such as Belgium and the United Kingdom, are radically calling for a ban against the veil. The Netherlands tried to ban the veil; an Italian committee approved a draft law to ban it; and in 2008, Denmark’s government barred judges from wearing head scarves and similar religious attire.

When all of this material about the veil is gathered together, it becomes clear that the important common factor among these issues is politics. However, in some cases, the laws have had the opposite effect. Some women, as a reaction to the veil being banned, actually started to wear it. Indeed, since the French law passed, Muslim women have increasingly worn the veil, even though some of them had not veiled before (Haddad, 2007; Moore, 2007; Nagra, 2011). Also, young Muslim girls in France have increasingly started to wear it after the media attacked them (Byng, 2010). And
after the bombing of America on September 11, 2001, the stereotypical representation of the Arab and Muslim has become increasingly widespread in various forms of media (Bullock, 2002; Parker, 2008; Shaheen, 2009). As a result of negative representation of Muslims and Arabs, depicting the veil as the “character” of Arab and Muslim women has increased in the media and become linked with violent, radical and aggressive news or way of living in Muslim culture, which contribute to represent the veil as a visual icon of violent. In fact, Ajrouch (2007) noted that “After 9/11 the veil became more threatening, representing an overt symbol of a religion linked to terrorism” (p. 324).

Accordingly, a number of nations have enacted legislation banning and discouraging the use of face veils in public places. Research by the Pew Center showed that, in the Western world, bans against face veils received support in countries such as France (over 80%), Spain (59%), Britain (62%) and Germany (71%) (Pew Global Attitudes Project [PGAP], 2010). In addition, lesser opposition exists in other Western countries such as the United States (28%) and Russia, among others (PGAP, 2010). France and other Western nations banned face veils after considering claims of inequalities against women and their oppression, subjugation, and deprivation of identity from their communities or families (PGAP, 2010). The law of banning face veils might create a feminist problem in which some veiled women might turn out to be deprived of identity and developing “restrictions imposed on veiled women” (Droogsma, 2007, p. 313). Accordingly, to further examine how some people see the veil from different perspectives, I explored the face veil from some terms that are frequently associated with the veil such as possession, desire, power, subjugation, gaze, and the oppression of women.
Possession

Possession refers to the act of owning something, thus entitling a person to have absolute rights on how it is used. According to Howard-Hassmann (2011), in most societies, men have dominated women, and some might regard them as second-class citizens. In many cultures, men in marriages and other relationships "possess" the women in their lives and assert undue influence over women’s affairs without consulting them or considering their opinions. On the subject of the veil, for instance, many people believe that fathers tend to possess their female children, while husbands tend to manage their wives as properties to be veiled (Elveren, 2008). With regard to gender differences theory, possession of women emanates from feelings of superiority among men. Therefore, men from certain communities tend to command women in terms of what to do or what to avoid. From the standpoint of possession, these men will use available techniques to safeguard their 'properties' from other men. In the case of the veil, men can force their daughters or wives to dress in full veils so as to conceal their faces and bodies from other men who might see them in public.

I acknowledge that this behavior might happen in some Muslim families; but I also argue that it can happen anywhere, not just with veiled women. Similarly, the superiority complex among some men makes them believe that women are lesser beings to whom they can give commands—i.e., the theory of gender inequality. I argue that gender differences and inequalities result in the oppression of women whose husbands view them as property. Chesler (2010) and Gould (2011), as well as others, argued that the Taliban, for example, forced its Muslim women to wear full-face veils despite their unwillingness. Failure to comply with such demands led to further
oppression in which victims endured physical beatings in public or death threats. 

Chesler (2010) described similar situations in Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, in which women received public lashes whenever they appeared in public places without their veils.

Similarly, Odeh (1993) observed in the Muslim community that people see and show more respect to the veiled woman than the unveiled one, which makes it hard for unveiled women. This prejudice may force non-Muslim women to put on face veils to conceal their identities in an attempt to avoid criticism in foreign lands. Therefore, I argue that intolerance to people from other societies by people, especially men, in Muslim countries might force women to wear veils and conceal their identities in public places so they can escape hostilities; but also, I argue that a similar intolerance of others applies to veiled women in non-Muslim countries. For example, my wife told me about one of her friends here in the U.S. who was veiling her face at first, but after two months she had to take it off because she tried to avoid receiving negative gestures of people as well as that her husband had begun to avoid going outside with her because going with her in full veil put him under the pressure.

About the requirement among some cultures for women to wear the veil, Chesler (2010) argued that a face cover is an arguable subject among Muslims, and it is not a religious requirement in Islam. In fact, she claimed that women are forced to wear veils because of culture or their families. Chesler (2010) also argued:

The fact is that Muslim women are increasingly not given a free choice about wearing the veil, and those who resist are beaten, threatened with death, arrested … Being fully covered does not save a Muslim woman from being harassed, stalked, raped, and battered in public places….Nor does it stop her husband from taking multiple wives… The Taliban, for example, flogged women on the street if their burqas showed too much ankle… some religious women
dress modestly...because they view this as a religious virtue...and there is a crucial difference between a free choice and a forced choice (pp. 38-40)

Many Muslim women claim that they wear veils voluntarily, while others put on veils because of circumstances such as religion or protection of identity (Droogsma, 2007; Read & Bartkowski, 2000; Ssenyonjo, 2007). Moreover, Dahan (2012), who is an unveiled Muslim but lives with many veiled relatives, explored her personal experiences with the veil in an essay entitled, The Hijab as culture edict, not Islamic obligation. Dahan (2012) also demonstrated that “it is a very personal choice, which is heavily influenced by culture, society, and politics rather than religious certainty” (¶ 1). Dahan (2012) additionally detailed more about her observations:

This is all about modesty and not calling attention to the female body...I have found that all my female cousins now wear the hijab. I know that this is not necessarily due to the pressure of our family. I am certain in many cases, for Libyan women, it was due to the strictness of Colonel Ghadaffi’s repressive regime... I feel that my cousins took the hijab more as a symbol of their own ‘power’ to choose rather than any major encouragement from the family...The entire discussion is more about culture, society, and politics than any religious edict ... (¶ 8)

In light of these observations, it is clear that even among Muslim women, there exists a misunderstanding about why women wear veils, and some feminists regard the face veil as a symbol of the punishment or imprisonment of women. Some feminists also assert that veils deprive women of their identity; otherwise why would men not wear it? (Ssenyonjo, 2007). Also, a study in Saudi Arabia revealed that the long-term use of the veil (niqab) might have a negative effect on women’s ability to breathe (Alghadir, Aly, & Zafar, 2012). Such claims are possible, but the difficulty of breathing could happen form different factors; otherwise, veiled women would be at a higher risk in Saudi Arabia.
From the possession perspective, some critical theorists perceive the face veil as a practice imposed on women by their men and culture (Fernando, 2012). Ultimately, critical theory assumes that women become oppressed and deprived of their identities through such practices. Accordingly, the critical solution to this problem is to ban the wearing of veils and ensure that men nor cultures cannot force women to wear veils. However, Howard-Hassmann (2011) asserted that banning the veil is a worse solution in terms of letting the government tell individuals what to or not to wear. The application of critical theory might imply that the wearing of veils is an oppressive practice that undermines the equality of all genders in society.

I respectfully agree and disagree with some of the above thoughts. I do agree that some men and cultures impose upon women to wear certain attire, but it is not limited to the veil or to certain cultures. Every culture has its own way of influencing women’s and men’s attire, so everyone is basically influenced by their own culture and society. In fact, many people usually try to fit in smoothly with the society in which they live. For instance, many Muslim women in the U.S. are expected to adapt somewhat to the American culture, so some of them would wear just a hijab to cover their heads, change its color, or remove the veil to wear casual Western outfits, even though they would continue to be veiled if they were in their own country. Moreover, in terms of men forcing women to wear the veil, which might be true for some people, but these same people would likely force women to remove the veil too. According to Bakalian & Bozorgmehr (2009), some Muslim parents are strongly instructing their daughters to not to wear hijab or any kind of cover. For example, according to Bakalian & Bozorgmehr
(2009), a few weeks after 9/11 Semira narrated her fight with her father after he saw her being harassed while picking her up from school saying:

He was so mad to see me, his only daughter, treated this way. But at the same time, he was so angry at me. We went home, and my mother, father, and I had this huge fight. It was all "We told you that you shouldn't cover. We told you that you are going to get hurt. What if I wouldn't have been there to protect you? What if you get yourself killed?" (p. 134)

Another example, my wife told me about one of her friends here in the U.S. who was veiling her face at first, but after two months she had to take it off because her husband told her that he could no longer take people’s reactions and stares anymore. He had begun to avoid going outside with her; and he told her to take the veil off because it was a problem. Also, since I came to the U.S., I have been given advice from friends encouraging me to not let my wife wear the full veil. I think they were assuming that I control her.

Desire

One of the feminist thoughts about the veil is that it represents men’s desire to control women because men are reluctant to control their own sexuality (Bartkowski & Read, 2003). That can be true in some cases, but some veiled women see their wearing of the veil as a woman’s desire to control the male gaze. Still other women who wear the veil for various reasons and to serve a number of purposes. According to Cairns (2001), in ancient Greek culture, for example, the veil is used to show either anger or honor. Most importantly to note is that “Greek definitions of anger regularly locate it in
the concept of honour” (Cairns, 2001, p.23).

Moreover, Llewellyn-Jones (2007), indicated that ancient Greek women used veils to show their modesty, and also the veil was desirable for its capacity to allow women to enjoy privacy and being in public at the same time. On the other hand, some Muslim women have a desire to wear the veil since they see it as a big part of their own identity, get more respect among their community, oppose sexual objectification from strangers, and provide them with more freedom from being objectified (Droogsma, 2007). Some Muslim women believe that the veil serves as a badge of honor and a sign of piety for women who have strong religious convictions (Droogsma, 2007). Also, simply stated, a veil can keep men at a distance since men do not have a clue about the person behind the veil.

In some cases, some women wear veils with the aim of avoiding conflict with their family or community. As such, these are women who wear veils out of their own convictions, which might be their desire to adapt to their circumstances. The differences and inequalities among genders derived from the fact that the experience of women is not similar and equal to that of men in regard of what they wear. For instance, men are not faced with the potential banning of their attire. Yet, such acts control women and disregard their desires with respect to dressing according to their feelings. Therefore, this unequal treatment justifies the difference between men and women and results in oppression (Silvey, 2004).

Further, according to Chesler (2010), some men have forced women against their wishes to wear veils in public settings. Conversely, however, some members of the public, especially after 9/11, have ridiculed or assaulted women who do wear veils in
public places (Boyden, 2002). Accordingly, feminist theorists can use critical theory to criticize both types of incidences in which people do not respect women’s personal decisions about veils. Therefore, I argue that as the international laws are intended to ensure women rights of not being forced to wear the veil. At the same time, the international laws can ensure the rights for women who desire to wear veils without being teased, assaulted, or ridiculed by the public. This kind of the international laws will bridge the differences and create some degree of equality, in which women can make their own choices (Sameh, 2010).

Power

I argue that an examination of power and where that power comes from is necessary in any discussion of the veil. It is obvious that the veil is just a piece of cloth, but the only power it has is its impact on people’s perceptions. That can be seen in a simple way by looking at Petchesky’s (1987) conclusion that, “images by themselves lack "objective" meanings; meanings come from the interlocking fields of context, communication, application, and reception” (p. 286). Based on Petchesky’s viewpoint on images, I argue that the veil is also just a piece of fabric, and without putting it into context, or in other words, without also attaching the cultural reactions to it, the veil would cease to be controversial. In France, for example, some feminists believe that women would never choose to wear the veil if the influences of men or society over women were not present (Wing & Smith, 2005).

Also, the power of the veil can vividly be seen in the politics and laws. Politicians might view the veil as a sign of religious or ideological power, so they might try to
destroy it by banning it. Before the veil was banned in France and other European countries, it was an issue first in Muslim countries since the 1920s-1930s, where some secular governments at that time banned it, including Afghanistan, Turkey, and Iran (Chesler, 2010; Najmabadi, 2000). Later, other Muslim countries passed a law to ban the veil in Tunis in 1981 and Syria in 2010 (Chesler, 2010). It is clear that both Muslim and non-Muslim secular governments are the same in terms of viewing the veil as a power symbol of radical ideology. On the other hand, the veil became mandatory in the political arena when some Islamic revolutions took over the government, such as in Iran during the Islamic revolution and in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime (Chesler, 2010). It is clear that the veil represent a power of ideology linked to it either by emerging or absence in such community. The veil has a power that can spur governments into sensitive debate and into making critical laws pertaining to its significance. The veil from that political level became a sign of empowering ideologies over others; it basically became, as Hasan (2007) asserted in the Afghanistan situation, an exemplified foundation towards the War on Terror operation, which was under the President George W. Bush time. Accordingly, by looking to Haddad (2007) affirmation of the increasing number of women wearing the veil in Western nations after 9/11, I maintain that increasing shows that Muslim women use the veil’s power to resist negative stereotypes and potential discrimination.

Many artists have also worn the veil since they found it has a power that can evoke viewers. Artists may find it powerful because of its capacity to hold many different meanings, as Knirsch (2012) noticed, “The veil has always been a powerful metaphor both in philosophical discourse and in the fine arts” (p. 170). The vivid example of veil
power in artwork could be seen when the artwork of the veiled Statue of Liberty was excluded from display in the exhibition, which was a digitally produced image photographed by the Moscow-based AES art group titled The Witness of the Future (Zahir, 2003). It presented a veiled Statue of Liberty carrying a copy of the Qur'an. The Walsall Borough Council banned this image from the exhibition (Zahir, 2003, p. 324).

Subjugation

Women’s subjugation to men is a common criticism against some religions, such as Islam and Christianity (Bartkowski & Read, 2003). The veil, worn mostly by Muslim women, leads some people to think that by wearing the veil, Muslim women tend to be submissive to the demands and desires of men (Jones, 2005). However, Bartkowski and Read (2003) argued questioned whether wearing the veil is a sign of submission to men or a sign of submission to Islamic principles. Others might believe that being uncovered means that women are more submissive to men’s desires. For example, Touria, an American Muslim student, argued, "People say it's the women who wear the veil who are submissive, but I think it is those women who are submissive, because it is what men want, women half naked" (as cited in Jones, 2005, ¶27). In reality, the act of veiling differs sharply from one community to another. If the veil is viewed as subjugation to men in certain culture, it can be viewed as the moral rights for women, which even relative men are prohibited to touch. For instance, in south of Saudi Arabia, according to Aljaber (2007), a 50 year-old woman requested a divorce from her husband after 30 years of marriage because the husband tried to take her veil off. She
believed that the act of trying to take her veil off was something she could not handle, but the husband apologized and promised not to do it again.

Masculinity allows men to perceive physical superiority over women. In some places, many men might believe in submissive women who must be under their control. In these places, women will follow the rules and commands of men without question. This results in cases of gender differences and inequalities. For instance, women have to add an extra cloth on top of their normal clothes. Women who do not wear their veils must suffer the consequences from all-powerful men. Therefore, the feminist theories seek the change for better by empowering women with their rights and raising their social status (Sameh, 2010).

In the modern world, Western women tend to be liberal and independent, exercising the freedom and right to act on their own (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010). This may not be the case in some Arab or African countries where men are believed to dominate and control women (Jones, 2005). Accordingly, foreign women who wear veils in Western culture are viewed, by many people right there, to be doing so unwillingly just to please their husbands and fathers or cultures (Chesler, 2010). Based on these perceptions, some Western governments might act to ‘liberate’ the affected women. For instance, when France enacted laws that outlaw the use of veils in public places, they are trying to create a society in which all men and women are equal when they are in foreign lands (Read & Bartkowski, 2000). Therefore, the laws address the differences and inequalities between men and women with respect to their choices of clothing.
In sum, the veil cannot be a clear sign of subjugation as well as unveiling is not a clear sign of not being subjugated. When some Muslim women gain citizenship in Western countries, they continue the practice of putting on face veils, which might result in some social or governmental subjugation if they were forced to take the veil off. Therefore, feminists advocate ensuring all rights for women to wear what they believe, which is the way to protect them from subjugation.

The Gaze

The gaze is the way we look at things. According to Duncum (2010), the gaze “refers to our predisposition to see things in certain ways, what we bring to images, and the relationships we form with them” (p. 8). Hence, the gaze also refers to the concept of how the audience views the images presented and the meanings the audience derives from them. The veil, in our subject, is a woman’s cloth, so at first, it must be linked to the way women are perceived. Bilge (2010) asserted that veiled women are the bearers of meaning of their veils, and the veiled women are utilizing the veil “to liberate themselves from the oppressive beauty culture of the West and the objectifying male gaze” (p. 20). So, women can change the gaze of how public might see them.

To make it simple, the male gaze assumes that the audience (public) is heterosexual men, and the female must be viewed based on her sexual appeal. According to Read & Bartkowski (2000), some men might believe that women are sexual objects that can easily entertain other men. Accordingly, some men who force their women to wear face veils may do so because of the male gaze. However, Bartkowski and Read (2003) argued that, “veiling liberates Muslim women from
America’s oppressive beauty culture and the objectifying male gaze that accompanies it” (p. 88). The full veil assists in concealing the body parts of women so that their audiences cannot contextualize them. Therefore, a woman may reject the male gaze, which she may view as “oppressive, and her choice to veil as a way to take control of her body” (Droogsma, 2007, p. 305).

The concept of gaze also applies to gender differences and inequalities between men and women. According to Mulvey (1989), the male gaze allows men to be the subjects while women are the objects. Often, the subject has control over the object by occupying a higher level of status in the relationship. With reference to feminist critical theory, the male gaze can be considered a derogatory perception towards women, since women are viewed and regarded as the sexual objects of men. According to Marasco (2006), the feminist critical theory advocate for diagnosing that perception in order to change it for better, so the use of that diagnosis might allow “feminist critical theory to both moderate and radicalize its imaginary, to acknowledge the perilous quality of critique, while harnessing its negative potential” (p. 89). Therefore, the veil might help the feminist critical theory in regard of rejecting the male gaze control.

The existence of the male gaze indicates the unequal experience for women that are the basis of most feminist theories, where “the female can function for the male only as an object of sadistic spectatorial possession” (Snow, 1989, p. 30). This feeling of being seen only as object may create psychological anguish for women, and the avoidance of the male gaze might be a factor in women choosing to wear veils or other clothes that hide their bodies from that gaze. Of course some women wear veils
voluntarily for many other reasons, but the reason in the context of the male gaze is primarily the women’s response to men’s tendency to sexualize women.

Oppression of Women

Feminist theory asserts that for several centuries women have suffered as a result of the overwhelming cultural practice of male dominance, and this has led to the oppression of women, since women tend to be more vulnerable in most social situations (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010). These cultural beliefs and values enable men to assign excessive roles and responsibilities to women. These roles might be oppressive in nature, but women within these cultural constraints might not feel comfortable complaining since they are viewed as second-class citizens under the control of their fathers and husbands. In the context of patriarchal culture, feminists see the veil as a consequence of male dominance over women. In fact, the veil is widely seen as an icon of oppression of Muslim women (Hasan, 2007; Güven, 2013; Bartkowski & Read, 2003; Franklin, 2013).

Depending on the circumstance or situation, the veil can be oppressive to some women who wear the clothing (Read & Bartkowski, 2000). For instance, women feel oppressed when forced to put on veils against their will. In certain cases, women who rebel against their men are beaten or punished for resisting until they put on the veils. According to Chesler (2010), rebellious women in some countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, and other regions have endured public beatings because of their refusal to put on veils. These acts of oppression further increase inequality between men and women (Lewis & Mills, 2003). Further, men are higher up on the social ladder and can
punish women who disobey their commands. Additionally, in patriarchal cultures, men can choose what they wear and cannot be dictated to by women (Howard-Hassmann, 2011). Although every culture has its own expectations about what men or women should wear, the problems around the subject of dress usually stem from one group trying to impose their beliefs about dress onto others. Again, gendered cultural expectations about what women should wear are a factor in the meaning of the veil in visual culture.

On the other hand, postcolonial theory asserts that acts of unveiling are a reflection of the continued colonial expression of white male dominance (Bilge, 2010). Postcolonial theory aims to reveal the negative colonial effects that may affect the integration of foreign women into colonized countries. However, currently, and especially since 9/11, many Muslim women fear U.S. culture, and many of them think they have to conceal their identities to avoid humiliation or harm. Women who put on face veils are likely to suffer more consequences by being deprived of their identities or being attacked (Tindongan, 2011). For example, no one can recognize these women unless they produce their identification papers. In some cases, they are harassed to remove their veils so that they can be identified. In U.S. culture, most people believe that only Muslim women put on face veils. This stereotype has a number of effects on the security of these Muslim women, as they are considered threats to public security as well as being portrayed in western media as “victims, oppressed and submissive” (Elveren, 2008, p. 114). Accordingly, they are at risk of harassment and physical assaults from unscrupulous individuals who might publicly strip them of their veils. I argue that this Western cultural expectation of the veiled women is left over from
colonialism, and it still affects the visual cultural rhetoric around the veil because the media is repeating the same concepts and representations over and over. Furthermore, the negative perception will remain that way until a positive representation of the veil affects the visual culture rhetoric around the veil.

Non-Muslim Experiences with Veiling

Before conducting my primary research, I explored the literature about non-Muslim women who wear the veil in public. That research was difficult and yielded few results from using the word veil, hijab, niqab, and burqa. Ultimately, I found two examples of research on non-Muslim women who wear the veil—the niqab to be specific—public, but both of those articles were not written as peer-reviewed research studies; rather, they were published in mainstream media.

Jones (2009) wrote in the Daily Mail about her experience: My Week Wearing a Burka: Just a Few Yards of Black Fabric, but it Felt like a Prison. Jones claimed to have worn the burka for a week in London, UK. Jones mentioned that she was motivated to have this experience by the case of a Sudanese woman who got 40 lashes for wearing jeans in public. In the article, Jones actually summarized her experience negatively, emphasizing points that vividly depict the burqa as an awful piece of cloth to wear. If fact, Jones (2009) started her article by writing, “Squatting next to me is my burka. It looks so innocuous: just a few yards of black fabric. But, my goodness, how oppressive it is, how suffocating, how transforming” (¶ 1). Even though I might understand her feelings in terms of suffocating and transforming, I cannot understand how she saw it as oppressive while she was wearing it voluntarily. I tried to read her sentences many times for deeper understanding, but I ended up wondering whether if the Sudanese
people who agree with the lashing of the Sudanese woman for wearing jeans were asked to, would they write a similar article as Jones, substituting the word jeans for burka.

Throughout the article, Jones (2009) focused mostly on her negative feelings wearing the burka. For instance, she stated, “a burka makes you clumsy, slow, fearful because you can’t hear, and helpless; I spent most of the week feeling like a disabled person” (¶ 12). Even when she states feelings that can be understood as slightly positive, she almost always followed it with negativity. For example:

You don’t have to bother to put on make-up, or wash your hair. How liberating and at least you won’t catch swine flu or be leered at…The night I finally took off my burka, I wanted to put on make-up, spaghetti straps and the highest shoes I own. All week I’d been wearing scent, so compelling was the need to be feminine (para. 16, 21)

I drew from Jones (2009) that she came to wear the burka with a preconceived negative opinion against it, which might have caused her to see everything surrounding the wearing of the burka as negative and oppressive. One can vividly see that when she represented the British community, and they perceived her with sympathy and helping hands except, as she said, “An Arab man shouted abuse. I have no idea what he was saying—perhaps I shouldn’t have been out on my own, or perhaps eating is a sin” (para. 10).

In another article, fashion editor of Vice Magazine, Annette Lamothe-Ramos (2012), reported her experience of wearing the burqa one day in New York City. Lamothe-Ramos (2012) titled her report, I walked around in a burqa all day (and I’m not
Muslim). Her report took a more positive tone. Lamothe-Ramos (2012) got interested in the burqa when she was asked to track down the burqa for a music video project. She noticed that people think she found nothing positive about the burqa, even the word itself is associated with the oppression of women. Moreover, she watched 74 videos and found nearly 108 Google© (www.google.com) search pages that could not tell her how Americans reacted to the burqa, or even if it was comfortable to wear in public. Lamothe-Ramos (2012) discussed the circumstances she endured, how difficult it was to wear it in summer, that it is kind of fun when it is windy, protective when it is raining, and evoking when it is seen. One of Lamothe-Ramos’ (2012) stories, for example, was about going to the train station and a woman with her children saw her wearing the burqa. That woman pulled her children away to the other side. Upon entering the Empire State Building, Lamothe-Ramos (2012) stated that, “I didn’t realize the significance of visiting one of the tallest buildings in New York dressed in Islamic garb until we reached the entrance. I felt like a jerk” (para. 9). She also noticed a security guard following her around, and intimated that she felt uncomfortable because she felt everybody was talking bad about her. In the end, Lamothe-Ramos (2012) expressed her thoughts about the experience of wearing the burqa in NYC saying:

At the end of the day I was proud of what I’d accomplished. Not only did I face some of my own fears by putting myself on display, I’d also learned to be more conscious of the way I treat people on the street, no matter how they’re dressed or what they look like…8 out of 10 people that I came in contact with while wearing a burqa acted as if I didn’t even exist, which actually made me feel worse than the looks I received from busybodies who were offended by my
presence. I have a newfound respect for the women who choose to wear these kinds of garments (para. 21, 22)

Converted Western Muslims Who Have Chosen to Be Fully Covered

This section focuses on some American women who converted to Islam and chose to veil. Their views might differ somewhat because they used to be unveiled and their cultures are not forcing them to veil as might be the case with other women who have Islamic or Arabic roots.

According to Hendrix (2011), Safiyyah Abdullah, a 55 year-old woman, who is Chicago-born and living in the Washington area, has been wearing the full veil since converting to Islam in 1975. She got used to people’s reactions, which do not bother her anymore. In her daily outings with the full veil, she has received mixed reactions of harassment and sympathy. She said, “I always get pulled over, but I have never gotten a ticket” (para. 9). She has also been told to get off of a public bus because of a suspicious behavior complaint. She believes that the veil makes her look more suspicious. At the airport she asserted, “I’m always the first one to be randomly selected” (para. 20). On the other hand, there has been sympathy sometimes. She pointed to a time when strangers apologized to her for the rude behavior of a drunken man. What bothers her most is people’s assumptions about her veil. For example, people have said to her: “This is America, your husband can’t make you wear that” (para. 26). Moreover, Romana, a forty-year-old woman who has worn the veil for four years, and is about two years from converting to Islam, believes that the veil helps her to keep men’s “interactions on an appropriate level” (para. #). Romana also indicated that her mother does not yet approve of her veil.
Another example is MerryMuslim (2014), who is an American woman who lives in Denton, TX, and who converted to Islam nine months ago. She started to write about her journey in a personal blog, on which she refers to herself as MerryMuslim. Her blog involves many of her thoughts and memories about her personal story of Islam. My review of her blog posts focused on her entries about Islamic clothes. She wears the Hijab, which covers the head, but not the face, as the full veil does. She has worn the Hijab everywhere except to work, until her boss allowed her to do so. She sometimes enjoys seeing people’s confusion when they see her Hijab, but hear her heavy Texas accent. MerryMuslim characterized her feelings about wearing the Hijab this way:

Seriously, wearing hijab and dressing modestly is comforting. I feel protected…men…step aside and open doors for me. I did have one man who I almost pulled in front of in my car who yelled at me and told me to "go back to Bagdad" and I am sure the only reason was my hijab. I laughed and said, "Bagdad?" Little does he know, I am not even sure exactly where that is or how to get there… I have a few women come up to me and ask me about my hijab or compliment me (¶para.11)

The Veil in Art

In the last two decades, a number of artists of diverse backgrounds, such as Shirin Neshat, Princess Hijab, and others, have represented the veil in ways that address its social, political, and aesthetic dimensions. The veil has mysterious power that can link it with many other controversial things such as religion or politics, which are also common topics of attention in artworks. One significant theme in such works has been gender identity. For example, Shirin Neshat’s photographic exhibition utilized the
veil in dualistic pictures that depict the veil as a powerful oppressor alongside with a veiled woman holding a gun in a position of power (Dannawi, 2008).

Similarly, Iranian-born artist, Shirin Neshat, who is known for film, video, and photography, has been using the veil or the hijab to address issues of identity and gender for several years. Neshat sees the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran as a changing point in her life. Being unable to return to her homeland is the inspiration for Neshat’s works, and she draws upon associations of the veil with women’s oppression to explore political perspectives on Iran. In Women of Allah (1993–1997), a series of black-and-white photographs and a film created after her first return trip to Iran, Neshat presents women in veils, Persian text written on a woman’s body, and weapons featured prominently. (Dannawi, 2008).

In Neshat’s next series, Turbulent, Rapture, and Fervor (1998–2000), however, she focused on photographing groups of veiled women, which contrasts with her previous work, which focused mostly on individual portraits. Also, her artwork includes representations of men separated from veiled women. In my view, such works address the gender segregation commonly reflected in religious or political ideology. MacDonald’s (2004) interview with Neshat allowed her to describe her interest in politics. She stated, “While I remained totally interested in the social and political realities of my country, I felt the urge to move beyond the realm of politics and take a more philosophical approach” (MacDonald, 2004, p. 630). It is clear that the social and political movements of Iran influenced Neshat artworks to represent the veil as a force of government.

Overall, I argue that the power of the veil comes from its capacity to elicit many
different interpretations. And Neshat is aware of that; in fact, in an interview with Enright and Walsh (2009) Neshat stated exactly that:

> The irony is that what can be threatening can also be very beautiful. I played with the veil in the same way; it's a symbol of repression, but it's also a symbol of independence and freedom from Western ideas that control a lot of the society so everything has multiple meanings…. What I'm saying is the work would be read differently by an Iranian than by a Westerner, even if you translated the poetry word by word. An Iranian would understand who the writer is, the author's history, the significance of this kind of expression and its relevance to the country; whereas the Westerner would only understand the word-by-word translation. (¶ 31, 33)

Accordingly, Neshat has tried to utilize the veil to empower her artworks and to leave room for a variety of interpretations. However, I, as a Muslim, see most of her artworks representing the veil as repression. The women’s faces seem sad or depressed, and the guns on her works also support that idea. Neshat has asserted that the veil in her works is a symbol of independence, but I argue that that symbolism is not clear. I agree with Dannawi (2008), who stated that, “Neshat is not the voice behind the veil that speaks for all Muslim women or even Iranian women. Neshat personifies what the West expects to see of a veiled Muslim woman holding a gun” (p. 28). It is important to note that Neshat’s representation of the veil might get more credit in the U.S. since she is from a practicing veiling culture, which adds up to the same negative perception that affect the visual culture rhetoric around the veil.
Further, Princess Hijab is another example of an artist who uses the veil. Princess Hijab is a nickname of an anonymous Parisian street artist who has only been interviewed wearing a hooded sweatshirt with her face covered by her long black hair (Moors, 2011). Practicing her art in the Paris metro by night with a thick black marker, Princess Hijab draws hijabs on the faces of figures in advertisements. In 2010, which was the year in which the media most prominently featured Princess Hijab’s work, corresponds with the timeframe in which the legislation banning the veil in France was passed. However, in a 2010 video interview with Al Jazeera television, Princess Hijab herself claimed that she had been creating Princess Hijab images for more than five years before the debate about the veil began in France.

Similarly, Princess Hijab argued that her work does not express concern about the religious aspect of the veil, claiming that, “I am not announcing or supporting anything, it is art” (Aljazeera, 2010). Her comments, however, must leave viewers wondering about the meaning of her art, since the connections among the veil, religion, and politics are so strong. Since she is an anonymous figure, it is difficult to interpret Princess Hijab’s beliefs and purposes. However, according to Moors (2011), some people have argued that her hidden identity gives more power to her work because it gives the public freedom to absorb the art itself without being distracted by other personal appearances, such as the artist’s cultural or religious background. As such, interpretations of Princess Hijab’s work have focused on the iconic nature of the veil. Accordingly, Princess Hijab’s work contributes to the idea of veil’s power that this artist used in response to French government after banning the veil.

Moreover, I argue that Princess Hijab’s work, from the point of view of my own
conventional Muslim belief system, does not effectively address the meaning of the veil in a religious context. As a Saudi Muslim who lives among veiled women, I can attest that Princess Hijab’s art would simply be rejected as offensive by most Muslims, who would see the idea of applying the veil to advertising images of nearly nude women as an insult to the religious meaning of the veil. This is because in the Qur’an, women who are asked to veil are faithful and godly. However, the Princess Hijab’s arts left me wanting to know more about the veil’s contexts in visual culture rhetoric around the veil in the U.S. I wanted to know what is the common understanding toward the veil from non-Muslim perspective.

Further, The Seen and the Hidden: (Dis)covering the Veil, a 2009 exhibition at the Austrian Cultural Forum in New York City, explored the veil from the perspectives of many contemporary artists of diverse backgrounds from many countries including Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Austria, France, Germany, the United States, and Canada. The many artists in this exhibition presented the theme of veiling through diverse interpretative lenses. Stadler (2009), the director of the Austrian Cultural Forum, commented about this exhibition that it “is about more than the veil. We want to promote a serious dialog and take advantage of the opportunity that a new era in the USA is opening up for relations between the Orient and the Occident” (para. 3). Here it is clear that the veil is a controversial subject that many people are looking to reflect upon and they have the right to be seen, which all adds up to the visual culture contexts around the veil.

Similarly, Veil: Curators, Artists, and 9/11, a 2003 exhibition at the Institute of International Visual Arts at the New Art Gallery in Walsall, England, explored “the
position of the veil and veiling within contemporary society” (Zahir, 2003, p. 319). It involved artwork by about 20 artists from both Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds. Photography and film were the media most commonly used by the artists, and the majority of the pieces were figurative rather than abstract, featuring some self-portraits. One of the most notable artworks was a digitally produced image photographed by the Moscow-based AES art group titled *The Witness of the Future*. It presented a veiled Statue of Liberty carrying a copy of the Qur'an. The Walsall Borough Council banned this image from the exhibition (Zahir, 2003, p. 324). Zahir (2003) noted that “the curators comment that the exhibition seeks to disrupt contemporary notions of the veil, yet the exhibition fails to challenge stereotypical notions” (p. 320). Most works in the exhibition portrayed the veil in ordinary ways, while the only work that could have strongly provoked viewers’ reactions was excluded due to the fear of creating conflict (Zahir, 2003). The fact that the work was banned from the exhibition because it touched on politically sensitive issues showed how the veil is a powerful visual culture symbol. Knowing that made me think of doing an artwork as graffiti in public representing Mary as a full-veiled woman, I wonder if public would reject it, tolerate it, or appreciate it.

The Veil as a Visual Culture

The art education field has an educational responsibility, as do other educational fields, to enhance people’s awareness of current issues that they might encounter in social settings. I and other art educators should use art education to help others and ourselves learn more about social and cultural matters. When I think about the connection between the veil and art education, I usually think of the veil as a visual
cultural object. Visual culture is a wide field of study that overlaps many areas such as society, culture, and visual art. Even though most definitions of visual culture involve social interaction, the term does not have a single definition. In fact, scholars have many definitions of visual culture, each emphasizing a different perspective on the Field. By looking at some of the well-known discourses in visual culture such as *The Visual Culture Reader* by Mirzoeff (1998), *An Introduction to Visual Culture* by Mirzoeff (1999), *Teaching Visual Culture* by Freedman (2003), and *Visual Culture and its Discontents* by Pollock (2003), I can explicate the working definition and capacity of visual culture that I use when writing about it in this dissertation.

Visual culture is the primary lens through which I have conducted this study; therefore, my definition of the term is important. I draw on a number of my predecessors’ work to make sure my readers understand what visual culture means in the context of this dissertation. First, according to Duncum (2002), visual culture can be any human’s items (which, for me, includes the veil) as a visible object. Duncum (2002) also explained that the sources of our input knowledge can determine how those items add up to a single culture. I also argue that the veil is a visual object that often appears in visual media, so it fits well with Mirzoeff’s (1998) definition of visual culture as being “concerned with visual events in which information, meaning, or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology” (p. 3). Mirzoeff (1998) further defined visual technology as “any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil paint to television and the internet” (p. 3). And from all these definitions, one can see vividly that all visual material, like the veil itself, to all visual representations depicting or referring to the veil from marble sculpture to a
cartoon in a website can add up and affect the visual culture rhetoric around the veil.

Further, according to Duncum (2001), visual culture is a field of study that emerges from diverse disciplines with different perspectives. Duncum (2001) stated that “visual forms today are linked to other communicative codes that appeal to sensory modalities other than sight” (p.105). In a similar vein of thought, Mitchell (2002) defined visual culture as social constructions studied in the field of visuals and vice versa.

Accordingly, I contend that the veil is a visual cultural object that is linked to senses and social constructions other than sight. Especially in the U.S., the veil has the power to evoke feelings, memories, or other sensory information from the onlookers as well as the veiled. Visual culture is an appropriate perspective from which to examine the experience of being veiled and the experiences of people seeing veiled women because “the study of visual culture is not about the objects studied, but the questions asked about visual images, objects, environments, and the phenomena of seeing and being seen” (Pauly, 2003, p. 267).

Visual culture, as mentioned above, links many disciplines, and education is one of those disciplines. Interpreting an image as a visual cultural object, according to Pauly (2003), is an important method of pedagogy to use to explore art, but teachers “rarely interpret images as visual culture” (p. 264). Additionally, Duncum (2010) mentioned some pedagogic tools commonly used in twentieth-century interpretation of visual culture: power, ideology, representation, education, gaze, intertextuality, multimodality, and looking to the future. These tools can aid in better understanding of what people see within visual culture, so I used these tools to gain knowledge about the veil, especially the concept of the gaze, as defined by Duncum (2010) earlier.
Duncum (2010) also argued that how and under what conditions we look at images is a major concern in enhancing our gaze, which is almost certainly influenced by personal biases. Duncum (2010) stated:

This means that considering the gaze is a way in which to understand ourselves as individuals and as a society, are our own gazes sexist, racist, and so on? The gaze offers a significantly different orientation to more common approaches to fine art, which tend to focus on artists, and on describing, interpreting, and evaluating their work without necessarily considering ourselves as viewers. (p. 8)

Accordingly, I argue that it is important to find out what people in the U.S. typically bring to mind when seeing the veil. I contend that to be aware of your gaze when seeing things is an excellent way to teach visual culture, and it can help viewers, participants, and researchers have a better understanding of their own biases in what and how they see things.

Furthermore, Hooper-Greenhill's (2000) definition of visual culture is also informative in understanding people’s reactions toward the veil. She suggests that visual culture is concerned with “focusing on questions of what is made visible, who sees what, and how seeing, knowing and power are interrelated. It examines the act of seeing as a product of the tensions between external images or objects, and internal thought processes” (p. 14). Moreover, I contend that everyone has some biases that influence their way of looking at things because what they are doing is not just looking at things but also recalling information that in the past has become aligned with the seen things. These biases can be due to ideology, cultural background, or other experiences that have shaped the individual’s gaze. For example, my biases based on
my experiences hold the veil as a sign of honor and faith that I respect. I developed this understanding from my background as a Muslim living in a culture in which many people practice the religion and wear and respect the veil. Therefore, when I see veiled women, I remember my mother and grandmother, both of whom I highly respect. However, people in the U.S. often have different perspectives when seeing veiled women because the U.S. culture is not primarily Muslim and women do not typically wear veils in this country. People in the U.S. know about the veil from reading or watching media, where the veil has been linked to Muslim who are playing negative characters according to Shaheen (2009). I agree with Duncum (2010) when he posited that “each image was hyperlinked to other images, definitions, discussion of the issues, and personal anecdotes” (p. 9). However, also important to consider is Bal’s (2003) argument that human beings change the meaning of certain objects, and I argue that this can apply to the veil, as their environments change. An example of this is that some Muslim women started to use the veil after 9/11, even though they did not do so before, in order to challenge and change the negative perception of the veiled Muslim women.

Ultimately, one focus of this study is on what people in the U.S. typically think when they see the veil and how external and internal influences make them see the veil as they do. To build a framework around media representations of the veil in visual culture terms, I studied media’s influence on U.S. perceptions of the veil as object.

The Veil in the Media’s Eyes

In our lives, people try to portray creatures or things to make it easy to be remembered, so some people use certain characteristics or significant labels to tag that thing or that creature. For example, some filmmakers have used a big beard with angry
face holding weapons to represent a Muslim man in their films. After a while, these simplified labels can become established knowledge for many people who never meet Muslim. I contend that the media uses the same technique to portray creatures, things, or even cultures. The problem with the media doing this is that the ideological or political beliefs expressed in media represent only a narrow viewpoint, but that media representation is broadcast to endless numbers of people. Viewers absorb the media’s characterization of individuals or whole races of people, especially if they do not interact with that kind of person or race in their daily lives.

Accordingly, Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. media have been depicted and labeled with some negative characteristics, which Parker (2008) outlined as follows: “in the mass media, Arabs have been portrayed as wealthy, barbaric, violent, corrupt, dishonest, religious fanatics, ignorant, abusers of women, and fanatic terrorists” (p. 16). In addition, for many years, Hollywood motion pictures and other works of fiction have continued to demonize Muslims and Arabs (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2002). The U.S. media has been portraying Arabs and Muslims in a primarily negative way for a long time, even before 9/11 (Bullock, 2002; Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2002; Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003; Ould, 2007; Parker, 2008; Shaheen, 1997, 2009). So, it is vivid that the negative media representation of Muslims has added up a common perception that affects the visual culture rhetoric around the veil.

Because mainstream U.S. media has participated in the public’s generalized view of the veil, it is important to my study that readers know the history of the perception of Muslims in general and in particular of veiled women. Many argue that the Islamic Iranian Revolution in the 1970s brought the veil to the surface of media labeling
(Berger, 1998; Coger, 2011; Dadi, 2008; Davary, 2009; Shirazi, 2001). Also, Berger (1998) and Coger (2011) noted that Muslims have been objects of racism since Islam entered America, but, additionally, since the Iranian Revolution, Muslims have received criticism about the Islamic laws mainly prompted by the United States. And the U.S. criticism was against the policies of the new Iranian government in the 1970s, which unfortunately forced women to wear the veil as a reaction to the previous Shah’s government, which forced women not to wear the veil (Najmabadi, 2000). Thus, the U.S. media used images of the veiled women to represent the oppression of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and in doing so, veiled women became negative icons in the U.S. because of their association the more restrictive policies supported by the Islamic revolution in Iran. In fact, Valles (2005) stated that she developed her negative impression of veiled women in the 1970s while watching the Iranian revolution on the American news. This negative impression indicates the media’s significant impact on people’s understanding of the veil. In addition, Dadi (2008) argued that, from the late 1970s until now, Iranian women have been portrayed in black chador. Moreover, Iran's holding of American hostages for 444 days in 1979 played an important role in stimulating the U.S. media’s heavy criticism of the Islamic revolution. Similarly, in the 1980s, images of armed and covered Iranian women became prevalent in the news during the Iran-Iraq war. Even more recently, coverage of the war in Afghanistan has focused on images of oppressively covered women and on insinuating that they are veiled to cover bombs under their clothing.

As a result of media portrayals, the sight of a veil in the American public evokes feelings of hatred or distrust toward the Islamic community (Khalid, 2011). Ironically,
most of my American friends think that is the veil is singularly reserved for Muslim women when in fact “the veil is an Islamic precept as much as it is a Christian or a Jewish one” (Davary, 2009, p. 49). Furthermore, there are still some Jewish women who wear the veil (Davary, 2009). Veiled women are further viewed, because of the impact of media coverage, as potential extremist people in the Islamic culture. Additionally, Coger (2011) argued that “the media portrays a connection between veiled women and terrorism and Islamist extremism” (p. 36). Consequently, some Americans might believe that a veiled woman is not only conservative, but also that she abhors the foreign (U.S.) way of living, and thus, they might “not view Muslim Americans as belonging to America” (Zahedi, 2011, p. 188).

Overall, the veil has become a significant visual culture icon that is used in U.S. culture to represent Arab or Muslim women (Ajrouch, 2007; Chakraborti & Zempi 2012; Coger, 2011; Haddad, 2007; Hasan, 2007). The veil usually refers to clothing that women use to cover their whole bodies for various reasons ranging from religious to protective purposes (Abdullah, 2006; Amrani Zerrifi, 2001; Bullock, 2002). Hasan (2007) argued that “it seems that the media in the West keeps targeting on the way they dress, the veil in particular. In fact, the identity of Muslim women has merely been reduced to this specific dressing code for the Western media” (p. ii). Furthermore, some writers have observed that the frequency with which the veil has been used as an icon in the U.S. has increased over the years, making it a visual object that most Westerners associate with forced marriages, the harem, the sharia law, or other negative things (Hasan, 2007; Murphy, 2009).
Shaheen (1984), the author of books like *The TV Arab, Reel Bad Arabs* (2001), and *Guilty: Hollywood’s Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* (2008), is one of the better-known authors who has been tracing, examining, and writing about the portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood before and after 9/11. He has examined more than 900 Hollywood films, and he researched 1,100 film reviews in his latest edition of *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2009). All of these films were produced before 9/11. He observed that the vast majority of these films “portray Arabs by distorting at every turn what most Arab men, women, and children are really like” (Shaheen, 2009, p. 7). About Arab women particularly, he observed that the stereotypes were mostly sexy belly dancers, oppressed women by their radical men, and forced to be covered with a burqa that left them with no identity. He concluded that Arab women in Hollywood films, “are humiliated, demonized, and eroticized in more than 50 feature films” (p. 28).

Additionally, according to Ould (2007), the Arab female portrayed in Western media as inaccessible, and she is shown to the audience “often veiled from top to toe” (p. 16).

Ramji (2005) wrote a critical article about the veil and Hollywood titled “From Navy Seals to the Siege: Getting to Know the Muslim Terrorist, Hollywood Style.” The author investigated sixteen films that showed how Hollywood portrayed Arabs and Muslims by associating them with the veil. His argument is that the film industry makes our cultural products, and those cultural products usually reflect the values of our society. The problem is that the news media, already shaped by politics as described above, is often the source informing these films. Therefore, the film industry is basically a reflection of the Western political agenda that eventually further affects viewers in
polarizing ways. Accordingly, Ramji (2005) thinks that Westerners have this perception of mysteriousness in the Orient, so the veiled woman in “movies such as Thief of Damascus (1952), Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981), and Ishtar (1987) becomes an allegory for the Western requirement to unveil the mystery of the Orient” (Ramji, 2005, para. 4).

In addition, Ramji (2005) reviewed a movie that was set during the Iran-Iraq war called Not Without My Daughter, in which the story revolves around an American woman who went to Iran for a brief visit. The American outlook of the woman, who is not even on the U.S. soil, is the one who felt the Islamic threat there, and she is embodied to be the protagonist among Muslim women. The American woman is shown to be the only woman capable of disagreeing with Islamic oppression of Muslim women, who are portrayed wearing veils and carrying guns to impose the law of veiling.

Furthermore, veiled Arab and Muslim women can be seen in Naked Lunch. The star of this film is Fadela, who is surrounded by veiled women but is the unveiled one who speaks to an American. For revealing herself, she is labeled a lesbian, drug user, and other bad things before being killed by extremist Muslims.

Additionally, Ramji (2005) also reviewed a handful of movies that were more positive about the veil, but the veiled women in these films did not play important roles. In the end, Ramji (2005) noticed that the Muslim stereotype seemed to come as a package linked to the darkness of oppression, violence, and the male terrorist, while the veiled woman “exists not for herself but for the definition of the Muslim man” (para. 80).

Over the years, some directors from the Hollywood have produced movies that exemplify veils as a visual object meant to represent the culture and values of the
people who wear them (Haddad, 2007; Shaheen, 2009). In MIA’s music video, Bad Girls, the veiled women are depicted as exotic objects that are visualized as belly dancers and harem girls even though the idea of the video is meant to encourage women’s right to drive in Saudi Arabia. With the exotic belly dancers representation, Muslim women perhaps are sexualized and portrayed as easily available for sexual activity. Other films that portray veiled Arab women as harem girls and belly dancers include Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves of 1944 and Crimes of Honor and Arabian Nights of 1942. Movies such as Sheik of 1921, Slave Girl of 1947, Bombay of 1995, and Beyond the Veil of 1998 portray Muslim women as suffering at the hands of a male-dominated culture (Shaheen, 2009; Zahedi, 2011). For instance, Hollywood has narrowly presented these women by depicting them as locked or imprisoned behind the veil in which they are expected to remain, underdeveloped, submissive, and voiceless (Zahedi, 2011).

The Veil and Western Print Media

After the September 11 terrorist attacks, some studies showed that there was a sharp increase in written published material about Arabs and Muslims (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2002; Parker, 2008). For example, the New York Times and the Washington Post increased the number of articles and stories about Muslims and Arabs by nearly 80% following 9/11 (Byng, 2010; Parker, 2008). Most importantly, these two publications have used the veil, hijab, and niqab as symbols in cartoons, photos, and as magazine covers that depict terrorist activities (Byng, 2010; Coger, 2011). Just as the word terrorism provokes concerns about security in the U.S., the visible symbols of the veil,
hijab, and niqab provoke a similar response (Byng, 2010). Additionally, the veil in print media is used to portray Muslim women as potential terrorists capable of concealing weapons beneath their burqa (Prothero, 2010). In addition, the U.S. print media portray the living conditions of Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan as primitive or savage, which evokes the fear of meeting or dealing with this kind of people. Accordingly, the threat of terrorism is depicted as real and existing within U.S. society, implying that terrorism can occur at any time, thus further instilling Islamophobia, bigotry, and discrimination in America (Prothero, 2010).

In most of the print media in America, editors and writers portray Muslim women as oppressed individuals who have no voice against their men (Bullock, 2002; Moore, 2007; Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2002). In print media, the veil represents women who are bullied and oppressed by their culture, men, or family members. Such representations evoke a desire in some Americans to want to help these oppressed women. Whenever a Muslim or Arab woman, who happens to be veiled, is poorly treated, her veil is used unfairly as a symbol of her oppression (Zahedi, 2011). At the sight of a veil, most readers might believe that the person has undergone suffering or oppression.

Murphy (2009) observed that the veil has become a visual cultural object by which Muslims are recognized since the terrorist attacks of September 11, the American military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the increase in the number of Muslims in Europe. The veil has become the easiest identifier of Muslim women, who are regarded as permanent victims or guilty terrorist sympathizers (Ajrouch, 2007; Coger, 2011; Lombardo, 2013; Zahedi, 2011). Therefore, the veil symbolizes insecurity and danger for Americans, especially in public places, as some people may assume
that weapons and other dangerous objects can easily be concealed beneath veils, enhancing the chances of a person carrying out a successful attack in a public place without anyone noticing (Lombardo, 2013). That is why Americans tend to believe the enemy can be easily identified as wearing a veil. However, this is a misconception, and according to Haddad (2007), some women started to wear the hijab to prove that veiled Muslim women are peaceful and do not support terrorist activities.

Additionally, the veil in America has become a visual sign of alert to the rest of society, especially for those who already look down on Muslims (Keane, 2012). The resurgence of the negative perceptions of the veil after the September 11 attacks was a way of lashing out at the entire Muslim community, labeling all of them as terrorists who revel in harming innocent Americans (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009; Haddad, 2007). However, many Muslim Americans are indeed citizens of this country, and they adamantly claim and defend it, never thinking of bringing suffering on their own country or community (Amarasingam, 2010; Khalid, 2011). These Muslim American women regard the veil as the recognizable dress among their minority group, and they try to effectively use it to assert their dignity against a majority culture that regards Muslims contemptuously (Haddad, 2007). In addition, the visibility of the veil among Muslim American women allows them to raise awareness about the sexualization and objectification of women in general. For these women, the veil provides a visible platform through which Muslims can announce their long-term and legal presence in America and their desire to fight for their rights amidst assumptions that they are terrorists (Haddad, 2007; Keane, 2012).
After the September 11 attacks, women who continue to put on the veil are commonly identified as conservative Muslims who follow their culture without fearing the harm, humiliation, or suspicion the veil may cause them in public (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009; Zahedi, 2011). Accordingly, Americans communicate with women dressed in veils but fear any socialization or sustained interaction with them. This state of affairs is illustrated by a clash of cultures in which American and Muslim culture are worlds apart; the clash demonstrating that even secular Americans might find it difficult to socialize or interact with conservative Muslims. Interestingly, Amarasingam (2010) stated that comedians such as Maz Jobrani, Dean Obeidallah, Shazia Mirza, Tissa Hami, and Maysoon Zaid have joined the struggle to break down the effects of negative visual culture associated veiled Muslim women. These comedians have worked hard to criticize with humor the cultural obstacles that make Americans perceive veiled Muslims as conservatives with anti-American attitudes (Moore, 2007). In addition, they have sought to promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue through comedy. Lastly, they have focused on demystifying the perceptions or feelings created by the presence of a veiled Muslim woman in U.S. visual culture (Holscher, 2012).

Some members of the Muslim community, however, display their veils in public so that they can be recognized as Muslims who appreciate their religion and culture regardless of the rogue elements in their midst (Keane, 2012). In addition, some veiled Muslim women want Americans to include them as people (and often citizens) who appreciate the American constitutional right that guarantees them free speech and religious freedom (Haddad, 2007; Lombardo, 2013). Moreover, the veil symbolizes both anticolonialism and opposition to efforts to eradicate Islam in America (Haddad, 2007).
The women who wear the veil for these reasons are using it as a visual symbol to encourage Americans to observe and recognize the presence of the Muslim community as a legitimate part of U.S. society. As Bonet (2011) suggested, already established U.S. laws should not disregard the rights of Muslim Americans; they should neither be viewed as threats to school or national security, nor should they be victimized when they publicly display their cultural, political, and ideological affiliations by wearing veils (Zahedi, 2011).

As a consequence of media portrayals, Hollywood movies, and other socio-cultural factors, veils have become conflated as representations of all Muslims and Arabs. Indeed, Betteridge (1983) observed that the veil is a particularly obvious symbol that draws attention and has many meanings. For example, Betteridge (1983) stated that “to some it represents oppression; to others it is an indication of spiritual independence and self-worth” (Betteridge, 1983, p. 109). Wearing the veil in public cannot go unnoticed in the U.S., which creates problems and challenges for the people wearing the cloth; thus there is no doubt that the veil has been a significant “key visual symbol of Islam” (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012, p. 269). For example, consider the Tielifoens’s (2009) YouTube video titled “Burqa and How People React”. This video is about a Dutch girl who recorded herself wearing the burqa for one day to capture people’s reactions. It shows how veiled women on the streets or in other public places draw blatant attention. In fact, it even shows people leaving places and avoiding her when she sat near them. They could neither miss observing her nor resist drawing conclusions about her figure, so they left. Similarly, Todd (1998) suggested that when people in the U.S. are exposed to Western film and media, they are more likely to
perceive veiled persons as terrorists or women imprisoned by their culture. Todd (1998) contended that film and media belong “to a wide-ranging Western legacy of portraying hijab-wearing women . . . as fundamentalists and/or terrorists” (p. 448). And I expect to find a similar outcome from this research.

Unfortunately, the most recognizable sign of being Muslim is the veil, which puts veiled women at a greater risk of getting attacked from haters. In Chicago, for example, Daraiseh (2012) reported people spitting on women and pulling off their headscarves in the street. Additionally, Tindongan (2011) reported that Muslim students in American schools have suffered from different types of discrimination such as verbal harassment or pulling off headscarves. He stated, “girls wearing hijab [have been] particular targets” (p. 83). Patel (2011) also reported in The Huffington Post Canada that 30% of Muslim women have experienced discrimination in that country. In addition, AbdElRahman (2009) reported about the tragic attack against Marwa, a 32-year-old, in an article titled “Egyptian Woman Killed in German Court for Being Veiled.” She was stabbed about 18 times and died in a German courtroom. There are countless examples of veiled women being the victims of violence because of their veils.

To sum it up, Hollywood films and news media have misled Americans into believing that the veil is a symbol of their country’s insecurity against inside enemies. Especially after 9/11, the media coverage of the veil has caused mixed feelings among Americans in terms of how they perceive the veil. Americans often see the veils as a kind of oppression against women whereby the foreign culture forces Muslim women to wear veils or face bad consequences (Gould, 2011). Americans might believe, as they read titles in news such as “Veiled bomber kills 3 Somali ministers” (Gettleman, 2009).
or “Veiled suicide bomber kills four French soldiers in Afghanistan” (Migliani, 2012), that Muslim women can conceal dangerous weapons beneath their veils to attack and kill innocent Americans in public places. Such widespread media portrayals of Muslim women would easily force people to look at veiled women with suspicion.

The 9/11 attacks seemed to prove for Westerners generally and Americans especially that the perceptions they already had about Arabs and Muslims were correct, leading to mixed reactions of sympathy and hostility toward this ethnic group. For instance, according to the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project (PGAP, 2010), which conducts public opinion surveys globally, 28% of the American population supported bans on the veil. The percentage of Americans who supported banning the veil was contrary to France, Germany, Britain, and Spain, where the majorities of those populations supported the bans. In fact, according to Pew Global Attitudes Project, (PGAP), (2010), a survey showed that 59% of Spain’s population, 82% of France’s, 62% of Britain’s, and 71% of Germany’s supported banning the veil. I contend, though, that Americans’ relatively low support for banning the veil has two sides. Many of the 65% of Americans surveyed who opposed bans, think that Muslims have the right to their cultural traditions for as long as they want. This part of the population believes that Muslim Americans wore the hijab before the 9/11 terrorist attacks and should be able to continue to do so. In addition, these Americans believe that the hijab is not an instrument of war but a religious cloth meant to uphold piety and modesty (Holscher, 2012). On the other hand, the 28% who supported the ban represent Americans who believe that the veil oppresses, denies identity to, and undermines the dignity of women, beliefs that lead them to think that veiled Muslims pose a threat to both their own values.
and national security (Ajrouch, 2007).

Undeniably, the veil has been used by both Americans and Muslims for various purposes (Moore, 2007). For instance, Americans have used the veil to identify Muslims and people affiliated with Muslim religion (Haddad, 2007). Even as some Westerners have used the veil to identify Islamic ethnicity, some Muslim women have started using the veil to resist the idea that they are dangerous. In fact, after September 11, Muslim women have increasingly worn the veil even though some of them had not veiled before the attacks (Haddad, 2007; Moore, 2007; Nagra, 2011). Also, the rise in number of veils can be interpreted as a kind of resistance against Western notions about what it means to be liberated (Wagner, Sen, Permanadeli, & Howarth, 2012). Ultimately, Muslim communities in America and in other Western regions have additionally used the veil as a visual cultural symbol to achieve a number of goals. First, veils have helped the minority of Muslims to assert their dignity in a society whose majority looks down on their communities. Second, the veil has been a visual signal of Muslims who exist in an American system that appreciates universal human rights. Finally, some Muslims have used the veil to market themselves as good people in a community that perceives them as familiar strangers (Kassam, 2011).

In comparing the U.S. with other countries in Europe, there is a vivid difference in terms of how strongly opposed to veiling the cultures are. Europeans have generally more strongly opposed the use of veils in public places, whereas American society has seemed more tolerant and coy about the veil-banning law (Byng, 2010; Khalid, 2011). By banning the veil, it seems that Europeans have oppressed the same women who they were seeking to protect by denying them their choice to wear or not wear in public.
Personally, I contend that Europeans have become afraid of Muslims in their communities and became oppressive in their own right by depriving these women of their identities. At the same time, the majority of American politicians, feminists, and others in the public seem to have, at least so far, granted freedom of dress to the Muslim American community.

It seems clear that the veil has indeed been linked to many areas of concern for cultural critics: gender, oppression, feminism, sexuality, security, terrorism, and politics, to name some. Politics, especially, is the most significant factor in my estimation because of its potent influence on visual culture. In fact, the veil has been used politically for a long time. For example, Shirazi (2001) observed that since the veil became compulsory in Iran, its political uses have led it to be a symbol in the fight among ideologies. Many scholars agree that the Islamic revolution of Iran in the 1970s brought the veil to media prominence (Berger, 1998; Coger; 2011; Dadi, 2008; Davary, 2009; Shirazi, 2001). However, the veil has been a symbol in the fight among ideologies since 1936, when the Shah’s government officially banned the veil or chador (Najmabadi, 2000).

Additionally, many artists have used the veil politically, sometimes against a certain country (as Nashat did with Iran), whereas others have represented the violence and oppression of the veil to demand a political or social response to women’s rights. The veil has become a significantly influential object over and across time and place. And ultimately, as Knirsch (2012) noticed, “the veil has always been a powerful metaphor both in philosophical discourse and in the fine arts” (p. 170).
No matter the point of view about it, most agree that the veil is a powerful visual object that is works as a double-edged sword to provoke intense emotional reactions from all sorts of people. Print media and the film industry in the U.S. have succeeded in featuring the veil as a visual object that has various meanings (Bonet, 2011; Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012; Haq, 2009; Keane, 2012; Nagra, 2011). And, although media treatment of the veil has increased since 9/11, western media have portrayed Arabs and Muslims since long before 9/11, representing them in mostly negative ways and rarely in positive ways (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2002; Norris, Kern & Just, 2003; Ould, 2007; Parker, 2008; Shaheen, 1997; Shaheen, 2009). In movies, veiled women often are depicted as exotic belly dancers and harem girls who are submissive, voiceless, and underdeveloped in sense of modern society; such depictions might lead to a public belief that all veiled women are ready-made sexual objects (Davary, 2009; Ramji, 2005; Zahedi, 2011). Accordingly, since 9/11, such representations have ensured that members of the Americans public see oppression and suffering in the lives of veiled women or stereotype them as potential terrorists who pose a huge threat to national security. It is also clear that to this day, veiled persons continue to struggle with the negative images the media create (Nagra, 2011; Ramji, 2005; Zahedi, 2011).

In public places, veiled women cannot move unnoticed or unsuspected, and, in the U.S. it is assumed that they are suffering behind the veil. Further, Western media have failed to address the diversification of Muslims. Instead, Western culture has succeeded in stereotyping the majority of Muslim women whose lives are totally different from the images that films and print media create. The veil remains a powerful image that has contributed to some predominant misconceptions about Muslim women.
in the West, even as the new Muslim generation has used the same visual cultural object to fight back against those misconceptions and resist losing their rights.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter details the methodology that guided this qualitative study. Specifically, the qualitative methodology used in this study is narrative inquiry. This chapter provides an overview of the research procedures and the research question(s) that the study will investigate. I also identify the target population, explain the sampling procedures and data collection, and describe how the data was analyzed. Further, I identify the study's location and the time and duration of the research study. Finally, I consider the ethical issues involved in the study as well as its limitations.

Having conducted the research described above, I was able to find some answers to my research questions about the veil as a visual culture object. Having grown up in Saudi Arabia, I saw the veil as an ordinary, everyday object. But, since I have been living in the United States, I have observed that a woman wearing a veil attracts stares and can often evoke dialog among Americans. Thus, I was curious to explore what image or perception they have in mind- and why. I hope my findings in this study will spark a dialogue among American academics that I can participate in and shed light on. Therefore, the methods outlined above allow me to present original research results that were obtained through the recording of personal narratives based on the experiences of three American women who wore veils in public for this study. My hope is that these narratives and lived experiences will help Americans better understand the veil and the people who wear it.
Research Questions

I sought to understand through this study the visual culture implications of women who wear the veil in the U.S.. Specifically, the main question for this narrative study was: How do veiled Western women incite transformative visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning veiled women? Additionally, I had several sub questions for which I sought answers. They are:

1. As a Western woman, what does it mean to be veiled in a Western culture?
2. What kind of verbal or physical interactions result from the experience of wearing the veil?
3. What understanding do Western women have about the veil or veiled women before and after the experience?
4. What possible narratives may emerge with the three non-Muslim women participants?

Overview of the Study

This qualitative study used narrative and lived experiences to collect information about the veil as an element of visual culture. As an art educator, I acquired a better understanding of the veil through dealing with its subject in the art education field. When speaking with colleagues, I found myself exploring other ideas about the Muslim veil, which changed my way of thinking and talking about it. This study strove to understand the veil from a real narrative approach contributed to by non-Muslim Western women from the U.S. Due to past experiences, I knew that there were many different viewpoints on the subject of non-Western women who veil their faces, so I explored these women’s perceptions, and they also used their lived experiences to invite transformative visual
cultural dialogue with people with whom they interacted while wearing the veil. I also sought to uncover in this study which part of this study would affect the research participants the most: the actual cloth that covers their faces or the threat they received while wearing the veil.

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore how visual culture dialogue about the veil can be transformed by non-Muslim Western women wearing the veil and interacting with the public. In conducting the study, I also learned what these selected women thought about the veil when they saw a veiled woman prior to participating by wearing one themselves; and I also asked them to describe their narrative about the veil before they were asked to veil their own faces in public. I used the approach to narrative identified by Connelly and Clandinin (1990). They stated that narrative “is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2), and they go on to assert that narrative concerns human experience and understanding. Similarly, Chase (2005) described narrative as the approach of understanding self-actions as well as the actions of others to make a whole meaning out of these experiences. Further, according to Feldman, Skoldberg, Brown, and Horner (2004), “narrative form can be loosely defined as a sequence of events, experiences, or actions with a plot that ties together different parts into a meaningful whole” (p. 148). Also, Flory and Iglesias (2010) defined narrative as “the reflective product of looking back and making sense of stories constructed to make sense of life” (pp. 116-17). Consequently, I used a narrative approach that incorporated the assumptions about narrative outlined above to help me make sense of the participants’ narratives and experiences with wearing the veils.

Narrative inquiry is an original methodology that emerged within and across the
diverse disciplines of the human sciences, and it developed further during the second half of the twentieth century (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Narrative inquiry also has historical roots in education, and it can be linked with art education, especially because lived experiences have long played an important role in understanding educational opportunities. In fact, John Dewey impactful book, *Art as Experience*, covers the importance of narrative as a viable research method, and additionally, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) asserted that narrative inquiry “is strongly influenced by John Dewey” (p. 2). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also contended that “experience is the key term in these diverse inquiries” (p. 2), which. These are the narrative inquiry methods I used in this study.

Although the study is solidly grounded in education research methods, it is important to note that the participants’ experiences in this study merely represent their personal perspectives; however, their narratives also contribute to a wider social conversation that Dewey foregrounded for education researchers. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) elaborated more on this concept:

Dewey transforms a commonplace term, experience, in our educators’ language into an inquiry term, and gives us a term that permits better understandings of educational life. For Dewey, experience is both personal and social. Both the personal and the social are always present. People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context. The term experience helps us think through such matters. (p. 2)

Accordingly, Dewey is ultimately connecting the individual’s personal experience
within the social context, which I see pointing clearly to an essential aspect of art education. The social context is where artists usually become inspired, where art educators derive their lessons from, and where the greater public reconstructs their personal viewpoints based on their social context. Thus, the social context is the platform on which individuals, artists, and educators rely to understand various types of communication. And therefore, for my research project, the experience is the first and most important thing to record and analyze, but the larger conversation that might be sparked because of the participants’ experiences might also lead to profound meaning.

Why Use Narrative Inquiry?

I would rather approach this question as why not narrative inquiry? I have established that narrative plays an important role in daily communication, and it is easily understood that people produce narratives related to their experiences, so it is relatively easy to see why using narrative inquiry would be an effective method for studying the visual culture implications of the veil. In fact, most humans turn their experiences into narratives through regular modes of communication. These narratives are loaded with perceptions, value judgments, and attempts to understand something or someone. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) elaborated on this by stating,

We might say that if we understand the world narratively, as we do, then it makes sense to study the world narratively. For us, life-as we come to it and as it comes to others-is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities. (p. 17)
Accordingly, I argue that narrative can be the main source of understanding. Researchers, then, also use narrative inquiry to make sense of social discourses pertaining to their experiences when conducting research. Similarly, Flory and Iglesias (2010) elaborated that “narratives are socially constructed discourses that not only derive their meaning from that context but also frame policies for subsequent action and interpretation” (p. 17). Thus, narrative inquiry has become a well known methodology that is used in many fields. In fact, in the last three decades, narrative inquiry has been increasingly used in many disciplinary fields such as education, social studies, and literary studies (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013). Therefore, I used narrative inquiry as an appropriate qualitative methodology for my research design since it deals with human social interaction and because I determined it to be the best way to navigate my research questions.

In general, my method of using narrative inquiry was to focus on social interaction with the veil as a specific visual cultural icon, centering on the meanings participants and the people they interacted with would reveal. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) suggested that narrative inquiry represents the “most compelling and appropriate way to study human interaction” (p. 6). Since the study investigated participants’ lived experiences with wearing the veil and interacting with the community, narrative inquiry was the best methodology to fit this specific research.

How Narrative Inquiry Was Used in This Study

I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and assured all participants that I would abide by ethical research protocols in this study. My study volunteers were
suited for the study criteria because all of them were adult non-Muslim Western females. I recruited potential research volunteers based on recommendations from fellow graduate students. My reasoning for choosing colleagues as participants was that doing so might improve the flow of their communication; the social relationship we already enjoyed might provide us all with the sense of comfort and trust that this sensitive communication might require (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 2006). As follow up to the participants’ agreement to participate in wearing the veils, I emailed them semi-structured interviews that they answered and returned to me. Also, using emailed responses gave the participants time to express their opinions freely without feeling the pressure or discomfort that a face-to-face interview with a Muslim man (me) might engender. Then, participants were asked to wear the full veil garment dress for a period of time while engaging in a full day of typical activities. The goal was for them to go about their regular routine as they experienced the reactions of others. All participants wrote in their diaries each day about their experiences while interacting with others. The diaries were submitted to me for data coding and analysis.

Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) suggested that researchers should, during the analysis process of the qualitative research methodology, “use words in their analysis, and . . . collect or construct stories about those they are studying” (p. 4). Therefore, specific words were important to classifying the data, and the classifications and codes from participants’ narratives, interviews, and observation notes provided the blueprint for answering the study’s questions.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a useful methodology, but as with the other methodologies, it
has advantages and disadvantages. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), one of the big advantages of narrative inquiry is that it can help provide rich information about the subject matter. Consequently, by providing rich information, narrative inquiry can help reveal feelings, reactions, or information that lies under the surface of people’s attitudes toward the veil. Many meanings can be drawn from the participants’ narratives and experiences. In addition to that, by using the narrative methodology, the door remains open for interpreting these narratives over and over. Researchers can draw some variables from these narratives for further study by using other methodologies.

Accordingly, the interaction through narrative inquiry and sharing thoughts or memories between the participants and me facilitated a more in-depth study. Discovering common perceptions, feelings, thoughts, or perspectives within the data challenged our beliefs toward certain matters. Thus, as Richardson (1995) asserted, we enhanced our thinking and broadened our horizons by trying to see the whole picture of the subject rather than relying just on statistics, much the way that Richardson (1995) asserted about narrative when he stated that narrative “makes individuals, cultures, societies and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes; it humanizes time; and it allows us to contemplate the effects of our actions” (p. 117). Moreover, Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) agreed that narrative “causes learning and growth” (p.14) for researchers, participants, and readers.

On the other hand, as with other methodologies, narrative inquiry is not appropriate for all studies, as it has its own limitations. The main weakness of narrative inquiry is similar to that of case studies in traditional research. Simply put, narrative inquiry limits the sample size that one researcher can study, which might increase
biases and limit generalizations that might otherwise be possible. Thus, narrative inquiry is unsuitable for studies that involve large numbers of participants because of the time commitment that narrative inquiry requires.

Additionally, this method involves participant interviews, which also might increase bias. According to O'Donoghue and Punch (2003), the researcher should develop trusted relationships with the research participants so that they feel comfortable speaking their minds without hesitation. My study is somewhat limited in this regard because of the lack of trusted relationships I had with the three Western women who volunteered as research participants. In addition, politics and religious matters are sensitive subject to speak about for many people. Thus, if many Americans have the same reticence about politics and religious issues, then I must consider how to encourage participants to speak frankly about the veil to effectively collect data.

Additionally, narrative inquiry is a double-edged sword. False impressions or facts can be put in place of truths and there is no possible way to distinguish between the two. While narrative inquiry ensures that the recollections are highly representative of the subject’s experience, it may also introduce problematic elements into the study (Mishler, 1986). With this in mind, it is crucial to remember that narrative inquiry is a continuous and integrated process. Unlike other forms of qualitative work, it is not clearly divided into segments. Data collection may flow into the reporting, and the preparation of subjects can become a part of their own experience, among other non-linear developments. The process is much more organic than any other form of research and this must be recognized and understood (Schon, 1987).

**Timeframe and Duration of the Study**
The data collection phase of this study occurred during the late Spring semester of 2014, and ended during the summer semester of 2014. The actual time of participant involvement in the study was intended to be approximately two to three weeks. However, two participants spent about four weeks during the timeframe to complete the experience, whereas the third one spent about six weeks to find time to complete the experience. They all wore it one time all day in public and wear it for short time in several other occasions such as shopping or eating in restaurant to get the experience.

Ethical Considerations

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), ethical considerations in narrative inquiry are an important matter and require responsibilities to be continually negotiated. Having ethical issues within any study might place difficulties on the participants and the researcher, which could lead to the collapse of the entire study. Josselson (2004) has discussed the ethical issue of narrative research. He emphasized that the issue of ethics is too complex because it deals with human experiences that require careful attention. Josselson (2004) suggests enhancing the ethical relationship between researcher and participants by “telling the participant the exact nature of the study” (p. 540). So, I told the participants the exact nature of your study would involve two semi-structured interviews plus wearing the veil in public for several times. I gave them the consent form that explained what I said verbally to them. I also discuss with participants the chance of receiving negative stares or verbal comments they might encounter by wearing the veil.
In addition, a majority of research scholars have asserted the importance of having the participants sign consent forms to protect them by obtaining approval for the use of the forms through the IRB. Josselson (2004) for example, stated, “most consent forms nowadays, under pressure from review boards, specify what will be done with the data -who else will listen to the tapes, when names will be changed, who else will read the transcripts, how the data will be stored, etc.” (p. 542). Therefore, the IRB provides strict guidelines to ensure the ethical responsibility of this study and the protection of research participants from any possible harm. With regard to the possibility of harm to my research participants, I shared with them that many Muslim women wear the full veil on the UNT campus and outside of it, and they do so regularly without getting attacked either verbally or physically. Moreover, I continually augmented the best ethical practices in research as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested, because:

Ethical matters need to be narrated over the entire narrative inquiry process. They are not dealt with once and for all, as might seem to happen, when ethical review forms are filled out and university approval is sought for our inquiries. Ethical matters shift and change as we move through an inquiry. They are never far from the heart of our inquiries no matter where we are in the inquiry process. (p. 170)

As a result, this study did not start until the full approval from the IRB was granted and the participants were fully informed of the study’s objectives, duration, development, protection, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Furthermore, I took very seriously my ethical responsibility in respecting and protecting my research participants. All the data records and informed consent forms are stored and maintained in the Supervising Investigator’s office on the UNT campus, where they will remain for three years following the end of the study. The names of the research participants were changed in this dissertation to protect their identities and their
personal information from any potential harm. All participants reviewed and completed informed consent forms before beginning.

The Population of the Study

It is difficult to study large research populations, especially using the qualitative research methodology. Miles and Huberman (1994) asserted, “You cannot study everyone everywhere doing everything. Your choices—whom to look at or talk with, where, when, about what, and why—all place limits on the conclusions you draw, and on how confident you and others feel about them” (p. 27). Accordingly, the population for this study was comprised of three adult female participants at the University of North Texas (UNT), in Denton, Texas. This population at UNT was chosen for several reasons. First, it provided familiarity and easy access to research participants. Secondly, since the study focused on non-Muslim Western people, the majority of UNT students are Western and non-Muslim, which fit the target of the study’s population. In addition, since the Muslim population at UNT and in Denton is a small minority, the majority of the participants were probably not entirely familiar with Muslim clothing and culture.

According to the UNT fact book 2012-2013, UNT is a university located in Denton, TX, a city of approximately 117,187 residents. The student population of UNT is approximately 36,000, 94.8% of them being U.S. citizens. This means the place is a good habitat of Western and non-Muslim citizens. UNT is also the fourth largest university in Texas and among the 30 largest in the United States.

Sample Selection of Participants
Qualitative methodology involves getting rich, in-depth information and understanding, which is typically only possible with small numbers of participants. Though there are some quantitative researchers who may criticize the small sample size, they miss the point others like Marshall (1996) shared, in that “quantitative researchers often fail to understand the usefulness of studying small samples. This is related to the misapprehension that generalizability is the ultimate goal of all good research” (p. 523). Consequently, since this study is not looking for generalization, conducting a qualitative methodology with a small sample size is appropriate. Furthermore, other qualitative researchers recommend a small sample size. For example, Miles and Huberman (1994) asserted, “qualitative researchers usually work with small samples of people, nested in their context and studied in-depth” (p. 27).

Necessarily, the population of this study’s sample is limited to non-Muslim Western women at UNT, since the study addressed non-Muslims’ opinions of the veil. This means that gender plays an essential role in this study. To be clear, men’s voices are often louder on matters about the veil, speaking either for or against it as seen in France, Turkey, and Iran, where men were the ones who made and publicized the veil laws. On the other hand, women who wear the veil are seldom heard, and if they are, there may be some ideological bias on the part of these Muslim women’s point of view. However, I reasoned that non-Muslim women should not have that ideological bias in their perspective of the veil. Also, by limiting the sample to those who are Western ensures that they are not familiar with the experience of wearing the veil themselves, and thus, get their real, true experiences and understanding about the veil.

As with any qualitative research study using a small sample size, the selection of
subjects in this study was crucial. While the final sample size is three, there were specific criteria that research participants had to conform with. The basic requirements for selection of participants included the following. Research participants must be:

1. female
2. adult woman
3. non-Muslim
4. resides in a Western area, such as Dallas Fort Worth in this study, which has a significant minority of women wearing the veil
5. willing to wear the veil voluntarily for a predetermined amount of time while engaging in daily activities
6. from the Art education program at UNT.

The first three requirements simply ensured that the subjects met the scope of this qualitative research study. Female subjects were chosen because the core problem links with the veil, which is predominantly worn by Muslim females. Also, females were selected over males because men do not wear the veil usually. Adult women were part of the criteria because adults usually wear the veil and not children. Furthermore, children might not be able to articulate their perceptions about the veil due to limited vocabulary or for other important reasons such as ethics of involving children in this research that could potentially put them in harm’s way. Additionally, I chose non-Muslim because most Western women who have written about the veil have not experienced wearing it. Also, I understand from firsthand experience that Muslims often think about this issue and want to know the views of non-Muslim women. Moreover, similar studies could be easily replicated in the future using other types of participants,
but those are outside the scope of this present study.

The next two requirements ensure that there is a purpose to this experience. If a subject was selected from an area without a significant presence of women who wear the veil, her perception would be positively skewed because of more extreme reactions than normal. Yet, if women wearing cultural clothing are the majority population in her area, there is the unlikelihood of receiving any reaction presented in the narrative. Also, I purposefully focused on non-Muslim western women who are not veil-wearers because then the focus and dialogue they encountered could focus on the veil as visual culture object rather than the religious aspect of the veil. Finally, all participants should meet the requirements of the study and also be willing volunteers.

Accordingly, the sampling for this study is a nonrandom sampling, so it is a non-probability sample, which shrinks the generalizability of the findings, but generalizability is not my concern for this study. My concern is to explore what these three participants might make meaning out of this experience. Further, Marshall (1996) noted that “the probability sampling techniques used for quantitative studies are rarely appropriate when conducting qualitative research” (p. 522). And, Lincoln and Guba (1994) asserted that researchers in qualitative studies are more likely to select purposive sampling to enhance their scope of data. According to Crookes, Davies and Royal College of Nursing (1998), purposive sampling is the type of sampling that depends on the researcher’s judgment of certain subjects or elements to fit the study’s scope. Such is the case in this study--there are certain requirements that all participants had to meet--non-Muslim Western women participants who wore the full veil dress. Abdullah (2006) defined the veil as “the dress that covers the whole body of the women including her
head, face, hands, and feet” (p. 30).

Instrumentation

Three methods were used to collect research data. First, I conducted two in-depth interviews with each participant; one at the beginning of the study and the other at the end of the study. Second, participants recorded their own observations based on their experiences wearing the veil on campus, and I observed their wearing of the veil to ensure that they completed the experience according to the study’s protocols. Finally, I observed the participants’ interactions with others, and each participant also wrote in her diary throughout the two weeks of the experience.

Interviewing

According to Atkinson (2007), the interview of a life story can lead to the core of personal experience, and it can help to discover how that person makes sense of his or her experience. Therefore, the interview should enrich the participants’ understanding of the experience. I completed two semi-structured interviews with each participant via email. Emailing the semi-structured interviews to participants gave them a chance to answer questions in their own time and allowed them more time to recall details. Conducting semi-structured interviews offered participants the opportunity to ask follow-up questions to the original interview questions to ask more details or seek clarification (O'Donoghue & Punch, 2003; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

The purpose of the first interview was to gain an understanding of what participants know about the veil, what they think about veiled women, and why. Moreover, to prevent a certain level of bias toward the idea of the veil, the participants were not told about the intended process of the study until after this first interview. The
initial interview questions sought to establish the respondents’ attitudes toward other women who wear the veil so that I could establish a baseline of understanding about their existing opinions about veiled women. Thus, based upon meeting the fifth requirement, agreeing to participate by wearing the veil, the first three participants were selected. The second interview was to follow-up with each participant with regard to the diaries they kept during their experiences of wearing the veil. These interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for coding and data analysis.

Observation

I observed the participants’ interactions with the public while they were wearing the veils. I was a nonparticipant observer. This type of observation, as Fraenkel and Wallen (2008) explained, requires the researcher to “sit on the sidelines” (p. 441) and not contribute to what is being observed. Instead, I watched the action only to ensure that participants did what I intended them to do during their veiling experiences. Moreover, this observation helped me to further answer sub-question number four, which is: What kind of verbal or physical interactions resulted from the experience of wearing the veil?

Participant Journaling

Participants wrote in their diaries during the time of the experiences of wearing the veil. Each participant wore the veil in full during daytime hours and allowed me to observe them. Following this time, each participant had two weeks to write her thoughts into her diary. The veil and abaya, the full garment dress, remained with the participants after the timeframe of the two-week study was completed, and I also asked them to try wearing the veil another two times for a short period of time, such as when shopping, at
a gym, or at a restaurant. They wore the garments for these additional trials without my observing them directly. In this way, they had more opportunities to write more and enhance the richness of the data. Experiencing the veil at different times and places outside of campus might also have changed their points of view.

Procedures

In the beginning, I told the participants to follow some steps such as answering the interview question first, then a meeting to practice wearing the veil with the help of my wife, Alia. Then, each participant need to wear the veil in public and observe people reaction and write about it their daily journals. Participants can start with the wearing the veil for short time in public before the long day experience. The experience of participants wearing the veil was advised to be one full day on the UNT campus to ensure that safety, but all of them preferred to do it in their convenience time especially during weekend. Each participant wore the full veil and went about her regular business day, which included walking, eating, working, and interacting with other people. The participants were asked to wear the veil while engaging in a full day of typical activities. They also wore the veil according to their own availability and choosing. By the participants spending a predetermined amount of time in the cultural clothing, the researcher sought to influence the participants’ interactions with others rather than just simply wearing the veil then discarding it. Spending more time wearing the veil and interacting with people placed the participants in a position to more fully experience being veiled in the U.S.

In particular, the study participants wore a full garment dress, which is called the Muslim *abayā*. This garment covers the individual completely in an opaque black fabric
with a slit near the eyes for vision. The women wore this garment for at least one full day. The goal was for them to go about their regular routine as they experience the reactions of others. So, if it is determined that more than one day would benefit exposure and immersion in the local community, they wore it for an extended period of time. For the full effect of this experiment, the women were required to be heavily veiled and covered in order to incite a reaction from others.

The women were instructed to go about their normal day, but to pay close attention to the reactions of their peers, colleagues, and other individuals with whom they interacted. They went to grocery stores, schools, government offices, or any other location that would be a part of their regular routine. I did not dictate their actual activities, as doing so might have influenced the results. The process of narrative inquiry required unstructured input from the subject, hence it was important that the research participant’s day was as natural and routine as possible.

Additionally, all participants wrote in their diaries for two weeks while wearing the veil, and they also recorded their personal thoughts about wearing and thinking about the veil. Diary entries included the participant’s feelings, interactions, events, stories with friends or relatives, as well as self-thoughts and the thoughts of others.

Coding Procedures

*Interviews.* After the participants’ experiences, I conducted a second, extended interview in the manner described above. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for data analysis. The interview is a semi-structured, researcher-led interview. At a minimum, the interview explored the physical experiences of the women, their self-perceptions, their experiences interacting with others (both male and female),
their understanding of how others perceived them and their clothing, and any incidents that particularly stood out to them.

Finally, the actual interview questions and transcripts are included appendices to this dissertation. I constructed this interview instrument to help me understand the narrative that each research subject wrote. By analyzing changed behavior, including any deviations from their normal routine, understanding their emotions towards others, and scrutinizing their potentially modified views toward those who wear the veil, I derived a rich, visual culture-based understanding of the participants’ experiences.

Coding. After completing the two interviews and collecting participants’ diaries and observation notes, formal coding of the qualitative research data began. Categories and themes related to feelings, perceptions, visual culture, and physical or verbal interactions emerged from the data.

By establishing and categorizing the words and descriptions used in their diary entries and interviews, I was able to do what Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) suggested: construct “stories about those [I was] studying” (p. 4). Since this study is a narrative qualitative study, words were important to classifying the data. Classifying and coding all the data collected from participants’ narratives, interviews, and observations notes provided the blueprint for answering my research questions. Further, the words used in these narratives and interviews are linked to the veil and visual culture in both social and personal aspects. In analyzing narrative qualitative research, I considered and employed Pinnegar and Daynes’ (2007) recommendations for analysis, which include:

Some narrative researchers employ sociolinguistic analytic tools to analyze qualitative data collected as field notes or interviews and either piece together or
develop a generic narrative of experience that generalizes as a "typical" narrative such as learning or everyday experience… Other narrative researchers may code narratives, translate the codes to numbers, and use statistical analysis, or they may analyze the factors involved during a storytelling event as a predictor of some phenomenon of interest. (p. 5)

Data Analysis

In this stage of analyzing data, the focus was on two sections. First, all interviews and narratives were transcribed using Microsoft Word. Second, I analyzed the interviews and narratives data based on common themes found during the coding process.

First, the participants transcribed their narrative and interview questions using Microsoft© Word. Within about two weeks after the participants completed their veil-wearing experiences, I had received two interview transcripts, and the other one took another ten days. Additionally, I received each of the three narratives after about three weeks.

To process the data, I used an approach advocated by Creswell (2009), who recommended “making sense out of text and data… and preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the date, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2009, p. 183). I searched for patterns, themes, and dimensions, and several themes and patterns emerged.
The first level of identification occurred during the initial review of each interview transcript and narrative. I read each transcript and narrative, analyzed the data for each interview and narrative, and then conducted open coding. *Open coding*, which utilizes a brainstorming technique described by Corbin and Strauss (2008) to “open up the data to all potentials and possibilities contained within them” (p. 160). Open coding involves thoroughly reviewing the data before beginning to group and label concepts. The process of coding involves grouping specific codes into themes. I used the following data analysis process steps:

1. Review all interview transcripts and narratives
2. Code the data, using open coding
3. Define the properties of the dominant themes that appear in the interview and narratives
4. Create subthemes, if needed

I used codes such as feeling expression, verbal interaction, gestures, and physical interaction to together into groups or themes. There was overlapping between words and codes when determining which themes to put them in. By reading and rereading through participants’ interviews and journals, I determine the priority for the various categories I established through coding. Some times, I came across repeated feeling or interaction, which led me to add up new codes or themes.

**Summary**

Conducting this research provided me with a decent opportunity to gain more understanding of a subject that touched my life, my culture, and my profession in many ways. As an art educator, researcher, husband, parent, and artist, I enhanced my understanding of how to use the narrative approach to gain more knowledge about the
veil as an object of visual culture and asocial issue here in the U.S. Employing narratives to explain and understand human behavior is useful for gaining knowledge about a cultural issue because understanding is often constructed based on the daily interactions and narratives that we encounter.
CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF DATA AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

This chapter presents and retells the participants’ stories of the veil experience and how they interacted with people during that experience. The veil experience has influenced them to recall, think, wonder, and become aware of things better as well as ask questions that can help me, as the researcher, and other readers to enhance our understanding about being veiled in the U.S. This chapter is presented in three parts. The first part includes tables that feature the common themes in the participants’ experiences as derived from the coded interviews and diary entries. The second part recounts participants’ narratives with the experience of veiling. Finally, these themes and narratives are analyzed.

The objective of coding the data was to identify factors relevant to the topic as reflected in the three interviews and three diaries as well as my personal observations. The three participants are identified in this dissertation as MENA, GEWA and EEMA. Two participants GEWA and EEMA are white Americans born in the U.S., while MENA is African American women raised in the U.S. Each of them completed interviews and maintained a diary of their experiences. Each interview and diary was viewed as a single incident. That is, each interview and diary was considered individually in the analysis. My personal observations were used to enhance the recollections and experiences of the women who were veiled and further elaborate on how other people were looking at and interacting with them. Common themes among the three women and my own observations emerged.
Arranging Data Analysis

The process of data analysis involves “making sense out of text and data…and preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the date, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2009, p. 183). I looked for patterns, themes, and dimensions in the data through analysis of the interviews/diaries, by coding the data, and further as analyzing the themes and patterns that emerged. The goal was to describe the participants’ subjective experiences and views as records of their having worn the veil in public.

The first level of identification occurred during the initial review of each interview transcript. Upon receiving the transcripts, each transcript was read and the data analyzed for each interview, and then open coding utilizing NVivo™ (www.qsrinternational.com) software, an analytic software tool used to facilitate the coding process.

Additionally, I used open coding, which is a technique that utilizes brainstorming, described by Corbin and Strauss (2008), to “open up the data to all potentials and possibilities contained within them” (p. 160). In open coding, the researcher thoroughly reviews the data before beginning to group and label concepts. The process of coding is completed by taking the raw data, pulling out concepts, and then further developing them in terms of their themes. The data analysis process included the following steps:

1. Reviewed all interview transcripts notes
2. Imported the data into NVIVO™
3. Coded the data in NVIVO™ using open coding
4. Defined the properties of the dominant themes
5. Created categories that represent themes
6. Recoded the data using the themes

The resulting themes are described in the summary of the research findings.

Validity, Trustworthiness, and Reliability

I ensured the validity, trustworthiness, and reliability of the research study through employing what Creswell (2009) described as “the researcher check[ing] for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures” (p. 190). Validation of my findings occurred throughout this process (Creswell, 2009) by continually checking during the coding process to ensure that coding did not drift from the original intent as the coding process evolved. I also used manual coding as well as an electronic codebook within the NVivo program.

Interview Questions Answered Before the Veil Experience

Below are the initial interview questions that the three participants answered prior to wearing the veils. Since the purpose was to discover what the participants already had in their minds about the veil, I did the first interview before they wore the veil out in the public. In the first interview, there were 16 questions relating to the subject of the veil.

All three participants admitted that they did not know much about the face veil that Muslim women wear. Some of them saw it as a religious practice, while others saw it as a tradition in certain cultures. EEMA, for example, stated that she “only knows that some Muslim women wear the veil as part of their religious practice.” However, MENA
and GEWA believed that the veil is a cultural and traditional practice in Muslim countries. In 2014 they stated:

MENA: I grew up in Cameroon, West Africa, where there are Muslims, Christians, and over 200 ethnic groups with different customs, and different languages. Some Arab Cameroonian women wear veils in many different ways and in all sorts of colors. I don’t remember the face veil being common in the parts of Cameroon I grew up in. From what I know the northern part of Cameroon has more Arab Cameroonians. I have never been there, so I am not sure how the veils are worn. So I don’t really know much about veils besides that they are traditional attires common in Arab and Muslim cultures.

GEWA: I am unfamiliar with the traditions. I only know it looks hot and restrictive in regards to movement. I also only know what western media says about it not being a choice for the woman, just as it is not a choice if they want to drive a car the media says. I read they could be stoned for even being seen glancing at a man other than their husband?

MENA, who grew up in a rich community with different ethnic groups, knows that the veil has many shapes, colors, and ways of wearing it. Her childhood’s multicultural environment helped her to develop her perspective toward the veil based on the facts where she lived. However, GEWA, who also has a rich ancestry of Irish/Dutch/Cherokee Native American roots and who was well exposed to various U.S. regions, thinks the veil looks hot and restrictive. Also, she knows that it is not a choice compared to driving as not a choice.
Interestingly, the conversation about the veil leads to a discussion about other things not being able to drive cars. It is clear that GEWA developed her perspective toward the veil based on her feelings and knowledge that she absorbed from the media. The media’s influence on her led her to bring up the subject of banning women from driving cars in Saudi Arabia, when the question was about the veil. Also, banning women from driving cars is only in one single Muslim country, whereas in all other Muslim countries women can drive cars, so I wondered what linked the face veil, which is practiced in many Muslim and non-Muslim countries, to the car ban for women in one single country. It is clear that the media influenced her knowledge regarding the veil. To reiterate the media’s influence, GEWA’s further commentary on the same question stated: “I read they could be stoned for even being seen glancing at a man other than their husband”. Despite the fact that this is not true, I wonder how GEWA was falsely informed about stoning women for looking at another man and banning women from driving cars, but she did not know that there are many different colored veils, as well as there are many different Muslim countries who have different laws and perspectives.

Question 1: What Comes to Your Mind if I Ask You to Draw a Muslim Woman?

I attempted to discover if the veil is the most significant icon linked to Muslim women in Western culture. I also wanted to know if there were other aspects that the participants used to label Muslim women. GEWA gave a clear answer of what she thinks of Muslim women as she stated: “In my mind I see a set of eyes looking out from a tiny hole from a dark place.” Surprisingly, the other two participants explained that Muslim women have many different appearances that cannot be reduced to just one
particular item. For example, MENA explained, “Honestly, there is no one look for a Muslim woman. I have had Muslim female friends who did not dress veiled at all. Sometimes depending on the event, they wore a head wrap.” EEMA explained what comes to her mind as follows:

I don’t know, I think I would most likely just draw a generic looking woman because I know that a Muslim woman could come from various different nations/cultures/ethnicities. Also, I know that Muslim women’s dress varies, some cover themselves completely, and some cover their heads, and some don’t dress any different than me (personal correspondence, 2014)

Participants MENA and EEMA showed that they know that various types of Muslims look and dress in different ways, and they tried to be more general and not label Muslim women in a particular way. However, at the end of her sentence, MENA admitted that: “The reality is that the head-wrap (Hijab) or the veil is what first comes to mind in thinking about a Muslim woman” (personal correspondence, 2014). Also, EEMA acknowledged that in her mind she might have drawn a form of the veil.

**Question 2: Can you name some characters that will influence your drawing of Muslim women?**

In responding to the previous question, EEMA, for instance, gave a broad answer, saying that she would draw a generic image of a woman, but in this question she stated with more clarity, “I suppose it is possible that I might draw a Muslim woman with a scarf on her head, but honestly the veiled face does not immediately come to mind when I think of Muslim women” (personal correspondence, date). EEMA further stated that a scarf might be what she would choose to draw on a Muslim woman, but
that it is not the first thing that comes to her mind when picturing a Muslim woman.

GEWA believed that not seeing much shape or definition in Muslim women would influence her to draw them as flat with eyes looking out from a tiny hole from a dark place. This seems like a reasonable answer, if it were true that the majority of Muslim women were face veiled, which they are not. More interestingly, GEWA added, “I do not see much personal choice or personality revealed” (personal communication, 2014). Additionally, MENA believed the items that would influence her drawing of Muslim women would have been the head wrap or the face veil. She emphasized these items, saying: “Those are the obvious identifications. Similarly in drawing a Catholic woman, I may draw with a rosary to indicate her religion” (personal communication, 2014). Her answer showed a more comprehensive understanding that recalls other similar types of veils, but she added that she associates the rosary with Catholic women, which differentiates them from Muslim women, but also indicates that the veil is heavily linked with Muslim women.

**Question 3: Have You Seen Any Veiled Women in Real Life? If Yes, What Did You Think About Them and Why?**

Answering this question can show how regularly participants have been exposed to veiled women, and what they thought about them at that time. All participants confirmed having seen a veiled woman in real life. EEMA, for example, just recently saw a woman wearing a face veil on campus. She stated that the veiled woman’s clothing caught her attention. She recalled: “I think I find myself wondering what the motivation is wearing all of that cover. It seems like it would be very inconvenient” (personal communication, 2014). Seeing the woman veiled made EEMA wonder if there is a
motivation that led the lady to wear “all of that cover,” meaning a lot more clothes than normal. It was clear from her answer to this question that EEMA believed her own type of clothes was the norm and the clothes of the lady who was veiled were outside of the norm.

MENA also has seen many veiled women, but she stated that she did not think much about them. However, she recalled some memories as she stated:

When I was younger, I wondered if they were not feeling too hot when fully veiled. As I got older, I wondered if the women wore veils by choice, as respect to their tradition and culture, or if they felt obligated to (personal communication, 2014)

MENA’s thoughts are understandable and a common question of many others, but MENA was different since she opened the interpretations to both sides. She even added her opinion that, “The media has played a role in propagating the veiled woman as a victim of oppression. This may be the case for some women or in some regions, but it is not the case for all” (personal communication, 2014). This response indicates a very good understanding, as well as more independent knowledge rather than just relying on the media. MENA also ended her answer by trying to look at the veil from the viewpoint of some veiled women; she stated, “I got the sense that the Muslim women had their own fashion” (personal communication, 2014). Veil fashion is a massive business, so MENA’s intuition about that was perceptive.

GEWA also had seen veiled women before and even lived next door to them. Even though she had never spoken with them, she recalled her thoughts about them at that time saying:
I always wondered why they did. I could understand it in their home country due to tradition and laws, but here where instead of protecting them, it seemed to make them stand out more and make them be looked at more instead of less (personal communication, 2014)

Clearly, GEWA wondered why her neighbors were veiled, but could not understand the point of being veiled in the U.S. She justified her thinking by pointing out the differences between these women’s culture and the U.S., but interestingly, she did not speak with them or ask them. Rather, she stated, “they never spoke” (personal communication, 2014).

**Question 4: What do you think veiled women feel under the veil?**

This question produced some answers that were based on location. To be clear, all of the participants thought that veiled women felt normal under the veil because they are used to it. For example, GEWA stated: “I think they feel as normal wearing it as I do wearing blue jeans in America” (personal communication, 2014). Also, EEMA stated: “I would imagine that to them it feels very normal” (personal communication, 2014).

However, EEMA and MENA thought location made a difference in terms of how the women felt wearing the veil. She said: “Perhaps in the U.S., a veiled woman might feel like an outsider or feel as though everyone is looking at her (because they probably are)” (personal communication, 2014). Also, MENA thought that “depending where they are, they feel anxious about others looking,” or at other places they may get “a sense of security, or cultural pride and respect” (personal communication, 2014). All participants showed a similar understanding that people get used to what they are accustomed to wearing, but location can influence veiled women’s feelings.
Question 5: How Do You Think People See Veiled Women?

With this question, I tried to find out more about what participants believe is the common understanding in their community. All participants thought that people in the U.S. might perceive veiled women with a sort of curiosity, as well as anxiousness or in an alarmed way. For example, EEMA believed that people are very curious to discover why women are veiled, and “some people might be startled by the veil because it is against the norm, and maybe because the woman appears to be hiding” (personal communication, 2014). In addition to EEMA, MENA believed that people would think about veiled women differently based on regional context; however, she believed that the September 11th attack prompted media attention that influenced perceptions about Muslims. She detailed her thoughts:

I believe repetitions of negative overtones to particular group influences, assumptions and perceptions of people belonging to the group. I think that many people may see the veiled woman as not only a victim of oppression, but also as a representation of a threat – a Muslim threat.

The third participant, GEWA, believed that people have different thinking toward veiled women, but she recalled the comments of her friends on Facebook saying that:

The women being slaves if they were made to wear it by law and how frumpy it made women look. Like they are part of a herd of sheep. Yet, don’t Nuns of the Catholic faith look basically the same?

Overall, the participants believed that people among their community perceive veiled women with a sense of threat, that women who veil are victims of oppression,
and that people in the community have a curiosity about veils and want to reveal what is hidden. Many people, like EEMA, think that people might greet veiled women with an uneasy feeling because their clothing is not normal, but GEWA responded, saying that nuns of the Catholic faith look the same as Muslim women, but people perceive them differently. Therefore, I argue that the issue is not about wearing abnormal cloth in the U.S., yet the issues of what people have in mind about that particular clothing.


The participants answered this question by expressing a belief that people who are well exposed to a certain culture can influence them to see veiled women in that way, the way in which they explained in the previous question. MENA, for instance, believed her childhood experience of living in a group of diverse ethnicities helped her a lot in understanding others. She stated:

If I grew up without interacting with Muslims, my perception of a Muslim woman may be limited by what I read, what I see on the television, and what I may hear.

GEWA also believed that “ignorance and not being exposed to different cultures” She continued by stating that people think what they think because “people are afraid of the unknown.” In a slightly different way, EEMA believed that how people look at or think of you is something that “has to do [with] cultural norms and also because of misconceptions about Muslim people that are perpetuated by the media.” I may agree with EEMA that challenging the culture norm is difficult and may make the individual who challenges the norm as the one to be looked at, or as MENA stated, “many people believe their culture which informs their frames of reference is rational and cultures that
Question 7: How do you see veiled women and why?

In this question, I aimed to explore the participants' impression or perspective toward veiled women. They had different viewpoints in terms of how they see them. EEMA, for example, stated that:

I see them as different than me, and also as courageous. I see them as different in that my clothing does not denote my religious/spiritual belief, but instead exemplifies almost meaningless cultural norms. I see them as courageous in that they seem to be prioritizing spiritual/religious beliefs through the way that they present themselves in public. This seems like it would be an especially difficult thing to do considering that their dress makes them appear very different from most of the people they encounter in public.

In addition to EEMA, MENA sees veiled women as choosing to represent their beliefs. However, she seemed unsure about choice, so she stated: “I have not encountered veiled women who exuded being a victim. Choice is really important. I cannot say that all veiled women are in a position of making a choice in how to dress, but some are.” GEWA sees veiled women as individuals. She stated: “WE are ALL PEOPLE on the planet earth, no more no less than any other.”

Based on their answers, EEMA and MENA see veiled women as people who try to disconnect themselves by emphasizing their traditions or religions. For example, EEMA believed veiled women indicate their beliefs through wearing the veil, whereas she believed that her own clothing is a meaningless cultural norm. Also, there is an indication that people have a sense of suspicion about whether veiled women really
have a choice when it comes to being veiled. MENA’s answer for this question, for example, expresses her doubt that the majority of veiled women can make a choice how to dress.

*Question 7: What reactions would you think veiled women might get from people?*

GEWA gave a very short answer to this question, saying: “Curiosity.” EEMA and MENA believed that staring would be the most common reaction. They stated:

**EEMA:**

I imagine that a lot of people stare at them and perhaps act suspicious of them. Perhaps on occasion someone might say something to them about their veil.

**MENA:**

I think most people will stare at them… I think people may be distant…When I see a fully veiled woman, she stands out because of how different her attire is, but I really don’t think much about how I relate to her. It will be interesting for me to be her place and observe how others react to me.

All participants had the sense that veiled women would have to encounter some interactions with people because of people’s curiosity, as GEWA mentioned. Overall, these three women opined that veiled women get stared at, have verbal interactions, and are distant from people.

*Question 8: Do You Know if There Are Any Global or Local Problems with the Veil? What Are They?*

In this question, I wanted to know if the participants were aware of any issue related to the veil or if they can point out any issues they have in mind. They all agreed
that there is a problem with the veil. Some of them, like GEWA, expressed a personal problem with it saying, “The only global problem I can see is they look hot to wear and not easy to take care of chores.” However, MENA pointed out more deep and intellectual issues associated with the veil as she cited, “I think there are many issues and concerns about women’s rights, especially with a world history of male dominance. There may be issues of the veiled woman being subjected to cover herself.” In addition to MENA, EEMA agreed in terms of women’s rights and equality as she stated:

I think a lot of women in the U.S. see the veil as oppressive, and perhaps as an issue of equality. Also, I think some people might be afraid of Muslims in general because of the terroristic acts of extremist Muslim groups. The media disproportionately represents such groups, which leads people to make negative (inaccurate) generalizations about Muslims. I also think that some people might view my wearing the veil as cultural appropriation and therefore see what I’m doing as a disrespectful thing. I have a friend, a white woman, who wears dreadlocks. She has been told that doing so is a form of cultural appropriation and that it is wrong for her to wear her hair that way—that it is an act of White privilege for her to do so. I think that some people will view my wearing a veil in the same way.

Clearly, the participants believed that there are some problems associated with the veil, but interestingly, they did not point out the fact that the face veil has been an issue in some European countries, where it has been banned in countries like France and Belgium. However, they did point out some of the general critiques toward the veil, like the issue of equality with men and the issue of being oppressed by the veil. Also,
EEMA expressed her concern that she might encounter a problem by wearing the veil if Muslims perceive her action as disrespectful.

**Question 9: Why Do You Think Some People Have a Problem with the Veil?**

In this question, participants, in general, agreed that the reason some people have a problem with the veil comes from their understanding of it as oppressive against women. This sentiment was detailed on some of my study participants’ answers:

**EEMA:**

I think some people view the veil as oppressive. They believe that Muslim women are forced to wear the veil. The veil is seen as restrictive and oppressive.

**GEWA:**

Women across the globe have been seen in a subservient way since the dawn of time… therefore men kept women in their subservient rolls through established religions and traditions through the years. The idea in the 21st century is that women should have the choice to choose how they live their lives and what they wear, and if they work out of the home or want to be a house wife, also if a man wants to be a house husband and the wife work, that is ok too. ‘CHOICE’ is the key for the 21st century.

**MENA:**

When people do not understand difference, it can be a problem. So I really don’t think people who have a problem with the veil really understand it socially and culturally within multiple contexts. If the issue is about women’s oppression, then another argument could be that the over sexualized exposure of women, in the
West for example, is also a form of female oppression. Perceived problems are more complex than what may seem obvious.

The overlapping idea of all participants is that the face veil is seen as oppressive because it is not a choice, as most people understand it. GEWA, for example, added more details with the argument that choice is the key. However, MENA showed more understanding of the complexity of the veil by declaring that people do not understand the difference of veiling and not comparing the act of veiling to what they have as daily norms. She, for example, looked at the issue from another perspective by comparing the issue as she stated the "over sexualized exposure of women, in the West for example, is also a form of female oppression. Perceived problems are more complex than what may seem obvious".

**Question 10: What Does the Veil Mean to You?**

This question was posed to find out any meaning they already had attached to the veil. Their partial responses were:

**MENA:**

Honestly, it really does not mean much to me because it is not part of my identity.

My participation in this research may give me a better sense or connection...My only concern was that I was respectful in properly wearing the attire in public.

**GEWA:**

The veil to me is a way to see from another perspective; it is a way to bring tolerance and understanding to a misunderstood part of a religious traditions. If we are as peoples’ on earth to learn and evolve enough to embrace differences and to see that differences are our species real strength in keeping our planet
alive we need to embrace the experiences of ‘the other’. By immersing myself in the social practice of a woman in the veil I am making a conscious choice to help end bigotry, to make physical and written differences not seem less important but seen as the strength that they are.

EEMA:

To me, the veil represents a commitment to a specific way of life. But, it does not hold any meaning for me personally. I am happy to be a part of this research project, but I don’t imagine that I will wear the veil at all after the project is over. I see wearing the veil as an opportunity to “try on someone else’s shoes.” I view myself as someone who tends to blend into the crowd, and I think it will be helpful for me to be in a different position where I might attract more attention. While I do not think I can fully understand the perspective of a Muslim woman wearing a veil in Denton, Texas (because I am not Muslim)...I do think that I can learn a lot about the day-to-day experiences of appearing different from most other people.

In this question, participants had a general idea that the veil is an expression of identity in others. MENA believed that the veil does not mean much to her, and similarly, EEMA indicated that the veil “does not hold any meaning” for her. So, both MENA and EEMA believed that the veil has no significant meaning to them. Also, GEWA viewed the veil as representing something different. She believed human differentiations are a strength that should be kept, and she hoped that her participation of wearing the veil would help to end bigotry. Nevertheless, they all appreciated and supported taking the opportunity of walking in veiled women’s shoes. Therefore, for all participants, the actual
meaning of the veil was that it is an opportunity to gain some good knowledge while participating in this research.

**Question 11: Can You See the Veils as Visual Culture Objects? Why?**

All participants emphasized that they see the veil as a visual cultural object. For example, EEMA stated that, “I definitely think the veil is a representation of visual culture. It has so much meaning—and it means different things to different cultures.” From EEMA’s answer, it appears to contradict her answer on the previous question when she stated that the veil has no significant meaning for her. GEWA, agreed that the veil is “without a doubt a visual culture object…because they have substance, form, shape, they are an expression of the woman's duty to her faith and culture.” Moreover, MENA believed that the veil is a visual cultural object, and shared that “it is iconic and can evoke meaningful dialog about culture and representation.” Therefore, all participants agreed before donning the veil that it is a visible visual cultural object that can evoke dialogue or make meaning.

Imagine if your daughter decided to be veiled, what are you going to do? Why? All participants answered with a conditional acceptance (in the rhetorical sense) of their daughters’ wanting to wear the veils. The most important condition they cited was that the daughter would have to wear it for a reasonable purpose. They further elaborated their thoughts about that matter in these ways:

**GEWA:**

I raised my daughter as an independent thinking adult… I also raised her in a Catholic Church environment. If she decided to change religions and chose to wear the veil she would have my blessing because I know she is like me and
would research everything thoroughly then follow her heart. As long as she is true to her convictions and keeps love for all in the center of her heart, I will back her in any way she needs me to.

MENA:

Well, I will hope that she is not just doing it for fun, there has to be a meaningful reason. I am Christian; the veil is not a common practice in my family and background. So, it will be really odd for my daughter to wear a veil, unless she changes her faith to Muslim.

EEMA:

I don’t think I would do anything. To me, the choice to wear the veil is an intentional act, and I think it is important to live life with intentionality. My daughter would not have grown up understanding the veil as a normal aspect of everyday life, and therefore I would expect that if she chose to wear a veil, she would have a meaningful rationale for doing so.

These participants also assumed that their daughters would not wear the veil because the veil is not their cultural norm. It is obvious that GEWA and MENA see the veil as only being for Muslims. Nevertheless, all participants agreed that their (rhetorical) daughters could wear the veil if they would like to.

**Question 12: Have You Tried to Veil Before?**

With this question, I wanted to find out if they had ever worn the veil and if so, what were their previous experiences. EEMA and GEWA stated that they have never worn it before. However, MENA had worn it one time, “Yes, I did when prompted by
Fahad in a class project…Prior to that, no.” Essentially, none of the participants never tried to wear the veil before being interested in my project.

*Question 13: Would you like to try it? Why?*

All participants intimated that they would like to try the veil, and they each explained their motivation behind the decision. GEWA’s motivation, for example, was to understand herself and others in a cozy environment as well as facing some of her unknown fear. She said:

I believe that only through personal experience and one-on-one conscious choice communications with others in the world can we find the common elements that we all share. By sharing openly your traditions I am trying to understand myself and others in a more intimate way. It is the unknown that people fear, and by keeping open lines of communications and projects like this on going we are helping bring understanding to a divided world.

Another example is MENA’s willingness to learn about other’s feelings towards the veil by seeing this as an opportunity to walk in the footsteps of others. She stated:

I am very interested in ideas of “otherness” and this research allows me the opportunity to consider or experience “otherness” different from a different perspective.

The last example is EEMA, who expressed her motivation to try the veil as an opportunity to broaden her understanding and learning and to stop viewing veiled women as strange. She stated:
I am interested to wear a veil because I think it will push me out of my cultural comfort zone. I would have never thought to wear a veil had Fahad not invited me to be a part of this project, and so I think it is important for me to broaden my horizons and to experience life through a different lens. I think it is important to question and test cultural norms, and for me, wearing a veil allows me to question my own practice of material/visual culture. Also, I think wearing the veil might help me better understand the veil in general. I hope that people can learn to stop viewing veiled women as the other or strange.

It is clear the motivation that drove them to try being veiled was their expectation of gaining more knowledge about others. Also, they showed motivation to gain knowledge by experience, and they showed that they are open to change or exchanging ideas regarding the veil.

The Interview Questions Answered After Wearing the Veil

How was your experience of wearing the veil? This question is actually based on the participants’ daily experience, which they wrote separately, but what I wanted to learn the most important aspects and conclusions that summed up their experiences. Interestingly, EEMA and GEWA focused on the same concept, whereas MENA focused on another concept as can be seen from their answers:

EEMA:

Honestly, the most personal issue was one of convenience. I am a mother of three boys, all under the age of 2—I did not think about how much thought and planning would have to go into wearing the veil in terms of my children…The thought of doing all of that and wearing the veil was tiresome to me…I construct
a great deal of stress in this process—so, adding another logistical point to the
equation was often more than I could imagine handling…So, even planning to
wear the veil became an obstacle for me. When I did wear it, I became more
aware of other people, because I was trying to gauge their reactions to me. I felt
like a lot of people didn’t even look at me. I also became very aware of the part
covering my mouth. It was odd to feel my breath blowing back at me from the
fabric. That made me feel somewhat restricted. Also, eating with the veil on was
a lot of work, and I often ended up pulling the veil off of my face accidentally, in
the process.

In additional to EEMA, GEWA also focused on the point of inconvenience and
difficulties that she felt under the veil as she stated:

What I expected it to be mostly. I was not surprised at being more or less ignored
by others, but I was surprised at how uncomfortable and impractical it was to
actually have to mess with it. It was just not a practical item of clothing to me…

However, MENA expressed a deep reflection on her experience and the results
she received as she stated:

It was an interesting learning experience. I had moments of comfort and some of
discomfort, as I elaborated in my narratives of daily experiences. Overall, the
experience of wearing the veil allowed me to embody the position of a veiled
Muslim woman. It made me more aware for their presence and more thoughtful
about what their daily experiences could entail.

In general, EEMA and GEWA expressed their feelings of restriction and

inconvenience while wearing the veil in public. Not being used to it, having difficulties dealing with it, and being ignored under it were the most notable incidences that EEMA and MENA pointed out in this question. Interestingly, GEWA mentioned that the experience met her expectations in terms of people’s ignorance, but finding the veil uncomfortable was surprising for her. Her surprise is because she thought differently based on her response in her first pre-veiling interview. She formerly stated: “I only know it looks hot and restrictive in regards to movement.” However, she might not be expecting that much discomfort or maybe her discomfort increased by being in public. MENA emphasized how the experience enhanced her awareness of what veiled women encounter on a daily basis. All participants, however, agreed on the fact that they felt ignored by others while wearing the veil.

**Question 1: What Were the Most Difficult Things to Do While Wearing the Veil?**

In response to this question, EEMA said that the most difficult things to do while wearing the veil were taking care of her children and eating. Also, GEWA believed that the most difficult thing was the practical aspect of wearing the veil in daily life as she stated: “To me, it is just too physically restrictive.” However, MENA expressed an opposite perspective as she declared:

Not much. One of the days I was veiled, it was hot outside and it was challenging being fully covered. While at Walmart, there were times when getting groceries seemed difficult. This was because of how I felt after being called scary by a lady who passed by.

Overall, the participants’ thoughts on the most difficult thing about wearing the veil was the restrictiveness as vividly expressed by GEWA and EEMA. MENA agreed in
terms of discomfort on one day while it was hot outside, but she believed that receiving
the verbal attack, an old lady told her “All black, scary, ehuuh”, made things difficult for
her.

Question 2: What Were People’s Reactions Toward You as a Veiled Woman?

In asking this question, I was trying to find out which reactions were still in the
participants’ memories. Their recollection of reactions to them were different. EEMA, for
example, believed that:

Most people did not react. I received the most interesting comments about the
veil from people I know personally…My cousin, who is a 21 year old male…
didn’t even recognize me. Later he said, “Ya, I thought—who is the ninja lady
who has my cousins!” Also, some other close friends came in late to the service
that day. They didn’t know I was me!

GEWA perceived that the reactions to her were less along the lines of being
ignored, and more so that “basically I was invisible.” MENA, on the other hand,
observed different reactions still; she detailed: “Some people stared at me, others
passed by me without looking. I am sure there were other reactions that I did not
notice.”

Overall, the people’s reactions varied from staring, being the butt of jokes, and
being ignored. The most common perceived reaction in the participant’s answers was
being ignored or seen as invisible by others. However, EEMA believed that most people
did not react at all.

Question 3: Does the Veil Provoke People? How?
MENA expressed about whether the veil provokes people that it “depends on the person… So, for some people it does and others, not so much.” EEMA believed that the veil “makes people uncomfortable because they can’t see your facial features. Several people said that—to people who are unfamiliar with the veil, it seems like the person who is covered has something to hide.” Therefore, EEMA thought that the veil makes people feel uncomfortable. However, GEWA thought that the veil “seemed to make them go overboard to act normal and by doing so they made me feel invisible” She felt that in going out of their way to act normal around her that her veil provoked a non-typical reaction toward her. In general, there is doubt about the veil provoking people; my participants believed that the veil could provoke some but not others.


In response to this question, GEWA, recalled her son’s argument about the veil saying:

My son thought it was silly for me to be wearing it for the experiment. He is an open-minded man, yet he thought it was obvious what people think. It [i]s NOT ok for her if you are not of the religion. So by me wearing it seemed not to be a true view of what it is like.

GEWA’s son believed that his mom would not get a realistic view because she was not a Muslim. EEMA answered this question by stating: “See answer above,” referring to her interaction with her cousin, who thought she was a ninja woman while she was veiled. From another point of view, MENA mentioned that none of her relatives
or friends saw her as a veiled woman, but she recalled: “I sent a picture to a friend and he said I looked good. I told him I was a participant in research.”

In general, their families reacted in different ways. GEWA’s son critiqued the experiment believing it would not lead to a realistic view, but most interestingly, he already believed that people have negative thoughts about the veil. EEMA’s cousin made the joke about looking like a ninja lady, and MENA’s friend thought the veil looked good on her.

**Question 5: What Were People’s Reactions to Your Veil?**

With this question, I tried to see the most general reactions they might agree on or recall the most. EEMA, for example, did not answer this question at all; GEWA referred me to her daily narrative, but she also summed it up saying: “mostly I was ignored.” However, MENA offered several different perspectives as she stated: “I had different reactions, as elaborated in my narratives. A lady though I was scary. The cashier at Walmart seemed uncomfortable. Another employee at Walmart passed by and greeted me. Some people did not seem to care.”

Overall, GEWA felt that being ignored was the most common reaction she got towards her veil, while MENA got many different reactions, most of which were negative as exhibited by the old lady, the cashier, or even being ignored. Therefore, being ignored is the most common occurrence that they expressed.

**Question 6: Did You Talk with Anybody About Your Veil? What Was the Conversation About?**

I asked this question of my participants because one time in the past, I noticed my wife speaking with a woman, and I found out later that the lady was asking her some
questions about the veil, including “why you are veiling?” So I asked the participants if anyone had engaged them in such conversations, and which of those conversations might stand out as important. MENA, for example, talked to several people and referred to her narrative for more details. GEWA recalled talking to her son about the veil as she mentioned in the previous question, as well as one of her friends, but she also mentioned that: “I did not have anyone ask me questions while I was wearing it.” She did not give more details about the conversations that she did have. EEMA recalled one conversation:

I remember one specific conversation I had with an older woman about the veil. She said she considers herself a progressive person, but for some reason, women wearing veils still makes her uncomfortable. She expressed that not being able to see someone’s face makes it hard for her to feel like she can trust her.

Overall, MENA did not recall any specific conversation, but GEWA and EEMA recalled specific conversations, which might indicate that they saw them as meaningful conversations. Both GEWA and EEMA recalled the conversations with their relatives and close friends; they did not mention any conversation with strangers. One interesting aspect in EEMA’s conversation with the old lady who told EEMA that she “considers herself a progressive person, but for some reason, women wearing veils still makes her uncomfortable,” is that the older lady is at least aware that not trusting a veiled person is not being progressive.

*Question 7: Does Anybody Change Her/His Interaction When Recognizing You? How?*
It is a common understanding for veiled women that the veil influences people’s perceptions, and they also change their normal interaction with veiled women. Therefore, since the participants are Americans and familiar with the normal interactions in Denton, I tried to find out if they had observed any kind of change from a normal interaction. EEMA did not answer this question, but from the answers of her previous questions, it was clear that people did change their interactions with her. For example, EEMA’s cousin and friends at the church changed their interactions as they recognized that she was the one who was veiled. Further, MENA said, “I am not sure. The only person that I can think of was the cashier at Walmart, who did not greet me, and seemed very uncomfortable.” GEWA answered by saying, “Yes, they stopped smiling and looking in my direction. They made a point to not look at me, or make me think they were not looking.”

Overall, all of the participants noticed that people changed their interactions based on seeing the veil. The only one who declared it clearly was GEWA, though, who noticed the disappearance of other’s smiles and eye contact. Also, MENA gave an example of what had happened to her with the Walmart cashier.

Question 8: Do You Encourage Others to Try the Veil? Why?

With this question, I was trying to discover how the participants saw their experiences and what results they got from them. MENA, for example, encouraged people to try the veil just for the purpose of enhancing understanding. She stated: 

Sure. Well, with intentions to experience or learn. But not just for fun, or with carefreeness. It is a good experience to embody the experiences that are
different from someone’s daily life. It can help people to be more open-minded, understanding and accepting of cultural differences.

However, GEWA differs from MENA by not wanting to encourage people to try the veil. She stated:

No, I would not; as I explained I can see no practical reason for a woman to wear one. Not even for religious practices. If the men do not have to wear one, why should the woman? Men are sexual beings too; also, if they have to wear them why black?

EEMA was unsure about encouraging people to wear the veil. She stated:
Sort of. I told the woman I wrote about above that wearing the veil did shift my perception of other veiled women. It gave me a personal point of reference for that mode of dress. So, I think it helps me keep from making assumptions about the trustworthiness of the person wearing the veil.

Overall, two of the participants would encourage people to try the veil, but one would not do so. MENA and EEMA agreed that trying the veil helped enhance their understanding. For example, MENA believed that the experience could help people to be more open-minded. Likewise, EEMA believed that the experience helped her shift her perception about veiled women and she became more aware of not making assumptions. However, GEWA did not support the idea of trying the veil because she could not find any practical reasons to do so. It is clear that GEWA was thinking mainly of two things toward the veil; first is the equality between men and women, and second is the practical reason for wearing the veil.
**Question 9: What Have You Learned About the Face Veil?**

With this question, I was trying to learn what knowledge they gained from their experience wearing the face veil. EEMA, for example, explained that what she learned reflected on her personal lifestyle. She explained:

I learned how intertwined my mode of dress is with my lifestyle. I am on the go all of the time…So, I usually wear fairly basic clothes that don’t restrict me in any way. If I was a practicing Muslim woman, I think I would probably choose to only wear a head cover, not a veil or a gown…

GEWA explained:

I would never wear one. I do still see it a lot like I see Mexican Catholic women wearing a scarf over their head in church. But, a pretty piece of lace over your head is a lot more practical than a long, claustrophobic black blanket like outfit. Now when I see woman wearing just the head covering around campus; that makes more sense.

MENA further explained what she learned in an in-depth and comprehensive way:

The face veil can be complex in meaning… I have learned that it is worn by Muslim women for different reasons. Some of them wear by choice, others as a standard based on regions, others for religious purposes. What I have learned is that the face veil is largely not understood, or at times projected out of context to infer or represent an idea.
Overall, relied on personal preferences about the restrictiveness of the veil. She believed that if she has to wear it again, she might just wear the scarf instead of the full veil. GEWA also expressed a practical point of view in terms of the restrictiveness of the full veil; she thinks that is why some Muslim women like to wear the scarf or hijab instead of the full face veil. She believed that she would not wear it again. On the other hand, MENA learned about the complexity of the veil, and how it can represent different meanings or beliefs. She stated in her conclusion that the veil is largely not understood.

**Question 10: What Did You Feel You Gained or Lost After Wearing the Veil?**

With this question, I wanted to make sure about the previous question if the participants believed that they gained from this experience or not. It is clear that they have a sense of new knowledge, but not all of them expressed that they learned the same things or in the same way:

**GEWA:**

I gained the practical knowledge about the outfit. I already believe that all people, men and women alike should be able to choose if they do or do not wear something like this, but personally they are just way too impractical to wear on a daily basis.

**EEMA:**

I think I gained a more nuanced perspective about the veil. Before, the perception of it was very flat—a very stereotypical perspective--mostly, one having to do with the mysteriousness of women who wear veils.
MENA:

I gained a sense of the veils normalness to those who wear it; in the sense that it is part of their daily attire. I got this sense when observing how your wife, casually wore her veil. I assumed that it was worn with care as a religious attire. I realized that it is an everyday attire for her. Just like how I put on clothes every day to go out. I also gained a sense of how people could feel uncomfortable because they are not accustomed to a veiled woman, or maybe they have assumptions that make them uncomfortable.

Overall, all of the participants felt like they gained some knowledge. Also, they all agreed that they gained more self-awareness or knowledge about others who practice the veil. GEWA, for example, believed she gained the knowledge that the veil is not a practical outfit in any way. Also, she brought up the idea that being veiled should be a choice as she believes in the right to choose. Moreover, she could not be tolerant in supporting those women who might choose to wear the veil because of her personal belief that the veil is “just way too impractical to wear on a daily basis.”

In another example, EEMA gained a more nuanced perspective toward the veil, not like the one she had before that linked with stereotypes and mysteriousness. MENA also expressed that the veil experience led her to gain a positive understanding toward the veil. She also gained a sense of awareness about others as she acknowledged that the veil is normal for those who wear it. Moreover, she pointed out that not being accustomed to seeing a veiled woman or having preconceived negative assumptions can make people uncomfortable they actually do see a veiled woman.
Question 11: How Do You See the Veil or Veiled Women Now?

With this question, I tried to see if the participants were aware of any perspective that had changed through this experience. GEWA did not answer the question, but the other two participants pointed out some awareness of having a new opinion toward the veil or veiled women:

EEMA:

Honestly, I think I will still see them as different from me—but, I think my perception of that difference has become much more complex. I know that we have things in common too. Hopefully, I will be less quick to make assumptions (like, oh-- about a woman wearing a veil).

MENA:

I don’t have one perspective. Each veiled woman has a unique character. The only veiled woman I have interacted with is your wife and she is cool! She wears her veil with confidence; she wears it like part of her daily fashion, when she leaves her house. In my opinion, the “veiled woman” is simply a representation. It communicates many things and yet nothing at all. Until someone engages with a real veiled woman, only then can they understand her individual relationship with her veil.

Based on these answers, EEMA still saw veiled women as different from her, but she pointed out some awareness of the complexity of the veil. She also got to see things in common between her and veiled women that made her mindful about not making quick assumptions about veiled women. Likewise, MENA got to see the
uniqueness of each veiled woman, so she started to see the individuality of veiled women as being much like Western women. Lastly, MENA ended her answer with an interesting assertion that the veil can communicate things or nothing at all based on the perceiver engaging with the real life of the woman who is wearing the veil.

**Question 12: What Advantages or Disadvantages Do You Think Veiled Women Can Get in the Denton Community?**

In response to this question, the participants did not provide much detail of the advantages or disadvantages, except for GEWA. In fact, EEMA left the question unanswered as she did with many previous questions. MENA was not sure what to say about Denton, but she stated, “I honestly can’t say,” and that might be because she is just studying in Denton, but not living there all the time. However, GEWA stated her opinion clearly saying:

I see NO, absolutely NO advantages from wearing it in Denton … it is not part of the local customs therefore they will keep the woman wearing them from making multicultural friends as easily as if they just wore the head scarf. Also when you factor in the fear people have of terrorists, it is understandable why someone walking around fully covered could be subject to be secretly watched.

Obviously, only one participant answered this question clearly. GEWA believed that there are no advantages of wearing the veil in Denton. In fact, she assumed having disadvantages from wearing the veil, such as having a barrier from making multicultural friends and evoking the fear of terrorism while being veiled. GEWA believed that the
face veil is a barrier to making friends, but that might be a factor only if the veiled woman was aiming to make a friendship with strangers.

**Question 13: What Are the Participants’ Feelings Regarding Their Daughters Choosing to Veil? Why?**

With this question, I tried to see if the participants might change their minds about the idea of dealing with their daughters’ decision to be veiled. GEWA left this question unanswered, but her previous answer to the same question was: “As long as she is true to her convictions and keeps love for all in the center of her heart I will back her in any way she needs me to.” However, EEMA answered this question in the same way as she did before doing the veil experiment. She reiterated:

I don’t think I would care either way if my daughter decided to wear a veil. My hope would be that she was doing so out of her own belief and commitments—that she had a good understanding of why she wanted to wear the veil.

Also, MENA answered this question the same way as she did before experiencing wearing the veil. She re-emphasized:

Well, she needs to have a good reason why. She can’t just wake up one day and want to be veiled without a reason. That may seem like she is being inconsiderate. Honestly I don’t see that happening unless she marries into a culture where that is the practice.

From their answers, they are emphasizing that their daughters have to have meaningful and solid reasons to wear the veil. They also do not believe that their
daughters would choose to do so. EEMA’s answer to this question linked religion to the veil even though the question was solely focused on dress: “My hope would be that she was doing so out of her own belief and commitments.”

**Question 14: What Does the Veil Mean to You?**

Asking them again about what the veil means to them might help me to see their judgment toward the veil after trying it. MENA, for example, still looks at the veil almost the same:

I don’t know. I don’t have a personal connection to it because it is not part of my practice. The only connection I now have to it is through knowing your wife. The veil is simply fabric. It is the person, the woman that embodies the different meanings.

In another example, EEMA, who expressed her personal difficulties wearing the veil while taking care of three children said:

At this point in my life—it means more complication. If my circumstances were different, for example—if my children where grown and out of the house—I think this whole experience would be much different for me.

However, GEWA’s conclusion was:

To me it means a waste of natural resources, claustrophobia, discrimination against those with disabilities (too cumbersome), impracticality of daily life. Having to buy two sets of outfits to wear every day is just NOT practical. With the advent of technology and the ability of anyone to see anything they want any
time of day, the idea that something as cumbersome as the veil outfit is just too outdated and useless, from a practical view.

Overall, GEWA and EEMAvied the veil as too restrictive for them. EEMA thought the veil created complications because of her busy life with her children, but if that were not her situation, she might feel differently. Finally, GEWA was clear that to her, the veil means a waste of resources, discrimination, and is impractical. However, MENA still does not know, but she sees a connection to the veil through people who are veiled. Therefore, all participants came up with different meaning. It is interesting that MENA linked her meaning with people who she knows as veiled, while the other two linked their meaning with their personal preferences.

*Question 15: As an Art Educator, How Can You Reflect on the Veil Experience? What Can You Teach Students by Using the Same Concepts?*

Since the participants are art educators, I tried to see how they might use their experiences with the veil as an idea for teaching in art education. All participants showed a similar understanding of using this experience as a way of enhancing students’ awareness and understanding of people’s differences living in a multicultural society. GEWA, for example, pointed out that the veil experience could be used as a way to encourage openness with others and to open discourse:

I will use it to show everyone should be open to others beliefs and customs, to respect them, and at the same time be open to speak their minds on what they believe as well. I believe in respecting differences, yet I also believe it is important to keep open discourse on all subjects.
Also, MENA had a similar thought of being more open to different cultures, and she emphasized that relying on true experience is better than reading about it:

The veil experience is a valuable learning experience… While I have read and encountered knowledge from the media about the veiled Muslim woman, the most understanding I gained was when I interacted with Fahad’s wife. Moreover, in wearing the veil I became the veiled Muslim woman, and I experienced how others perceive me. The experience of embodying someone’s daily life is a memorable learning experience. I will always remember this experience.

I believe this a concept is valuable for students, particularly in gaining understandings about different cultures and traditions.

In addition to GEWA and MENA, EEMA also believed that the experience could be used in art education to enhance students’ awareness of cultural differences of others:

In education, we always talk about students as individuals, and in art education we often talk about individual self-expression. Both of these perspectives seem to omit the cultural complexities of the classroom—and the cultures of the students themselves. I don’t think anyone ever really operates as a true individual. We are influenced by various aspects of culture. Our ideologies frame how we view the world and we can never full detach ourselves from them, though our ideologies may shift over time. All this to say, I think it is important for students to acknowledge and embrace cultural difference, and to seek to gain understanding about the cultural differences of others.
Overall, all participants emphasized that the veil experiences can be a valuable way to teach students about cultural differences. Also, they believed it is a valuable way to enhance students’ awareness and openness toward others as a way of learning. Additionally, GEWA emphasized her belief in opening discourse among students. MENA emphasized the importance of relying on self-experience and interacting with the real environment, not just hearing or reading about it, just as she did in her veil experience. EEMA emphasized the importance of this experience to enhancing the understanding of cultural complexities that affect each one’s identity.

Coding Themes

The coding process identified 15 primary themes. The themes were delineated into four groups of themes. The findings for each theme are summarized below. Themes based on what participants know about the veil, what they think about veiled women, and why. As reflected in Table 1, the primary themes in this area were concerns about lack of gender equality, suspiciousness, lack of understanding about the veil, lack of exposure to veiled women, and the veil as a visual culture object.

Themes for Research Topic 1

Table 1: Themes and Definitions for Research Topic 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concerns about lack of gender equality</td>
<td>Participants expressed concerns about lack of gender equality or unequal power for women who veil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspiciousness</td>
<td>Refers to the perception that the veil denotes suspiciousness or that the veiled woman is hiding something</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lack of understanding about the veil  
Refers to the perception that there is a lack of understanding and knowledge about the veil and the act of veiling

Lack of exposure to veiled women  
Refers to the perceptions that there is general lack of exposure to veiled women

Veil is a visual cultural object  
Refers to the participants perception that the veil is a visual cultural object

Table 2 shows the frequency with which the themes appeared across interviews/diaries and across the data.

Table 2: Frequency of Themes for Research Topic 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of interviews/diaries in which the theme appeared</th>
<th>Total exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concerns about lack of gender equality</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspiciousness</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of understanding about the veil</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of exposure to veiled women</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veil is a visual cultural object</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concerns About Lack of Gender Equality

The first theme for Research Topic 1 was *concerns about lack of gender equality*, which refers to participants expressing concerns about lack of gender equality or unequal power for women who veil. This theme was mentioned 16 times in four interviews/diaries. Examples of data from the interviews and diaries that correspond to the theme are shared here.
In her interview, participant EEMA stated the following about the veil being perceived as oppressive to women: “I think a lot of women in the U.S. see the veil as oppressive, and perhaps as an issue of equality” (personal correspondence, 2014). She later explained these views: “As I said before, I think some people view the veil as oppressive. They believe that Muslim women are forced to wear the veil. The veil is seen as restrictive and oppressive.” Participant GEWA raised the issue of gender equality and veiling in a diary entry:

I hear it is for modesty issues to protect them from the eyes of others and keep them just for their husbands. Well? If that is the case, then why don’t men have to cover themselves? They are sexual beings too and have sex organs and body shapes that can be distinguished? Men can be lusted after? So why don’t they wear it?

Later in her diary, she questioned:

Also, it is black? Why would anyone want to wear black in a country full of sun? Black absorbs the heat more than other colors? Men there do not have to wear black head covers, right? It seems I have seen red and white checked covering for them? Does that make them less or more sensual?

When being interviewed, GEWA mentioned:

I also only know what western media says about it not being a choice for the woman, just as it is not a choice if they want to drive a car the media says. I read they could be stoned for even being seen glancing at a man other than their husband?
In the following quote from her interview, GEWA’s words more fully embody a concern about equal rights for women who wear a veil:

Women across the globe have been seen in a subservient way since the dawn of time. Men were stronger physically so in the beginning they had the ‘power,’ that power led them to want to keep it, therefore men kept women in their subservient rolls through established religions and traditions through the years. Now with the advancement of science and the realization that in this century having ‘physical strength’ is not the most important factor for survival. The prevalent idea is that women should be able to do anything a man can do if she is physically able. Also, if a man doesn’t have to wear one, why does a woman? He is a sexual being just as she is? So what is the difference? The idea in the 21st century is that women should have the choice to choose how they live their lives and what they wear, and if they work out of the home or want to be a house wife, or if a man wants to be a house husband and the wife work, that is ok too. ‘CHOICE’ is the key for the 21st century.

MENA made the following comments during her interview expressing concern for the rights of women who veil:

I think there are many issues and concerns about women’s right, especially with a world history of male dominance. There may be issues of the veiled woman being subjected to cover herself.” She later stated, “For others it could represent male dominance over the woman. I have learned that it is worn by Muslim women for different reasons.
Suspiciousness

The next theme for Research Topic 1 was **suspiciousness**, which refers to the perception that the veil denotes suspiciousness or that the veiled woman is hiding something. This theme was mentioned 14 times in four interviews/diaries. With regard to the veil “hiding” something, EEMA stated, “I think some people might be startled by the veil because it is against the norm and maybe because the woman appears to be hiding.” Later in the interview, she further explained, “I imagine that a lot of people stare at them and perhaps act suspicious of them. Perhaps on occasion someone might say something to them about their veil.” She also explained why others may be suspicious of a person wearing a veil: “I think it makes people uncomfortable because they can’t see your facial features. Several people said that to people who are unfamiliar with the veil, it seems like the person who is covered has something to hide.”

In her interview, GEWA said she thinks of the veil in the following ways:

In my mind I see a set of eyes looking out from a tiny hole from a dark place.”

It seems to be a shrouded place, a secret place as though a place of hiding a prize position.”

She later explained the suspiciousness of a veiled person:

Also, when you factor in the fear people have of terrorists, it is understandable why someone walking around fully covered could be subject to be secretly watched. I mean, banks will not let people walk in with baseball camps because of needing facial recognition due to bank robberies. So if baseball caps and sunglasses also are not allowed then the full secretive outfit also should not be
allowed. I feel the restrictiveness of the outfit has outlived its usefulness on a daily basis.

In the final example of this theme, while she was wearing the veil, MENA began to feel that she was seen as suspicious. She noted:

It was odd that the manager came by, did not resolve anything, walked around behind me and waited until I was gone. Also MENA’s interview excerpt demonstrates her thoughts about the veil being suspicious and threatening to some because of the media associating Muslims with terrorism.

MENA notes:

911, and the wars that resulted from it, have influenced perceptions about Muslims. I cannot speak for everyone, but the U.S. media has participated in the stereotyping of Muslims. I believe repetitions of negative overtones to particular groups influences assumptions and perceptions of people belonging to the group. I think that many people may see the veiled woman as not only a victim of oppression, but also as a representation of a threat – a Muslim threat. The veiled Muslim woman is definitely more obvious and more noticed than pre 911.

Lack of Understanding About the Veil

Another theme for Research Topic 1 was lack of understanding about the veil, which refers to the perception that there is a lack of understanding and knowledge about the veil and the act of veiling. The theme was mentioned eleven times in three interviews/diaries.
Before beginning the experience of wearing the veil, EEMA said, “I don’t know much about the face veil, except that some Muslim women wear them as part of their religious practice.” When explaining others’ perception of the veil, she stated:

I think they see them and feel very curious as to why they choose to dress that way and what they look like under the veil. I think some people might be startled by the veil because it is against the norm, and maybe because the woman appears to be hiding.

Before veiling, GEWA stated in her interview, “I am unfamiliar with the traditions, I only know it looks hot and restrictive in regards to movement.” She followed this by saying:

I have lived next door to families where the women wore the veil, and I always wondered why they did. I could understand it in their home country due to tradition and laws but here where instead of protecting them, it seemed to make them stand out more and to be looked at more instead of less.

After veiling, GEWA wrote the following in her diary; the excerpt reflects a lack of understanding about why a woman would wear a veil:

As I look back on the five times I wore it I realize I was not as uncomfortable in a cultural sense or on how people were or were not reacting but more on a personal level. I just could not wrap my head around ‘WHY’ just, logically, ‘why.’ Why would a woman want to wear it from a logical standpoint?

Later in her diary, she further questioned and reflected a lack of understanding:
Almost every nation and religion on earth has sayings about the ‘eyes’. Therefore, if the eyes are so important and are mentioned in most religious documents as being one of the human senses that are important to be aware of… I have one last question. If the eyes are truly so important, actually the most mentioned part of the body in most spiritual books, if that is the case, (and I am not meaning to sound curt or impolite, or dismissive of cultural differences), I can’t help but think and wonder. If the eyes are the window to the soul, why then, don’t men and women all wear sunglasses? Then their true motives and non-verbals will be hidden.

In her interview, MENA suggested that a lack of knowledge leads to people having problems with the veil, “So I really don’t think people who have a problem with the veil really understand it socially and culturally within multiple contexts.” She then went on to explain her initial interaction with my wife and how it helped her realize what little she knew about the veil:

I remember when I visited Fahad’s house, for some reason, I expected his wife to be dressed traditionally, but she had on jeans and a shirt. I have heard that the veil is usually worn in public, so it made sense that she would not have one on at home. My Interaction with her was awesome! We had great food and hung out as girls. She exuded pride and showed me [how] to wear the attire. It was strange to me how she handled the clothes in no special manner. She brought down a bunch of them and placed on the carpet to sort. I was surprised to see this because I regarded the veiled attire as precious religious outfits – that were to be handled with care.
Lack of Exposure to Veiled Women

This theme was mentioned six times in four interviews/diaries. It refers to participants and others having a general lack of exposure to veiled women. EEMA stated, “I recently saw a woman wearing a veil on campus. Her clothing caught my attention. I had trouble not staring. I think I found myself wondering what the motivation is wearing all of that cover.” GEWA said, “Ignorance and not being exposed to different cultures in their lives; people are afraid of the unknown” when explaining the lack of exposure that many people have to veiled women. MENA wrote about her lack of exposure to veiled women:

I live in Plano, at the intersection of Dallas North Tollway and President George Bush highway. I have lived in this area for the past three years, and I have not seen or encountered any woman dressed fully veiled; at least, none that I remember.

She later wrote that she felt people’s views of veiled women depended on their exposure to veiled women, “Of course that depends on the region in the U.S. and the community they live in. I believe exposure is important to understanding cultural and traditional differences.”

Similarly, when interviewed, MENA explained:

I believe people are influence by the sources of knowledge they have access to or that are provided to them. If I grew up without interacting with Muslims, my perception of a Muslim woman may be limited by what I read, what I see on the
television, and what I may hear. I think people’s individual perception of a veiled woman in directly related to their experiences and learning context.

The Veil Is a Visual Cultural Object

The final theme for Research Topic 1 is the veil is a visual cultural object refers to the participants’ perception that the veil is a visual cultural object, and was mentioned four times in three interviews/diaries, and all of the participating women affirmed that the veil was a visual cultural object. EEMA indicated:

Yes, I definitely think the veil is a representation of visual culture. It has so much meaning, and it means different things to different cultures. The meaning of the veil is different based on who is viewing it and who is wearing it.

GEWA said, “They are without a doubt a visual culture object. Why? Because they have substance, form, shape, they are an expression of the women’s duty to her faith and culture.” Similarly, MENA said:

It is certainly a visual culture object. It is iconic and can evoke meaningful dialog about culture and representation. The veil is simply fabric. It is the person, the woman that embodies the different meanings.

The veil as a visual cultural object was not mentioned in any of the diary entries.

Themes for Research Topic 2

Research topic 2 was related to women’s attitudes toward other women who wear the veil and opinions about veiled women. As reflected in Table 3, the primary themes were awareness of veiled women’s experience and admiration.
Table 3: Themes and Definitions for Research Topic 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of veiled women’s experience</td>
<td>Participants expressed that they gained a better awareness and knowledge of what veiled women experience as a result of their research participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admiration</td>
<td>Expressed admiration or respect for women who veil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows the frequency with which the themes appeared across the data points (interviews and diaries) and across the data.

Table 4: Frequency of Themes for Research Topic 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of interviews/diaries in which the theme appeared</th>
<th>Total exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of veiled women’s experience</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admiration</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Awareness of Veiled Women’s Experience

The first theme for research topic 2 relates to awareness of veiled women’s experience. This theme was mentioned 11 times in four interviews/diaries and was defined as participants gaining a better awareness and knowledge of what veiled women experience as a result of their participation. In the interview, EEMA expressed awareness of what veiled women experience when she stated, “I would imagine that to them it feels very normal, but perhaps in the U.S. a veiled woman might feel like an
outsider, or feel as though everyone is looking at her (because they probably are).” She later verbally stated that she felt wearing the veil increased the depths of her awareness:

I told the woman I wrote about above that wearing the veil did shift my perception of other veiled women. It gave me a personal point of reference for that mode of dress. So, I think it helps me keep from making assumptions about the trustworthiness of the person wearing the veil.

When interviewed, GEWA said:

By immersing myself in the social practice of a woman in the veil I am making a conscious choice to help end bigotry, to make physical and written differences not seem less important but seen as the strength that they are.

MENA wrote about her shift in awareness in the following diary excerpts:

The experience of wearing the full veil gave me the opportunity to embody a life outside of identity. I considered notions of stereotypes of the veiled Muslim woman. I wondered if I have stared at a fully veiled Muslim woman before. I am sure I have. This experience made me more aware of the subtle actions that may occur, as in the case of the manger at Walmart. I wondered if such cautionary actions occur often to fully veil Muslim women lining in the United States. [The experience] challenged me out of my comfort zone and allowed me to experience the narrative of a full veiled Muslim woman.

In the following interview quotes, MENA explained her increased awareness of what veiled women experience:
Overall, the experience of wearing the veil allowed me to embody the position of a veiled Muslim woman. It made me more aware of their presence and more thoughtful about what their daily experiences could entail.

The face veil can be complex in meaning. For some it is mundane attire based on region or cultural background. For others it is significant for religious purposes. For others it could represent male dominance over the woman. I have learned that it is worn by Muslim women for different reasons. Some of them wear by choice, others as a standard based on regions, others for religious purposes. What I have learned is that the face veil is largely not understood, or at times projected out of context to infer or represent an idea. For example it can be used as a symbol to advocate for women’s rights.

Moreover, in wearing the veil I became the veiled Muslim woman, and I experienced how others perceive me. The experience of embodying someone’s daily life is a memorable learning experience. I will always remember this experience.

Admiration

The next theme for Research Topic 2 was admiration. This theme was mentioned three times in two interviews and was defined as participants expressing admiration or respect for women who veil. EEMA verbally expressed admiration for women who wear a veil:
I see them as different than me, and also as courageous. I see them as different in that my clothing does not denote my religious/spiritual belief, but instead exemplifies almost meaningless cultural norms. I see them as courageous in that they seem to be prioritizing spiritual/religious beliefs through the way that they present themselves in public. This seems like it would be an especially difficult thing to do considering that their dress makes them appear very different from most of the people they encounter in public (of course I am speaking from the context of Denton, Texas).

When asked what she though women felt under the veils, MENA said, “Maybe a sense of security, or cultural pride and respect.” She then furthered explained:

Each veiled woman has a unique character. The only veiled woman I have interacted with is your wife and she is cool! She wears her veil with confidence; she wears it like part of her daily fashion when she leaves her house. In my opinion, the ‘veiled woman’ is simply a representation.

Themes for Research Topic 3

Research Topic 3 was related to how women felt during their experiences of wearing the veil as well as how others looked at them, talked with them, and interacted with them. As reflected in Table 5, the primary themes were awkwardness and restrictiveness, invisibility, receiving stares, friendliness, subtle discrimination and discomfort, and self-consciousness.
Table 5: Themes and Definitions for Research Topic 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awkwardness and restrictiveness</td>
<td>Participants experienced the veil as being awkward to wear, cumbersome, or restrictive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invisibility</td>
<td>Participants felt ignored or invisible in the veil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving stares</td>
<td>Participants felt they stood out or received looks and stares</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendliness</td>
<td>Participants felt some of their encounters were normal and accepting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtle discrimination and discomfort</td>
<td>Participants experienced subtle discrimination and others’ discomfort when they were veiled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-consciousness</td>
<td>Participants felt self-conscious while veiled</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 shows the frequency with which the themes appeared across interviews/diaries and across the data.

Table 6: Frequency of Themes for Research Topic 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of interviews/diaries in which the theme appeared</th>
<th>Total exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awkwardness and restrictiveness</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invisibility</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving stares</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendliness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtle discrimination and discomfort</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-consciousness</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Awkwardness and Restrictiveness

The first theme for Research Topic 3 was *awkwardness and restrictiveness*. This theme was mentioned 22 times in six interviews/diaries and was defined as participants experiencing the veil as being awkward to wear, cumbersome, or restrictive.
When writing in her diary, EEMA shared:

I got the children all ready for church and waited until the last minute to put the robe on. I grabbed the veil and covering and loaded the children in the car for church. When I arrived in the parking lot, I took a few minutes to put the head cover and veil on. It is an awkward process for me anyway, and attempting to get everything in place in the car made it all the more challenging.

Later in her interview she stated:

Honestly, the most personal issue was one of convenience. I am a mother of three boys, all under the age of 2. I did not think about how much thought and planning would have to go into wearing the veil in terms of my children. When I am out of the house, I am usually carrying at least one child and one bag (if not more). The thought of doing all of that and wearing the veil was tiresome to me. When I take my kids anywhere, I usually try to envision the scenario I will be in before I get there (i.e.-dropping them off at school, going to the store, etc.) I do this so that I can plan ahead and make sure I have everything I need, and so that I can load/unload them in the most sufficient manner—making sure that everyone is safe. I construct a great deal of stress in this process—so, adding another logistical point to the equation was often more than I could imagine handling. I am not used to functioning with my head and face covered, so it felt strange, and the fabric felt like it was in my way. I felt like I had to be careful all of the time not to pull it off. If it fell off in public, I would have to go to the bathroom and fix it. With all three kids (or even 2) in tow, this becomes a very difficult task. So, even planning to wear the veil became an obstacle for me. I also became very aware
of the part covering my mouth. It was odd to feel my breath blowing back at me from the fabric. That made me feel somewhat restricted. Also, eating with the veil on was a lot of work, and I often ended up pulling the veil off of my face accidentally, in the process.

In her diary, GEWA explained her feelings of the veil being restrictive and cumbersome. She wrote:

When I picked up the veil I understood how to wear all three pieces and was excited. I had originally planned on wearing it the whole two weeks. After putting it on I figured out that it was so restraining and claustrophobic that I would not be able to do that. The first time I wore it was to Kroger grocery store. I put it all on before I left the house except the veil itself. Fahad had advised me to not drive in it because of visibility issues. I put the front veil on when I parked. When I got out of the car the first thing I noticed was how cumbersome it was. I went back home and once again I noticed the cumbersomeness of having to deal with all that material all over me. I felt smothered.

In another diary entry, she wrote:

The visit was pleasant and once again the main issue was me feeling claustrophobic in it. I just kept thinking, “Why on God’s green earth would all this fabric be made and worn in hot countries? Such a waste of resources. Some have no clothes or food, yet, all this material goes over women who also have clothes on under it?” That is what I thought on the way home.
When being interviewed before wearing the veil, GEWA expressed that the veil appears cumbersome: “The only global problem I can see is they look hot to wear and not easy to take care of chores, or take care of personal hygiene needs. So much material.” In an interview that occurred after wearing the veil, she stated, “I was surprised at how uncomfortable and impractical it was to actually have to mess with it. It was just not a practical item of clothing to me.” She then elaborated, “The most difficult thing was the practical aspects of daily living, like seeing, walking, taking care of personal needs in restrooms, reaching for items in stores, eating. To me, it is just too physically restrictive.” A final quote from GEWA illustrates her conclusion about the impracticality of wearing the veil:

To me it means a waste of natural resources, claustrophobia, discrimination against those with disabilities (too cumbersome), impractical for daily life. Having to buy two sets of outfits to wear every day is just NOT practical. With the advent of technology and the ability of anyone to see anything they want any time of day, the idea that something as cumbersome as the veil outfit is just too outdated and useless, from a practical view.

MENA also expressed a view that the veil was cumbersome in her journal entries. She wrote:

I had the outfit on for about an hour and half while doing laundry. I started feeling hot, because it was about 75 degrees. This was the first time I wore the full veil in public and I did not feel uncomfortable.
In a final example of this theme, in the post-interview MENA shared, “One of the days I was veiled, it was hot outside and it was challenging being fully covered. While at Walmart, there were times when getting groceries seemed difficult.”

Invisibility

The next theme was *invisibility*. This theme was mentioned 16 times in three interviews/diaries and refers to participants’ feelings of being ignored or invisible while wearing the veil.

EEMA indicated that while wearing the veil, “I felt like a lot of people didn’t even look at me.” GEWA wrote about feeling invisible in the grocery store, “No one said anything negative; in fact, no one said anything at all. I felt rather invisible.” She then described feeling invisible in another store:

I had to go to Home Depot and figured I might as well see how in a store that has more men than women would react. I was surprised. Once again, I was completely ignored. No one talked to me, looked at me that I noticed. No one even acknowledged me as I checked out? I didn’t get a thank you for coming, nothing. It was like I was invisible.

When asked about her experience when interviewed, GEWA explained:

I was not surprised at being more or less ignored by others, but I was surprised at how uncomfortable and impractical it was to actually have to mess with it… It seemed to make them go overboard to act normal and by doing so they made me feel invisible.

MENA also felt invisible as described in the following diary entries:
It was about 4:00 pm and I was on my way out to get change from a nearby carwash. I decided to put on the full veil attire with the face veil. I did not think much about it; I just wore it over my clothes, and I was careful to wear it properly. I carried my laundry downstairs to my car. On my way I noticed two guys stepping out of a car next to my car; I wondered if they would notice me. I walked confidently to my car. They saw me, but did not stare; it was as though they did not notice me. I got into my car and drove to the car wash to get some change. I parked my car away from the car wash, so I could walk for a few minutes. I bypassed a few people on my way but no one seemed to pay attention to me. When I first walked out of my apartment, I felt like I would stand out, and most people would stare at me. However, some people did not seem to notice me. Some people looked at me; others did not seem to notice me – maybe they did, but they did not stare.

In a final example of this theme, MENA explained her general experience wearing the veil which included not being noticed, “I had different reactions. Some people stared at me, others passed by me, without looking. I am sure there were other reactions that I did not notice.”

Receiving Stares

The next theme for Research Topic 3 was receiving stares. It was mentioned nine times in three interviews/diaries and refers to participants feeling they stood out or received looks and stares while veiled.

In her diary, GEWA wrote:

I was in there for about an hour and some looked and then quickly turned away
like they were embarrassed they had looked. She then described other experiences with ‘looks, I also stopped through Chick-fil-A. The lady at the window did take a double take but was polite. She was a Latino that spoke very broken English. While at Target I did have a few women look but attempt to cover the fact that they were looking.

MENA described her experience with looks and stares. She wrote:

I got to the change machine, to get quarters. I noticed a man washing his car. He paused and looked at me; when I looked at him, he looked away and kept washing his car. I walked back to my car.

She also wrote:

When I first walked out of my apartment, I felt like I would stand out, and most people will stare at me. However, some people did not seem to notice me. Others looked at me and went by their activities.

In a final example of this theme from MENA’s diary, she wrote:

Afterwards, I went to check-out at the registrar. I stood in line; a young African American man was in front of me. He kept looking at me, as though he wanted to ask a question; but he did not.

Friendliness

The next theme was friendliness. This theme was defined by participants’ feelings from some of their encounters while veiled and if some of the people were
friendly and accepting. It was mentioned six times in MENA’s interviews and diary.

MENA wrote:

I wanted to talk to someone. On my way out of the baking lot I rolled down my window and asked a lady who was walking to her car if she knew where the closest post office was. She was nice and responded to me, giving me directions on how to get there. She spoke to me normally and I thanked her. I drove back home.

She later wrote:

One of the employees passed by me and asked, “How are you doing today?” I responded. “I am doing well, thanks.” Yeah! I felt good that I was acknowledged in a good way, after being called scary.

MENA described an encounter with a friendly gentleman she met in a store:

Me: Excuse me sir, do you mind if I ask what your thoughts are about my attire?  
Tyrone: Well, I think you are representing your culture and religion. People represent their faith in different ways. As a Christian, I represent mine by talking about it; I don’t need to wear something specific to show my faith. So, I think it is good that you express your culture and faith in this way, and you have every right to.

In a final example of a quote exemplifying this theme, MENA stated:

I had different reactions, as elaborated in my narratives.....An employee at Walmart, passed by and greeted me. Some people did not seem to care. None of the other women mentioned friendly encounters.
Subtle Discrimination and Discomfort

The next theme for Research Topic 3 was *subtle discrimination and discomfort*. Subtle discrimination and discomfort was mentioned six times in three interviews/diaries and refers to participants’ perception that they experienced subtle discrimination and other’s discomfort while veiled.

EEMA verbally explained others’ discomfort with the veil,

> I think it makes people uncomfortable because they can’t see your facial features. Several people said that—to people who are unfamiliar with the veil, it seems like the person who is covered has something to hide.

She also recalled a conversation with a woman about the veil and the discomfort associated with it:

> I remember one specific conversation I had with an older woman about the veil. She said she considers herself a progressive person, but for some reason, women wearing veil’s still makes her uncomfortable. She expressed that not being able to see someone’s face makes it hard for her to feel like she can trust her.

MENA explained an experience with subtle discrimination in her diary:

> I realized that my experience at the registrar was odd. The lady at the registrar did not look at me directly and she seemed uncomfortable. I also noticed that the manager stayed around until I left. At one point he walked behind me as if checking on items. The more I think about it, I am not sure why the manager was
there. There were not transactions that need to be rectified. It occurred to me that maybe she called the manager to her registrar, because of me. Maybe she was uncomfortable, and felt more comfortable with the manager around. My interpretation could be wrong, but it was odd that the manager came by, did not resolve anything, walked around behind me, and waited until I was gone. If this was the case, then it is such a shame. I wonder how many other subtle cautions occurred that I did not notice.

When asked in the interview, “Does anybody change her/his interaction when recognizing you? How?” MENA said:

I am not sure. The only person that I can think of was the cashier at Walmart, who did not greet me, and seemed very uncomfortable.” Later in her interview, she shared, “I also gained a sense of how people could feel uncomfortable because they are not accustomed to a veiled woman, or maybe they have assumptions that make them uncomfortable.

Self-Consciousness

The final theme for Research Topic 3 was self-consciousness. This theme refers to participants feeling self-conscious while veiled. It was mentioned three times in three interviews/diaries.

EEMA felt self-conscious in the veil as she explained in her interview, “When I did wear it, I became more aware of other people, because I was trying to gage their reactions to me.” GEWA wrote about feeling self-conscious:
I went in the store, got the basket, I felt self-conscious as I walked around and the material seemed to touch stuff in the vegetable aisle and as I reached for things. Maybe I was just not used to it.

MENA also felt self-conscious as indicated in the previously-shared excerpt from her diary:

I turned around, and asked “I am, why I am I scary?” She responded, as she moved along, “All black, scary, ehuuh.” She looked disgusted by me. I was hurt. For the first time I left uncomfortable in the veil. What she said made me very aware of my attire and I felt like everyone in the store was looking at me. I was more aware of my attire, but I kept shopping.

Themes for Research Topic 4

Research Topic 4 addressed participants’ verbal and physical encounters with others while veiled. As reflected in Table 7, the primary themes were jokes or insults and comments expressing discomfort.
Table 7: Themes and Definitions for Research Topic 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jokes or insults</td>
<td>Participants experienced verbal jokes or insults from others while veiled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments expressing discomfort</td>
<td>Others commented about feeling uncomfortable with the veiling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 shows the frequency with which the themes appeared across interviews/diaries and across the data.

Table 8: Frequency of Themes for Research Topic 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of interviews/diaries in which the theme appeared</th>
<th>Total exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jokes or insults</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments expressing discomfort</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jokes or Insults

The first theme for Research Topic 4 was *jokes or insults*. This theme was mentioned five times in four interviews/diaries and was defined as participants experiencing verbal jokes or insults from others while veiled. EEMA wrote in her diary:

> The doors swing open as I approach and my cousin walks out—looking at me with a dumbfounded expression. I said hello and he took one of the twins from my arms. As we walked inside he confessed that he did not know it was me, and he thought, “Who is this ninja lady with my nephews?” I laughed, to some extent shocked that a ninja was the first thing that came to his mind.
In her interview EEMA shared the following:

I wore the veil to church one Sunday. My cousin, who is a 21 year old male, attends our church and helps look after our kids during the service. That day, as I was walking into the church with the kids, he didn't even recognize me. Later he said, “I thought—who is the ninja lady who has by cousins!”

MENA wrote about an encounter:

About 10 minutes into my shopping, I was in a shopping aisle, when I had a negative encounter. An older lady (Caucasian, estimate age: 70-85) passed by in a shopping cart—the carts for the elderly to sit, ride and shop. She passed by me, paused and said “Ehuuh… you are scary.” I turned around, and asked, “I am, why I am I scary?” She responded, as she moved along, “All black, scary, ehuuh.” She looked disgusted by me. I was hurt. For the first time I left uncomfortable in the veil. What she said made me very aware of my attire and I felt like everyone in the store was looking at me.

In her interview, she also explained:

One of the days I was veiled, it was hot outside and it was challenging being fully covered. While at Walmart, there were times when getting groceries seemed difficult. This was because of how I felt at after being called scary by a lady who passed by.
Comments Expressing Discomfort

The next theme relates to comments expressing discomfort. This theme was mentioned two times in two interviews/diaries and was defined as others commenting about feeling uncomfortable with the veiling.

In her diary, EEMA recalled a conversation with a woman who expressed discomfort with someone wearing a veil:

We began setting up the room for the service and I began to have a conversation with an older woman who is a regular member of our church. She is a retired university professor who spent most of her career at the University of Toronto. She said, “You know, I like to think of myself as progressive, but I’ve never felt comfortable with someone who has their face covered.” It was an interesting comment, and I felt like I knew what she was talking about.

GEWA wrote the following about someone seeming uncomfortable, “I was in there for about an hour and some looked and then quickly turned away like they were embarrassed they had looked.”

Summary

In general, I used the coding to arrange themes that emerged from participant’s interviews and narratives so that I could better envision their main concerns or levels of understanding. Therefore, I found out that the veil incites their concerns toward lack of gender equality and oppression of women. Moreover, they declared some lack of understanding about the veil and lack of exposure to veiled women, which increased some sense of suspiciousness around them. Finally, participants acknowledged some admiration and awareness toward veiled women’s experience in USA.
Analysis: Answering the Sub-questions

Question 1: As a Western Woman, What Does It Mean to be Veiled in a Western Culture?

This question can be answered by examining the participants’ experiences and viewpoints that were revealed in their narratives; the participants’ responses help me understand the conditions of being veiled from the participants’ perspectives (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008). Their narratives include some rich information, allowing me to draw meaning out of their experiences, which “causes learning and growth” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p.14). The participant interviews provided keen perceptions of veiled women, whereas the participants’ experiences of being veiled provided me with examples of how people perceived and treated veiled women. The answer to this question is not directly stated in one particular interview question, but it is addressed in a more holistic examination of the interviewees’ responses. Therefore, answered this question by combining the participants’ perspectives of what it means to be veiled in a Western culture. It is important to note that the participants provided two perspectives on the matter: the perceptions of others toward veiled women and the perceptions of themselves as Western women who do not normally wear a veil.

Ultimately, wearing the veil publicly in Denton, TX, cannot go unnoticed because it is rare to see it there. Furthermore, the veil became a “key visual symbol of Islam” (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012, p. 269), and the media have linked the veil mostly with problems (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2002; Ould, 2007; Parker, 2008; Shaheen, 1997; Shaheen, 2009). Consequently, wearing the veil in a Western culture brings a lot of attention, so the participants were most likely to be stared at, and their normal
interactions with people might have been affected. Such interaction provided some insight into the meaning of being veiled in Western culture as Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) suggested, in that narrative inquiry represents the “most compelling and appropriate way to study human interaction” (p. 6). Thus, such interaction with the public allowed me to make meaning of the participants’ experiences and perceptions.

Perceived as Not Belonging

Before wearing the veil, the participants answered the following question: What does the veil mean to you? All of them indicated that they viewed veiled women as the others. They also indicated that to be veiled in Denton, Texas, means you are not from this country. For example, MENA expressed that the veil “does not mean much” to her because the veil is not a part of her identity. According to Zahedi (2011), most people might “not view Muslim Americans as belonging to America” (p. 188). Likewise, GEWA agreed with the idea of “the other,” stating that the veil “is a way to see from another perspective . . . we need to embrace the experiences of ‘the other’” (personal communication, 2014). EEMA expressed a similar opinion: “I hope that [I] can learn to stop viewing veiled women as the other or strange . . . perhaps in the U.S. a veiled woman might feel like an outsider.” It is clear that the participants are sharing the same feeling of not belonging while wearing the veil.

Similar to my participants, some American Muslim women have confirmed a feeling of not belonging just because of wearing the veil. For example, Safiyyah Abdullah, a 55-year-old woman, who is Chicago-born and living in the Washington D.C. area, has been wearing the full veil since converting to Islam in 1975. She emphasized
that people’s assumptions about her veil are what bother her the most. She said that they came up to her to and tell her that she is in American and her husband does not have the right to make her wear the veil (Hendrix, 2011). I have also heard similar expressions when I was with my wife in downtown Dallas-Fort Worth. Furthermore, Safiyyah Abdullah confirmed that she has been called a terrorist, and she has been asked to “go back to her own country” (Hendrix, 2011; ¶ 8). It is obvious that some people perceived her as not belonging in the U.S.—otherwise they wouldn’t have asked her to go back to her own country.

In addition to Safiyyah Abdullah, MerryMuslim (2014) also confirmed her perception of not belonging because of the veil or hijab. MerryMuslim is an American woman living in Denton, Texas, who converted to Islam about a year ago. She wrote about her journey in a personal weblog, on which she refers to herself as MerryMuslim. She stated that “I did have one man who almost pulled in front of my car who yelled at me and told me to "go back to Baghdad" and I am sure the only reason was my hijab” (¶ 11). MerryMuslim attests that she is also seen as not belonging to America.

Accordingly, it is obvious that at least some Westerners perceive veiled women as not belonging to the Western culture. Even if these women were Americans, some Americans would perceive them as outsiders just because they were wearing the veil. Ultimately, these accounts show that the veil remains a powerful piece of cloth that can have a negative effect on a woman who wears it and can contribute to loss of identity or her sense of belonging.

Perceived as Muslims

Most often, people perceive women who are veiled in Western culture as
Muslims. And that can be understood because Muslims are the majority of women who practice veiling. Accordingly, there is no doubt that the veil has been a significant “key visual symbol of Islam” (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012, p. 269). Also, the Western media have played a significant role in linking the veil with Muslim women in negative ways (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2002; Ould, 2007; Parker, 2008; Shaheen, 1997; Shaheen, 2009). Consequently, it is difficult for women who wear the veil in public to go unnoticed, which sometimes creates challenges and problems for them. The participants, without a doubt, indicated that they associate the veil with the religion of Islam. For example, EEMA mentioned that she does not know much about veils except that “Muslim women wear them as part of their religious practice.” When EEMA veiled herself at her church, she found that her friends perceived her to be a Muslim: “They assumed that the veiled woman was a friend of the family—a Muslim woman.” Also, MENA indicated that there is a link between Muslims and Arabs by stating, “I don’t really know much about veils besides that they are traditional attires common in Arab and Muslim cultures.” However, being veiled or wearing black clothing are not solely Muslim traditions. In fact, historically, according to Stillman (1979), in the 19th century, Jewish women in Egypt veiled themselves. Also, today, some groups of Jewish women in Israel still veil themselves with a frumka, which is an item of clothing similar to a burka, and they practice this in daily life (Blomfield, 2010; Solomons, 2008).

In addition to the frumka in the Jewish community, MENA and GEWA indicated that Muslim women’s and Catholic nuns’ and some Catholic women’s clothing is similar. GEWA, for example, stated, “I do still see it a lot; like I see Mexican Catholic women wearing a scarf over their head in church.” MENA also mentioned that similarity when
she was asked to draw a Muslim woman: “Similarly in drawing a Catholic woman, I may draw her with a rosary—to indicate her religion” (personal communication, 2014). The link between the veil and a Muslim might seem obvious to some people. Wearing a veil indicates that a woman is Muslim, some people then also conflate being a Muslim with being something worse, such as a terrorist, an oppressed woman etc.

After asking the participants what their opinions would be if their daughters decided to be veiled, GEWA and MENA clearly linked it with changing their faith to Islam, even though the question had not specified any faith. For example, in reference to her daughter, GEWA stated, “If she decided to change religions and chose to wear the veil.” Similarly, MENA thought the same and linked it to the faith: “It will be really odd for my daughter to wear a veil, unless she changes her faith to Muslim.” Therefore, it is clear that the immediate link to the veil is the religion of Islam. In the minds of some people, being a Muslim is associated with other myths; for example, GEWA intimated, “I read they could be stoned for even being seen glancing at a man other than their husband.” Moreover, she linked the wearing of a veil with other issues: “It is not a choice if they want to drive a car the media says” (personal communication, 2014). From GEWA’s statements, it is obvious that she views veiled women as Muslim and oppressed. To explain, although GEWA was asked a question about the veil and not about religion or women’s rights, she brought in the assumption that in Muslim countries women are not allowed to drive; however, there are more than 50 Muslim countries that do not forbid women from driving and effectively only one that does forbid it. This is one example of how the veil is tied with being Muslim and being Muslim is tied with oppressing women.
Similarly, when I speak with most of my American friends about the veil, they think that the veil is reserved just for Muslim women when the fact is that “the veil is an Islamic precept as much as it is a Christian or a Jewish one” (Davary, 2009, p. 49). Furthermore, there are still some Jewish women who wear the veil (Davary, 2009). For some people, veiled women are further viewed, because of the impact of media coverage, as people with conservative attitudes toward Islamic culture. Coger (2011) argued, “the media portrays a connection between veiled women and terrorism and Islamist extremism” (p. 36). Consequently, the sight of a veil in the American public evokes feelings of hatred or distrust of the Islamic community (Khalid, 2011). In the end, to be veiled in a Western culture can mean many things, one of which indicates that the person wearing the veil is a Muslim, which in post 9/11 is associated with a host of negative perceptions. There is evidence for this in the literature (name some here) and in my own study. In addition, people seem to associate Islam only with the Middle East. For example, even when a veiled woman is born in the U.S., she will likely to be perceived as belonging to the Middle East, as in the example of MerryMuslim above.

Perceived as Oppressed

Some Americans believe that Muslim women are being forced to wear veils because of how they are depicted in the media. Accordingly, some Western people look at veiled women as oppressed, which has been documented as the most common representation of Muslim women in the Western media (Bullock, 2002; Moore, 2007; Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2002). Also, according to Elveren (2008), Muslim women are viewed by people in the U.S. as “victims, oppressed and submissive” (p. 114) when
portrayed in the media. Likewise, my study participants shared that the most common idea they held about veiled women in Western culture is that they are being oppressed. Participant EEMA, for example, stated, “I think a lot of women in the U.S. see the veil as oppressive.”

Moreover, MENA shared the same belief that veiled women are mostly perceived as oppressed by stating, “I think that many people may see the veiled woman as not only a victim of oppression but also as a representation of a threat—a Muslim threat.” Likewise, GEWA declared about the veil that “it [is] not being a choice for the woman, just as it is not a choice if they want to drive a car, the media says.” The participants expressed their understanding of how American society views veiled women in general, and all of them agreed that veiled women are perceived as oppressed.

In general, the veil is widely seen as an oppressive icon of Muslim women (Hasan, 2007; Güven, 2013; Bartkowski & Read, 2003; Franklin, 2013). Therefore, veiled women in Western culture can certainly be perceived as victims of oppression. As a result of the oppression assumption, it is not odd to hear some people telling veiled women to take the veil off since they are in America. For example, according to Hendrix (2011), Safiyyah Abdullah, a 55 year-old American Muslim woman, emphasized that people’s assumptions about her veil are what bother her the most, when they come up to and say things like “This is America, your husband can’t make you wear that” (¶ 26). Interestingly, I heard a similar statement while walking with my wife and kids in downtown Dallas-Fort Worth. A man walking on the other side of the street began shouting at my wife that she did not have to wear a veil: “You do not have to wear that, you are in America.” Interestingly, he already believed that a veiled woman was forced
to wear it and that that force should be ended because we are in America.

Perceived as Suspicious

Todd (1998) suggested that when exposed to Western film and media, viewers are more likely to perceive veiled persons as terrorists or women imprisoned by their culture; he asserts that film and media belong “to a wide-ranging Western legacy of portraying hijab-wearing women . . . as fundamentalists and/or terrorists” (p. 448). Consequently, veiled women are most often perceived as suspicious in public, especially while shopping. Suspicion refers here to the perception that the veil denotes dishonesty or that the veiled woman is hiding something. That suspiciousness might be reasonable for some people, but I argue that the same suspicion most likely would not occur if the woman was wearing a medical face mask, an Indian sari, or a nun’s habit. However, the Muslim veil might be the only traditional piece of cloth that can make you seem suspicious. For example, according to Hendrix (2011), Safiyyah Abdullah, a 55-year-old woman who was born in Chicago and currently resides in the Washington D.C. area was told to get off a bus because of a suspicious behavior complaint. She believes that the veil makes her look more suspicious in the eyes of the American public. She also asserted that at the airport, “I’m always the first one to be randomly selected” (¶ 20).

The participants in my study did not mention that they felt others found them to be acting suspiciously. EEMA, however, did state that the veil caught people’s attention “because the woman appears to be hiding.” Later in the interview, she further explained, “I imagine that a lot of people stare at them and perhaps act suspicious of them.” She also explained why others might be suspicious of a person wearing a veil: “I think it
makes people uncomfortable because they can’t see your facial features. Several people said that.” According to EEMA’s statements, one common thought among people in Denton, Texas, is that women in veils are suspicious.

Another example of veiled women being seen as suspicious is in GEWA’s description of the veil: “It seems to be a shrouded place, a secret place as though a place of hiding a prize position.” Then, she later explained the suspiciousness of a veiled person by saying, “Also, when you factor in the fear people have of terrorists, it is understandable why someone walking around fully covered could be subject to be secretly watched.” Accordingly, GEWA thinks it is reasonable to perceive veiled women with suspicion because of people’s fear of a terrorist attack. I found no documentation of a terrorist attack in the U.S. by a veiled woman, so it is not clear how the veil has come to be linked with a terrorist attack. One might assume it is because the veil can hide people’s face and identity, but I could not find information to confirm that terrorists have used the veil to conceal their identities. I believe that terrorists do not want to attract attention, so they wear plain clothing. If the problem with the veil is its ability to conceal weapons or bombs, there are many other pieces of clothing that have the same ability, such as a trench coat with a hood, a long jacket, or even a backpack. Therefore, I believe the problem of linking the veil with suspicious activity is not because of its ability to hide weapons or one’s identity—otherwise many other pieces of clothing would have the same issue.

The final example involves MENA’s feelings of being perceived as suspicious: “The lady at the register did not look at me directly and she seemed uncomfortable. I also noticed that the manager stayed around until I left . . . it was odd that the manager
came by, did not resolve anything, walked around behind me, and waited until I was gone.” Also, an excerpt from MENA’s interview demonstrates her thoughts about the veil being suspicious and threatening to some because of the media associating Muslims with terrorism:

The U.S. media has participated in the stereotyping of Muslims. I believe repetitions of negative overtones to particular groups [will] influences assumptions and perceptions of people belonging to the group. I think that many people may see the veiled woman as not only a victim of oppression but also as a representation of a threat—a Muslim threat.

In general, to be veiled in Denton, Texas, means a veiled woman might be perceived as a threat. Accordingly, veiled women might have difficulty dealing with people and making friendships because other people are suspicious of them. That suspiciousness might bias people’s perception of veiled women, which might result in issues of discrimination and humiliation. Especially since 9/11, such representations encourage members of the American public to see the veil as oppression and suffering in veiled women or stereotype them as potential terrorists who pose a threat to national security. Today, veiled persons continue to struggle with the negative images the media create (Nagra, 2011; Ramji, 2005; Zahedi, 2011). Additionally, for my study participants, being veiled can include being perceived as Muslim, not belonging, being oppressed, and even being a threat.
Question 2: What Kind of Verbal or Physical Interactions Result from the Experience of Wearing the Veil?

Throughout verbal or physical interactions, I am addressing what verbal or physical interactions the participants encountered while being veiled, as well as viewing their comments about the veil. As shown in the literature review, the veil is one of the most recognizable signs that puts veiled women at risk of acts of discrimination, including verbal assault, being spit on, having the veil pulled off by someone, etc. (Daraiseh, 2012). More specifically in America, Muslim students endure different types of discrimination at schools; as documented by Tindongan (2011), who stated, “girls wearing hijab [have been] particular targets” (p. 83). Women seem to have a higher chance of receiving these types of negative interactions because of wearing the veil. Additionally, Coger (2011) pointed out that, “September 11 had a particularly significant negative impact on hijabs in the United States” (p. 23). Both the positive and the negative interactions of others with my participants are reflected below.

Positive Interactions from Others

I consider positive interactions with others any interaction that is normal or polite. For example, a normal interaction might include shopping at a store and the clerk asks several times if he or she has been helped or needs any help. The participants pointed out some interactions that were essentially just normal as described above, but I rated them as positive because the participants got the same treatment as any other person. MENA, for instance, was shopping at Wal-Mart while wearing the veil. She had a positive interaction, which she happily reported: “One of the employees passed by me and
asked, “How are you doing today?” I responded. “I am doing well, thanks.” Yeah! I felt good that I was acknowledged in a good way.” Also, at another store, MENA stated that: “One of the employees passed by me, said hello, and asked, “Are you finding everything ok?” Even though these encounters seem normal, it appears that she did not regularly experience them in her short time wearing the veil. In fact, MENA considered it nice to have a normal interaction with the lady whom she asked for directions. Mena stated,: “She was nice and responded to me, giving me directions on how to get there. She spoke to me normally and I thanked her.” Furthermore, MENA had the courage to dig deeper to see what people thought about her appearance with the veil, so she started asking them what they thought about her attire. She randomly asked Tyrone, an African American male who said: “I think it is good that you express your culture and faith in this way, and you have every right to.” Tyrone’s answer was coded as a positive verbal interaction. Again, some people would think this answer is normal, but actually MENA asked two other people who answered, “It’s different…Well, maybe some people may see you as scary,” and “Well, nothing really… I think everyone should have the right to dress however they want.” These two responses were coded as negative.

Moreover, at a restaurant, GEWA encountered positive interactions: “When I ordered, the people behind the counter were Hispanic and African American. They were polite when they took my order and looked me in the eyes even when I paid.” She did not say what they said; it could be just normal treatment that she did not expect. I coded this as a positive interaction based on her sense of treatment equivalent to others.

In general, the participants did not point out receiving any nice comments about their veil by others. The only positive interactions they pointed out were that employees
interacted normally with them, and once, MENA got complimented when she asked another person’s opinion. Participants did not receive any privileged interaction because of wearing the veil; instead they considered normal treatment as positive interactions.

Negative Interactions

For the purpose of this study, I defined negative interactions people saying words using body language in a disapproving way. It is important to note that anybody can have a negative interaction for a variety of reasons, but the focus here is negative reaction because for the participant was veiled. Being veiled in the United States can increase the chance of receiving negative interaction, especially after September 11, which impacted women with a head cover like the hijab (Coger, 2011). That impact is also shown in the statistical scale, as Patel (2011) reported to The Huffington Post Canada that 30% of Muslim women have experienced discrimination. Moreover, Daraiseh (2012) emphasized that “Muslim women were specifically discriminated against all over the country” (Daraiseh, 2012, p. 10). Muslim women are most likely to be known by their head cloths (a hijab or veil), which can easily evoke feelings of fear or distrust toward them (Aziz, 2012). Moreover, Gehrke-White (2006), an American journalist, who interviewed more than fifty Muslim American women in the U.S.. She highlighted and linked receiving negative interactions with being a head-covered Muslim woman. Gehrke-White (2006) noted that “most Muslims wearing the hijab say they have been harassed in some way, usually with foul language, threats, or an exhortation to “go home” (p 9). These studies affirm that the veil can easily put women at a higher risk of receiving negative interactions in the United States.
My study participants experienced several negative verbal interactions. I consider negative verbal or physical interactions as any word, sign, or gesture that indicates feelings of dislike toward the participant. Also, while considering normal treatment in the store as a positive interaction in the previous paragraphs, I coded the instance as negative when the participant was not being treated in a normal way. Some of these negative verbal interactions were jokes or insults, and some others were just physical gesture reactions indicating negative feelings toward the participants. For example, EEMA had a verbal interaction with her cousin while she was wearing the veil. She wrote in her diary:

The doors swing open as I approach and my cousin walks out—looking at me with a dumbfounded expression. I said hello and he took one of the twins from my arms. As we walked inside he confessed that he did not know it was me, and he thought, “who is this ninja lady with my nephews?!?” I laughed, to some extent shocked that a ninja was the first thing that came to his mind.

EEMA did not take her cousin’s comment as an insult; rather, she took it as a joke and that she viewed as reasonable because the veil does not belong to her or represent her personality in any way. However, I coded this experience as negative because criticizing people’s appearance is not normally a nice behavior. Another example happened to GEWA as she planned to meet two of her friends at a restaurant that they typically go. GEWA arrived at the restaurant first while veiled and waited for her friends. One of them entered, but did not recognize GEWA until GEWA called her friend’s name. GEWA detailed:

She looked at me, leaned forward, squinted and looked and smiled as she shook
her head side to side and said, GEWA? What on earth are you wearing and why?” [The other friend] came in about that time and she reacted about the same way... Neither of them was condemning or negative. In fact they just giggled a little at me trying to eat with the veil on (personal communication, 2014)

As EEMA perceived her cousin’s joke, GEWA also did the same by not taking any of her friends’ comments as offensive. I coded these instances as negative, however, because their reactions to EEMA and GEWA were not typical reactions to her from these people she knows. Further, according to Tindongan (2011), Muslim students in American schools have suffered from different types of discrimination. Tindongan (2011) stated, “girls wearing hijab [have been] particular targets” (p. 83). For example, Nazma Khan, the founder of World Hijab Day, faced some negative encounters while in middle school. There, she was called Batman or ninja, and she was even called Osama Bin Laden or terrorist when she moved on to college after 9/11 (Nye, 2013). Among my participants, a negative interaction happened with GEWA while shopping at Wal-Mart. As she entered the doors, there was a couple that got her attention as she stated: “I heard the woman say to the man, “what tha? What’s the reason for her to wear that garb?” The man just shook his head and made sure I could see that he did.” The couple did not ask her why she was veiled; they made displeasing gestures when seeing her. Also, when GEWA went to Home Depot and tried to interact with people there, she was surprised by how invisible she felt that she became. She stated: “No one talked to me, looked at me that I noticed. No one even acknowledged me as I checked out? I didn’t get a thank you for coming, nothing. It was like I was invisible.” Obviously GEWA felt ignored at least, and she even stated that she felt invisible. This kind of ignoring has
frequently happened with my wife and I. I considered these instances of being ignored as a negative interaction because is not the norm to be treated by employees neither at any store nor by friends or classmates.

Another example comes from MENA who went shopping at Wal-Mart and everything was fine until she faced a difficult negative encounter while shopping. In her daily journal, MENA detailed the encounter as she stated:

An older lady (Caucasian, estimate age: 70-85) passed by in a shopping cart—the carts for the elderly to sit, ride and shop. She passed by me, paused and said “Ehuuh… you are scary.” I turned around, and asked “I am, why I am I scary?” She responded, as she moved along, “All black, scary, ehuuh.” She looked disgusted by me. I was hurt. For the first time I felt uncomfortable in the veil.

In this instance, MENA received a direct negative encounter that hurt her and made her feel uncomfortable as a result of wearing the veil. MENA tried to engage in a dialogue to find out the reason that made her scary in the eyes of that old lady, but the old lady just mentioned the black color without stopping to speak. Although MENA had the courage to start a dialogue, the old lady made sure to deliver a message of displeasure to MENA. One interesting thing that happened as a result of this negative encounter was the awakening of MENA’s awareness toward others and how others see her as veiled. Menastated: “What she said made me very aware of my attire and I felt like everyone in the store was looking at me.” That awareness led MENA to pay more attention to things that happen around her from that point forward. She stated:

Afterwards, I went to check-out at the register. I stood in line; a young African American man was in front of me. He kept looking at me, as though he wanted to
ask a question; but he did not. I noticed the cashier greeted him when it was his
turn to check-out. When it was my turn, she did not say hello. I did not get a
greeting! She did not look at me directly – it was like she was avoiding eye
contact with me by all means.

MENA reported that the earlier encounter made her become more alert in her
situation of being veiled. As MENA became more aware of how the cashier was treating
her, she noticed that the manager also came over around that time. She wrote: “It was
odd that the man[a]ger came by, did not resolve anything, walked around behind me,
and waited until I was gone.” Complicating this matter is that MENA’s race is African
American, and that might be a factor in her receiving unequal treatment from the
cashier; however, the person in front of MENA in the line also was an African American
and he was given a friendly greeting. Also, the manager came around only when she
stepped to the register. I coded this example as negative because of the way it made
Mena feel and because Mena did not think the encounter with the woman, the cashier,
nor the manager would have happened if she had not been in the veil.

Additionally, EEMA, explained others’ discomfort with the veil. She stated, “I think
it makes people uncomfortable because they can’t see your facial features. Several
people said that...” She also recalled a conversation with a woman about the veil and
the discomfort associated with it:

I remember one specific conversation I had with an older woman about the veil.
She said she considers herself a progressive person, but for some reason,
women wearing veils still makes her uncomfortable. She expressed that not
being able to see someone’s face makes it hard for her to feel like she can trust her.

Moreover, MENA explained an experience that happened with her at the register in her diary: “I realized that my experience at the register was odd. The lady at the register did not look at me directly and she seemed uncomfortable. I also noticed that the manager stayed around until I left.” It is clear that MENA felt the discomfort of people seeing her, but this uneasiness is just the beginning of a negative interaction. Hence, feeling uncomfortable toward veiled women seems a common feeling and it perhaps increases the possibility of creating even more negative interactions toward them.

Overall, the interactions that resulted from the participants’ experiences of wearing the veil can be divided into two types of interactions; one is positive, the other is negative. Even though there was a direct negative verbal interaction toward one of the participants, there was no direct physical interaction toward the participants. However, they encountered several indirect verbal and physical gesture interactions as a result of being veiled. The examples of the indirect negative verbal interactions are the jokes or comments by GEWA and EEMA’s friends, and the instances of being ignored or not greeted. The examples of indirect physical interaction toward the participants are the gestures or body language of others toward them, like moving the head side to side as GEWA pointed out previously, avoiding eye contact, or the presence of a manager, as MENA discussed previously.

In general, the participants’ outcomes here affirm what has been said by other studies, which have indicated that since 9/11 most covered Muslim women have been harassed or were at a higher chance of being discriminated against (Coger, 2011; Daraiseh,
Furthermore, Michaela, a fashion designer who converted to Islam, mentioned a negative impact of the veil on one of her Muslim friends at school. That incident happened before Michaela converted to Islam. Gehrke-White (2006), cited Michaela’s recalling of her friend’s situation, stating that Michaela “would often defend her when immature kids would make rude comments about her hijab and other Islamic customs” (p. 30). Even though my study participants did not receive a direct physical attack, some studies showed that attacks can sometimes happen. For example, according to Daraiseh (2012), “Muslim women in Chicago reported having their headscarves pulled off their heads and being spat at on the street” (p. 10). In these instances, wearing the veil increased the participants’ chances of encountering negative interactions, and wearing the veil did not bring any privileged treatment for the participants.

Question 3: What Understanding Do Western Women Have About the Veil or Veiled Women Before and After the Experience?

Literature reviews about the veil or veiled women reveal that the veil is misunderstood in the Western context. First of all, research has revealed that the veil, hijab, or any type of covering represents an identity of Islam or being Muslim in the wearer; indeed, in the western context, the veil has become a widely known icon that represents Muslim or Arabs sometimes (Ajrouch, 2007; Chakraborti & Zempi 2012; Coger, 2011; Haddad, 2007; Hasan, 2007). Since Muslim women from the Middle East have commonly worn the veil for a longtime, the veil also has been linked not only with being religiously Muslim, but also with being geographically from that part of the world. That part of the world is where the Western colonizers went to fight, colonize, and then
presented their own biased narrative about that colonized societies. Hoodfar (1993), also established that “Western representations of the harem were inspired not only by the fantasies of A Thousand and One Nights, but also by the colonizers' mission of subjugating the colonized” (p.8). Hence, Western colonizers became selective in creating their own narrative to subjugate the colonized linking the veil with being uneducated lower class group.

Furthermore, Chatterjee (1989) asserted that the colonizers’strategy of subjugating the colonized women worked in this way: “the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country” (p.622), which I argue has happened in a similar way with the veil in Muslim countries. Therefore, people in the U.S. look at people in Middle Eastern parts of the world and in Muslim countries as people who veil their women for the negative reasons already discussed earlier. Additionally adding to this research is the case of Sarwat Husain, highly educated Muslim woman with a professional career living in the U.S., who decided to wear the veil as a way to fight the common assumptions that the veiled woman is less skilled or even illiterate (or backward). According to Gehrke-White (2006), Husain said by wearing the veil, she might help change the stereotype of Muslim women being “backward, dominated, and uneducated” (p. 224). Additionally, Gehrke-White (2006), confirmed the same common assumption of being less educated based on her interviews of forty-nine American Muslim women. She noted that American Muslim women are “unlike others in the West, they don't see the covering as a symbol of female inferiority. Indeed, many
hijab-wearing American women are highly educated” (p. 13). So, it is clear that the veil identifies a woman as being Muslim and illiterate or less educated for quite some time.

In addition to being seen as less educated, the veiled woman also is seen as oppressed. The veiled vividly seen as a sign of oppression is a widely and common accepting belief by the westerns eyes (Ajrouch, 2007, Diffendal, 2006, Hirschmann, 1997; & Hoodfar, 1993). Additionally, Hirschmann (1997) declared that “historically, veiling has been seen by Westerners as the ultimate symbol, if not tool, of gender oppression in Islamic cultures” (P.461). Also, Ahmed (1992), clarified how the veil is perceived by Western eyes by affirming:

Veiling—to Western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies—became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam's degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies … that Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies (p. 152).

In sum, it is clear that the veil is equated with Muslim identity, and the veil or veiled women have been perceived as backward and oppressed since the age of orientalism. As stated earlier, I do not intend to generalize anything from this small study; however, the stories these women related about their experiences wearing the veil are a source that might help make sense of as the veil as an object of visual culture in the U.S. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) asserted that narratives “causes learning and
growth” (p.14). I contend that narratives also can easily influence understanding of the veil. Since all participants in my study are Western women, their perceptions, as gleaned through interviews and daily journaling, might reflect the general understanding of the veil and veiled women among Western women.

Women’s Understanding Before the Experience of Wearing a Veil

Findings on the perspectives of participants regarding the veil and veiled women are presented here in two main sections that correspond to information obtained before and after their experience of wearing the veil, respectively. In each section, the findings are presented according to common themes identified in the data.

The Veil Indicates Ethnicity or Religion

Before the participants experienced wearing a veil, they answered interview questions about their understanding of the veil and veiled women. Most participants ended up referring to Muslims, which is reasonable these days given that veiled women in the U.S. are mostly Muslim. Additionally, during the first interview question, I attempted to broaden the focus of the discussion by asking participants general questions about the veil itself without specifying any religion or ethnicity. Even so, the participants’ answers focused on Muslim or Arab women. For example, EEMA offered this understanding of the veil: “Some Muslim women wear them as part of their religious practice.” Similarly, MENA described the face veil as “traditional attire common in Arab and Muslim cultures.” GEWA did not use the word Muslim, but she implied the connection by linking the face veil to the practice in some Muslim countries of banning women from driving cars. Participants did not mention nuns’ habits or wedding veils, which indicates that their understanding of the veil was mostly related to its role in
Muslim religious practices and traditions.

Participants demonstrated that, from their perspective, the veil represents some ethnicity or religion other than their own. All participants viewed veiled women as. For example, MENA said that the veil is not part of her identity. GEWA shared a similar perspective on the veil as representing someone different from herself, saying that the veil "is a way to see from another perspective...we need to embrace the experiences of 'the other.'" EEMA shared a similar view about veiled women by saying, “I hope that [I] can learn to stop viewing veiled women as ‘the other’ or strange...perhaps in the U.S., a veiled woman might feel like an outsider.” These perspectives indicate that Western women commonly view veiled women as others.

In general, the participants believed that veiled women were most likely to be Muslim or to belong to other ethnicities (i.e., not Western), and they labeled veiled women as others. Participants confirmed what is also evident in the literature, which is that there is no doubt that the veil has been a significant “key visual symbol of Islam” (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012, p. 269). Furthermore, participants mentioned the others as referring to veiled women, which confirmed what Zahedi (2011) cited, which is that people might “not view Muslim Americans as belonging to America” (p. 188). Further, viewing veiled women as can change the nature of people’s interactions with veiled women, as was the case when GEWA described how interactions with her changed when the cashier she said: “She got brave, maybe because of my blue eyes and accent I am not sure, but she asked me about the veil.” In this case, GEWA thinks her blue eyes and Western accent made the cashier relax and view her as somewhat belonging to the same group, rather than being an outsider.
Lack of Knowledge and Exposure to Veiled Women

Sometimes believe what they hear without questioning. I contend that Americans have heard misleading things about the veil and veiled women. Additionally, according to Cole and Ahmadi (2003), Americans’ misconceptions about the veil and Islam “usually stem from a lack of cultural and religious exposure” (p. 58). Our participants in this study confirmed these misconceptions and acknowledged their lack of understanding about the veil or the act of wearing a veil in public. For example, EEMA said, “I don’t know much about the face veil, except that some Muslim women wear them as part of their religious practice.” She explained that this lack of knowledge might explain why Western people don’t understand why some women wear the veil. Additionally, GEWA noted, “I am unfamiliar with the traditions,” which indicates that she views wearing the veil as a tradition. She recalled seeing women wearing the veil in her neighborhood, and she “always wondered why they did,” demonstrating her lack of understanding. MENA, who lived in Africa as a young child and saw some veiled women there, also acknowledged a lack of understanding: “I don’t really know much about veils.” She said that lack of knowledge might lead people to have problems with veiled women, and that confirmed Droogsma’s (2007) claim that: “With regard to the American public as a whole, stereotypes remain entrenched due to a lack of exposure to and/or an avoidance of Muslim women who veil, as well as reliance on the media as the main source of information about Muslims” (p.315).

Participants understood that they lacked exposure to veiled women and that this might explain their lack of knowledge about the veil and veiled women. EEMA said she lacked exposure to veiled women, but then admitted to recently having seen a woman
wearing a veil on campus. GEWA mentioned the same lack of exposure to veiled women, but recalled having seen veiled women in her childhood neighborhood in Africa “a long time ago.” She acknowledged that “ignorance and not being exposed to different cultures” would make people afraid, since humans are usually afraid of the unknown. MENA expressed her lack of exposure to veiled women in the U.S., saying, “I have lived in this area for the past 3 years, and I have not seen or encountered any woman dressed fully veiled; at least, none that I remember.” MENA agreed with GEWA that lack of exposure to different people can create problems, and she considered exposure to others as vital for enhancing people’s understanding of one another. In sum, lack of exposure to veiled women can lead to a lack of knowledge about them. Accordingly, people fear what they don’t know and avoid it. The lack of knowledge about the veil and veiled women is evident in the American public and it has been recognized by many researchers as well as by the participants in this study.

Gender Inequality

One of the key perspectives regarding the veil relates to gender equality. Gender equality plays an important role in terms of criticizing the Muslim veil. According to Williams and Vashi (2007), gender equality is a main concern in human rights discourse in this era, and the gender equality discourse is looking to perceive all people as the same (p. 275). Therefore, the veil gets some criticism because wearing the veil is applied to women but not men and this creates gender separation. Consequently, the veil is perceived by Americans as a sign of gender inequality in Muslim communities. According to Ssenyonjo (2007), some people criticize the veil and see it as “an unambiguous symbol of discrimination and gender inequality imposed only on women
(but not men) regardless of their freely chosen personal beliefs” (p. 701). Moreover, Zempi & Chakraborti (2014), confirmed that perception toward the veil by stating: “in post-9/11 climate, popular perceptions of the veil suggest that it is a symbol of Islamist extremism and segregation as well as a sign of gender inequality” (p.6). Based on this literature and others mentioned earlier, I argue that one of the main criticisms of the veil is that it represents gender inequality to Westerners.

Interestingly, the participants in my study suggested that if women should be veiled, men should also be veiled, and they expressed their concerns regarding the unequal treatment of women and male dominance. For example, EEMA stated that the veil is perceived as oppressive to women and pertinent to issues of gender equality, “I think a lot of women in the U.S. see the veil as oppressive, and perhaps as an issue of equality.” She emphasized the issue of gender equality as a common perspective among Western women. GEWA also raised the issue of gender equality in a critique she wrote in a diary entry:

I hear it is for modesty issues to protect them from the eyes of others and keep themselves just for their husbands. Well? If that is the case, then why don’t men have to cover themselves? They are sexual beings too and have sex organs and body shapes that can be distinguished? Men can be lusted after? So why don’t they wear it?

GEWA’s critique reveals her belief that the veil reflects gender inequality for women. Even though her argument appears logical, it is based on a shallow interpretation of the veil and misconceptions about women wearing the veil to “keep themselves just for their husbands.” The Quran does not provide that as a reason for wearing the veil, and such
reasoning discounts veiled women who are unmarried. More misconceptions were revealed in GEWA’s diary as she continued to address the gender equality issue by questioning the black color of the veil: “Also, it is black??... Men there do not have to wear black head covers, right? It seems I have seen red and white checked covering for them. Does that make them less or more sensual?” GEWA believed that the veil had to be black, which is not true. Black is a popular color for veils in some countries, but veiled women use other colors, too. GEWA’s perspective reflects a general concern about equal rights and power for women: “Women across the globe have been seen in a subservient way since the dawn of time. Men were stronger physically so in the beginning they had the power…that power led them to want to keep it.” Here, GEWA expresses concerns about male dominance leading to gender inequality.

MENA also referred to male dominance during her interview as she expressed her concerns about the rights of women who wear the veil: “I think there are many issues and concerns about women’s rights, especially with a world history of male dominance. There may be issues of the veil[ed] woman being subjected to cover herself.” She later stated, “For others it could represent male dominance over the woman.” Together, these responses demonstrate clearly that all participants’ perspectives on the veil and veiled women included the issue of gender equality, which is one of the most controversial topics surrounding wearing the veil. Participants expressed their beliefs that the veil represents a clear violation of gender equality that may affect women’s rights and that results from male dominance.

The Veil is not a Choice
The issue of choice surrounding the wearing of the veil is complex. It was one of the arguments or justifications that French president Nicolas Sarkozy pointed out to justify the French ban saying, “the ruling is to protect women from being forced to cover their faces” (as cited in Shahid, 2010, ¶ 7). It is not clear whether Sarkozy and his advisors considered that for some women, being forced to not wear the veil was also taking away their authority over their own decisions.

According to Merriam Webster, choice, or the act of choosing, is defined as: “the act of picking or deciding between two or more possibilities.” Most humans possess the ability to choose, but problems may arise due to the consequences of those choices. Most people try to avoid the negative consequences of their choices. For example, Muslim women might take the veil off in a western country due to the possible negative consequences of veiling, as some other Muslim women might wear it to avoid family and societal criticism. So, from that perspective, the consequences of not wearing the veil in Muslim countries might be the same as the consequences of wearing the veil in non-Muslim countries. However, the Western perspective tends to see Muslim women as being forced by their parents, brothers, husbands, or by the government to wear the veil in both situations.

The idea of being forced to veil is a widely accepted concept in the west. In an academic survey, Bullock (2002) amassed many different reasons why women covered as she tried to resist the “Western stereotype that all Muslim women are forced to cover and that covering is oppressive” (p. xxxix). The notion of Muslim women being forced to veil is one of the many stereotypes that is even used in advertising strategies (Shirazi, 2001, p. 20). More clearly, Allievi (2006) confirmed that “for the West, the Muslim
woman is by definition downtrodden, and the symbol of her oppression is the hijab, the
veil, which she is forced to wear” (p.120). Likewise, Bullock (2002) emphasized, “many
in the west believe Muslim women cover because they are forced to by their culture”
(p.109). Thus, one can make sure that the veil in the western context is vividly observed
as a sign of force against women.

Similarly, this study’s participant interviews revealed a common belief that the
veil is not a choice for women, but a forced practice. At best, they believed it was a
choice for only a marginal group of women. For example, in the first interview, GEWA
said, “I do not see much personal choice or personality revealed.” She added, “I also
only know what Western media says about it not being a choice for the woman, just as it
is not a choice if they want to drive a car, the media says.” In her daily journal, GEWA
provided a rich discourse questioning the veil, “CHOICE is the key for the 21st century.”
Here, she clearly indicates her understanding that wearing the veil is not a choice. Her
decision to write the word choice in capital letters emphasizes this point of view. She
mentioned the lack of choice in other contexts, such as women having no choice about
driving in countries where they are not permitted to do so.

EEMA was careful not to state her own beliefs about the veil, but when she was
asked about what others might think of the veil, she responded, “I think a lot of women
in the U.S. see the veil as oppressive, and perhaps as an issue of equality.” She later
explained these views, “As I said before, I think some people view the veil as
oppressive. They believe that Muslim women are forced to wear the veil. The veil is
seen as restrictive and oppressive” (Personal communication, 2014).

MENA made comments during her interview that expressed her understanding of
the veil and the choice to wear it, “I think there are many issues and concerns about women’s rights, especially with a world history of male dominance. There may be issues of the veil [sic] woman being subjected to cover herself.” She later stated, “For others it could represent male dominance over the woman.” Here, the issue of male dominance suggests that the veil is not the choice of women, but the choice of men. Although MENA was the only participant who repeatedly stated her belief that some women choose to wear the veil, she demonstrated some doubts about the issue. “As I got older, I wondered if the women wore veils by choice, as respect to their tradition and culture, or if they felt obligated to.” Predominantly growing up in a Western culture, MENA grew to doubt women’s choice about the veil as she got older. Despite MENA saying she lacked knowledge about and interaction with the veil, she might be the only participant who had seen many veiled women because she lived in Africa when she was young. Other statements by MENA reflect her doubts about whether or not the veil is a choice: “I have not encountered veiled women who exuded being a victim. Choice is really important. I cannot say that all veiled women are in a position of making a choice of how to dress, but some are.” Clearly, she believed that some women choose to wear the veil, but the use of the word some indicates that at least some other veiled women are not in a position to choose. While MENA admitted to having seen no women being forced to wear the veil, she developed a sense of doubt about whether they were forced to do so.

The perceptions of the participants reflect those of the majority of people in the West who frequently use the “stereotype that all Muslim women are forced to cover and that covering is oppressive” (Bullock, 2002, p. xxxix). Consequently, America is a part of
the West, which perhaps use the same stereotype that wearing the veil is not a choice for women. While Western women might acknowledge that some women choose to wear the veil, they believe such women do not comprise the majority. In addition, some Americans doubt that women who choose to wear the veil actually have a choice; rather, they think instead that the women wear it are trying to please their family or culture. However, many people make choices about a lot of things in an effort to please society, family, or friends, so their influence on choices for these women would not be unusual and could still be considered a personal choice. In general, according to Chesler (2010), it has been established that some women might be forced to veil, it has also been shown that women choose to veil for different reasons. For example, Bullock (1999) mentioned, “These surveys demonstrate that women cover for many different reasons, be they religious, social or political. Empirical reality alone challenges the Western stereotype that all Muslim women are forced to cover and that covering is oppressive” (p. 27).

To be clear about the choice or force debate regarding the veil, I do not argue that no women are forced to wear the veil. However, I do argue that any force against women is a global issue that is linked to not only veil, but also many other customs and situations. Therefore, in the case of the veil, the cases in which women are forced to veil because of male domination are not the majority but the minority, as with other instances of force or violence against women. In cases where politics has influenced veiling or not veiling, the vast majority of veiled women around the world are not forced by political laws or actions to veil. The perception that women are required by law to veil comes from the media’s focus on two or three countries that require wearing the veil.
rather than acknowledging that the majority of Muslim countries do not. In terms of religion, some people might question whether Muslim women have a choice in the matter. The Quran describes no punishment for unveiled women, but encourages women to wear a veil for the sake of modesty. Yet many in the U.S. believe that some countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Afghanistan have laws that require women to cover their hair and body, or even to fully veil in public (Chesler, 2010 & Franklin, 2013). Unfortunately, these countries do have these laws, but women in these countries might also be veiled because it is their culture and regular style of dress, and they might be veiled even if there was no such law. Of course there probably are also some women who didn’t formerly, but might have to begin wearing the veil just to obey the laws of such a country, and in those cases, I would also argue that this veiling is forced.

Finally, some people might also argue that even women who initially chose to veil for other reasons in these countries are now forced to wear them because of the law. For example, Korteweg & Yurdakul (2014), argued that “the fact that women choose to wear it does nothing to change its meaning . . . there is no surer oppression than self oppression” (P.34). Moreover, according to Billaud & Castro (2013), “Republican discourse considers veiled women to be oppressed by their culture and religion,” and they are looking at veiled women’s actions as “automatically disqualified as ‘false consciousness’ and blindness to their own oppression” (p. 91). Therefore, if women in these countries where the veil is required are seen as forced to veil even if they initially chose to veil, then in countries where veiling is banned the women must also be considered forced.
Diversity in Veiling

Veiling practices around the world are diverse, and Muslim veiling has its own diversity that is based on region, culture, and the Islamic denomination. The various schools of Islam have diverse interpretations of the veil and the act of veiling, as Walseth & Fasting (2003) documented: “In the Islamic literature the different types of Muslim veils have many different names and women are not always consistent in the use of these names” (p.50). That diversity of practicing the veil “is indeed reflected in the multiplicity of terms in Arabic and in the various languages spoken in Muslim majority” (Amer, 2014, p.13). This diversity can be hard to comprehend, especially for those who are not practicing the act of veiling.

Further, two of my participants acknowledged having seen some diversity in the colors of veils and the ways in which veils are worn. They know diversity exists, but do not understand why or how. For instance, MENA recalled her memories of seeing veiled women as a child in Africa: “Some Arab Cameroonian women wear veils in many different ways and in all sorts of colors … I understood that there isn’t one rationale.” She recognized the different colors of veils and ways of wearing them. She added, “I have had Muslim female friends who did not dress veiled at all. Sometimes depending on the event, they wore a head wrap, and I did not think much of it.” Here, MENA recognizes that some Muslims do not wear the veil, but understands that to be dependent on the event, which that understanding is not true most of the time. The choice to wear the veil depends more on the school of Islamic thought that is followed, or the culture in which one is raised. However, there might be some Muslim women who
try to please society or who readily adapt to it, so they might wear the veil or not based on their view of how wearing the veil fits with certain events.

EEMA also acknowledged the diversity of Muslim veils, as shown in this interview excerpt: “I know that Muslim women’s dress varies, some cover themselves completely, some cover their heads, and some don’t dress any different than me.” While she emphasized the diverse ways of wearing the veil, including having no veil at all, her previous comments suggested that she believed wearing the veil was not a choice for Muslim women. There appears to be a contradiction in acknowledging the diversity of choices among Muslim women in regard to wearing the veil, while maintaining the belief that wearing the veil is forced on women and is not a choice. If some women choose to wear part of the veil in different ways, including taking it off completely, then it stands to reason that some of them might choose to be fully veiled. GEWA appeared to be unaware of any diversity in veiling. She wrote, “If they have to wear them, why black?” She believed that veiled women could only wear black veils, which demonstrates a lack of understanding of the diversity in veil color.

In summary, two participants showed some understanding of diversity in veiling, such as the different colors and shapes of veils, while the third one showed no awareness of diversity. The first two also believed that Muslim women wore the veil in different ways. While they did not know what dictated the various choices in how to wear the veil, one suggested the choice was connected to the type of event. The third participant believed that the veil must be black. These perspectives demonstrate some shallow understanding of diversity, as well as a lack of clarity around the reasons for that diversity. Lack of knowledge can lead to many things, one of which is prejudice or
discrimination. Matusitz (2012) suggested “that knowledge about and acquaintance with members of other ethnic groups make for tolerant and friendly attitudes, and that a lack of knowledge oftentimes results in stereotyping and discrimination” (P.93). Most importantly, the two participants acknowledged diversity in veiling were less critical of the veil than the participant who was not aware of that diversity.

When and Where to Veil

Where and when to wear the veil is well-known to Muslims who are practicing veiling, but it is not necessarily known to non-Muslim people who are living in a non-Muslim country. Not knowing what other cultures or religion practices are is not really a necessity, but that lack of knowledge can cause misunderstandings that lead to other negative consequences. For example, not knowing that the majority of women chose to wear the veil led many people to believe and generalize the selective cases of force veil. Accordingly, people’s assumption of force veil led them to vote to ban the veil as thinking they are saving all women from possibly forced to veil. The issue can come from people’s assumptions that are based on little knowledge or a lack of exposure. Cole and Ahmadi (2003) contended that American’s misconceptions about the veil and Islam “usually stem from a lack of cultural and religious exposure” (p. 58). According to Droogsma (2007) the American public would continue to have a lack of knowledge about Muslim women and their veil “due to a lack of exposure to and/or an avoidance of Muslim women who veil” (p.315). And that lack of exposure can be found in some of the participant’s assumptions. For instance, one of the most interesting findings was the common assumption that women remain veiled everywhere they go and for most of the
time. This perception appears to be common among my Western friends and colleagues. MENA demonstrates that assumption in the following statement: “When I visited Fahad’s house, for some reason, I expected his wife to be dressed traditionally…I have heard that the veil is usually worn in public, so it made sense that she will not have one on at home.” Also, I remember Dr. Acuff, who is my advisor in this study, expressed her surprise when she saw my wife at home with no veil. That surprise made me realize that Western women, like my study participants and my advisor, might think they would never see my wife unveiled. When I showed the study participants the veils before they wore them, they asked me if there was a particular time or place for wearing or not wearing the veil. For example, GEWA felt that she should not wear the veil when going to a bar or nightclub.

In general, the incorrect assumption that veiled women are veiled even in their homes still exists, as indicated by one of the participants. I realized that other people think women wear the veil whenever they are out in public and take it off at home, but that is not always true. Women wear the veil based on whether strange men will be present, where the term strange refers to men who are not relatives. Accordingly, women may wear the veil in their homes or take it off in public, depending on the male presence in that situation.

Concerns About Disrespecting the Veil

When I first began interviewing the participants, they expressed concern and worry about correctly wearing the veil so as not to come across as disrespectful to
Muslims. For example, Participant GEWA repeated this concern many times; she even asked my wife to tell her what not to do or where not to go while wearing the veil. Participant MENA also expressed her worry by saying, “My only concern was that I was respectful in properly wearing the attire in public.” Participant EEMA expressed her concerns about Western women wearing the veil: “I also think that some people might view my wearing the veil as culturally inappropriate, therefore seeing what I’m doing as a disrespectful thing.” These concerns about the feelings of others demonstrate the thoughtfulness and respectful attitudes of the participants. However, I wondered where the participants got the idea that people would perceive their wearing the veil as disrespectful. I am curious about how they feel when they see people from different cultures wearing typical American outfits, or cowboy attire (since we are in Texas), and whether they consider that to be disrespectful. It seems logical to me that seeing someone wearing an outfit that indicates some other nationality or culture would be interpreted as admiration for that culture.

The participants appeared to understand that the veil represents more than just a piece of clothing, and they showed concern about not doing anything that might be perceived as disrespectful. For example, GEWA understood that going to bars or nightclubs while wearing the veil might be perceived as disrespectful, and EEMA and MENA understood that going out in public wearing the veil in an inappropriate manner might also be considered disrespectful.

Expecting to Draw Attention

The sight of the veil draws much attention in the United States. In fact, Gehrke-White (2006) acknowledged that some of veiled women in her study complained about
the stares that they received because of wearing the veil. Moreover, people who walk with veiled women can easily notice the stares as was the case when “Michaela's father and sister got offended if people stared at her in her hijab” (Gehrke-White, 2006, p. 33). Participants in this study also anticipated that wearing the veil would draw people's attention and may cause people to stare at them. For example, when MENA was asked what responses veiled women might get from people, she replied, “I think most people will stare at them.” EEMA expressed the same expectation that veiled women would be stared at when she stated, “I imagine that a lot of people stare at them and perhaps act suspicious of them. Perhaps on occasion someone might say something to them about their veil.” These two participants clearly expressed their belief in the high probability of drawing attention and receiving uncomfortable looks or words when wearing the veil. GEWA did not state such an opinion clearly, but she implied such as she recalled her experiences in Hawaii wearing pantyhose, “I began to feel out of place wearing hose. I felt different and like others were looking at me, so I stopped wearing hose.” She felt odd because, as she said, women in Hawaii do not usually wear hose. Recalling this experience when she was asked about the veil indicates that GEWA believed she might have the same experience when wearing the veil. Participants acknowledged that the veil draws people’s attention, most likely because it is not commonly worn in Western society. Participants also believed that wearing the veil would lead to verbal criticism. This perception suggests that the veil is not just unfamiliar in the West, but it is also attached to specific meanings that may result in unwanted physical or implied attention or in physical reactions by onlookers.
Assuming Discomfort when Wearing the Veil

Clothing that has many layers and long sleeves is perceived as uncomfortable to wear and impractical. Thus, wearing the veil is perceived as being uncomfortable and impractical, and this opinion was reflected in the participants’ comments. For example, with regard to wearing the veil (before she tried it), Participant EEMA believed, “It seems like it would be very inconvenient.” Participant MENA mentioned, “I wondered if they were not feeling too hot when fully veiled.” Participant GEWA was more clear about her opinion on wearing the veil: “I only know it looks hot and restrictive in regards to movement.” Note that these perceptions were not the result of experience as this was before the participants wore a veil.

Two participants clearly stated that veiled women might not feel any discomfort or restriction when wearing the veil because they were used to the experience. GEWA said about veiled women: “I think they feel as normal wearing it as I do wearing blue jeans in America.” EEMA expressed her assumption of how veiled women feel under the veil: “I would imagine that to them it feels very normal.” MENA suggested some familiarity with seeing veiled women: “they wore a head wrap, and I did not think much of it, as it is normal in their tradition.” These comments reflect differences among the participants in terms of their familiarity with seeing veiled women.

Further, participants believed that the veil is restrictive and uncomfortable, which is natural since they are not used to it. For the same reason, they assumed it would most likely be true for them when they wear the veil. However, according to Bullock (1999) & Gehrke-White (2006), many veiled Muslim have clearly proclaimed feeling comfortable wearing the veil. Women often wear things that could be viewed as
uncomfortable or restrictive, such as high heels and makeup, but they still wear it and express their comfort with doing so. Their expression does not certainly mean it is comfortable by itself, but at least they feel comfortable by what they gain out of wearing it. In other words, the wearing of attire such as the veil might be restrictive, but women will wear it depending on their interest and goals for doing so.

Women’s Understanding After the Experience of Wearing a Veil - Discomfort and Restrictiveness

Before wearing the veil, participants expected that it would be uncomfortable and restrictive. After wearing the veil, some of these expectations were borne out by their experience. For example, EEMA noted that it was challenging to eat with the veil on. She added, “Honestly, the most personal issue was one of convenience…It was odd to feel my breath blowing back at me from the fabric. That made me feel somewhat restricted.” She also conveyed that it was difficult for her to be veiled and take care of her three children or work at her job.

GEWA said of her experience wearing the veil that it was “what I expected it to be mostly. I was not surprised at being more or less ignored by others, but I was surprised at how uncomfortable and impractical it was to actually have to mess with it.” GEWA’s expectations of discomfort were met by her experience. She was perhaps the participant who most frequently expressed her feelings about the restrictiveness and discomfort of wearing a veil, both before and after her experience wearing it. Her level of discomfort was such that she had to cut short her plans to wear the veil for two weeks: “I had originally planned on wearing it the whole two weeks. After putting it on I figured out that it was so restraining and claustrophobic that I would not be able to do
that.” The great difficulties she experienced in wearing the veil were clearly reflected in her interview, daily journal writings, and observation notes.

MENA found that some of her expectations regarding the comfortableness of the veil were correct. While she did not express any feelings of restriction or discomfort, she wondered if women felt hot under the veil. After wearing the veil, MENA was asked if she had experienced any difficulties. She replied, “Not much. One of the days I was veiled, it was hot outside and it was challenging being fully covered.” Thus, although MENA did not complain about discomfort or being restricted, as did the other participants, she met her prior expectation of feeling hot while wearing the veil.

Even though many veiled American Muslim women expressed the comfort of wearing the veil by itself, they have mentioned the discomfort of its consequences while wearing it in public and interacted with people (Bullock, 1999 & Gehrke-White, 2006). It is also interesting to note that all three participants’ expectations were met with regard to the experience of wearing the veil. The two participants who expressed concern that wearing the veil would be restrictive and uncomfortable reported just that after wearing the veil. Yet, the third participant who suspected that wearing the veil would make her feel hot, expressed feeling hot while wearing the veil, but not any discomfort or restrictiveness.

Becoming More Self-Conscious

Becoming more self-conscious can be a consequence of people’s comments or reactions. Wearing the veil in the U.S. lead to moments of feeling self-conscious for
these study participants. As Bullock (1999) discussed in her dissertation entitled, *The Politics of The Veil*, some veiled women also expressed that she felt self-conscious. For example, Iman, “always feels self-conscious in hijab” and another women, Bassima, expressed her feeling saying: “when you first wear hijab you’re very self-conscious and you feel as though everybody is staring at you. [B]ut once you get used to it” (Bullock, 1999. p.81).

My study participants predicted that they would be self-conscious about the veil. After trying the veil in public, the participants became more conscious about themselves and the surrounding atmosphere, such as the reactions of other people. For example, GEWA described her experience with being out in public while wearing the veil this way: “I went in the store, got the basket, I felt self-conscious as I walked around and the material seemed to touch stuff in the vegetable aisle and as I reached for things.” When asked if people changed their behavior toward her when she was veiled, she replied, “Yes, they stopped smiling and looking in my direction. They made a point to not look at me, or to make me think they were not looking.”

What GEWA describes here is a common experience for me. I frequently notice when I’m out with my wife that people interact with us differently. When they see the veil, they smile less and look at us more. However, as GEWA described, some people first look and then try to appear as though they did not notice us. Some people extend this to the point of appearing to ignore us, as GEWA mentioned in her interview: “Mostly I was ignored.” Hence, GEWA’s experience and awareness of people’s reactions was consistent with my experiences when out with my wife. GEWA showed acute awareness of the effect of wearing the veil on herself and on others.
Likewise, EEMA expressed her feelings of self-consciousness when wearing the veil. “When I did wear it, I became more aware of other people, because I was trying to gauge their reactions to me. I felt like a lot of people didn’t even look at me.” The experience of wearing the veil clearly enhanced her consciousness of how people reacted toward her, and she felt people did not want to look at her. She added, “I also became very aware of the part covering my mouth. It was odd to feel my breath blowing back at me from the fabric.”

After being stared at herself, MENA thought about her reactions to veiled women: “I wondered if I have [sic] stared at a fully veiled Muslim woman before. I am sure I have.” MENA became more conscious about other people when an old lady called her “scary.” She recounted, “What she said made me very aware of my attire, and I felt like everyone in the store was looking at me.” This reflection clearly shows MENA’s understanding of how the experience made her more self-conscious and conscious of others’ reactions. When describing how the cashier and the manager at Wal-Mart treated her with suspicion, MENA said that it made her realize that she might be not paying close attention: “I wonder how many other subtle cautions occurred that I did not notice.” I agree with MENA about not noticing sometimes how others are reacting; I have clearly observed how people look at my wife while shopping when she is not even paying attention. The best way for me to observe people’s reactions is by walking behind her. I have seen people pretending not to look until my wife passes, and then they turn their head to stare.

Overall, the experience of being veiled and interacting with people in public was valuable and memorable for all three participants. MENA said, “The experience of
embodying someone’s daily life is a memorable learning experience.” Participants clearly expressed how their understanding of veiled women was enhanced and how they become more conscious about themselves as they became under the focus of people. The participants were also more conscious about how the veil influenced people’s behavior and reactions toward them. That state of consciousness caused the participants to observe their surroundings more closely and to pay more attention to others, which may help in drawing attention to wearing the veil.

From Being the Focus of Attention to Being Invisible

It seems sensible that wearing a type of attire that is rare in the U.S. would easily grab people’s attention. Certainly, in Denton, Texas, wearing the veil is a rare practice that can catch people’s attention, and it is important to be aware of people’s reactions after that attention is caught. Veiled women in other Western countries also have pointed out how easily the veil catches people’s attention (Gehrke-White, 2006). Participants in this study noticed how easily the veil drew people’s attention toward them. They declared that wearing the veil made them stand out. MENA said: “When I see a fully veiled woman, she stands out because of how different her attire is.” This informed her expectations of how others would react to her when she wore a veil: “I felt like I would stand out, and most people will stare at me. However, some people did not seem to notice me.” Apparently, not all of MENA’s expectations were met, since some people did not stare at her.

MENA also mentioned being the focus of attention while shopping because of her attire: “I went to check out at the register. I stood in line. A young African-American
man was in front of me. He kept looking at me.” GEWA also mentioned being in focus: “I was in there for about an hour and some looked and then quickly turned away like they were embarrassed they had looked.” Here GEWA points out an important observation that I, too, have observed many times. GEWA provided a vivid description of people’s reactions toward her: “They made a point to not look at me, or make me think they were not looking.” This deliberate ignoring behavior leads veiled women to feel invisible, as GEWA pointed out many times in her diary. “I felt rather invisible . . . It was like I was invisible.” What GEWA expresses here accurately describes what I have felt many times when shopping with my veiled wife.

In general, participants noticed that at first they were the focus of people’s attention, but then quickly found themselves feeling invisible. Based on my personal observations, people’s reactions to the veil are diverse; some do a double take followed by an inquisitive face, while others stare followed by making a comment. It is rare to see people do a double take and follow it up, for example, with a smile. Thus, veiled women tend to transition from being the focus of attention to being invisible or ignored. I can understand people looking for the first time, since it is a rare form of attire in the U.S., but it is very difficult for me to understand why they then behave as though the veiled woman is not there.

Sympathy and Admiration

According to Hendrix (2011), some veiled women noticed some sympathy expressed toward them. In fact, Hendrix (2011) mentioned a sense of sympathy in interviewing a veiled woman who told him her story that “after a drunk man harangued her on the Red Line, three other strangers apologized for his behavior” (Hendrix, 2011¶
3). I believe that much of Western people’s sympathy toward veiled women comes from the believing that they were forced to be veiled, so it is common, as it had happened with me, to hear some people shouting toward veiled women to remind them that they are in the land of freedom. Another example Hendrix (2011) shared was the case of Safiyyah Abdullah, a 55 year-old American Muslim woman, who said a guy came up to her saying; “This is America, your husband can’t make you wear that” (¶ 26). This might be one of the most common sentences that veiled women hear from strangers in the U.S. I have heard it many times. These comments show how some people’s assumptions cause them to sympathize with veiled women and because of the sympathy they feel, try to help them to take off the veil.

Some participants in this study expressed feeling sympathy and admiration toward veiled women after their experience of wearing the veil. In fact, two participants clearly expressed their concern and respect for women who wear the veil regardless of the social pressure. For example, EEMA expressed admiration for women who wear a veil: “I see them as courageous in that they seem to be prioritizing spiritual/religious beliefs through the way that they present themselves in public.” EEMA admired veiled women for their bravery in facing difficult social situations. Previously, EEMA mentioned that she felt ignored under the veil when people did not look at her, which provided her with an understanding of what veiled women might face on a daily basis. Regarding her experience, EEMA said, “It gave me a personal point of reference for that mode of dress. So, I think it helps me keep from making assumptions about the trustworthiness of the person wearing the veil.” EEMA is showing that as she became more conscious of the issue, she developed more consideration of veiled women.
When asked what she thought women felt when wearing the veil, MENA said, “Maybe a sense of security, or cultural pride and respect.” She added, “The only veiled woman I have interacted with is your wife and she is cool! She wears her veil with confidence; she wears it like part of her daily fashion when she leaves her house.”

Other comments by MENA reflect an increased awareness of the issue and sympathy for veiled women: “This experience made me more aware of the subtle actions that may occur, as in the case of the manger at Wal-Mart. I wondered if such cautionary actions occur often to fully veil[ed] Muslim women living in the United States.” MENA reflected thoughtfully on her experience as she stated: “In wearing the veil I became the veiled Muslim woman, and I experienced how others perceive me. The experience of embodying someone’s daily life is a memorable learning experience.” Considering the situations of others is a clear indication of understanding and respect.

Overall, two participants expressed feelings of sympathy toward veiled women, who might face the same difficulties interacting with others as faced by the participants. They experienced what veiled women most likely feel on daily basis living here in Denton, Texas. Interestingly, although the third participant, GEWA, indicated an increased awareness about how people ignored her when she was wearing the veil, she did not provide any indication of having considered what might happen to other veiled women. However, she stated many times that she respected the veil and did not want to do anything that might be perceived as disrespectful toward the veil.

Complexity of Meaning

There is not one sole meaning of the veil; rather, the meanings for it change and
recurr over time, as Siraj (2011) suggested: “Indeed, wearing the hijab does not represent a homogeneous discursive reality for Muslim women around the world, but instead the fluid and changing meaning of the hijab depends upon the spatial context in which it is worn” (P. 728). Thus, wearing the veil can have many and contradictory meanings at the same time based on the eyes of the beholders. For example, among Muslim who practice the veil, it has its own meanings such as “an embodiment of modesty, virtue and respect” (Siraj, 2011, p.716), as well as it can refer to the modesty, privacy, and resistance (El Guindi, 1999). Yet, the same veil has another meaning from the Western perspective. In fact, the veil is commonly viewed as a sign of “backward, dominated, and uneducated” (Gehrke-White, 2006; p. 224), as well as it is sign of oppression toward Muslim women (Bartkowski & Read, 2003; Bullock, 2002; Hasan, 2007; & Hoodfar, 1993). Likewise, the veil is associated with the enemy, violence, and terror (Cloud, 2004).

Participants agreed that Westerners generally perceive the veil as an oppressive obligation that results from male dominance. Clearly, they were looking at the veil from one perspective, as if there is just one reason for women to be veiled. However, after participating in this research, they expressed a more complex view of the veil and the meaning of wearing the veil. For example, MENA developed an understanding of the veil as meaning many things: “The face veil can be complex in meaning. For some it is mundane attire based on region or cultural background. For others it is significant for religious purposes. For others it could represent male dominance over the woman.” Here, MENA demonstrates a thorough comprehension of the different reasons for wearing the veil. That level of realization may help people to consider other cultures,
beliefs, and choices.

In another example, before the experience of wearing the veil, EEMA said that she viewed veiled women as different people. After the experience, she said, “I think my perception of that difference has become much more complex. I know that we have things in common, too. Hopefully, I will be less quick to make assumptions.” Here, EEMA shows some realization of how her thoughts before the experience changed after the experience. Eventually, EEMA realized that the differences between her and veiled women were complex and might involve many other considerations. The most important thing to mention here is her hope that awareness of this complexity can prevent her from making false assumptions about veiled women.

While two participants acknowledged the complexity of the issue of wearing the veil, the other participant gave no such indication. In regard to the meaning of the veil, she said: “To me it means a waste of natural resources, claustrophobia, discrimination against those with disabilities.” She obviously has strong personal opinions about the veil. She did not appear to consider the perspective of veiled women, or she may believe they are forced to wear the veil. Regardless, it seems that she perceives the veil from the perspective of first-wave feminism, as in her writing, she often mentioned the fact that men don’t wear the veil.

My personal realizations from this study are that the purpose of the veil is complex and the reasons for wearing the veil are many, even within one culture. I came to realize that there is no one reason why women wear the veil, which would lend itself more readily to criticism. In fact, just one woman can have many reasons for wearing the veil. I came to understand that it is not sufficient to stand with or against the veil.
based on your own perspective without looking at the perspectives of others. I realized I needed to understand the complexity of the many perspectives toward the veil in order to reach the logic behind those perspectives. As a result of trying to achieve that understanding, I became less hostile toward other perspectives. Therefore, I believe that understanding the complexity of veiling can help people to be less judgmental, and can also prevent them from making quick judgments.

Veils as a Visual Representation of Culture

The veil is a piece of cloth that provides a vivid visual representation of a certain culture. In fact, there is no doubt that the veil has been a significant “key visual symbol of Islam” (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012, p. 269). The participants in this research are all art educators who believe in using art to educate people. They believe that the veil is a visual representation of culture that can clearly show and teach people about cultural differences. They considered wearing the veil to have been a valuable experience that they can use to enhance awareness among their students and to promote openness to understanding people’s differences. For example, GEWA said about the veil, “I will use it to show everyone should be open to others’ beliefs and customs, to respect them, and at the same time be open to speak their minds on what they believe as well.” GEWA emphasized open discourse so that people can learn and think about the issues. MENA also acknowledged that the veil experience provided a true view of a different culture instead of simply hearing or reading about it. She declared how valuable it was to learn from that experience, even though she had some knowledge about it from the media. Moreover, MENA believed that the experience would be beneficial for enhancing
her students’ understanding of the subject: “In wearing the veil I became the veiled Muslim woman, and I experienced how others perceive me…I believe this concept is valuable for students; particularly in gaining understandings about different cultures and traditions.”

EEMA also believed that the veil experience could be used in art education to enhance students’ awareness of cultural differences: In education, we always talk about students as individuals, and in art education we often talk about individual self-expression. Both of these perspectives seem to omit the cultural complexities of the classroom and the cultures of the students themselves. I don’t think anyone ever really operates as a true individual. We are influenced by various aspects of culture. Our ideologies frame how we view the world and we can never fully [detach] ourselves from them, though our ideologies may shift over time. All this to say I think it is important for students to acknowledge and embrace cultural difference, and to seek to gain understanding about the cultural differences of others.

In general, all three participants emphasized that the experience of wearing the veil can be a valuable way to teach students about cultural differences and to enhance students’ awareness of the importance of being open to others as a way of learning. However, each emphasized a specific aspect of this concept. For example, GEWA emphasized the idea that students should be open to others while also speaking their minds in order to maintain an open discourse on the subject. MENA emphasized the importance of relying on self-experience and interacting with the environment, as she did when she saw how people perceived her with the veil, rather than just hearing or reading about it. EEMA emphasized the importance of this experience for enhancing the
understanding of cultural complexities that affect each one of us individually. Since the Western media has mostly described the veil of Muslim women in negative ways and rarely in positive ways (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2002; Ould, 2007; Parker, 2008; Shaheen, 1997; Shaheen, 2009), it is important to break that negative stereotype via art education classes. Art education was able to teach and make our generation understand and appreciate African masks, the Mexican skulls from the Day of the Dead, and other cultures' identities, so I believe it can easily teach our generation how to understand, respect, and appreciate the veil as just another cultural identity.

Question 4: What Possible Narratives May Emerge with the Three Non-Muslim Women Participants?

The purpose of the participants’ narratives is to explore what transformative dialogue and ideas concerning the sight of the veil or veiled women, as an icon of visual culture. Because the narrative, as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state, “is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2), it is possible that through this narrative study, a clearer picture of Western women’s understanding about the veil will emerge. I, as a researcher, and possibly others who are interested, can see what makes the veil a controversial topic around the world. The participants’ narratives, can also show how individuals' stories help to shed light on many aspects of the veil issue. For example, Richardson (1995) asserted that narrative “makes individuals, cultures, societies and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes” (p. 117). Having a comprehensible understanding of these narratives “causes learning and growth” (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007, p.14). Thus, participants’ experiences wearing the veil and interacting with the
public did lead to building some understanding of how at least these three American women view the veil.

All participants are graduate students in the art education field, and they are believed to think and reflect from within their interests, knowledge, and passion of art education. They all went through the same process of interviewing, the introduction to the veil and how to veil as well as wearing the veil in public. They do not agree or reflect all the same outcomes, but they generally express a somewhat similar general narrative outline in terms of the desire and anxiousness of veiling. For example, they express the same feeling of a lack of knowledge about the veil or veiled women, and they might share a somewhat similar assumption of major forced veiling among Muslim women. Two of them express real difficulty in wearing the veil and feeling nervous under the veil, while the other one did not complain much about the difficulty of wearing the veil, yet some people’s reactions were difficult from her standpoint. Moreover, two of the participants expressed more empathy toward the challenges veiled women face in the United States, while the other one was more concerned with the idea of equality and why men do not wear the same veil as women. However, the participants’ narrative with the veil represents their individual experience and thoughts, each one of them has a very unique perspective with rich details written below.

First Participant

MENA is the first participant in this research. She is an African American lady who is studying for her PhD in the Art Education program at UNT. In terms of ethnicity, she refers to herself as a Cameroonian American (African American). As a religion, she considers herself a Christian. Even though she was so busy doing her dissertation at
that time, she agreed to be one of the participants to experience wearing the veil and reflect on that experience. She read the consent form and signed it without hesitation. Consequently, I sent her the semi-structured interview via email to answer the questions before wearing the veil. After answering the interview questions, we sat up a follow-up meeting to see the veils and practice wearing them with my wife. Asking her about the veil, she showed some understanding of other cultures as she remembered when she was young living with various ethnic groups with different customs. She believed that the Cameroonian Muslim women cover their head in many different ways with different colors. She cited that, “I don’t remember the face veil being common in the parts of Cameroon … so I am not sure how the veils are worn. So I don’t really know much about veils besides that they are traditional attires common in Arab and Muslim cultures”. Even though MENA expressed her feeling of not knowing much about the veil, she showed more understanding about it than the other participants.

In order to learn more about the veil and practice wearing it, MENA met my wife around 1:00pm so she could learn how to wear the full veil. She is an outgoing lady and seemed very comfortable meeting my family. At first, she seemed surprised to see so many different styles of the full veil and all in black. She chose the veil parts that matched the best. I noticed that she tried on many veils so that she could choose a comfortable veil that fitted her properly, which she did. She paid a great deal of attention to my wife while she showed her the steps to veil properly. MENA picked up the steps quickly; at the end, she could get fully covered without any help. She seemed to have the courage to face others wearing the veil, but for a moment after wearing the full veil, she felt a little worried thinking about going out and facing people. She asked my wife to
advise her on how to feel comfortable going outside. My wife’s answer was to act
normally as she usually does and not think about the veil.

MENA’s first time to wear the veil out in public was Tuesday, February 18, 2014.
It was about 4:00 pm when she decided to put on the full veil attire and go out to get
some change from a nearby carwash. She stated:

I did not think much about it; I just wore it over my clothes. I was careful to wear it
properly … On my way I noticed 2 guys stepping out of a car next to my car; I
wondered if they would notice me. I walked confidently to my car. They saw me,
but did not stare; it was as though they did not notice me … I bypassed a few
people on my way; no one seemed to pay attention to me. I got to the change
machine, to get quarters. I noticed a man washing his car. He paused and looked
at me; when I looked at him, he looked away and kept washing his car.

From her narrative, MENA decided to not think about it so she would not be
influenced by her anxiety. Also, she emphasized that she took the time to veil properly,
which indicates her consideration not to offend Muslims by improperly veiling. While
walking, she noticed how others looked and stared at her, and how they tried to avoid
looking at her again. She was aware that some people did not notice her; however,
when one man stared at her, she was ready to stare at him until he looked away, which
means that she is tough and ready to defend her choice.

On her way home, MENA thought about interacting with people to see what
would happen, so when she saw a lady walking to her car, she asked her for directions
to the closest post office. The interaction with the lady was normal and she responded
kindly. Later, MENA was home doing laundry and going back and forth to her
apartment. She noticed that she was not thinking about her attire, which she thought
might be because she was focused on finishing the laundry. She spent time doing the
laundry and there were a lady with her kids who seemed not to be paying attention. In this first experience, MENA expressed her feelings saying:

I started feeling hot, because it was about 75 degrees. This was the first time I wore the full veil in public and I did not feel uncomfortable. It felt different for me to cover up my face, because I have never dressed full covered before. When I first walked out of my apartment, I felt like I would stand out, and most people will stare at me. However, some people did not seem to notice me. Others looked at me and went by their activities. It was an interesting experience; I stayed close to my area, for a sense of comfort.

According to MENA’s diary, wearing the veil was not an issue of feeling uncomfortable for her; in fact, she felt different only because she was not used to the face veil. Also, it seems that she had expectations that people would make her feel uncomfortable by staring at her, so she preferred to wear the veil only in her comfort zone.

MENA’s second experience veiling in public was on Saturday, February 22, 2014, at the Corner Bakery. After dressing fully covered, MENA went by Corner Bakery to get some snacks and coffee. One interesting note was that she was not sure how to eat with the veil in public, so she ordered it to go. At the cafe, she noticed that there were a few people, but nothing odd. However, she thought maybe that was because she was not there for enough time to get people’s reaction.

Another experience occurred on Friday, March 7th. She needed to go get groceries, so she decided to wear the veil for a full day. She went to three stores, Wal-Mart, the 99 cent store and Aldi grocery store. On her way, she recalled that for three years she lived in this area and had not encountered any woman dressed fully veiled, which made her wonder if that would make her stand out more. The first stop on her shopping day was Wal-Mart, and MENA wrote:
I was on the phone while shopping and focused on my getting the items on my shopping list. I did not notice anyone staring at me when I got into the store. About 10 minutes into my shopping, I was in a shopping aisle, when I had a negative encounter. An older lady (Caucasian, estimate age: 70-85) passed by in a shopping cart—the carts for the elderly to sit, ride and shop. She passed by me, paused and said “Ehuuh... you are scary.” I turned around, and asked “I am, why I am scary?” She responded, as she moved along, “All black, scary, ehuuh.” She looked disgusted by me. I was hurt. For the first time I left uncomfortable in the veil. What she said made me very aware of my attire and I felt like everyone in the store was looking at me. I was more aware of my attire, but I kept shopping. Some people looked at me; others did not seem to notice me – maybe they did, but they did not stare. One of the employees passed by me and asked, “How are you doing today?” I responded. “I am doing well, thanks. Yeah! I felt good that I was acknowledged in a good way, after being called scary.

After the interaction with the old lady at Wal-Mart, MENA was not sure why her shopping took longer than usual. She wondered if it was the veil or something else as she expressed her feelings after that interaction saying:

I think my happy mood was disrupted by being referred to as “scary.” It seems I wandered around the store, not being able to find what I was looking for. I wanted to hurry up and leave, but I needed to get all the items on my list; so I kept shopping. Afterwards, I went to check-out at the register. I stood in line; a young African American man was in front of me. He kept looking at me, as though he wanted to ask a question; but he did not. I noticed the cashier greeted him when it was his turn to check-out. When it was my turn, she did not say hello. I did not get a greeting! She did not look at me directly – it was like she was avoiding eye contact with me by all means. She focused on scanning my items. I wanted to interact so I asked her, “Do you guys do cash back?” She hesitated in answering, “…huh? Yes we do.” A manager came by her register, I am not sure what for but at that moment I did not think about. I paid, collected my items and
said to her, “Thank you and have a good day,” she replied “Thank you and have a good day as well.” Her age range was between 40-50. She is most likely an immigrant…I guessed so by her accent particularly, but I can’t guess her ethnicity.

MENA went to her car, and took the time to write her experience in a notebook. While doing so, she realized something odd in her experience at the register. She noticed that the cashier seemed uncomfortable and avoided any direct eye contact with her. More importantly were her feelings about the sudden presence of the manager. She further recalled that the manager walked behind her pretending he was checking on items. Her awareness of what happened increased. She thought if there were no transaction issues to be addressed why the manager would emerge until she left. MENA believed that her appearance with the veil might have made the lady worried, so she called the manager to make her feel more comfortable. MENA even debated with herself, but she logically noted:

My interpretation could be wrong, but it was odd that the manger came by, did not resolve anything, walked around behind me, and waited until I was gone. If this was the case, then it is such a shame. I wonder how many other subtle cautions occurred that I did not notice. I also wondered what Muslim women dressed in a full veil experience on daily basis living in regions where a fully veiled Muslim woman is not very common.

From MENA’s above interaction, the verbal attack toward MENA increased her sensitivity when she was called scary. She even became more aware in noticing the cashier and manager’s behavior. She started wondering if she was not paying attention
to other things before. She felt uncomfortable and felt time go by slowly. She preferred that the time went faster so she could get out of that uncomfortable situation, but the other positive interaction with an employee made her feel more comfortable. The lady emphasized that the black color was the scary thing, which I believe was not just the black color. Black can be found everywhere, would any black color be scary or would the veil be normal if it was blue or green. Also, MENA became more aware and noticed everything. She noticed the cashier ignoring her and stated: “I did not get a greeting! She did not look at me directly.” MENA also tried to help her relax by speaking with her and asking normal questions about the change, but that did not seem enough. Moreover, MENA not only was the brunt of the cashier’s rudeness, but also she felt she appeared suspicious as the manager emerged because of her attire. All of that led MENA to think of other veiled women who might suffer such similar reactions on a daily basis.

The next stop for MENA was at the 99 cent store. Her main purpose while shopping was to interact with more people, but this time with more courage to face people and ask them what they thought of her as veiled. She found a Caucasian lady who looked somewhere between 35-45 years-old. Their conversation appears below:

MENA: Excuse me, do you mind if I ask you a question?

Lady: Sure.

MENA: Do you think my attire is scary?

Lady: Well, no. It’s different, but not scary.

MENA: Thanks, I was just at Wal-Mart and someone said I looked scary, so I wondered how others felt when they see me.
Lady: Well, maybe some people may see you as scary. It may be because everything is covered except your eyes.

MENA: Ok, I just wanted to know what others may think. Thank you so much. MENA seemed to become more comfortable speaking with people and hearing their thoughts. She then found another person who was an African American man, between 40-45 years-old and asked him about her attire. She wrote:

MENA: Excuse me sir, do you mind if I ask what your thoughts are about my attire?

Tyrone: Well, I think you are representing your culture and religion. People represent their faith in different ways. As a Christian, I represent mine by talking about it; I don’t need to wear something specific to show my faith. So, I think it is good that you express your culture and faith in this way, and you have every right to.

MENA: I have been interacting with people to get a sense of their perception. One lady at Wal-Mart said I was scary.

Tyrone: Scary…? Well, it may be because you are in all black. I have seen women with many different colors. Maybe as part of the study, you can try different colors to see if color is the factor.

MENA: So even if I was fully covered, with my eyes only visible, and had on a different color, that will make a difference?

Tyrone: Maybe, imagine if you were in all white or pink… Also, have you considered going out with a friend and your friend asking someone what they thought about you – pointing at you as if they don’t know who you are. You have
to keep in mind that some people will be polite and not say what they really think directly to you, but they may be more honest to someone else.

MENA: That is a good idea!

Tyrone: I saw you when you came in, but your walk seemed to give you off – it did not fit your attire. Your walk was too regular.

MENA: Regular? Is there a regular walk?

Tyrone: What I mean is that you walked carefree; you did not seem intentional in your walk. The women I have seen dressed like you walk with more intention.

They seem more aware in their walk.

MENA: Really? Well, I was simply walking with confidence as I usually do. I did not want to walk as though I am out of my comfort zone. So I did not think much about how I was walking. (Personal comunication, 2014)

The last person she asked about her attire was the cashier who was college-aged, 18-27 years-old. The cashier responded that she thinks everyone should have the right to dress however they like.

Looking at MENA’s experience, one can see how the past experience of being called scary affecting her feeling so she asked people to see if they agreed or not. She asked various ethnicities to hear different voices. Her questions were straightforward, but she was not sure about the answers. All of the people said they did not see her attire as scary. However, they then followed it by other statements, such as some may see it as scary. Another answered that some may see it as scary because everything is covered except the eyes. Others have a better understanding of other cultures and see it different, but not scary, like Tyrone. Tyrone told MENA that: “You have to keep in mind
that some people will be polite and not say what they really think directly to you, but they may be more honest to someone else”. That is true and supports the thought that there is deep honesty about the veil that needs further exploration.

At Aldi grocery store, MENA just got a few items and went to the register. She did not notice people staring; instead she noticed in line in front of her was a lady covering only her hair with a blue hijab. MENA expressed her concern saying:

I was actually more concerned that she may notice that I am not wearing the attire perfectly. On my way out, I walked up to her to chat. I asked her what her thoughts were about my attire. She said, “Well, you have on a full hijab. Some Muslim women look like you, some look like me. There are different ways in which Muslim women dress.” I then asked, “What do you think people think when they see me?’ She replied, “It really depends on their location, their level of education and exposure. In the South, people seem to be more comfortable. She was an African American woman, between 30-40 years-old. It was such a pleasure talking to her. In a strange way, it was so nice to see another Muslim woman; I felt more comfortable.

In this situation, MENA got more concerned about her attire, worried that other Muslim woman might criticize her way of wearing the veil. However, she felt more comfortable having someone look like her. The other Muslim in Aldi believed that people’s thoughts about the veil depended more on location, level of education, and exposure. I think that is true sometimes, but would place a greater emphasis on being exposed more frequently with each other.
MENA did another experience with the veil out in public. She went to get gas and rent a movie, but she did not notice people’s attention. Later, she went to Stein Mart where she felt more obvious to people, which she thought was the result of the bright lighting in the store. She noticed everything was normal as she spent just about 30 minutes in the store. In her diary, she concluded saying:

The experience of wearing the full veil gave [me] the opportunity to embody a life outside of identity. I considered notions of stereotypes of the veiled Muslim woman. I wondered if I have stared at a fully veiled Muslim woman before. I am sure I have. With this experience, I was in the other position of being stared at. It was interesting how different I felt when I had the face veil on, and when it was off. Without the face veil, the impact of my experience would have been different. I felt more comfortable without the face veil, although I wore the face veil in public. Face-to-face interaction is how people connect and communicate with others. I wondered if people could not fully communicate with me with my face being covered.

This experience made me more aware of the subtle actions that may occur. I wondered if such cautionary actions occur often to fully veil Muslim women living in the United States. I believe exposure is important to understandings of cultural and traditional differences. While I have experienced Muslim women in different ways, and understand that there are differences in how they choose to dress, I had never had a close dialog with Muslim woman, who dresses fully veiled in public. Fahad’s wife is the first Muslim woman I know who dresses fully veiled in public. However, when I met her at their home she was not veiled. So I have not
interacted with her in public while she is veiled. My experience of wearing the full veil started when I met Fahad’s wife and she talked to me about wearing the veil, and showed me how to properly wear it. She advised me to be confident when wearing the veil, and I believe I was. I enjoyed this experience. It challenged me out of my comfort zone and allowed me to experience the narrative of a full veiled Muslim woman. It was a humbling experience and I am grateful to Fahad for the opportunity.

In her conclusion, MENA showed a great appreciation and valued the experience because she believes that this experience made her more aware of Muslim differences as well as herself. She acknowledged that she might stare or look at veiled women before, but never think of speaking with them. Also, when speaking with Tyrone, he told MENA that he had looked at her entering the store and her walk was too regular, which refers to the fact that people are looking at MENA even though she did not notice them sometimes. As MENA gained awareness of herself and others, she also thought that having all of the veil parts except the face veil would have made the experience so much easier. In addition, she wondered if others did not communicate with her because of her face veil.

Second Participant

GEWA was the second participant of this study. She is a white woman with unique demographic roots that involve Irish, Dutch, and Cherokee (Native American) ancestry. She was born in 1950 in a religious environment and raised in the ‘bible belt’ of Texas, as her father was a Christian preacher. She converted to Catholicism after marrying a Mexican American who was Catholic. Also, she has been exposed to many
U.S. regions living in Hawaii, Chicago, Lincoln NE, Oklahoma City, and Houston, as well as the Dallas area. She studied eastern religions, and gained knowledge and a personal philosophy as she stated:

I embrace a more universal love, more Buddhist philosophy of everyday life. Spiritually I believe if a religion keeps love as the center guiding principal then it is a true religion to me. I do not embrace one religion though I try to emulate God’s love for all mankind and try to guide and plant seeds of joy and love for all by leading by example.

GEWA was interested in the veil and got excited to be one of the participants when asked. Consequently, I sent her the semi-structured interview via email to answer the questions before wearing the veil. After answering the interview questions, we sat up a follow-up meeting to see the veils and practice wearing them with my wife. However, she was aware of her knowledge about the veil as she said; “I am unfamiliar with the traditions. I only know it looks hot and restrictive in regards to movement.”

GEWA’s first time to try the veil was at my house where she met my wife to learn how to wear it. She told me that she had to leave quickly for a dental appointment so she was in a little hurry. She seemed comfortable meeting my wife and excited to see the variety of veils. I noticed that she wanted to find the style she liked. She picked her styles carefully and it seemed that she liked the sparkly veil and the large Abaya. In fact, all Abayas were open from the front except one that is completely closed in the front, but GEWA liked it more. Then, my wife repeated the steps many times to help her practice wearing the full veil. GEWA paid a great deal of attention, but needed more practice. She was excited trying on the veil, and laughing at herself while failing to get
the steps correctly. She finally liked it saying, “It looks nice now”.

I mentioned to her that in two weeks, she should wear it for one day and then wear it five other times over a two-week period, but she replied that she would wear it for the whole two weeks. She showed some knowledge by asking some good questions, such as what things that she should not do while wearing the veil. She wondered whether she should go to pray; and if there is a time that she should not be out in public. In fact, she emphasized that to her knowledge she would not go to bar or nightclub with the veil because she was worried that she might offend Muslims by veiling in these places. My wife answered her questions saying that nobody has the right to ask a woman to go pray because women have many exceptions in terms of praying, and there is not a prohibited time to go out. Regarding her decision to not go to a bar or nightclub, we thanked her and advised her not to go there because there is no way to know what drunk people may do to you.

GEWA’s first time to wear the veil in public was at a Kroger grocery store. She put the full veil on before leaving the house, except the face veil itself. She followed my advice to not drive in it because she was not used to it, which may create visibility issues. She put the face veil on as she parked at the store and stated:

When I got out of the car, the first thing I noticed was how cumbersome it was. I went in the store, got the basket, I felt self-conscious as I walked around and the material seemed to touch stuff in the vegetable aisle and as I reached for things. Maybe I was just not used to it. No one said anything negative; in fact no one said anything at all. I felt rather invisible. I went back home and once again I noticed the cumbersomeness of having to deal with all that material all over me.
I felt smothered.

Feeling uncomfortable wearing the veil made her think and recall her feelings wearing her normal attire, saying: “I am used to wearing stretch comfy pants and comfy shirts. Having all that material around me made me feel like I was wearing a baggy sheet.” Moreover, she recalled her feelings and intentions wearing the veil for the first time trying it on at my house and then for the first time wearing it in public. She wanted to see some tough reactions, but after her first public experience, she started to think more about her commitment and wrote:

When I picked up the veil I understood how to wear all three pieces and was excited. I had originally planned on wearing it the whole two weeks. After putting it on I figured out that it was so restraining and claustrophobic that I would not be able to do that. I also had thought I was going to wear it to UNT classes, but on further consideration I decided I would not wear the veil around people that knew me. I wanted to get unsolicited reactions from strangers, everyday people I might meet on the street.

In GEWA’s narrative, there is a sense of her undesirable feelings towards the veil. That feeling should not be a surprise; in fact, it was one of the highest expectations because participants were not used to it, and also it caused people to stare at them. However, one surprising thing about GEWA’s experience is that she felt uncomfortable at first when she went out in public. She faced the difficulty of being uncomfortable which made her change her plan of wearing it for two weeks to just five times. Her second time wearing the veil, she was driven by the desire to solicit tough reactions, so she thought if there was anywhere in town she might get a reaction, it would at Wal-
Mart. She wore the veil there around two in the afternoon. She interacted with a couple as follows:

I didn’t notice the couple walking in the same time due to the visibility issues while wearing it. But under their breath, I heard the woman say[ing] to the man, “what tha[t]? What’s the reason for her to wear that garb?” The man just shook his head and made sure I could see that he did. I was in there for about an hour and some looked and then quickly turned away like they were embarrassed they had looked. Once again, I had issues with the material getting in the way. So far, the physical part of wearing it is my biggest issue. I took it off as quick as I could.

GEWA is still emphasizing her undesirable feeling towards the veil as the big issue that faced her. Also, she was aware of people’s stares and paid attention to their actions. GEWA’s belief about going to Wal-Mart was right, but she did not give any details of why she came to that conclusion. In the end, people’s stares might not bother GEWA, or her personal feeling of restrictiveness overwhelmed her from thinking of other issues, such as staring, looking, or not smiling.

The third time she wore it for the whole day. She was planning to meet two old friends from Dallas. She went to Taco Bell where they usually go. She was the first one to arrive at the restaurant. When she ordered, she noticed that the people behind the counter, who were Hispanic and African American, were polite taking the order and making eye contact. She was sitting at a table when her friend walked in looking for her, but she could not recognize GEWA because of the veil:

She didn’t see me, so I had to raise my arm and say her name out loud. As I did so, two or three people also turned and looked. It was an interesting
phenomenon I thought. She looked at me, leaned forward squinted and looked and smiled as she shook her head side to side and said, "GEWA? What on earth are you wearing and why?"

After a while, the other friend came in and she reacted about the same way. GEWA was looking for interesting interactions as she wrote: "Considering these two women are extremely religious and follow the doctrine of their religion as closely as Muslim's follow their religion, I felt this would be an interesting contact." However, GEWA noticed none of them was condemning or negative. "In fact they just giggled a little at me trying to eat with the veil on." The main issue was feeling claustrophobic in it, but it left her thinking about it, stating:

I just kept thinking, why on God's green earth would all this fabric be made and worn in hot countries?? Such a waste of resources. Some have no clothes or food, yet, all this material goes over women who also have clothes on under it?? That is what I thought on the way home. I was so frustrated wearing it; I took it off as soon as I got back to the car.

From her narrative, GEWA was looking for more interaction. She noticed that Hispanics and African Americans were more polite to her. Also, as she was comparing her extremely religious friends to Muslims, she thought Muslims are extremely religious, which made me wonder how she got that assumption about Islam. In her conclusion, she did not like the veil because she felt claustrophobic in it. She is still thinking on a personal level of how the veil fits her. Also, the experience let her think that the veil fabrics are just a waste of resources that should be given to people who are in need of
clothing or food. Well that may be true, but it can apply to many other things, not just the veil. Indeed, most of us are wasting resources by buying more cloths than we actually need. Moreover, some people think the full veil can be used in an economical way to reduce the demand of buying such expensive brands or using make up.

On a rainy day, GEWA felt nice and decided to wear the veil outfit. She was not happy with the experience as she stated: “I am so sorry I did. I was so wet and cold. All I could think of was how uncomfortable it was.” However, GEWA wanted to see what men’s reaction would be to her, so she thought of Home Depot as a store that has more men than women. She stated, “I was surprised. Once again, I was completely ignored. No one talked to me, looked at me that I noticed. No one even acknowledged me as I checked out? I didn’t get a thank you for coming, nothing. It was like I was invisible.”

After her experience at Home Depot, she went back home. On her way home, she thought of getting something to eat where she encountered another interaction: “I also stopped through Chick-fil-A. The lady at the window did take a double take but was polite. She was a Latino that spoke very broken English.”

GEWA felt wet and cold in the rain, which is normal if you go out without an umbrella. Even though being ignored at Home Depot surprised her, GEWA did not question people’s reactions or think about people who could be in that position. However, she noticed a positive look from a Latino lady at a restaurant. This is the second time she noticed polite reactions from non-Caucasian people. Most important is that the positive reaction here is to be treated as a normal person and not to be ignored. In the last experience, GEWA wore it while shopping. She went to Target, World Market, and Best Buy in an up-scale higher income community. She may have thought there would be
different reactions from this community. She thought all reactions were the same, but at Target she noticed:

A few women looked, but attempted to cover the fact that they were looking. I decided to be very outgoing at the check-out stand. It was a middle age white woman. I said, “Hello, how’s your day going?” She looked up, was quiet for just a second, looked me in the eyes and answered, “Fine and yours?” Then she got brave, maybe because of my blue eyes and accent I am not sure, but she asked me about the veil. She asked me if it was hot and how I breathed in it. I answered her respectfully to the veil and explained to her what I was doing.

GEWA here was more aware and thinking of people’s reactions. She noticed how people try to hide their stares, and she was aware that if she did not take the initiative to open the dialogue no one would open it. She noticed the hesitant response to her at first, but this was followed up by a woman who asked how she felt under the veil. GEWA thought that her assertiveness might come from her blue eyes and accent, wondering if the blue eyes and accent caused a different reaction.

In conclusion, GEWA became more aware of her experiences as she cited:

I realize I was not as uncomfortable in a cultural sense or on how people were or were not reacting but more on a personal level. I just could not wrap my head around “WHY” just, logically, “why”. Why would a woman want to wear it from a logical standpoint? Some people have differences like me (claustrophobia), or crutches, or other physical issues. Therefore, it is prejudiced to those with differences. (Personal comunication, 2014)
GEWA showed a clear awareness of her personal reaction and she asked some good questions. She could not draw a logical conclusion for being behind the veil. The right question I think would be if human beings have a logical reason behind each thing that they wear. If blue jeans, cowboy hats, woollies, bandannas, vests, high heels, Indian saris, Japan kimonos, and Scotland kilts have logical reasons to be worn, the veil can have its own logical reasons to be worn too. Also, GEWA thought that the full veil shows prejudice to those with differences, which is an indication that she thinks all women have to wear it no matter what, which is not true because people with differences have many exceptions in Islamic laws. However, I would agree that the veil would be prejudiced towards them if they were forced to wear it.

Other questions that GEWA mentioned in her narratives offer different perspectives.

She argued:

I hear it is for modesty issues to protect them from the eyes of others and keep themselves just for their husbands. Well, if that is the case, then why don’t men have to cover themselves? They are sexual beings too and have sex organs and body shapes that can be distinguished? (Personal communication, 2014)

That is a great argument, if it is based only on facts not assumptions. It is true that many veiled women see the veil as an article of modesty, and what is modest for women does not have to be the same for men, as well as other cultures. However, I wonder if that standard can be applied to Tuareg tribes where the men are the one who cover themselves and the women do not. Tuareg are mostly Muslims, as well as others Muslim who do the opposite by veiling the women, so it is really based on a deep
cultural understanding. Looking at these different ways of wearing clothes should make us think more of how similar we are.

I think our problems usually come from our misunderstandings that might lead to further assumptions. People understand things as simply as they can, but it cannot be that way with everything. An example of that occurred when GEWA stated that I told her that the full veil is not mandatory and a woman chooses to wear it, but when she researched Saudi on the web: “I saw that a Saudi woman not wearing it is frowned on by others and that if she is caught looking at a driver, her husband can get mad at the driver and they both can be in trouble.” She is right, I told her that women do not wear the full veil because it is mandatory; this answer is based on my knowledge of my close community. I see women wear it there as a cultural norm, and I think most people everywhere try to not break the norm. I have not seen or know anyone who got in trouble because of not wearing the veil. Yes, if women are not wearing the veil, they would be frowned on by others just like what veiled women face here in the United States, but I have no idea of the driver theory that GEWA got from the webpage. Women usually go shopping and deal with men in public, not by looking, but also speaking, and nobody is getting in trouble.

GEWA, at the end of her diary thoughtfully stated that the veil encouraged her to think about many issues: “It [the veil] is black?? Why would anyone want to wear black in a country full of sun? Black absorbs the heat more than other colors?” It seems that there is a misunderstanding here; Muslims do not specifically wear black or other color; in fact, Muslims around the world wear many different colors. However, it is noticeable that there is one common color in each country, such as black in Saudi Arabia and Iran,
blue in Afghanistan, and white in Algeria. Also, it is understandable that black is not a desirable color for some people or cultures, but that is not the case in every culture. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the Kaaba, a cube building that is placed in the center of the Great Mosque that is the most holy site to all Muslims, is covered in black. Moreover, in the eastern corner of Kaaba, there is a holy stone called the Black Stone that is black in reality, but holds a high place in terms of religious practice.

Also, GEWA argued that, “Men there do not have to wear black head covers, right? It seems I have seen red and white checked covering for them? Does that make them less or more sensual?” It appeared that GEWA believes that wearing black makes women less sensual, which lacks proof. If the argument is about everything women wear men have to wear too, we should apply that standard everywhere, which I believe women and men’ preferences are different. However, if the argument is about forcing women, not men, to wear certain attire, which I think emphasizes the idea that women are forced to wear the veil, otherwise they will not wear it, and then this should be proven.

GEWA is still opening up some good dialogue, stating:

Then the most spiritual question I have is this: Almost every nation and religion on earth has sayings about the ‘eyes’… If the eyes are the window to the soul, why then, don’t men and women all wear sunglasses? Then their true motives and non-verbals will be hidden. For truly nothing is hidden behind the veil really. The eyes are the way we judge and see others. If that wasn't the case then Middle Eastern women would not get in trouble if they are seen looking at another man beside their husband? (Personal comunication, 2014).
This is a thoughtful question, but it is based on false information that was found on the Internet and believed to be true. That information can be an assumption, reflection, or rare experience, but it is not the norm or typical action that veiled women go through. People think of things based on their cultural norms, so having eye contact here is normal. GEWA debates this saying: “The veils themselves are adorned as to call even more attention to the eyes? So the logic that covering up all of the body to protect or to be humble does not work from a logical stand point.” I agree this is a good point, which has caused some Muslim scholars to say that being covered in a place that might make you at risk is not the goal behind the veil. However, that argument is solid in places where the veil is not norm, but in places where the veil is most worn, being unveiled would call attention. Finally, GEWA concluded her thoughts about the veil, which I really appreciated her thoughtful honesty. In her conclusion she wrote:

What I have found after this experience is that I have more questions than I had going in to it. As I said, I am left with many more questions than answers. While wearing the veil I had no inner issues on a spiritual level one way or the other. For my spirituality comes from within me. The outward body is unimportant in the spiritual realm. As a closing sentence I would once again beg you to understand where my thoughts are coming from. I in no way mean to be disrespectful. I believe women and men should have the choice to wear what they want. I do understand cultural differences and it is not as simple as that of course. Yet, in a Utopia?

Based on GEWA’s dialogue, I particularly noticed other ideas arise while speaking about the veil. GEWA brought up many other things that she might believe like the punishment toward the driver and women as she mentioned before, and the belief of
forcing women to wear the veil. Therefore, I can derive the meaning here that GEWA is usually linking other issues to the veil as she links the veil with specific countries like Saudi Arabia even though the veil is worn by millions of Muslim around the world.

Third Participant

EEMA was the third and last participant in this study. She is a white woman who is a mother of three kids, two of them are twins meaning she is busy. She considers herself a religious person and her husband is the pastor of the church they attend. They are not conservative, but more liberal. She is a PhD student in the Art Education program and works as a teacher’s assistant (TA) at the same time.

EEMA was attracted to the veil project when I asked her if she would like to be one of the participants. She agreed without hesitation and signed the consent form, so I sent her the semi-structured interview via email to answer the questions before wearing the veil. After answering the interview questions, we sat up a meeting to see the veils and practice wearing them with my wife. When asked about the veil, she lacked much informative knowledge about the veil. In fact, she said, “I don’t know much about the face veil, except that some Muslim women wear them as part of their religious practice.” She was aware of her lack of knowledge about the veil, but she knew that it has a religious practice behind it, as well as that Muslim women could be veiled in various ways. She had not been exposed to veiled women, but she recently saw a woman wearing a veil on campus, which caught her attention and made her wonder the motivation to cover. We asked her opinion about veiled women’s feelings and she showed some understanding, saying that they might feel normal, “but perhaps in the
U.S. a veiled woman might feel like an outsider or feel as though everyone is looking at her (because they probably are).”

Her first time to try the veil was about 1:00 pm at my house where she met my wife to learn how to wear the full veil. She looked comfortable meeting my wife and motivated to see, touch, and try on the veils. I noticed that she liked some styles of the veil over others. She thought some Niqabs make her eyes look better than others, so she chose the Niqab that she thought was better for her face and eyes. It did not take her a long time to pick the style she liked. My wife showed her the steps to veil properly. EEMA did not get the steps easily at first, but after repeating the steps, she could fully cover herself and looked at herself in the mirror excitingly.

At the first of March, EEMA tried the veil for the first time in public. She got herself and the children ready for church. She waited until the last minute to put the Abaya on. Putting the veil on made her feel awkward and was a challenge for her as a mother of three kids. After parking at the church, she had the time to wear the head cover and the face veil. While preparing her veil, she noted:

I approach and my cousin walks out—looking at me with a dumbfounded expression. I said hello and he took one of the twins from my arms. As we walked inside, he confessed that he did not know it was me, and he thought, “Who is this ninja lady with my nephews?!” I laughed, to some extent, shocked that a ninja was the first thing that came to his mind. My children didn’t seem to be at all altered by my new wardrobe.

In EEMA’s narrative, there is sense of her eagerness to try out new things. She was more aware of the challenges that she might face, but her courage prodded her
into taking the opportunity. The veil did not cause any interactions with her children, but it did with other people, like her cousin. EEMA noticed his astonished expression, and so she said hello to make him relax, but he did not respond, instead he took one of the twins from her arm. I wonder what caused him to take that action. He stated that he thought EEMA was a ninja lady. I wonder whether a real ninja would make one scared or curious.

Another interaction happened with EEMA as she was having a conversation with an old woman at the church, who is a retired university professor. The old woman told EEMA that, “You know, I like to think of myself as progressive, but I’ve never felt comfortable with someone who has their face covered.” Thinking about this interesting comment made EEMA write:

[I] realized that a lot of my initial connection with a human being has to do with the reading of facial expressions. I have a deep-seeded belief that if I can see someone’s face—and view their expressions and emotions, then that means that I can gain a better understanding of them as an individual, and therefore build a stronger relationship with that person. In my daily experiences, it is normal for me to be able to see the faces that I am talking to in face-to-face exchanges.

In this interaction, EEMA told the woman about the study and they got into a long discourse about the veil, but EEMA did not write any details about it, except the point that made her think more, which means there was still more hidden dialogue to be discovered. EEMA emphasized that connection with human beings helps her to read facial expressions. Also, she thought that seeing facial expressions helps to understand people and build relationships, which is true, but I wonder if not being able to see facial
expressions would cause behavior to be more aggressive toward human beings.

Another interaction with EEMA happened after her husband posted a picture of her wearing the veil with him on Facebook, and then tagged both of them and the researcher too. Later on, EEMA was at the church seated in a chair facing the main entrance, when a couple of her close friends came in while everyone was seated. She noticed:

They walked around the room and sat down in two chairs next to me. We didn’t exchange any words, which I thought nothing of, since we were in the middle of the service. A bit later, my friend turned to me and said, “where is EEMA?” I paused in confusion, and responded, “I am EEMA!” “Oh my gosh!” she said. “I thought you were a friend of the family… my friend had seen the picture, and assumed that I was a friend of the family. She had no idea it was me in the photograph. So, when she arrived at church that day, she further assumed that I was said friend of the family—visiting church.

From this narrative, one can see that EEMA friends did not want to sit beside the veiled lady at first, so they walked around to find another place, but when they could not, they sat beside her. Avoiding sitting beside veiled women is a common thing that can be noticed by veiled women. When the friend asked her “Where is EEMA?” her confusion indicated that she was not aware of the change caused by the veil, meaning that she might have gotten used to it quickly or she was not paying much attention. Also, I wonder why they did not assume her to be veiled. Did her friends think because she was veiled, she was converting to Islam? I wonder if that assumption would put more pressure on EEMA to continue her experience.
EEMA started to be late sending her narratives of being veiled. I tried to encourage her to finish the experience, yet she usually had an excuse of her children and how busy she was taking care of them. Therefore, I suggested to complete the five times of veiling by veil even while going to pick her children up from daycare or by going to the nearby park with her children. However, she did not send me anything the next week. I asked her if there was a problem and her answer was that it is difficult to veil while having three children, and she cannot leave them alone to do the veiling. I asked how she could do her assignments and she said that sometimes she had to call her babysitter to sit with the children in order to get more free time. I told her I could pay for the babysitter if that would help and she said okay, yet she did not complete the full five times of veiling as planned. I felt that it might be something else other than the children. Therefore, I asked EEMA if being afraid of disturbing her social life might be the reason preventing her from completing the five times of veiling, and her response was positive. From here, I can see how the veil is really powerful and tells a lot about veiled women even though she was telling them that she is participating in a study.

Observation Narrative of EEMA and MENA

EEMA and MENA tried the veil while I observed them in downtown Denton. The meeting was on Sunday at about 1 pm at Jupiter House Coffee. I came first for coffee about 12:40 pm. The coffee house was crowded and there was no table available. However, there were two long sofas facing each other that had some available space. An old couple, around 60 years-old, sat on the sofa on the left. The sofa on the right had one guy reading a book, so I sat beside him. Since I know the place really well, I
noticed that different people share the same sofa usually two people on one sofa or sometimes three people if they were friends. The couple in front of me was busy; the woman was reading a novel, whereas the man seemed to be playing a game on his cellphone. The guy sitting beside me on the sofa went outside after a call. I noticed EEMA wearing the full veil as she entered the coffee shop at about 1:05 pm. Some people did not notice her because they were busy reading or talking with friends, but other people noticed her. In fact, some people gave her a quick glance and turned to their partners whispering and then the partners glanced at her as well. I noticed that they tried not to stare at her until she was almost passed them.

EEMA came and sat beside me on the sofa. The couple was still busy, but the woman noticed EEMA, which caused her to stare for almost 3 to 4 seconds then she looked at her husband who was still playing on his cellphone. Next, she closed her novel and went somewhere outside the coffee shop. When speaking with EEMA, I noticed the husband glanced at her several times. Shortly, the wife came back in wearing her jacket, got her novel, and looked at her husband emphasizing that they were ready to go. The husband got up and they were mumbling as they left, and then the man gave EEMA a glance while shaking his head side to side. Surprisingly, EEMA said that she did not notice what was happening. I asked her if she noticed anybody looking at her, but she answered negatively.

EEMA went to order her coffee and there was a teenage couple in front of her. The couple went to the other side to take their order and EEMA still waited for anybody to take her order. It might seem normal because there were just two girls working in the coffee shop, but it took a longer time than usual. The teenage couple hesitantly glanced
at EEMA many times, but she did not notice. In fact, the teenager girl secretly tried to use her iPhone to take a picture of EEMA with the veil. EEMA seemed normal and got her order with no problem. I asked her if she noticed the teenager looking at her, but again she said no. I showed her a picture that I caught of them watching the picture in their cellphone, which made her laugh.

As EEMA and I chatted, the sofa in front of us was empty for almost fifteen minutes. Nobody sat there even though the coffee shop was crowded and there were a couple of people standing on the other side holding their coffee. I know it is not normal to find these two sofas available when the shop was so crowded. I believed that EEMA was the reason that people did not come and sit on the available sofa. Soon, MENA entered the coffee shop. A man entering before her held the door open for her to enter. People glanced at her as they did with EEMA. She sat with EEMA on one sofa where I stood beside them waiting to see if there was anyone who would sit on the available sofa that was in front of them, but nobody attempted to sit there, so I sat down and relaxed. MENA went to order and she spoke with a couple in front of her, who appeared to be Hispanic, asking them to help her choose a good coffee. The couple interacted with her normally.

After taking their orders, EEMA and MENA found it uncomfortable to drink under the face veil because sometimes they forgot that they had the veil on, which might result in getting coffee on the veil. They seemed more comfortable when they were together. However, I asked them if my assumption was right, but EEMA thought that seeing MENA made her more aware of herself wearing the veil. While we spoke, I noticed that they see the veil as an interesting item that could easily catch people’s attention. Then
they started talking about whether the veil makes people afraid because the eyes are the only visible thing, so they felt that people believed they were spying on them; however, EEMA said that she usually thinks of Wal-Mart, which has many spy cameras everywhere and people still go there.

In the discourse, EEMA thought that the veil made her more comfortable to go out without taking much time to prepare her hair and deciding what to wear. She said that she likes to wear her comfortable clothes, which she cannot usually wear except at home, but because of the full veil, she could wear them that day. Also, EEMA told us that one of her friends thought that the full veil made EEMA tiny, which she appreciated.

Finally, after almost thirty minutes waiting for anybody to sit beside us, there was just one young girl who sat in beside us and her eyes were focused on her cellphone all of the time. We introduced ourselves to her, and asked what she felt seeing veiled women, and what made her sit here. She said that she was waiting her friends to come, and she felt okay seeing the veiled women because she highly respects people’s cultures and religions. During the discussion about culture and feminism, she said that: As a Latino I think every culture is rich by itself, but people recently try to enforce our culture with things that are based on the white viewpoints or values, which does not necessarily match my culture values. In fact, it might collapse my culture system if I adapted to these different cultures.

We all actually were fascinated by her understanding and how she thought about it. She then excused herself to go to her friends who might want to go to another coffee shop since this one is so crowded. Next, we all went out of the coffee shop and took a tour around downtown. We entered a cloth store that had a white woman about 40
years-old, who was behind her computer most of the time. There was no warm
welcome, but she asked if she could help. I had not seen her smile, until I told her about
our project. She answered that she respected others and had seen women wearing a
hijab in her store sometimes. Before we entered the store, EEMA told me that her
experience with this store was not that good.

Afterward, we went to the recycled book store downtown. People glanced at the
participants, especially when they walked past them. I was not walking beside the
participants, but I followed them from some distance so that I could observe them easily
as well as other people. I noticed people were trying their best to not stare at them, but
they would glance at them many times. MENA noticed people in front of her looking at
her many times. She thought it was interesting to feel people’s attention directed toward
her.

Surprisingly, we found an unexpected person at the bookstore. If I had noticed
him before the participants, it would have been a great opportunity for more interaction
with him. The unexpected person was my advisor Dr. Barrett, who is known by the
participants as well. We met him by accident at the bookstore. The participants were in
front of me and, when they saw him, they moved toward him saying hello without paying
attention to the fact they were veiled, which surprised him at that moment. He said that
he did not recognize MENA and EEMA until he saw me. It was a great time to take
some pictures.

Finally, we went to a restaurant to eat lunch. We were the only people there
except for a couple of guys at the far end of the bar table. The waitress was kind to us. I
noticed the participants ate their lunch without any problem. Our dialogue covered many
things, and they asked why veils were black and not another color. I answered that black was not the only colors and that there were actually many colors. EEMA thought it was similar to some of the old Christian women’s clothes. MENA told us that in her original Cameroonian country, women wear different clothes, and they cover their hair even though they were not Muslim.

The dialogue continued as the discussion shifted to what people wear at marriages and the culture of the people. I noticed a similarity between what MENA said about the Cameroonian way of showing happiness during a marriage and what my mother told me about their marriage in the old days. For example, their marriages can take up to 3 days, and the wife’s relatives would not let the husband take the wife easily, the husband had to show his desire to marry her. It is a kind of a game. MENA brought up seeing a person wearing the medical face cover; they believed it covers the same part of “the face”, but each one indicated differences based on observation.

Observation Narrative of GEWA and her friend NEO

GEWA and her friend tried the veil while I was observing them at the same place as the other participants. The meeting took place on Saturday about 1:00 pm. I came to the coffee shop about 20 minutes early to be prepared. The coffee shop was kind of crowded, but I found an available table where I sat. GEWA and her friend both came together at about 1:10. They were veiled all in black. While they were coming toward me, I noticed that they got many people’s attention. Almost everybody noticed them and looked at them at least once.

While we were talking, one guy kept looking at them as he entered the coffee until he passed them by, but the participants did not notice that he was staring because
he was behind them. The next step was to try to interact with people, so they went to order their coffee. They noticed that a young lady with short hair was not approachable to them. They both agreed that she seemed like she was ignoring them. GEWA thought that girl meant to treat them like that maybe due to some prejudice; whereas her friend thought that the girl actually seemed tough in her appearance, which may make her actions normal if that was her normal life. GEWA argued that how the girl treated them would be the normal reaction from people out of town, but she believed that Denton people were more educated. She believed if we went to the countryside, we would get more aggressive reactions.

I noticed that NEO was more comfortable wearing the veil. They were laughing at themselves while facing the difficulties of drinking their coffee while veiled. I observed that GEWA seemed uncomfortable, but she said that she was in a hurry for work, so she tried to enjoy the time, taking some pictures using her cellphone. Even though GEWA said that she does not like the full veil because it is heavy and thought that it was a waste of resources, I noticed that she seemed to be delighted having her friend with her. As the dialogue continued, GEWA said that the veil is not practical since it could easily limit her ability; and that was obvious for her because she could not wait until she reached home to take them off. Her friend, NEO, responded that being uncomfortable with things that we wear was not just related to the veil, it could be with many other things as well. In her case for example, NEO said that the first thing to do when she returns home is to take off her hat and heels and other accessories. GEWA argued that the veil is just not practical. Banks and other security sensitive places see a veiled woman who can conceal weapons underneath the veil, or maybe
blow him/herself up. Also, she argued that the veil would not help with security issues since it can hide people’s facial features. When asking her if she would agree to ban the veil, she said she would agree to that in banks, courts, government security and sensitive places.

Then GEWA discussed another issue regarding the veil saying why is there no other color than black. I asked her, who told her it is limited to black? She said that she had read it, and the veil is not allowed to have other colors than black. I told her that is not true; many veiled women wear different colors. She argued that all that she saw in my wife’s closet was black veils, which was true because what she saw was just the veils that we prepared for the experience and all of them are black.

To sum it up, from looking at participants’ narratives, I aimed to see how participants’ individuals’ stories help to shed light on many aspects of the veil issue as Richardson (1995) asserted that narratives “makes individuals, cultures, societies and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes” (p. 117). Furthermore, the narrative according to Boje (2001) “is something that is narrated, i.e. ‘story’. Story is an account of incidents or events, but narrative comes after and adds ‘plot’ and ‘coherence’ to the story line” (p. 1). As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) believe that narrative “is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2), our participants in this study have experienced the world from behind the veil. They discover how being veiled in Denton, Texas and nearby areas can easily change their normal daily life. Based on participants’ narratives, the transformative dialogue concerning the veil as a visual symbol speaks clearly that the veil has the capacity to embody them as “the others”, outsiders, or not belonging. That sense is what they expressed in their narratives of being veiled in
Denton, Texas. They built up their stories based on their experiences of veiling in a Western culture that helps this narrative to emerge. Accordingly, their stories can influence me as a researcher as well as others, and “causes learning and growth” (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007, p.14), toward deep meaning behind the veil.

The general narrative that comprises their stories is that seeing the veil on someone in a Western culture, such as Denton, Texas, can easily affect normal interactions between both the observers and the one who wears the veil. By wearing a visual culture icon like the veil one would attract the attention of the public. That attention leads all of them to have a difficult time to interact with the public as they usually do and are more likely to receive some negative verbal interactions. It caused them to encounter both being the focus of people’s attention or being completely ignored or invisible. The veil made them feel like outsiders or not belonging to their country. In fact, it caused one of them become a suspicious person at a supermarket. Moreover, it makes them see the ordinary interaction of people as positive. Participants that changed their opinions while wearing the veil reflected differently. One of them showed more sympathy to veiled women who might be put in a difficult position because of public reaction toward the veil. The other one criticized the veil in terms of equality among genders. The last one showed some sympathy toward veiled women, but she could not wear the veil as much as the others due to her perceived social difficulties. Therefore, the image of the veil can incite dialogue to emerge among participants and the public. That dialogue can be rich and is able to transform the visual messages and meanings that the veil carries in the Western culture.
Answering the Primary Research Question

In the previous section, I utilized the outcome data and emerging themes of this study to answer the four sub-questions. Answering the four sub-questions was actually the pilot helping me to answer the primary question, which is: For veiled Western women, how does the veil incite transformative visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning veiled women? So, the study’s participants play an important role to enrich the study, and their dialogue is the fuel for this research. Their experiences of wearing the veil in public and interacting with people does offer some valuable research information that is not usually available in academic inquiry. This information enhances my understanding and enabled me to reflect on their perception of veiled women, as well as reflecting on my own experience with the veil. By telling my own experiences with the veil, which comes through my wife, and retelling the participants’ stories, I believe more enhancement is provided on the issue of the women’s veil and what visual culture understanding is linked with the sight of the veil.

First of all, it is important to notice that dialogue is the most significant key here in this study, and it is important to gain a healthy environment of awareness. Fischer (2007) notes that “it is through dialogue that we develop consciousness, learn control over internal mental processes and develop conceptual tools for thinking” (p. 616). Therefore, by offering my dialogue and the participants’ dialogue based on them wearing the veil, I am aspiring to develop my consciousness or enhance my understanding of the veil issue as well as the participants’ understandings. We, participants & I, all are art educators, and we are looking at the veil as a visual culture representation. However, we might perceive the veil in conceptually and metaphorically
different, which can affect our way of interacting with it. By opening and sharing dialogue participants and I can help each other develop our own understandings about the veil. Also, we can utilize this understanding in our field as art educators to help develop consciousness and awareness among students. The veil is a very complex topic and needs to be looked at from various angles if seeking comprehension of its place in visual culture. I believe discussing the veil can be integral in helping students develop critical thinking skills. As an art educator, I see that the veil can speak or send many different meanings or messages to people, either seeing it in real life or in an art form. I believe that the veil has the capacity to incite a dialogue among observers as well as the veiled person or even readers.

Therefore, I thought that the participants could play a significant role by doing some art preforming in public, which may produce some rich discourse and making meaning of the veil. They are not just wearing a visual symbol that they have never worn, but also they wear it while having concerned and difficult feelings toward the full veil, the performances’ clothes. In this case the participants are not merely inanimate artworks inciting people to interact, but they play the role of artwork that perform, incite, interact, and reflect on their own experience.

The primary question is focused on how the veil incites transformative visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning veiled women. By looking at the participants’ experiences and written reflections, I am able to vividly see that the sight of the veil or veiled women incites transformative visual culture dialogue between participants and observers. At first, the sight of the veil catches people’s attention, which is transforming the visual image of the veil to a meaning that might need further discussion. The
observers usually interact when seeing the veil, yet that interaction is not continuously the same. Sometimes the interaction performs as a silence dialogue as if the veil or veiled woman does not exist; some other times the interaction goes further to shape a harsh dialogue like a verbal attack, or other times the dialogue comes in a physical reaction showing the response of observers such as using finger or turning the head from side to side. Also, the veil incites other dialogues that the participants wrote about in their diary. In this section, I explain how the veil incites transformative visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning veiled women in many ways, such as inciting dialogue and thoughts toward Muslim women’s issues, inciting some negative interactions, and inciting a dialogue toward a selective region or countries.

Inciting a Dialogue of Muslim Women’s Issues

The veil has a powerful sight that immediately incites people’s attention in the Western culture. Certainly, Betteridge (1983) observed that the veil is a particularly obvious symbol that draws attention and has many meanings, such as, “it represents oppression; to … an indication of spiritual independence and self-worth” (p. 109). According to Byng (2010) just as the word terrorism provokes concerns about security in the United States (U.S.); the visible symbols of the veil, hijab, and niqab provoke the same response and restriction. More specifically, in the U.S. the sight of the veil pulls people’s attention, as Gehrke-White (2006) noticed while interviewing several veiled women in the U.S. who asserted how the veil catches people attention and cannot go unnoticed. However, there is no issue of catching people’s attention yet the problem comes after that catching. The vision of the veils or the visual representation of it can
easily impact peoples thinking and understanding, which might lead to up normal
to interactions from just seeing a new piece of cloth. The impact can be seen vividly if
tracking where the direction of people’s dialogues, thoughts, reflection, and
understanding go after seeing the sight of veil or veiled women.

The first direction of people’s understanding starts from perceiving identity that
linked the issues. A piece of cloth “the veil” can define someone’s identity and link her
with issues as well. Seeing that piece of cloth can incite people’s attention and direct
them to make some certain further meanings. For example, the veil, as piece of cloth is
a visual culture symbol representing so many meanings. At first, it represents the
religion or faith of that person. According to Chakraborti and Zempi (2012) most often
people perceive veiled women in Western culture as Muslims for the reason that the veil
is a “key visual symbol of Islam” (p. 269). The participants in this study associate the
veil with the religion of Islam. For example, EEMA mentioned that she does not know
much about veils except that “Muslim women wear them as part of their religious
practice.” When EEMA veiled herself at the church, she found that her friends perceived
her to be a Muslim: “They assumed that the veiled woman was a friend of the family—a
Muslim woman.” Also, MENA indicated that there is a link between Muslims and Arabs
by stating, “I don’t really know much about veils except they are traditional attires
common in Arab and Muslim cultures.”

However, being veiled or wearing black clothing is not just Muslim traditions.
According to Stillman (1979), in the nineteenth century, Jewish women in Egypt veiled
themselves. Until today, some groups of Jewish women in Israel still veil themselves
with a frumka, which is an item of clothing similar to a burka, and they practice this in
daily life (Blomfield, 2010; Solomons, 2008). Additionally, “the veil is an Islamic precept as much as it is a Christian or a Jewish one” (Davary, 2009, p. 49), which MENA and GEWA might agree with as they believed that Muslim and Catholic women’s clothing are similar. GEWA, for example, stated, “I do still see it a lot; like I see Mexican Catholic women wearing a scarf over their head in church.” However, there is a similarity between Muslim and Catholic women’s clothing, the veil will continue to be associated with Islam, which is not a big deal yet it leads to another meaning as explained in the next paragraphs.

Another direction is that seeing the veil or veiled women usually raises the notion of oppression and forcing women to wear it against their will. Unfortunately, the idea of being forced to veil is a widely spread concept in the West. In an academic survey, Bullock (2002) amassed many different reasons why women covered as she tried to resist the “Western stereotype that all Muslim women are forced to cover and that covering is oppressive” (p. xxxix). The notion of Muslim women being forced to veil is one of the many stereotypes that is even used in advertisement strategies in the US (Shirazi, 2001, p. 20). In the 2006 article, entitled, The Shifting Significance of the Halal/Haram Frontier, Allievi confirmed, “For the West, the Muslim woman is by definition downtrodden, and the symbol of her oppression is the hijab, the veil, which she is forced to wear” (p.120). Likewise, Bullock (2002) emphasized, “many in the west believe Muslim women cover because they are forced to by their culture” (p.109). Thus, one can make sure that the veil in the western context is vividly observed as a sign of force against women, which also might be found among the participants' belief in this study.
Based on analyzing the participants’ data, the veil can provoke people and transform their dialogue to many directions. For example, EEMA believed that the veil is linked with the oppression that some Muslim women face as she stated, “I think a lot of women in the U.S. see the veil as oppressive.” Moreover, MENA shared the same belief that some women might have been forced as she stated: “I cannot say that all veiled women are in a position of making a choice of how to dress, but some are.” Clearly, she believed that just some women choose to wear the veil, but the use of the word *some* indicates that the majority of veiled women are not in a position to choose. MENA also believed that in the U.S. veiled women are mostly perceived as oppressed, and stated, “I think that many people may see the veiled woman as not only a victim of oppression but also as a representation of a threat—a Muslim threat.” Likewise, GEWA declared her knowledge about the veil as that “it [is] not being a choice for the woman, just as it is not a choice if they want to drive a car, the media says.” The participants expressed their understanding of how American society observes veiled women in general, and all of them agreed that veiled women are perceived as oppressed. Consequently, after seeing the veil or veiled women, the thoughts and perspectives of observers can transform easily toward the Muslim women’s issues of being oppressed, or forced in doing things that she cannot chose for herself. In other views, we can say that wearing the veil transforms an ordinary woman to an oppressed woman, or at least a submissive one.

Another direction is that the veil incites people thoughts toward gender equality regarding Muslim women. Gender equality is one of the key perspectives regarding the veil. Gender equality plays an important role in terms of criticizing the Muslim veil. The
veil gets some criticism because women wear the veil, but not men and this creates gender separation. Consequently, the veil is perceived as a sign of gender inequality in Muslim communities. According to Ssenyonjo (2007) some people criticize the veil and see it as “an unambiguous symbol of discrimination and gender inequality imposed only on women (but not men) regardless of their freely chosen personal beliefs” (p. 701). Moreover, Zempi and Chakraborti (2014) confirm that perception toward the veil by stating: “in post-9/11 climate, popular perceptions of the veil suggest that it is a symbol of Islamist extremism and segregation as well as a sign of gender inequality” (p. 6), which participants in this study confirmed too as it shows below.

Some participants suggested that if women should be veiled, men should also be veiled, and they expressed their concerns regarding the unequal treatment of women and male dominance. For example, GEWA raised the issue of gender equality as saying: “I hear it [the veil] is for modesty issues to protect them from the eyes of others and keep themselves just for their husbands. Well? If that is the case, then why don’t men have to cover themselves?” GEWA’s critique reveals her belief that the veil reflects gender inequality for women. Moreover, GEWA continued arguing about the gender equality issue of veiled women by questioning the black color of the veil: “Also, it is black??... Men there do not have to wear black head covers, right? It seems I have seen red and white checked covering for them. Does that make them less or more sensual?” GEWA believed that the veil had to be black, which is not true. Actually, black is a popular color for veils in some countries, but veiled women use other colors, too. She expresses concerns about male dominance leading to gender inequality.

Similarly, EEMA stated that the veil is perceived as oppressive to women and
pertinent to issues of gender equality, “I think a lot of women in the U.S. see the veil as oppressive, and perhaps as an issue of equality.” She emphasized the issue of gender equality as a common perspective among Western women. MENA also might agree with the other participants as she referred to male dominance and women rights during her interview as saying, “I think there are many issues and concerns about women’s rights, especially with a world history of male dominance. There may be issues of the veil[ed] woman being subjected to cover herself.” She later stated, “For others it could represent male dominance over the woman.” Together, these responses demonstrate clearly that all participants’ perspectives of the veil and veiled women included the issue of gender equality, which is one of the most controversial topics surrounding wearing the veil. Participants expressed their beliefs that the veil represents a clear violation of gender equality that may affect women’s rights and that is the result of male dominance. It is clear that the veil incited the participants’ thoughts and led to their dialogue toward gender equality.

To sum it up, Western’s perception is linked with somewhat suspiciousness feeling toward Muslims. According to Pew Research Center (2006), nearly seventy percent of non-Muslims U.S. citizen’s respondents believed that Muslims are not respectful of women. In fact, just 19% believed that Muslims were respectful of women, whereas 69% thought that Muslims are not respectful of women. The U.S. percentage of viewing Muslims as to not respectful toward women is close to the France and Germany percentages, who already made some legitimate laws banning the veil there. Suitably, seeing the veil incites many issues in many western thoughts. It starts by transforming a sequence of issues starting from defining veiled women as Muslim. Accordingly, many
other issues come along with perceiving Muslim women as possessions, subjugated, oppressed, forced, or equality.

The Western narrative of Muslim women is that Muslim women are not treated equally with men; they are oppressed in many ways like being forced to cover up as if men own them. Then, surprisingly they are not fighting for their rights yet they are passive and allowing men to subjugate them. This narrative or assumption is based on the veil in the Western context, which participants here confirmed it after wearing the veil and reflecting on their experiences. Therefore, I noticed that the discourse of veil or veiled women usually lead people’s thoughts, as well as participants here, to associate veiled women with other issues of Muslim women everywhere. Consequently, the veil incites Westerners’ collective memory to think of related issues.

Inciting a Dialogue About the Others or About Selective Countries

For some Westerners, the veil incites a visual culture representation of being Muslim, and it maybe incite reflections of ethnicity too. To be clear, Islam is a religion not race or ethnicity, and Muslims can be found anywhere and from any race. However, as seen previously, the veil incites thoughts of Muslim women's issues, it also can incite thoughts and dialogue of specific countries or regions such as, women cannot drive in Saudi Arabia, women have issue in education and marriage’s rights in Iran and Afghanistan. Most important to realize is that Muslims and Muslim countries are a lot and so diverse. According to a report entitled Mapping the Global Muslim Population conducted by Pew Research Center, there are about 1.57 billion Muslims all over the world today, and there are about 50 Muslim-majority countries where half or more of the
population is Muslim (Pew, 2009). Moreover, the report describes the 10 countries with the largest number of Muslim population in descending order as Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Egypt, Nigeria, Iran, Turkey, Algeria and Morocco. Interestingly, when speaking about Muslims, many Westerners’ minds are most likely to think of some Middle Eastern countries, which constantly associate with some women issues. Some Westerners cannot think of a Muslim person without associating him or her with such foreigner countries, they might forget that any one from anywhere can become a Muslim. According to Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) (Stereotypes, 2015) under the Common Western perceptions about Islam and the Middle East, one of the common perceptions mentioned was that:

Muslims are all foreigners who cannot adapt to Western societies. Muslims live normal lives in societies throughout the world -- shopping, cooking, telling jokes, going to work, raising families. They also have a long history in America. For example, a large proportion of the African slaves brought to America in the 18th and 19th centuries were Muslim. (¶ 26)

This thought may go even further to, if those Muslims are American born, they are still viewed as the others, foreigners, outsider, or not belonging. Just as Moore (2007) explained “Muslim Americans represent every philosophical, theological, and political strain in Islam. While widely perceived as a foreign population, less than half of Muslims today are actual newcomers to the U.S.—most are native-born” (p.121). That perception of Muslims as outsiders is not strange if looking to how media portray Muslims. According to Eid and Karim (2014), “Muslims are most commonly represented as outsiders in Western societies” (p.100). Furthermore, Schønemann (2013) agreed with that idea, as she believed that the American media portrayed Muslims as outsiders; in fact, she emphasized, “today Muslims are perhaps the heaviest targeted out-group”
Therefore, Schønemann (2013) believed that the media’s representations “influence the American media audience’s perceptions of Muslims as an out-group” (p. 11). Subsequently, Chakraborti and Zempi (2012 note, as the veil is a significant “key visual symbol of Islam” (p. 269), it is clear that these veiled women are perceived as the others or outsiders. Carland (2011) might agree as saying “it is not surprising that Muslims who express their religion visibly, and those perceived to be weak, will be the first targets for abuse. Muslim women who wear any sort of head-covering will always be at the forefront” (p. 473). Accordingly, we are looking at the power of visual culture representation in Western culture, and how the veil incites a visual culture dialogue placing American Muslim women as outsiders or not belonging in Western culture, which the participants confirmed it as below.

Likewise Zahedi (2011) believed that “some Americans did not view Muslim Americans as belonging to America” (p. 188), the participants in this study agreed by indicating that they considered veiled women as not belonging. In fact, they labeled the veiled women as “the others” as they wrote it. For instance, EEMA expressed her opinion as saying: “I hope that [I] can learn to stop viewing veiled women as the other or strange . . . perhaps in the U.S. a veiled woman might feel like an outsider.” She described veiled women as the others, strangers, or outsiders. Likewise, GEWA agreed with the idea of “the other,” stating that the veil “is a way to see from another perspective . . . we need to embrace the experiences of ‘the other.”’ The last example is MENA, who was so very careful to label them with “the others,” she first expressed that the veil “does not mean much” to her because the veil is not a part of her identity. However, she agreed to participate in this study because she is “very interested in ideas
of ‘otherness’ and this research allows me [her] the opportunity to consider or experience ‘otherness’. “It is clear that the participants are sharing the same feeling that the sight of the veils transforms the idea of the others or not belonging to the Western cultures.

Likewise the participants here, other American Muslim women have confirmed that feeling of not belonging just because of wearing the veil. For example, an American Muslim woman expressed how wearing the veil transformed her from born and raised as American to be not belonging (Hendrix, 2011). More specifically, she had been asked to “go back to her own country” (Hendrix, 2011, ¶ 8). Furthermore, Gehrke-White (2006) who interviewed several American veiled Muslim women mentioned that “most Muslims wearing the hijab say they have been harassed in some way, usually with foul language, threats, or an exhortation to ‘go home’ (p. 9). Accordingly, it is obvious that many Westerners often perceive veiled women as not belonging to the Western culture, otherwise why they would tell them to go back to their country or home. Even if the participants in this study are not Muslim Americans, others would perceive them as outsiders just because they were wearing the veil. Therefore, the veil is merely a piece of cloth, yet it can cause someone to lose her identity or her sense of belonging.

Some people might not see any big issue with perceiving veiled women as the others or not belonging. According to Chuang and Roemer (2013), “insiders who resemble groups in power are represented with cultural codes that imply that insiders are safe, normal, and rational, whereas outsider ‘Others’ are represented with Orientalist stereotypes that imply they are alien and dangerous” (p. 92). So, it all depends on people’s indication and understanding of the others or not belonging. Not
belonging can give many different indications to observers based on their level of understanding. In some people’s thoughts, not belonging can indicate not having the same rights as they do, or not having the same interest or caring as they do too. In some others, not belonging can go to the extremist side as the enemy or the threat to them. As Kwan (2008) advocated, “as this anti-Muslim narrative that conflated the Islamic faith with terrorism and constructed all Muslims as dangerous anti-American outsiders captured the popular imagination, many Americans turned their patriotic fervor into anti-Muslim hate violence” (p. 654). Accordingly, that nation of not belonging can draw some issues to those veiled women because the sight of the veil on them transforms them immediately to not belonging women in the Western culture context. Then observers are most likely to deal with them as not belonging, the others, or suspicious of enemy.

Selective Countries

As explained previously, when speaking about Islam or Muslim, Westerners thoughts most likely associate them with the others or outsider (Carland, 2011; Schønemann, 2013; Zahedi, 2011). That perception toward Muslim can be understood and rooted to what Said (1979) explained in his book Orientalism. He argued that Orientalists helped associating the East with their bias assumptions and misunderstandings, and Westerners today are still feeding from that biased context of Orientalists at that time, which Said believed they, Orientalists, have a misunderstanding of Orient culture as they wrote about it as a homogenies culture and made further generalizations about it. That misunderstanding did not just pop up suddenly, rather it built up through history as he elaborated more:
Yet Orientalism is very much a book tied to the tumultuous dynamics of contemporary history. I emphasize in it accordingly that neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other. That these supreme fictions lend themselves easily to manipulation and the organization of collective passion has never been more evident than in our time, when the mobilizations of fear, hatred, disgust, and resurgent self-pride and arrogance—much of it having to do with Islam and the Arabs on one side, “we” Westerners on the other—are very large-scale enterprises. Orientalism’s first page opens with a 1975 description of the Lebanese Civil War that ended in 1990, but the violence and the ugly shedding of human blood continues up to this minute. (p. xvii)

Consequently, the Oriental discourse is filled with generalizing ideas and perspectives of Muslims and Arab cultures associated with “their backwardness, lack of democracy, and abrogation of women’s rights” (Said, 1979, p. 21), which I believe linked Muslims with a certain area in the orient. To see that link clearly, one needs to pay attention to Americans’ public attitude toward Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim people; they are usually sorted as a homogeneous group. According to Panagopoulos (2006), “in the aftermath of September 11, most Americans felt it was ‘very likely’ that people in the U.S. were singling out Arab-Americans, Muslims, and Middle Eastern immigrants unfairly” (p. 610). Therefore, one can understand that Americans are most likely to associate Islam or Muslim with the region of Middle East. In fact, Gottschalk and Greenberg (2008) have studied some American understanding toward Islam, and
they asserted that:

Most Americans who we have asked to do this exercise have given an almost routine set of answers. The names and events they think of tend to be associated with violence (e.g., Osama bin Laden, the 9/11 tragedies, Palestinian suicide bombers), the ideas and practices associated with oppression (e.g., jihad, veiling, Islamic law), and the places limited to the Middle East (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran). (p. 3)

Accordingly, I believe that there is a sort of sequence linked with Islam; it may start with Orient, Islam, violence, Arab, Middle East, women oppression, and the veil can be the igniter of all that from down up since the veil is a vivid visual culture icon. This misunderstanding is widely accepted among Americans as Said (1979) admitted: “I wish I could say, however, that general understanding of the Middle East, the Arabs, and Islam in the U.S. has improved somewhat, but alas, it really hasn’t” (p. 19). More important to notice is that Said’s statement previously was written in 1979, and unfortunately American perception toward Islam may still be like that, as Gottschalk and Greenberg (2008) declared, “in the minds of so many Americans, has Islam become synonymous with the Middle East, Muslim men with violence, and Muslim women with oppression” (p. 4). Furthermore, the participant GEWA has linked the veil clearly with a selective country in the Middle East as she said: “I also only know what western medias says about it not being a choice for the woman, just as it is not a choice if they want to drive a car.” She was referring to Saudi Arabia, as the veil is an issue of Muslim from there. She also mentioned another time that: “If that wasn’t the case then Middle Eastern women would not get in trouble if they are seen looking at another man besides
their husband?” The veil incites GEWA’s dialogue to link it with specific areas such as Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. Likewise, MENA who indicated a link between Muslims and Arabs by stating, “I don’t really know much about veils besides they are traditional attires common in Arab and Muslim cultures.” MENA is most likely to refer to the African or Middle Eastern areas though she did not specify exactly. Therefore, it is clear that the veil can incite a transformative visual culture dialogue toward some specific culture and selective countries like Middle East.

Inciting Alert, Undesirable, or Hateful Interaction

The sight of the veil draws much attention in the U.S. In fact, Gehrke-White (2006) quoted some of veiled women in the U.S. complaining about the stares that they received for wearing the veil. There is a connection that linked veiled women with potential threat, which Coger (2011) argued that “the media portrays a connection between veiled women and terrorism and Islamist extremism” (p. 36). When the veil draws attention, it is most likely to send an alert or invite for actions to be taken, which incites peoples thoughts in another direction. The other direction is that the veil can transform a person from being an ordinary one to a suspicious one. According to Todd (1998) the Western film and media belongs “to a wide-ranging Western legacy of portraying hijab-wearing women . . . as fundamentalists and/or terrorists” (p. 448). Consequently, some veiled women complain of being perceived often as suspicious in public. For example, Safiyyah Abdullah was told to get off a bus because of a suspicious behavior complaint, and at the airport, she asserted, “I’m always the first one to be randomly selected” (Hendrix, 2011, p. 20). Accordingly, for women to put on the
veil has implied a strong indication that they are conservative Muslims who follow their culture without fearing the harm, humiliation, or suspicion the veil may cause them in public (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009; Zahedi, 2011). The participants in this study also confirmed that feeling of being seen somewhat suspiciously. EEMA, for example, stated that the veil could catch people’s attention “because the woman appears to be hiding.” Later in the interview, she further explained, “I imagine that a lot of people stare at them and perhaps act suspicious of them.” Also, when EEMA’s cousin took one of her kids and walked away from her, he was thinking as she quoted “who is this ninja lady with my nephews?” It is clear that her cousin was suspicious about her as the ninja look was most likely to alert him.

Another example is GEWA’s description of the veil: “It seems to be a shrouded place, a secret place as though a place of hiding a prize position.” Then, she later explained the suspiciousness of a veiled person by saying, “Also, when you factor in the fear people have of terrorists, it is understandable why someone walking around fully covered could be subject to be secretly watched.” GEWA thinks it is reasonable to perceive veiled women with suspicion because of people’s fear of a terrorist attack. I wonder what makes veiled women be seen as potential terrorists, but not a man wearing a trench coat with a hood and big sunglasses. Furthermore, MENA explained her feeling of being perceived as suspicious at the Wal-Mart: “The lady at the registrar did not look at me directly and she seemed uncomfortable.” Then she continued noticing that the manager stayed around as she was making the payment until she left. She stated that “it was odd that the manager came by, did not resolve anything, walked around behind me, and waited until I was gone.” Overall, the sight of the veil in the U.S.
might alarm Westerners with a sense of suspiciousness or threat, and the veiled person might be treated suspiciously as well. In other words, wearing the veil can transform a typical American person to a suspicious one.

The veil is one of the most recognizable signs that puts veiled women at risk of acts of discrimination, including verbal assault, being spit on, having the veil pulled off by someone, etc. (Daraiseh, 2012). More specifically in America, Muslim students endure different types of discrimination at schools, “girls wearing hijab [have been] particular targets” (Tindongan, 2011, p. 83). Obviously, there is a high chance of receiving these types of negative interactions because of wearing the veil. As Coger (2011) pointed out that, “September 11 had a particularly significant negative impact on hijabs in the U.S.” (p. 23). Moreover, Daraiseh (2012) emphasized that “Muslim women were specifically discriminated against all over the country” (p. 10). Muslim women are most likely to be known by their head clothes of a hijab or veil, which results in a high chance of receiving some negative interactions. According to Gehrke-White (2006), an American journalist who interviewed more than 50 Muslim American women in the U.S., most veiled or head covered Muslims women affirmed receiving some verbal threats as well as calling them to where they belong. These negative interactions can be mainly verbal interactions by saying words or physical interaction by using body language or face’s gestures. It is important to notice that anybody has the chance of receiving some sort of negative interaction for different reasons, but the focus here is on the main reason of receiving negativity interaction for being veiled. Thus, the veil obviously can easily put veiled women at a higher risk of receiving negative interactions in the U.S., as the participants of this study confirmed.
Based on the participant’s experiences, there were several negative verbal interactions that occurred toward them. Some of these negative verbal interactions were jokes or insults, and some others were just physical gesture reactions indicating negative feelings toward the veiled participants. For example, EEMA had a verbal interaction with her cousin while she was wearing the veil. That interaction was a result of the experience of wearing the veil as she wrote in her diary:

The doors swing open as I approach and my cousin walks out—looking at me with a dumbfounded expression. I said hello and he took one of the twins from my arms. As we walked inside he confessed that he did not know it was me, and he thought, “who is this ninja lady with my nephews?!” I laughed, to some extent shocked that a ninja was the first thing that came to his mind.

EEMA did not take her cousin’s comment as an insult, rather she took it as a joke and that is reasonable because the veil does not belong to her or represent her personality in any way. However, the case would be different if EEMA was wearing the veil as a way to represent her personality or style because criticizing people’s appearance is not a nice behavior. Another example happened to GEWA as she planned to meet two of her friends at a restaurant that they usually like to go to. GEWA arrived at the restaurant first while veiled and waited for her friends. One of them entered, but did not recognize GEWA since she was veiled until GEWA called her friend’s name, as GEWA detailed:

She looked at me, leaned forward squinted and looked and smiled as she shook her head side to side and said, “GEWA? What on earth are you wearing and why?” [The other friend] came in about that time and she reacted about the
same way... Neither of them was condemning or negative. In fact they just giggled a little at me trying to eat with the veil on. (personal communication, 2014).

As EEMA perceived her cousin’s joke, GEWA also did the same by not taking any of her friends’ comments as offensive. It might be a normal reaction for some people, but actually would be totally different if they wear the veil for fashion or as a belief. The jokes or comments could not evoke the participants to think of their situation if the veil was a part of their daily attire. They would not think of Muslim girls at schools who suddenly became veiled in middle or high school where they might be the subject of some of these jokes or insults from their classmates. According to Tindongan (2011), Muslim students in American schools have suffered from different types of discrimination; “girls wearing hijab [have been] particular targets” (p. 83). For example, Nazma Khan, the founder of World Hijab Day, faced some negative encounters while studying. She was called Batman or ninja in her middle school, and Osama Bin Laden or terrorist when she moved on to college after 9/11 (Nye, 2013).

Another example of receiving a negative interaction happened with GEWA while shopping at Wal-Mart. As she entered the doors, there was a couple that got her attention as she stated: “I heard the woman say to the man, “what tha? What’s the reason for her to wear that garb?” The man just shook his head and made sure I could see that he did.” The interesting thing is that the couple did not ask her why she was veiled, instead they made sure to show her some displeasing gestures when seeing her. Also, when GEWA went to Home Depot trying to interact with people there, she was surprised by how invisible she became as she stated: “No one talked to me,
looked at me that I noticed. No one even acknowledged me as I checked out? I didn't get a thank you for coming, nothing. It was like I was invisible.” Obviously GEWA felt being ignored, which is what many veiled Muslim women might feel on a daily basis. This kind of ignoring has frequently happened with my wife and me. The ignoring can easily reach me because I am associated with my veiled wife, and that reminds me of my wife’s friend Stepha who was ignored by her classmates while she walked with a veiled woman. That happened when my wife and Stepha went to the park and Stepha saw one of her classmates, so she thought to introduce them to each other. Stepha shouted and waved to a girl in her class many times, but she was ignored, which caused Stepha to feel awkward. Stepha believed that the veil was the problem that made her classmate ignore her, and she said sorry to my wife for being ignored. Clearly, the undesirable reaction not just toward my wife, the veiled woman, but also reached Stepha for the reason of walking with a veiled woman. It is usually frustrating for me to observe how people react toward my wife and noticing her being ignored many times. It is also ironic to feel that I might be the one who is blamed of so called forcing her to be veiled. I consider being ignored as a negative interaction because it is not the norm to be treated poorly by employees at any store or by friends or classmates. Another example comes from MENA who went shopping at Wal-Mart and everything was fine until she faced a difficult negative encounter while shopping. In her daily journal, MENA detailed the encounter as she stated in 2014:

An older lady (Caucasian, estimate age: 70-85) passed by in a shopping cart—the carts for the elderly to sit, ride and shop. She passed by me, paused and said “Ehuuh... you are scary.” I turned around, and asked “I am, why I am I scary?”
She responded, as she moved along, “All black, scary, ehuuh.” She looked disgusted by me. I was hurt. For the first time I left uncomfortable in the veil.

In this instance, MENA received a direct negative encounter that hurt her and made her feel uncomfortable as a result of wearing the veil. MENA tried to engage in a dialogue to find out the reason that made her scary in the eyes of that old lady, but the old lady just mentioned the black color without stopping to speak. Although MENA had the courage to start a dialogue, the old lady made sure to deliver a message of displeasure to MENA. One interesting thing that happened was the awakening of MENA’s awareness toward others and how others see her as veiled as she stated: “What she said made me very aware of my attire and I felt like everyone in the store was looking at me.” That awareness led MENA to pay more attention to things that happen around her as she expressed:

Afterwards, I went to check-out at the register. I stood in line; a young African American man was in front of me. He kept looking at me, as though he wanted to ask a question but he did not. I noticed the cashier greeted him when it was his turn to check-out. When it was my turn, she did not say hello. I did not get a greeting! She did not look at me directly – it was like she was avoiding eye contact with me by all means.

It is obvious here how MENA became alert after the old lady’s comments and began to notice everything. Being aware helped MENA to see things clearly and associated it properly with her situation of being veiled. As MENA became more aware of how the cashier was treating her, she noticed the manager coming that made her
think:

It was odd that the man[ager] came by, did not resolve anything, walked around behind me, and waited until I was gone. If this was the case, then it is such a shame. I wonder how many other subtle cautions occurred that I did not notice. I also wondered what Muslim women dressed in a full veil experience on daily basis living in regions where a fully veiled Muslim woman is not very common.

Clearly if MENA was not alert, she would not have noticed the manager or considered his arrival as odd. MENA even started to think of how many things that she did not notice before. I consider this encounter as a negative interaction since it indicates unequal treatment that most likely occurred because she was wearing the veil. One might think that the fact that MENA’s race is African American it might be a factor of receiving unequal treatment from the cashier; however, the person in front of MENA in the line was an African American who was given a friendly greeting. Also, the manager came when she stepped to the register, which I believe was because of the veil. Therefore, wearing the veil caused MENA to receive a direct negative comment from the old lady and indirect negative treatment from the cashier and the manager. Most importantly is that these negative encounters toward MENA’s attire helped increase her awareness about the fact that there are some women who suffer the same experience on a daily basis.

The realization of feeling discomfort is the foundation of emerging direct or indirect negative interactions. Having the feeling of discomfort was mentioned many times by the participants in this study as they experienced other’s uneasiness of seeing them veiled. EEMA, for instance, verbally explained others’ discomfort with the veil, “I
think it makes people uncomfortable because they can’t see your facial features. Several people said that…” She also recalled a conversation with a woman about the veil and the discomfort associated with it:

I remember one specific conversation I had with an older woman about the veil. She said she considers herself a progressive person, but for some reason, women wearing veil’s still makes her uncomfortable. She expressed that not being able to see someone’s face makes it hard for her to feel like she can trust her.

Moreover, MENA explained an experience that happened with her at the register in her diary: “I realized that my experience at the register was odd. The lady at the register did not look at me directly and she seemed uncomfortable. I also noticed that the manager stayed around until I left.” It is clear here that MENA felt the discomfort of people seeing her, but this uneasiness is just the beginning of a negative interaction. Hence, feeling uncomfortable toward veiled women seems a common feeling and it perhaps increases the possibility of creating more negative interactions toward them.

Overall, the interactions that resulted from the studies participants’ experiences of wearing the veil can be seen mostly as negative. There was no positive or privileged interactions that happened with them, yet I considered normal interactions as positive as explained on sub-question two. Even though there was a direct negative verbal interaction toward one of the participants, there was no direct physical interaction or attack toward the participants. However, they encountered several indirect verbal and physical gesture interactions as a result of being veiled. The examples of the indirect negative verbal interactions are the jokes or comments that GEWA and EEMA’s friends
spoke about the veil, as well as being ignored or not greeted. Besides, the examples of indirect physical interaction towards the participants are the gestures or body language of others, like moving the head side to side as GEWA pointed out, avoiding eye contact, or the presence of a manager as MENA discussed previously. The positive verbal or physical interaction towards the participants that I consider positive are mainly for them to receive the same treatment as other Western people, such as being greeted or asked if they needed help.

In general, the participants’ outcomes affirm what has been said by other studies, that especially after 9/11 most covered Muslim women were harassed or had a higher chance of being discriminated against (Coger, 2011; Daraiseh, 2012; Patel, 2011). Even though the participants did not receive a direct physical attack, which was not even expected, some studies showed that it could happen sometimes. For example, according to Daraiseh (2012), “Muslim women in Chicago reported having their headscarves pulled off their heads and being spat at on the street” (p. 10). If wondering why some people would do that to veiled women, the answer according to Zempi and Chakraborti (2014) is that:

Based on the Western perspective, veiled Muslim women are routinely perceived as submissive, passive and with very little power over their lives. Thus, popular perceptions that veiled Muslim women are deemed ‘passive’ increase their chance of assault, thereby marking them as an “easy” target to attack. (p.30)

Clearly, the sight of the veil as visual culture can incite some Westerners’ cautions with suspicious alert as well as it is most likely to lead them to react negatively or with up normal reaction toward these veiled women. Therefore, wearing the veil
increased the participants’ chances of encountering negative interactions, and wearing the veil did not bring any privileged treatment for them, rather it most likely decreased their chances of being treated as normal people. In reflecting on my personal life relating to my veiled wife in the U.S., I totally agree that being treated as normal would be a positive experience for us. I was thinking that my wife and I might be overly sensitive about that, but after reading participants daily journals, I found them sharing the same observations that we see and feel.

To sum it up, based on the Western participants veiled women, the veil can incite transformative visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning veiled women in many ways. First of all, the sight of the veil incited a visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning issues of Muslim women such as the nation of being Muslim, then consequently a notion of being oppressed as well as being forced to veil against their will. Accordingly, the dialogue goes further from believing that Muslim women are oppressed to reach the issue of gender equality regarding Muslim women, and how these women are somewhat perceived passive and submissive to men in power. The second, the sight of the veil is able to transfer a dialogue about the “Others”. These so called “others” are meant for veiled women who are perceived as not belonging to U.S.; in other words, they are not originally from here. Thus, the dialogue of that visual culture icon turned to some selective countries as these veiled women must be from somewhere in that area, especially The Middle East area. Finally, the veil, as a visual culture icon, is able to incite a transformative idea of warning. That warning or alert is linked with suspicious feelings toward that veiled woman as a threat or even a possible terrorist attack. Consequently, people might stay away from them, ignore them, or react
with them. The reactions are either negative verbal interactions, or physical ones, which are limited to face gestures or some form of negative body language that is meant to be a message of disliking.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This study attempted to explore what the transformative visual cultural discourse is behind the veil of Muslim women. The main question for this narrative study is: How do veiled Western women incite transformative visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning veiled women? There are several sub questions under Question 1 for which this study sought answers, such as: What does it mean to be veiled in a Western culture; what kind of verbal or physical interactions result from the experience of wearing the veil; what understanding do Western women have about the veil or veiled women before and after their experience; and, what possible narratives may emerge with the three non-Muslim women participants?

This study explored the importance of visual cultural dialogue and concepts of Western women in relation to the Muslim women’s veil by analyzing participants’ experiences. By listening to participants' stories of the veil experience and reading their points of view toward it, I get a better understanding of the problem surrounding the veil as well as Western women’s knowledge about the veil. Upon reviewing the participants’ notes from their experiences, I began to believe that the veil can be used peacefully to incite a transformative visual cultural dialogue to help people enhance their understanding of the veil’s issue. By engaging in participants’ experiences, listening to their understanding, sharing my observations, and retelling the participants’ stories, I attempted to enrich the dialogue surrounding the issue of the veil so that rich intellectual discourse can flourish by enhancing my understanding as well as others. The dialogue
between the art education participants and I can be a starting point for other researchers to build upon who may be interested in tackling the veil issue in art education.

In light of the participants’ exploration of experiencing the veil in public and by encountering people in Denton, Texas, their stories and reflections constructed a vivid picture of how the veil provokes some Westerners to react harshly toward veiled women. The participants faced some difficulties and negative reactions when dealing with people. They admitted feeling ignored, stared at, looked at suspiciously, and receiving gestural or verbal criticisms. Participants also expressed their concern that perhaps Muslim women are not treated equally to men, since Muslim women in the Western narrative are oppressed in many ways and forced to cover up while men are not. All participants reflected by agreeing that the majority of Westerners believe that wearing the veil is forced. Two of the participants complained of not feeling free under the veil and that the veil made it hard for them to move easily. Two of the participants felt sympathy for what veiled women encounter every day. In general, the veil can incite a sequence of transformative visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning veiled women. For example, the sight of the veil incited ideas concerning issues referring to being a Muslim woman, consequently, the notion of being oppressed as well as being forced to veil against their will. Accordingly, the dialogue explored the issue of gender equality regarding Muslim women and how these women are perceived as somewhat passive and submissive to men in general.

Moreover, the sight of the veil transfers a dialogue about “others.” The so called “others” is a term meant for veiled women who are perceived as not belonging in the
United States, as if there is a contradiction of being American and Muslim. Accordingly, seeing this visual cultural icon can incite the dialogue to some selective countries as these veiled women must be from somewhere in the Middle East simply because they are veiled. Finally, the veil, as a visual cultural icon incites a transformative idea of warning. That warning or alert is linked with suspicious feelings toward veiled woman as a potential threat or connected to a possible terrorist attack. Consequently, people might stay away from them, ignore them, or react negatively towards them, either through verbal or physical interactions, which are limited to facial gestures or some form of negative body language meant to reflect a message of dislike. The results of this research also highlighted the negativity the media portrays regarding the veil, which influences Western culture perceptions.

By engaging with the veil subject and reading more about the veil in Western discourse, I enriched my knowledge of different opinions, especially from the participants’ dialogue. It helped me to rethink my opinions regarding the veil and the difference between my perspective and the general perspective of Western people. Thinking and rethinking about the veil enhanced my consciousness about the issue in many ways. I became more aware of how Western culture looks, reacts, and thinks about the veil, and what arguments do they open up usually regard the veil. I also realized how my thoughts have changed because of evolving with the veil issue discourse. For example, I started to pay more attention to make some logical dialogue when speaking about the most common topic as why women wear veils. I believe that by taking the time to expose oneself to an unfamiliar cultural or religious belief allows the mind to digest and grasp what it once could not, which should be useful regarding
the veil subject. As an art educator, I believe using the veil as a subject in art education can contribute to the veil’s dialogue. Utilizing art classes to address the veil issue might help students understand it in a better way, especially in today’s society where the veil appears to be a real issue in some parts of the world. Thus, it is important to link art education classes in intellectual discourse to address current social issues to help students understand these issues better.

Conclusion

“Narrative is a way of understanding one’s own and others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (Chase, 2005, p. 656)

This study based its raw data on three participants’ narratives of wearing the full veil in public in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas area. Participants were all Americans and non-Muslim with a lack of exposure to the veiled women community. They were also doctoral students in Art Education who were familiar with the importance of visual cultural representation. Participants’ narratives allowed me as a researcher to access a small sample of Western women with an understanding toward the veil or veiled women. This study does not seek any generalization; yet to gain a more thorough understanding of what the transformative visual cultural veil communicates to some Western people.

By reading and coding participants’ narratives, I constructed several broad ideas into four groups of themes, each addressing an identified research focus. The themes are linked with each research topic. For example, research topic one is related to participants' understanding and concern about veiled women. This section includes primary concern themes such as concern about a lack of gender equality,
suspiciousness, lack of understanding about the veil, lack of exposure to veiled women, and the veil as a visual cultural object. The second topic is related to participants’ attitudes toward Muslim veiled women. This section shows that participants acknowledge gaining a better awareness of the veil issue, and they reveal some sympathy or respect of what veiled women might face because of being veiled. The third topic is related to how participants felt during their experiences of wearing the veil as well as how others interacted with them while being veiled. This section demonstrates that participants had to face some difficulties of restrictiveness and invisibility regarding wearing the veil. This section also presents that participants had to face some awkward moments when receiving stares and subtle discrimination or discomfort. Participants also felt more self-conscious while veiled since the veil made them stand out.

The last topic is related to participants’ verbal and physical encounters with others while veiled. This section indicates that participants experienced verbal jokes or insults from others while veiled as well as receiving negative gestures from people. Participants also articulate that some people commented about feeling uncomfortable with the veiling. In general with the coding here, I found out that the veil incited participants’ concern toward a lack of gender equality and women oppression. Moreover, they declared a lack of understanding about the veil and a lack of exposure to veiled women, which increased some sense of suspiciousness around them. Finally, participants acknowledged admiration and awareness toward the veiled woman’s experience in the USA.

I used the previous themes to answer the first sub-questions that concerned the
meaning of being veiled in a Western culture. All the themes helped in constructing the general meanings of being veiled in a Western culture. The veil became a “key visual symbol of Islam” (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012, p. 269), and the media have linked the veil mostly with radical Muslim and violence (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2002; Ould, 2007; Parker, 2008; Shaheen, 1997; Shaheen, 2009). Consequently, wearing the veil in a Western culture, like Denton, brings wide attention, so the veiled participants were most likely going to be stared at and perceived differently. For instance, they were perceived as not belonging or as “the others.” It is obvious that Westerners often perceive veiled women as not belonging to Western culture. Even if these women were Americans, others would perceive them as outsiders just because they were wearing the veil.

Moreover, veiled women in Western culture are perceived as Muslim as the veil is an Islamic tradition and is reserved only for Muslim women. However, the fact is that “the veil is an Islamic precept as much as it is a Christian or a Jewish one” (Davary, 2009, p. 49). In the end, to be veiled in a Western culture can mean many things, one of which indicates that you are a Muslim, which perhaps is associated with a host of negative perceptions, like being oppressed, backward, and submissive. I believe that perceiving Muslim women as oppressed comes from the idea that Muslim women are being forced to wear veils. According to Elveren (2008), Muslim women are viewed as “victims, oppressed and submissive in mainstream Western media” (p. 114).

Participants also confirmed this perception of oppression by vividly answering the interview questions. Westerners also perceived veiled women suspiciously. Todd (1998) suggested that when exposed to Western film and media, viewers are more likely to perceive veiled persons as terrorists or women imprisoned by their culture. Accordingly,
the veil indicates one’s religion; being veiled here in Denton, Texas, means that that person is perceived as Muslim and that being Muslim means she does not belong to this country or culture. Veiled women can also represent oppression and a threat at the same time.

The second sub-question to answer concerns the verbal or physical interactions resulting from the experience of wearing the veil. In the literature review, the veil is one of the most recognizable signs that puts veiled women at risk for acts of discrimination, including verbal assault, being spit on, having the veil pulled off by someone, etc. (Daraiseh, 2012). More specifically in America, Muslim students endure different types of discrimination at schools; “girls wearing hijab [have been] particular targets” (Tindongan, 2011, p. 83). However, participants did not face any direct physical interaction, but they faced some negative verbal interactions such as jokes, comments, gestures, and a sense of being discriminated.

Important to notice is that participants pointed out some negative interaction while they wore the veil several times in a short period of time, so the chance of receiving negative verbal or physical interactions might increase by increasing the time of wearing the veil. Apparently, by wearing the veil there is a high chance of receiving different types of negative interactions including a sense of discrimination. Clearly, the participants’ outcomes affirm what has been said by other studies, that especially since 9/11 most covered Muslim women have been harassed or were at a higher chance of being discriminated against (Coger, 2011; Daraiseh, 2012; & Patel, 2011). In general, the participants did not point out receiving any privilege or kind comments about their veil by others. The only positive interactions they pointed out were when people looked
at them as normal people and interacted with them normally.

The third sub-question is concerned with the participants’ understanding of the veil or veiled women before and after their experience. Based on participants’ interviews, the veil, hijab, or any type of covering is a clear identity of Islam or being Muslim. Typically, the participants believed that the veil indicates ethnicity or religion, so veiled women were most likely to be Muslim or to belong to other ethnicities (i.e., not Western), and they labeled veiled women as “the others.”

Furthermore, participants perceived the veil as a sign of gender inequality in Muslim communities. According to Ssenyonjo (2007), some people criticize the veil and see it as “an unambiguous symbol of discrimination and gender inequality imposed only on women (but not men) regardless of their freely chosen personal beliefs” (p. 701). Therefore, participants, as Westerners, have the same idea that the veil is not a choice in general even though some women might choose to veil. More clearly, the idea of force can be seen in Allievi’s (2006), article entitled, The Shifting Significance of the Halal/Haram Frontier. He confirmed, “For the West, the Muslim woman is by definition downtrodden, and the symbol of her oppression is the hijab, the veil, which she is forced to wear” (p.120).

The issue of choice surrounding the wearing of the veil is complex. It was one of the arguments or justifications that French President Nicolas Sarkozy pointed out to justify the French ban saying, “the ruling is to protect women from being forced to cover their faces” (Shahid, 2010, ¶ 7). Participants here are a clear example of what other studies show in tackling the veil issue. Certainly, in the Western context the veil became a widely known icon that represents Muslim or sometimes Arabs (Ajrouch, 2007;
Chakraborti & Zempi 2012; Coger, 2011; Haddad, 2007; Hasan, 2007). To be clear, being known as Muslim because of the veil is not a problem, yet the problem is what Muslim or veiled women indicate in the Western context. In history, Western colonizers went to fight, colonize, and then presented their own narrative about that colonized societies.

According to Hoodfar (1993), “Western representations of the harem were inspired not only by the fantasies of A Thousand and One Nights, but also by the colonizers' mission of subjugating the colonized” (p.8). Hence, Western colonizers became selective in creating their own narrative to subjugate the colonized, which I believe is happening now when linking the veil with oppression, backwardness, and other negative labels. Since all participants in my study are Western women, their perceptions, as gleaned through interviews and daily journaling, reflect the general understanding of the veil and veiled women in a Western context. It is clear that the veil is a known identifier of being Muslim, and the veil or veiled women have been perceived as a sign of backwardness and oppression since the age of Orientalism.

On the other hand, two participants showed a little understanding of diversity in veiling, such as the different colors and shapes of veils, while the third one showed no awareness of diversity. Importantly to notice here is that the two participants who acknowledged diversity in veiling were less critical of the veil than the participant who was not aware of that diversity. Participants also admitted uncertainty of when and where to veil as they were concerned about disrespecting the veil. They were also expecting to draw attention when wearing the veil as well as having an assumption of discomfort when covered up with the veil. In general, participants acknowledged having
the lack of exposure to veiled women and that this might explain their lack of knowledge about the veil and veiled women.

Accordingly, people fear and avoid what they don’t know. The lack of knowledge about the veil and veiled women is evident in the American public, and it has been recognized by many researchers as well as by our participants here in this study. The issue can come from people’s assumptions that are based on little knowledge or a lack of exposure as Cole and Ahmadi (2003) state, American’s misconceptions about the veil and Islam “usually stem from a lack of cultural and religious exposure” (p. 58). According to Droogsma (2007) the American public will continue to have a lack of knowledge about Muslim women and their veil “due to a lack of exposure to and/or an avoidance of Muslim women who veil” (p.315). Therefore, I believe that art educators can contribute by introducing the veil issue and veiled women by exposing American children to a whole different culture.

Participants affirmed feeling more self-conscious after veiling in public. They also grew more conscious of their surrounding atmosphere, such as the reactions of other people. Bullock (1999) cited that sense in her dissertation, “Naturally, those who do not wear hijab full time see it differently. Iman "always feels self-conscious" in hijab” (p. p.81). GEWA also declared that people “stopped smiling and looking in my direction. They made a point to not look at me, or to make me think they were not looking.” In general, participants noticed that at first they were the focus of people’s attention, but then quickly found themselves feeling invisible. Consequently, two participants in this study expressed feelings of sympathy and respect toward veiled women who might face the same difficulties interacting with others as they faced while wearing the veil.
Participants after veiling revealed having some conclusion of the veil's complexity of meaning. Siraj (2011) indicated that “wearing the hijab does not represent a homogeneous discursive reality for Muslim women around the world, but instead the fluid and changing meaning of the hijab depends upon the spatial context in which it is worn” (P. 728). Accordingly, the visual cultural representation of the veil should not be homogeneous representation as well. It should represent all its rich meaning and variations.

In general, all three participants emphasized that the experience of wearing the veil made them more conscious of the reality of being veiled in public. As they are art educators, they also acknowledge that the experience of wearing the veil can be a valuable way to teach students about cultural differences and to enhance student awareness of the importance of being open to others as a way of learning.

The last sub-question is concerned with the participants’ narratives that emerge as they wear the veil in public. The purpose of the participants’ narratives is to explore what transformative dialogue and ideas concerning the sight of the veil or veiled women emerge as an icon of visual culture. Each participant had a different narrative. MENA, for example, showed great appreciation and valued the experience because she believes that this experience made her more aware of Muslim differences as well as herself. She acknowledged that she perhaps had stared or looked at veiled women before, but never considered to speaking to them. GEWA, the second participant, showed a clear awareness of her personal reaction and she asked some good questions, but she brought up many other things to the veil issue such as laws against women driving in Saudi Arabia. I think GEWA here is like many other people who
usually link many other countries’ issues to the veil that is worn by millions of Muslims around the world. The third participant is EEMA, who wore the veil for three times then stopped for feeling afraid of disturbing her social life as I understood from her in person-to-person conversation. EEMA recognized how the veil is very powerful and tells a lot about veiled women. In general, I noticed that all participants tried to tell people at first that they were not Muslim and that they wore the veil as a participant in a research study.

Finally, in answering the primary research question, I utilized the outcome data from the emerging themes as well as the sub-question answers, which helped to construct the answer to the main question. The primary question is: How do veiled Western women incite transformative visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning veiled women? Thus, the study’s participants play an important role to enrich the study, and their dialogue is the fuel for this research. Their experiences of wearing the veil in public and interacting with people offers truly valuable and rich information that is not usually available in academic inquiry. This information enhanced my understanding and enabled me to reflect on the perception of veiled women, as well as reflecting on my familiarity with the veil. By telling my encounters with the veil and retelling the participants’ stories, I believe more enhancements remain regarding the issue of the women’s veil.

First of all, it is important to notice that dialogue is the most significant key in this study, and it is important to gain a healthy environment of awareness. Fischer (2007) notes that “it is through dialogue that we develop consciousness, learn control over internal mental processes and develop conceptual tools for thinking” (p. 616).
Therefore, by offering my dialogue and the participants’ dialogue based on the wearing of the veil, I am aspiring to develop my consciousness or enhance my understanding of the veil issue as well as the participants' understandings. The veil is a very complex topic and needs to be looked at from various angles if seeking comprehension of its place in visual culture. I believe that the veil has the capacity to incite dialogue among observers as well as the veiled person and readers.

The primary question is focused on how the veil incites transformative visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning veiled women. By looking at the participants’ experiences and written reflections, I can vividly see that the sight of the veil or veiled women incites transformative visual cultural dialogue between participants and observers. At first, the sight of the veil catches people’s attention, which is transforming the visual image of the veil to a meaning that might need further discussion. The observers usually interact when seeing the veil, yet that interaction is not continuously the same. Sometimes the interaction performs as a silent dialogue as if the veil or veiled woman does not exist. Other times, the interaction goes further to shape a harsh dialogue like a verbal attack, or indirect physical reaction such as turning the head from side to side or showing some facial gesture. Also, the veil incites other dialogues that participants communicated about such as inciting ideas concerning veiled women or Muslim women’s issues, inciting negative interactions and dialogue toward a selective region or country.

The veil has a powerful sight that immediately incites people’s attention in Western culture. According to Byng (2010) just as the word “terrorism” provokes concern about security in the United States (U.S.); the visible symbols of the veil, hijab,
and niqab provoke the same response and restriction. Therefore, Westerner’s perception is linked to the idea of Islam with suspiciousness feelings toward Muslims. According to Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey (2006), nearly 70% of non-Muslim U.S. citizen respondents believed that Muslims are not respectful of women. In fact, just 19% believed that Muslims were respectful of women, whereas 69% thought that Muslims are not respectful of women. The U.S. percentage of viewing Muslims as not respectful toward women is close to the France and Germany percentages, who already made legitimate laws banning the veil. Suitably, seeing the veil incites several negative impressions in Westerners' thoughts. It starts by transforming a sequence of issues starting from defining veiled women as Muslim. Accordingly, many other issues come along with perceiving Muslim women as possessions, subjugated, oppressed, forced, or unequal.

In general, the sight of the veil incites a dialogue concerning Muslim women’s issues. The Western narrative of Muslim women is that Muslim women are not treated equally to men; so, they are oppressed in many ways, like being forced to cover up as if men own them. Then, surprisingly they are not fighting for their rights and rather, they are passive and allowing men to subjugate them. This narrative or assumption is based on the veil in the Western context, which participants here confirmed it after wearing the veil and reflecting on their experiences. Therefore, I noticed that the discourse about the veil or veiled women usually leads people’s thoughts, as well as the participants here, to associate veiled women with other issues of Muslim women everywhere. Consequently, the veil incites Westerners’ collective memory to think of related issues.
Furthermore, the sight of the veil incites a dialogue regarding “the others,” or not an American. For some Westerners, the veil incites a visual cultural representation of being Muslim, and it possibly incites reflections of ethnicity indicating a sense of not belonging. To be clear, Islam is a religion, not a race or ethnicity, and Muslims can be found anywhere and from any race.

According to a report entitled Mapping the Global Muslim Population conducted by Pew Research Center, there are about 1.57 billion Muslims all over the world today, and there are about 50 Muslim-majority countries where half or more of the population is Muslim (Pew, 2009). Moreover, the report describes the 10 countries with the highest population of Muslims in descending order as Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Egypt, Nigeria, Iran, Turkey, Algeria, and Morocco. Interestingly, when speaking about Muslims, many Westerners’ minds are most likely to think of some Middle Eastern countries, which they associate with women’s issues. Some Westerners cannot think of a Muslim person without associating him or her with foreign countries. Likewise, Zahedi (2011) concluded that “some Americans did not view Muslim Americans as belonging to America” (p. 188). Participants here demonstrated some sense of being ignored or perceived as the other. Participants here felt the real feeling of being veiled in Western culture. The sight of the veil on participants transformed them immediately from ordinary American women to "the others" or women who do not belong. Some Americans are most likely to deal with them as not belonging, “the others,” or as a suspicious enemy.

Accordingly, the sight of the veil incites a dialogue regarding selective countries, especially in the Middle East. That perception toward selective Muslim countries can be understood and rooted to what Said (1979) explained in his book Orientalism. He
argued that Orientalists helped to associate the East with their bias assumptions and misunderstandings, and Westerners today are still feeding from that biased context of Orientalists at that time. Accordingly, Said believed they, Orientalists, have a misunderstanding of Orient culture as they wrote about it as a homogeneous culture and made further generalizations about it. That misunderstanding did not just emerge suddenly, rather it built up through history as he elaborated more:

Yet Orientalism is very much a book tied to the tumultuous dynamics of contemporary history. I emphasize in it accordingly that neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other. That these supreme fictions lend themselves easily to manipulation and the organization of collective passion has never been more evident than in our time, when the mobilizations of fear, hatred, disgust, and resurgent self-pride and arrogance—much of it having to do with Islam and the Arabs on one side, “we” Westerners on the other—are very large-scale enterprises. Orientalism’s first page opens with a 1975 description of the Lebanese Civil War that ended in 1990, but the violence and the ugly shedding of human blood continues up to this minute. (p. xvii)

Consequently, the Oriental discourse is filled with generalizing ideas and perspectives of Muslims and Arab cultures associated with “their backwardness, lack of democracy, and abrogation of women’s rights” (Said, 1979, p. 21), which I believe linked Muslims with a certain area in the Orient. Therefore, one can understand that Americans are most likely to associate Islam or Muslim with the region of Middle East.
In fact, Gottschalk and Greenberg (2008) have studied some American understanding toward Islam, and they asserted that:

Most Americans who we have asked to do this exercise have given an almost routine set of answers. The names and events they think of tend to be associated with violence (e.g., Osama bin Laden, the 9/11 tragedies, Palestinian suicide bombers), the ideas and practices associated with oppression (e.g., jihad, veiling, Islamic law), and the places limited to the Middle East (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran). (p. 3)

Fittingly, I believe that there is a sort of sequence linked with Islam; it may start with Orient, Islam, violence, Arab, Middle East, and women oppression, and the veil can be the igniter of that thought process since the veil is a vivid visual cultural icon. This misunderstanding is widely accepted among Americans as Said (1979) admitted: “I wish I could say, however, that general understanding of the Middle East, the Arabs, and Islam in the U.S. has improved somewhat, but alas, it really hasn’t” (p. 19).

Similarly, the sight of the veil might incite a dialogue regarding alertness, undesirable, or negative interactions. There is a connection that linked veiled women with a potential threat, which Coger (2011) argued that “the media portrays a connection between veiled women and terrorism and Islamist extremism” (p. 36). When the veil draws attention, it is most likely to send an alert or invite for actions to be taken, which incites people’s thoughts in another direction. The other direction is that the veil can transform a person from being an ordinary one to a suspicious one like what happened with MENA when she went shopping at Walmart, and the manager came observing for no reason. Overall, the sight of the veil in the U.S. might alarm Westerners with a sense
of suspiciousness or threat, and the veiled person might be treated suspiciously as well. In other words, wearing the veil can transform a typical American person to a suspicious one.

The interactions that resulted from the study’s participants’ experiences of wearing the veil can be seen mostly as negative. There was no positive or privileged interactions that happened with them, yet I considered normal interactions as positive as explained in sub-question two. Even though there was a direct negative verbal interaction toward one of the participants, there was no direct physical interaction or attack toward the participants. There were several indirect verbal and physical gesture interactions as a result of being veiled. In general, the participants’ outcomes affirm what has been said by other studies, that especially after 9/11, most covered Muslim women were harassed or had a higher chance of being discriminated against (Coger, 2011; Daraiseh, 2012; Patel, 2011).

In summary, based on the Western veiled participants, the veil can incite transformative visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning veiled women in many ways. First of all, the sight of the veil incited a visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning issues of Muslim women such as the nation being Muslim, then consequently a notion of being oppressed as well as being forced to veil against their will. Accordingly, the dialogue goes further, believing that Muslim women are oppressed to reaching the issue of gender equality regarding Muslim women, and how these women are somewhat perceived as passive and submissive to men in power. The second, the sight of the veil can transfer a dialogue about “the others.” These so called “others” are meant as veiled women who are perceived as not belonging to U.S.; in
other words, they were not originally from here. Thus, the dialogue of that visual cultural icon turns to selective countries as these veiled women must be from somewhere in that area, especially the Middle East. Finally, the veil, as a visual cultural icon, can incite a transformative idea of a warning. That warning or alert is linked with suspicious feelings toward veiled woman as a threat or even a possible terrorist attack. Consequently, people might stay away from them, ignore them, or react negatively toward them. The reactions are either negative verbal interactions or physical ones, which are limited to face gestures or some form of negative body language that is meant to be a message of dislike.

Researcher’s Reflection
In the current study, I first addressed social and religious background surrounding the influences of my understanding about the veil. I had not thought about the veil or even questioned it before France’s arguments to ban it. The veil was just a normal outfit like the Shemagh or Ghutrah, a square traditional headdress worn by men in many Middle Eastern regions. However, after the political arguments regarding the veil in France, I started noticing the veil everywhere in public, which helped me to seriously think about it. I wondered what made the French ban the veil. In thinking about the issue, I formed many assumptions such as the French wanting to empower their own identity by criticizing other identities. I assumed that the French wanted to enhance their security by banning any facial covering; or maybe they wanted to treat people based on how their native place dealt with French citizens. I know some of these assumptions may sound nonsensical, but I admit to thinking about them.

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As a reaction to the argument of banning the veil, I chose the veil as the subject for my Masters in Fine Arts. I believed that women’s veils were not represented enough in the visual arts of my home country, Saudi Arabia. I wonder if the male power or the religious aspect in country was the cause of seeing the veil absent in our visual art. I thought, if the veil is a respected identity in my culture, it should be presented in the visual artwork. Therefore, I tried to challenge the male representation in my culture and dedicate my veil artworks to the veiled women in Saudi Arabia showing them that we are proud of them and their identity. As an artist and art educator, I try to express my mind freely. By choosing the veil project, I gained more knowledge about the veil from my heritage and history. I found out that the veil existed thousands of years before Islam and that Islam did not invent the veil to cover up women, which I, and perhaps others may have thought. I also learned that Muslim women have used the veil as a sort of fashion, which indicates a woman’s tribe, region, or conditions by decorating it with local materials. What was interesting for me is that visual art guided me to constantly search and shape my knowledge.

Before engaging with the veil issue, I had a different opinion toward the veil. I had a shallow judgment supporting the rights for any government to make laws and force people to follow them. Therefore, I used to agree with the idea of requiring women to wear the veil in Saudi Arabia. I was looking at the issue from the political power of any country upon its land. I used to agree with the French law of banning the veil since I was looking at it from a political point of view that France can govern as they wish, just as Saudi Arabia can do the same. I doubt it if I was even looking at women’s perspectives or their rights about the veil issue. I probably did not put women in the equation just as
governments who made laws to require or ban the veil. I perhaps had the same feeling that the French law of banning the veil intended to treat veiled women unfairly. In addition, I most probably had only looked at and read what supported my viewpoint at the time. I was just hearing about the veil issue yet not feeling the real issue. Therefore, I think my engagement with the veil at the time was more of an indirect reaction of the global issue surrounding the veil, which helped me understand the complexity of the issue.

Studying abroad in the U.S. with my family, I noticed how people looked at my veiled wife and me. I noticed people’s reactions when seeing my wife, their reactions were not just unpleasant, but cold as well. I also noticed this same reaction, the same unpleasant gazing towards me. In the U.S., the veil is not banned, and there are no serious governmental debates to ban it yet; however, I think many people are not aware of the unfriendly reaction of many people like my wife and me. I can even understand the cruel reactions in countries like France since the veil is already banned, but I do not understand the common unpleasant reactions of many people here in the U.S. I wonder if the veil issue in France started with unpleasant feelings of seeing the veil just as I see it right now in the United States. I recalled my master’s project hoping it might help me enhance my understanding to see the real problem with the veil from the other perspective, but all I could recall was some descriptive and historical information about the veil from Muslim and non-Muslim heritages. That information did not help me see the problem from the viewpoints of people who might not like the veil or have a problem with it. Therefore, I thought being in a Western culture might give me a good opportunity
to understand the problems surrounding the veil and discover the other arguments toward the veil.

Consequently, I found some of my Western colleagues who were interested in participating in this study, which provided me with the opportunity to write about their experiences and views. Their experience and reflection helped me reach an understanding of what they think about the veil. For example, I was not aware that many people were looking at the veil from the equality perspective. I was looking at the issue simply as men and women usually wearing different attire. I also thought that many people were criticizing the veil because of its strangeness in Western culture or being old fashion in style; however, I found out that many people have the assumption that men are forcing women to be veiled, otherwise why would they wear it? By engaging with participants’ narratives, I learned that there is one essential idea most people believe in, and that is the veil is a force not a choice. I also realized that I unintentionally helped in confirming the idea of women being forced to veil by the way I answered people’s questions. For example, sometimes when people meet my wife and me, they eventually ask out of curiosity why my wife is veiled. I started answering the question without paying attention that although my wife is with me, the question was directed to me, and I unconsciously answered instead of directing the question to her. My action of answering that question is not only confirming the idea of forcing women to wear the veil, but it is also confirming the idea that veiled women are passive and submissive.

Moreover, the longer my wife and I live in Texas, the more we encounter unfriendly situations, unpleasant staring, or overhearing negative words. The more I think about these difficult encounters, the more I wonder why some people are behaving
like this, and perhaps we should remove ourselves from the spotlight so people will perceive my family as I do, as normal people. Sometimes I even think that my wife and I may be the ones who have this false assumption, and that we, as foreigners might be sensitive toward a normal reaction, hence we start to assume that people are staring undesirably at us, feeling unpleasant dealing with us, or making negative reactions or gestures toward us. Therefore, I preferred to let my colleagues take a walk in my wife’s shoes, and let them describe what they felt and how they were perceived. Thus, I could look at the issue from their perspectives, and ascertain if they felt the same way or encountered the same issues. I was not expecting too much from them since they were going to wear the veil just five times in public, but as it turned out, they encountered the exact same reactions my wife has encountered since coming to Texas.

Based on these participants’ experiences, it seems that most of them are not sure what Muslims think, do, or believe. In my view, this lack of knowledge might lead them to easily believe whatever people say about Muslims. Therefore, I believe that Westerners, or Americans in this study, need to be well-informed about Muslims cultures, and I see the veil issue as a great opportunity to enhance Americans consideration of Muslims and their way of life in a safe environment. As stated earlier, the veil has great power, so it is a topic for use in with art education students in terms of building critical thinking skills. Also, it is a rich subject that might help students discover how Muslims are different from and similar to themselves.

Most important is that many of Westerners obtained their knowledge about Muslims from the media, and the media has portrayed Muslims in a negative light, as Shaheen (2009) and others confirmed. It is possible that the media cycle of negative
representation might continue to spread to younger generations of Westerners unless further, larger studies like mine are employed to encourage understanding through experience. I contend that art teachers could play an important role in Americans’ discovery of other cultures through visual culture objects such as the veil.

Accordingly, the veil indicates one’s religion; being veiled here in Denton, Texas, means that that person is perceived as Muslim and that being Muslim means she does not belong to this country or culture. Also, veiled women can represent oppression or a threat. By coming to know these possible indications of the veil, I have increased my personal awareness of how some people might view my family in a Western culture. Increasing my personal awareness, moreover, will help me to clarify rather than emphasize people’s assumptions. For example, sometimes when some people get the courage to ask about the veil, instead of asking my wife, they would ask me why my wife had to veil. I used to answer this question, but by doing so, I helped to reinforce their assumption that veiled women are oppressed. By answering their question, I essentially agreed with their assumption that she had to wear it and that I was the one who should be asked this question. I should have told them to ask my wife instead of asking me; my wife’s answer would be more credible than mine because they might suspect that I am forcing her to wear the veil. Her conversation with them might help increase their awareness that she has the right to do what she believes in just as they do.

Also, I think reading and engaging with the veil's dialogue will increase veiled women’s awareness of how they would be perceived in a Western culture, and it will help provide more information about such a controversial subject in this era. Therefore,
if you are an American woman, for instance, who might choose to wear the veil, you most likely will be perceived differently—as someone outside of the culture—by wearing that piece of cloth. Moreover, this kind of awareness might draw attention to a general lack of knowledge about the veil, which would allow educators to clarify the complexity and negative perceptions of the veil in Western culture. Finally, answering this question can help show how the veil incites transformative dialogues touching on the view of the veil and veiled women.

The participants felt ignored by some people, encountered negative reactions, and were perceived as suspicious people at times. The participants’ experiences vividly revealed to me that the difficulties my wife and I encounter are real and common things that anyone can feel just by wearing the veil. It is important to notice that the main issue here surrounds a visual cultural symbol, which is the veil. Accordingly, visual culture is an important part in the field of art education, and art educators should pay attention and utilize their field to address the issue of the veil by approaching it from different angles so that students can have a better understanding of the visual culture behind the veil.

Implications

Art Education

*Visual arts are vital to all societies and that representations of art in education should seek to reveal its complexity, diversity, and integral cultural location.*

*These perspectives represent the lived meanings of art and arts communities through, for example, change in curriculum, collaborative instructional methods, and community action. Social reconstructionist versions of these perspectives*
are also founded on the belief that art education can make a difference in student understanding of and action in the world and that difference can enrich and improve social life. (Freedman, 2000, p. 67-68)

Most important to notice is that the existing discourse regards the Muslim veil from a political and religious perspective. Therefore, by conducting this kind of research, I attempted to provide rich academic information to contribute positively to the veil issue via the field of art education. As an art educator, I believe that art can educate myself as well as students as long as all of us are committed to making an effort and keeping our minds open. Visual art is a way of thinking and it has the ability to foster a peaceful discussion of even the most taboo subjects. Since I was wondering why the veil caused so much tension in my life living in the U.S., the process of conducting this research, listening to participants’ thoughts, and reflecting upon it allowed me to understand the issue of women in veil. Consequently, I believe that by utilizing art education to address the veil issue can also help enhance students’ understanding of women’s veils. Art education can play an important role by using visual culture in order to make some improvements in students’ understanding as Freedman describes above. I believe that Western culture is not used to seeing veiled women, and most of what they know about the veil or veiled women comes from Western media, which is mostly associated with negative or tragic news. For example, Coger (2011) and Todd (1998) have noticed that Western media is trying to show a relationship between being a veiled woman and Islamist radicalism or fundamentalist. Accordingly, if that is what American students understand about the veil or veiled women, it is not strange to see some of these students be aggressive toward dealing with what they believe as Islamist radicalism.
Therefore, I believe veiled women will continue to face the same difficulties. There will be no improvement in terms of the veil issue as long as the American public are receiving their information about the veil from the media. As Droogsma (2007) argued “The American public as a whole, stereotypes remain entrenched due to a lack of exposure to and/or an avoidance of Muslim women who veil, as well as reliance on the media as the main source of information about Muslims” (p. 315). By saying that, it is important to notice the necessity of breaking the stereotypes about veiled women and letting students engage in more sources and perspectives about the veil. By hearing other voices regarding the veil, students can easily enhance their understanding about the veil issue. It is important to let students engage in social issues as Freedman (1994) notes, "Not only to promote knowledge for students' personal gains, but to engage students in thinking about knowledge as a part of social life" (p. 158). Hence, as the veil has put Muslim women at risk in the U.S., it is essential to encourage American students to think about Muslim women and the veil, from a visual cultural perspective. More important is what Milbrandt (2002) argued: “It is essential that all educators understand the potential risks involved in not engaging students in such discussions” (p.153). Therefore, I believe it is essential for students as well as educators here in The United States to encounter the veil issue early and look at it from the perspective of learning about cultures. Students, then, will gain more personal and social understanding about the veil, which will help them naturally encounter and deal with veiled women. Most important to notice is that wearing the veil will most likely increase in the near future as Haddad (2007) claimed that veiling in America has increased since 9/11.
In general, it is important to notice the need of tackling the veil issue in the U.S. In looking at studies, one can vividly see how things might become worse. To illustrate it more, in American media “today Muslims are perhaps the heaviest targeted group” (Schønemann, 2013, p.11). The media’s portrayal after 9/11 was followed by outrage against Arabs and Muslims, which increased by 1600% (Daraiseh, 2012). Not only have all Muslims faced more discrimination in the U.S., but more Muslim women have been the main targets for different kinds of discrimination (Carland, 2011; Daraiseh, 2012).

More specifically, veiled women or girls, who wear types of head clothing are more at risk and are particularly targeted (Gehrke-White, 2006; Tindongan, 2011). They are targeted even in school, the most secure of places. According to Wingfield (2006) Muslim school girls who wear the veil or hijab are at risk of receiving racist assaults from other students as well as some teachers. In fact, he asserted that post 9/11, Muslim students “were subjected to physical violence, death threats, mockery, and many forms of harassment, coming both from other students and from teachers and other staff. Muslim students, especially girls who wore the hijab head covering, were the most vulnerable” (p. 265). Now it is clear that the veil or hijab leads to an issue in some Western societies, and it ignites debates, ignorance, and bigotry.

One might at first wonder why some people have a problem with being veiled, why some people might react in such an aggressive way toward veiled females, and what might be the solution to get rid of that problem. Let us first describe the problem. The problem seems to be an overreaction towards the veil; sometimes the overreaction stays at the level of displeasure, and other times it might reach its high level to be a physical attack. Thus, one should first ask why the veil gets that overreaction. It seems
that the veil or veiled woman are linked to negative perceptions in Western context and media, so some people react based on these negative perceptions. I also believe that many Americans are not exposed to the veiled women’s culture, which may result in fear. Hence, having fear from the veil or veiled women plus having a background from negative media portrayal can simply lead people to overreact when seeing the veiled woman. Therefore, if one is seeking to resolve the issue of the veil, one should engage with that issue first. If the main issue is not being exposed to veiled women, let people be exposed to the veil and veiled women; and if a school is affected by some acts of discrimination against veiled girls, I think it is wise to start solving the problem in school and allow the school community to engage with the veil issue. The best start in school would be to break the veil’s stereotypes in students’ imagination, which can be done via art education.

Implications in Art Education Lessons

*Learners of all ages can successfully decipher the many messages circulating in the images and objects of visual culture if given the opportunities and some strategies. Knowledge of the culture in which we live and how it functions is its own reward. It is also immensely important that we interpret the images and designed objects with which we live. Images and objects present opinions as if they were a truth, reinforce attitudes, and confirm or deny beliefs and values.*

*(Barrett, 2003, p.12)*

By looking at the issue surrounding the veil and the complexity of its meaning, one might think it is a tough subject to tackle with elementary or secondary students.
However, I argue that undertaking the veil as a subject at an early age would be easier and a successful step to enhance students’ understanding. Younger students are less exposed to the veil; they are less affected by media coverage and other ideologies toward the veil. Since Duncum (2010) suggested that “each image was hyperlinked to other images, definitions, discussion of the issues, and personal anecdotes” (p. 9), I suppose these students are not yet linking the image of the veil with negative or positive things. Therefore, teaching students during that time and exposing them to the original idea of the veil and veiled women would help them understand it better, and it might reduce the violence against veiled women in the future. What I mean by the original idea of the veil is the basic belief and use of the veils by the veiled woman’s culture. I advocate that one of the study implications is to help students look at the veil from its wearer’s perspective, which can be achieved via art education lessons in school.

Art educators simply can utilize the vehicle of visual culture to show students different cultures visually. There is variety of images of women’s veils from history to the present time showing the art decorating different veils and the meaning of the art on the veils. For example, in different Middle Eastern areas, veiled women and girls have produced various styles of veiling, and they used to decorate their veils to indicate their tribes, ages, and sexual maturity (Vogelsang-Eastwood & Vogelsang, 2008). I believe that would be an interesting subject to illustrate to students. Students can then reflect on that subject by conversation, critiquing, or drawing some styles indicating their own states. Every single student can have his or her own veil written or drawn on paper, and the teacher can ask students to emphasize their identities or what they want to tell others on their paper. They then can wear that paper as as veil to show them to their
peers. Visual culture is an appropriate perspective from which to see the experience of being veiled or seeing veiled women. As Pauly (2003) stated, “the study of visual culture is not about the objects studied, but the questions asked about visual images, objects, environments, and the phenomena of seeing and being seen” (p. 267).

By utilizing the visual culture vehicle to enrich the veil’s subject, students will have a more solid and open understanding of the veil not merely as negative anecdotes that appear in the media. Freedman (2003) noted, “an important educational aspect of visual culture is its effect on identity, in terms of both art-making and viewing… Education is a process of identity formation because we change as we learn; our learning changes our subjective selves” (p. 2). We change as we learn, and we should pay more attention to the whole curriculum as well as teachers who are going to use the veil in visual culture. Accordingly, I agree with Duncum (2002) who states that “a visual culture approach requires teachers to deal directly with the images of mainstream society and in place of a defensive position to locate themselves at the core of the curriculum” (p. 8). Educators should be aware of how to teach about the image and how to address them in a proper way to students.

The whole idea is to expose students to the veil and let them understand its real meaning from the perspective of its culture, not to give them a picture that may be misrepresented by some political ideology since “images carry ideological messages, which cumulatively shape the culture’s ideas, values, and attitudes” (Barrett, 2012, p. 173). Images are important and can be used in purpose. Images can be laden with many messages to intentionally portray a certain culture in negative way as Alloula (1986) wrote in his book “The Colonial Harem.” He examined many French postcards
that contained poorly dressed or half-naked Algerian women. These postcards were
brought to the European market from 1900 to 1930. He emphasized the issues of the
Western perspective toward the Orient and how they were trying to embody Algerian
women as exotic gifts to the French. Alloula (1986) then proved that these women in
postcards were not actually real harem women yet they were victims of war and
prostitutes who most probably were required to pose in such condition to suit the
photographers’ lens as well as the Orientalists’ desires.

Therefore, it is essential for teachers to be aware of what kind of images they are
going to present to students and what messages they want to pass along. Another
implication of this study for art lessons is that teachers can utilize the veil subject to look
at its equivalence in what we see as “normal.” American students, for example, are
familiar with the African masks, and they are not afraid of them, in fact, they might
appreciate whenever they encounter them. I wonder if art educators use the same idea
of African masks and let students understand its concept and compare it with the other
masks around the world such as African masks, Egyptian masks, Warriors’ masks,
Halloween masquerade masks, Muslim women, bridal veils, and so on. For many years,
art educators have recognized the value of multicultural art in the classroom. As we
strive toward a multicultural curriculum, and as the world becomes increasingly more
connected, we have begun to recognize the growing diversity in the daily lives of our
students. The necessity for a visual culture curriculum that acknowledges all diversity of
students in the classroom has become clear. Providing students with the facts about the
veil and its use would help students to build a healthy conversation as Hubbard (2010)
believes such conversations generated by artworks are excellent ways to build positive
and meaningful communication across cultures. Through multiculturalism, it is possible for an art education lesson to meet the needs of diverse environments and students by creating lessons that are appropriate for students’ level of cultural awareness.

In the article, Seven Principles for Visual Culture Education, Duncum (2010) mentioned some pedagogic tools that were used in the twentieth-century interpretation of visual culture such as power, ideology, representation, education, and gaze. These tools can help students gain a better understanding of what they see. Duncum (2010) explained, “The gaze concerns how we look at images and the circumstances under which we look. It refers to our predisposition to see things in certain ways, what we bring to images, and the relationships we form with them” (p. 8). Therefore, I advocate for art teachers to use these tools with their students to gain better knowledge about the veil issue, especially the concept of the gaze.

Another implication of this study is that it can be used to let students practice the critical theory based on the veil issue. The veil issue is complex and it has its own abnormal aspects, which usually catch more attention than the normal. For example, the norm in the veiled women culture is that women practice veiling voluntarily and for many different reasons. However, one can find several news reports about women claiming to be beaten or even killed by their families because they refused to wear their veil. Also, one might find some reports claiming that the reason for women veiling is just family or government enforcement. Consequently, some people will react by advocating the banning of the veil or passing such laws to control the veil. While it might be true that there are some cases of family or government forcing women to veil, the majority of veiled women chose to wear the veil. Therefore, it is not legitimate to ban the whole
majority of Muslim women from their right of wearing the veil because of finding individual cases of men requiring their women to wear the veil.

In a practical way of living in a diverse society, Smith (2007) argued that “interpretations of culture are significant for the pedagogical practices of art teachers working with students in a culturally diverse society” (p. 29). Similarly, because the veil is deeply connected to cultural practices, beliefs, and identities and has become a central point of interaction between cultures, art educators may play an important role in addressing this issue, encouraging people to think about it from different points of view. Therefore, art teachers can introduce students to the veil issue of banning or not and let them reflect based on their perception. Then, students will be divided into two groups; each group should take a side of either supporting veil-banning or opposing the ban. With the complexity surrounding the veil issue, teachers can lead the discussion to let their students practice some critical discourse based on the veil issue. To see the complexity of the veil issue and lead the discourse properly, teachers have to point out some aspects regarding the issue of the veil. For example, as there are some family cases of veil force there are also some cases of unveiling forces; also, as there are some governments legalizing veiling enforcements on women, there are more governments now legalizing unveiling enforcements on women. Furthermore, as women usually practice veiling, there are some men who do the same. And if women used to take the veil off to protest against society or government’s rules, they used to wear it to resist against another society or government’s rules too. Clearly, the veil is a complicated and interesting subject to discuss with students, and I believe it could be a good subject to exercise a critical theory in the classroom.
Potential Living in Western Culture as Veiled Women

Another implication would be for people who are looking to practice veiling in a Western culture. This study might help them to understand what it looks like to be veiled in Western culture and what people might think about them as well as the main concerns they may encounter in a certain culture. The most important thing that I would like to emphasize for veiled women are that people will most likely assume that you are being forced to veil. When veiling in a Western culture, it does not matter if one is a Caucasian woman or from another race. Many stereotypes such as being oppressed, submissive, the outsider, backward, less educated, and a potential threat will still occur. The association to terrorism and being an outsider will also be present. Moreover, if a woman from a Western culture chooses to veil, the chance of discrimination will increase and she might feel ignored and stared at many times.

The main issue with the veil, as I believe, comes from the media coverage that linked the veil or being veiled with many mentioned stereotypes. Veiled women will have difficulties making friends and dealing with people in public. A veiled woman will have to make more efforts to prove that she is friendly and kind. The biggest misconception linked with the veil is that it is a forced rule by men or governments. A husband of a veiled woman might make it worse by trying to explain why his wife is veiled by answering on her behalf, and by doing so is most likely emphasizing that she is voiceless and submissive.
Recommendations of Future Research

I conducted this research by using narrative inquiry of just three non-Muslim Western art education colleagues and in an average sized city in Texas. I wonder if the participants’ major might make any difference in the study’s results, or if the race might make any difference on that matter. I have been told by one of the participants that the experience of wearing the veil would be more risky and richer if it had been done in a small town in Texas. So, I recommend doing the same study with women in a small town and taking more care of ensuring the safety of these participants. Similarly, I would like to suggest that researchers apply this study in different continents such as Asia or Africa with non-Muslim women from these continents. Then, the researcher can later do a comparison analysis between this study and their own study to emphasize the differences or similarities.

I would suggest the researcher do further research of what adjectives Westerners would use to describe an image of veiled women. Researchers can also use a social media website to collect extra data to give validity. I wonder what types of social media comments a young Texan girl would receive from her friend if she posted a photograph of herself wearing the veil. What critical comment or complement might she get? Would her friend associate her with the common stereotypes; what would her parents’ reaction be? All of that can enrich the subject of the veil and the visual culture interpretation discourses, which would call some attention regarding how to depict cultures and how to educate what is misrepresented.

I further recommend doing the same study with a different culture’s type of veiling like Tuareg in the sub-Saharan where men are veiled rather than women. I wonder what
it would look like if Western men were veiled like Tuareg men while living in Western culture. Would Westerners criticize veiled men, and if so, what would the criticisms be? Also, on a different note, how do feminists look at Tuareg veiled men compared to veiled women. Are Western people going to perceive him as they perceive veiled women? What visual cultural discourse would emerge from this comparison and how could an art educator benefit from it? What could art educators in Western culture teach students from this visual cultural diversity?

As we have seen from this study, the veil is causing a debate in some Western cultures; would any other piece of clothing cause the same debate in a different culture? For example, would cowboy hats and boots have this same effect in Muslim cultures? Would the Jewish Kippah or Indian sari, for instance, cause any issue in others cultures; if so, I recommend the researcher find out how Western media depicts that those items of clothing. I would like to see a comparison study tracing the woman’s veil in Muslim culture and Western culture. How have veiled women been represented? Will there be any difference between them and if so, when and why?
APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL LETTER
January 17, 2014

Dr. Terry Barrett  
Student Investigator: Fahad Aljebreen  
Department of Art Education  
University of North Texas  
RE: Human Subjects Application No. 13-575

Dear Dr. Barrett:

In accordance with 45 CFR Part 46 Section 46.101, your study titled “A Narrative Study about the Transformative Visual Cultural Dialogue beyond the Women Veil” has been determined to qualify for an exemption from further review by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Enclosed are the consent documents with stamped IRB approval. Please copy and use this form only for your study subjects.

No changes may be made to your study’s procedures or forms without prior written approval from the UNT IRB. Please contact Jordan Harmon, Research Compliance Analyst, ext. 4643, if you wish to make any such changes. Any changes to your procedures or forms after 3 years will require completion of a new IRB application.

We wish you success with your study.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Patricia L. Kaminski, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

PK:jh
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER
University of North Texas Institutional Review Board

Informed Consent Form

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

Title of Study: A narrative study about the transformative visual cultural dialogue beyond the women veil

Student Investigator: Fahad Aljebreen, University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Art Education. Supervising Investigator: Dr. Barrett.

Purpose of the Study: You are being asked to participate in a research study that involves the issue about the Muslim woman veil. In the last few decades, the veil has become an important topic in many Western and Muslim countries (Fournier, 2012; Khiabany & Williamson, 2008; Pocock, 2008). It has also has become a powerful political issue for many politicians to address (Scott, 2007). Discussing the veil is not a new matter, but the idea of making a law to ban the veil in Western nations is a new level of dealing with a piece of cloth. I wonder, what does the veil mean to Westerners, and what dialogues can the veil make among Westerns. I also wonder if Western women decided to wear the veil, what would their narrative be. The purpose of this narrative study is to explore what transformative visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning veiled women may emerge with three selected non-Muslim Western women. It will explore what these selected women think about the veil when they see a veiled woman, and what their narrative about the veil would be if they were asked to veil their faces in public. The main question for this narrative study is:

For veiled Western women, how does the veil incite transformative visual cultural dialogue and ideas concerning veiled women?

In investigating this question, there are several sub-questions for which this study seeks answers:

1. As a Western woman, what does it mean to be veiled in a Western culture?
2. What kind of verbal or physical interactions result from the experience of wearing the veil?
3. What understanding do Western women have about the veil or veiled women before and after the experience?

What possible narratives may emerge with the three non-Muslim women participants?

Study Procedures: This study has two parts that you will be asked to participate in. The first part is to wear the veil multiple times in your regular days while writing your diary or journal writing about the veil experience. This part of the study will last approximately two weeks. In the
next part of the study, you will be asked to answer some interview questions of your thoughts about the veil and your experience with the veil before and after the study. Each interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The first interview will be completed before the two weeks of wearing the veil, and the follow-up interview will be completed shortly after the two weeks of wearing the veil experience.

**Foreseeable Risks:** The potential risks involved in this study are that some people might stare at you many times or say some discomforting words about your veil.

**Benefits to the Subjects or Others:** We expect the project to may benefit you by seeing the veil issue as well as your surrounding community from a different angle. Also you may have a good understanding of the veil by getting the experience of wearing it and hearing other people’s thoughts about it. Also others may get a better understanding of what does the veil mean in Western nations by reading your experience and the project’s results, which may help to bridge the gaps of knowledge about the veil.

**Compensation for Participants:** You will receive the full veil outfit as compensation for your participation as soon as you finish answering the interview questions and sending the diaries papers.

**Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality of Research Records:** I, the researcher, will be responsible not to release any personal identifiable data to anyone. Diaries, interviews, and observation notes will be written in English and they will be kept in the Supervising Investigator’s office on the UNT campus. The research subject will have the option to use any nickname while writing her diary to keep all private information anonymous. The confidentiality of your individual information will be maintained in any publications or presentations regarding this study.

**Questions about the Study:** If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Fahad Aljebreen at (940)-312-8158 or The Supervising Investigator Dr. Barrett at Terry.barrett@unt.edu

**Review for the Protection of Participants:** This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-3940 with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects.

**Research Participants’ Rights:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read or have had read to you all of the above and that you confirm all of the following:

Office of Research Services
University of North Texas
Last Updated: July 11, 2011
• Fahad Aljebreen has explained the study to you and answered all of your questions. You have been told the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study.
• You understand that you do not have to take part in this study, and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. The study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time.
• You understand why the study is being conducted and how it will be performed.
• You understand your rights as a research participant and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study.
• You have been told you will receive a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant ___________________________ Date

For the Student Investigator or Designee:

I certify that I have reviewed the contents of this form with the subject signing above. I have explained the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study. It is my opinion that the participant understood the explanation.

Signature of Student Investigator ___________________________ Date

Approved by the UNT IRB

Date: 2/17/14

Office of Research Services
University of North Texas
Last Updated: July 11, 2011
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