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## To be a true Muslim: online discussions on the headscarf among Moroccan-Dutch women

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The headscarf (*hijab*) and its relation to Muslim identity and gender relations within Islam is a major topic of contention for Muslim women living in Western Europe. One aspect of this is that they have to present an acceptable religious identity vis-à-vis other Muslims. The present study uses membership categorization analysis to examine the membership categories and category-bound attributes used in Internet forum discussions on the headscarf among Moroccan-Dutch women. The analysis shows how the category of ‘true’ Muslim is linked to wearing the headscarf out of religious submission. Women who did not wear the headscarf produced accounts that emphasized personal conviction and religious engagement as additional defining attributes of a ‘true’ Muslim, or emphasized other activities or predicates as being critical for a Muslim female identity. With these accounts, these women negotiated the normative religious context on which categorization practices with fellow believers are based.

**Keywords:** headscarf; Muslim identity; accounts; membership; gender

Muslim migrant women in Western Europe face normative pressures from within their religious community (e.g. Ehrkamp 2013). The Islamic tradition places great emphasis on the ‘correct’ performance of religious practices (orthopraxy). Yet, debate about what constitutes ‘correct’ practice forms an equally important part of this tradition (Asad 1986). With regard to Islamic clothing, religious scholars tend to agree that women should be covered, exempting either only the eyes, or also the hands and face (Roald 2001). However, some religious scholars point out that the Qur’an only makes reference to appropriate clothing but does not give clear guidelines (e.g. Asad 1986; Roald 2001). Furthermore, Muslim feminists reject a literal reading of religious texts in favour of a historical, contextual one and argue that veiling is a cultural practice that originated from outside of Islamic circles (e.g. Mernissi 1987).

These different positions on the religious injunction to wear a headscarf can also be identified among Muslim migrant women (Dwyer 1999; Hancock, forthcoming; Piela 2012; Read and Bartkowski 2000; Secor 2002). In non-Muslim countries, the different interpretations of the headscarf are arguably more pronounced because there tends to be greater variability in religious meanings (Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003). Furthermore, belonging to a religious minority makes women more aware and reflexive of their religious identity (Jeldtoft 2011; Wagner et al. 2012). Muslim migrants tend to consider orthopraxy important for their religious identity (Jeldtoft

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2011) but are divided on what is correct Islamic clothing and how this relates to being a 'true' Muslim (Smith 1999). Some women claim that the headscarf has received undue attention as indicator of piety, and sarcastically call it the 'Sixth Pillar of Islam' (Haddad, Smith, and Moore 2006). However, many Muslim women, even if they do not wear a headscarf, view it as a religious injunction (Bullock 2002; Read and Bartkowski 2000). Because of this, women who do not cover their head face the challenge of being accepted as 'true' Muslims by fellow believers. Not wearing a headscarf increases one's social accountability towards other Muslims (Ehrkamp 2013).

Yet, little is known about the interactions between Muslim women who do and do not cover and the ways in which the latter try to claim a 'true' Muslim identity in unfolding discussion (Furseth 2011). This lack of knowledge is unfortunate because identity claims are made, validated, challenged and negotiated within social interactions. An investigation of the ways in which Muslim women talk about wearing the headscarf provides insight into the discursive practices by which they try to make their identity claims socially acceptable. Therefore, our interest is in social interactions and more specifically in identifying and describing how 'doing gendered religion' (Avishai 2008) is achieved in discourse. We build on Avishai's (2008) notion of 'doing religion' as a process of constructing and performing the religious self by looking at how Muslim women discursively negotiate wearing the headscarf as part of a *gendered* religious identity. Argumentative positions about the status of women in Islam range from 'secular' or 'Western' feminists, whose feminism is articulated outside of religious discourses, to those who argue for gender equality based on an 'egalitarian' interpretation of the Qur'an (variously called Muslim feminists or Islamic feminists), and to those who reject strict equality of the genders and embrace 'gender complementarity' based on the perceived naturalness of gender distinctions and the complementary roles of men and women (Badran 2009; Karam 1998). We demonstrate that these argumentative positions can also be identified in discussions about the headscarf and its connection to a 'true' Muslim identity.

Because the Internet is an increasingly important medium for Muslim migrants living in Western societies, we focus on Internet forum discussions with co-believers. We examined online Internet interactions between Moroccan-Dutch Muslim women in the Netherlands, making this study one of the first that examines online interactions about religious identity and the *hijab* among Muslim women living in a Western country. Moroccan migrants started coming to the Netherlands in large numbers during the late 1960s and early 1970s as labour migrants. Currently, they are one of the largest ethnic minority groups in the Netherlands and overwhelmingly self-identify as Muslim. Muslims are evaluated quite negatively in Western Europe, also by the Dutch public (see Helbling 2012). Hostility often focuses on the headscarf which is seen as a symbol of women's oppression, patriarchy and rejection of gender equality (Bowen 2007; Moors 2009). More than half of the native Dutch have been found to support a ban on headscarves (Van der Noll 2010).

Using membership categorization analysis (MCA; Sacks 1992), we investigate the membership categories and category-bound attributes that are used to construct the category of 'true' Muslim in relation to wearing the headscarf. This construction happens through discourse involving arguments about which features and activities should contribute to a 'true' Muslim identity. Our main interest is therefore in how the relationships between attributes and category emerge as online interactive achievements.

### **Identity negotiation in social interaction**

Quite a number of studies use in-depth interviews and personal narratives to examine the motives behind, and multiple meanings of, wearing a headscarf and other forms of veiling. Research with Muslim women living in Western societies shows that they invest the headscarf with various complex and new meanings (e.g. Dwyer 1999; Ehrkamp 2013; Hancock, *forthcoming*; Mansson McGinty 2014; Mishra and Shirazi 2010; Peek 2005), and strategically use clothing to negotiate access to various social spaces (Droogsma 2007; Siraj 2011). This research examines personal narratives about religion within the broader historical, cultural and political contexts in which Muslim women find themselves (Rasmussen 2013). The focus is on the diversity of women's experiences and interpretations, and how they define their religious and gender identities in light of broad-based cultural representations.

This article has a different analytic focus and tries to identify the discourses that are used to provide an account of (not) wearing a headscarf in relation to the claim of being a 'true' Muslim. Thus, the analytical focus is on the arguments that are used in unfolding online interactions and not on the individual differences in meanings and motivations behind (not) covering. Non-covering Muslim women often need to qualify and defend their position to prevent identity denial and rejection from other Muslims (Furseth 2011). Their acceptance as a religious group member depends on being able to successfully enact and claim a Muslim identity in social interactions. Social identities can be seen as referring to who people are to each other and how different kinds of identities are produced in spoken and written interaction (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). This conceptualization of identity moves the analytical interest from the 'private' realms of personal experiences, feelings and beliefs to the 'public' realms of social interactions. Who we are to each other is negotiated and accomplished in interaction. Not wearing a headscarf can be construed as signifying noncompliance with injunctions that are presented as inherent to religious identity. This places those who do not wear a headscarf and want to be accepted as 'true' Muslims in an accountable position. Interaction is norm oriented: the things individuals say and do imply a normative framework of accountability that supports or challenges their identity claims (Hollander 2013; West and Zimmerman 1987). This means that it is important to focus on the types of arguments that are used to provide an account of one's religious identity, particularly in relation to religious behaviour. Individuals who do not exhibit 'normative' religious behaviour have to negotiate their claim to being a Muslim in order to be recognized as a 'true' Muslim by co-believers who verify the religious identity (Burke and Stets 2009).

### **Online religious identity construction**

The Internet is an increasingly important medium for Muslim migrants living in Western societies. Online communication allows for the exchange of religious knowledge and of personal experiences and understandings (Piela 2012). Islam online is conceptualized as a 'missing middle' between authoritative scriptural interpretations and the practices of 'common' believers, especially for the younger generations (Leurs 2012). It has the potential to open up spaces for counter-discourses about 'true' Islam and Islamic requirements. The anonymity and lack of visual feedback of computer-mediated communication make discursive identity claims salient and important topics of online interactions. This means that the Internet is a highly relevant medium for studying accounts about Muslim identity. Moreover, virtual communication technologies are especially relevant for religious identities since they allow for worldwide religious connections (Piela 2012). Members of religious and ethnic minority groups are

disproportionately involved in online communities (Kozinets 2010). Identity and community formation among Dutch Muslims increasingly take place online (Brouwer 2004) and online places are used to make normative statements about ‘correct’ religious interpretations and behaviour (Van Summeren 2007). More specifically, online forums are used by young Muslims to discuss and negotiate what is *halal* (allowed according to Islam) and *haram* (forbidden according to Islam). As a result, decisions such as wearing a headscarf are increasingly based on online discussions with fellow Muslims rather than on traditional religious authorities (Echchaibi 2008).

### Membership categorization analysis

We seek to gain a better understanding of the ways in which Muslim religious identity is negotiated using MCA. MCA considers how the use of categories and their category-bound attributes is part of the practices by which people make sense of their social world (Lepper 2000; Stokoe 2012). Categories are produced and evoked within discursive contexts and depend on the social actions being performed in interactions. Categories are powerful interactional tools because they are tied to normative expectations. Those who do not conform to the common sense and normative knowledge about what a particular category membership entails are not seen as ‘real’ category members but rather as exceptional or deficient, and are thereby placed in an accountable position (Jayyusi 1991; West and Zimmerman 2009). However, category ascriptions are not static or fixed but can be challenged and reworked, and MCA involves unpacking the asserted common-sense relationships between a category and its category-bound features and activities (Schegloff 2007). Wearing a headscarf can be construed as an intrinsic part of Muslim religious identity, thereby forming a basis on which those who claim this identity are evaluated and judged. However, the headscarf is not the only category-bound attribute of being a Muslim, nor does its absence necessarily mean rejection of a Muslim identity. Muslim women define and negotiate the relationship between multiple aspects of their religious identity and rework membership categories and category-bound attributes to make identity claims. Our interest is in the discursive connection made between the headscarf and the category of ‘true’ Muslim woman so that the headscarf becomes an inextricable aspect of this identity, and the ways in which this connection is challenged and reworked.

### Data and method

#### *Material*

Online communication and especially chat sites and discussion forums are very popular among Moroccan-Dutch youth: 20.9% of Moroccan-Dutch youth visit forums four or more days a week, compared to 9.1% of native Dutch youth (Leurs 2012). Religion is an important topic for Moroccan-Dutch Muslims, and this is apparent in the prevalence of religious topics and discussions in their online communication (Van Summeren 2007).

Data were collected from the forum section of the website [www.marokko.nl](http://www.marokko.nl) on 5 October 2012. Marokko.nl is currently the largest Internet community for Moroccan-Dutch, with around 200,000 members and 50,000 unique visitors per day, more than a million topics and over 35 million posts. The site plays a large role in the online communication of Moroccan-Dutch youth: it reaches 70–75% of this group, of which one-third visits on a weekly basis (Leurs 2012). Marokko.nl consists of different subsections, such as a news section, a ‘business’ section, an agenda where interesting events are posted and a separate subsection for women. The size of Marokko.nl and the variety of forum

topics indicate that the site draws members from different sections of the Moroccan-Dutch community. The website used to receive a subsidy from the Dutch government (until 2009) and has collaborated with the government in projects aimed at the emancipation and integration of Moroccan-Dutch youth. However, it remains a relatively independent and 'authentic' virtual place, as evidenced by its free discussion which sometimes includes discriminatory and incendiary posts (*De Volkskrant*, November 6, 2009).

Postings on Marokko.nl are public and can be viewed by anyone with Internet access. Searching the online archives (which date back to 2002) for threads with the words 'hoofddoek' (headscarf in Dutch) or 'hijab' in the title resulted in a large amount of material. In agreement with our research aim of examining specific accounts rather than representing the diversity of subjective experiences and interpretations, only the threads that discuss whether the headscarf is obligatory within Islam were selected. Four of these were considered for the analysis based on our focus on identifying arguments of (not) wearing a headscarf in unfolding discussions between posters. This means that we did not consider the many posts on, for example, clothing styles and fashion, tutorials on how to fold scarves and veils, tips about where to buy Islamic clothing and how to make it yourself, and comments to media reports on the headscarf.

Data selection followed the principle of saturation, meaning that additional data were selected based on whether the data are sufficient for a thorough analysis and to ground and justify the arguments made (Wood and Kroger 2000). The four selected threads are representative of many other similar threads and were posted in different sections of the forum (e.g. 'The world of the Moroccan woman' and 'Moroccan youth: love and relationships'). Only one of the four was posted in the Islam section (Islam and me). The threads range between 53 and 613 posts in length and date from 2002 to 2011 (with one dating 2002–2006, one 2003–2010, one 2009–2010 and one 2011). The total number of posts (citations excluded) is equivalent to 102 pages of text or approximately 50,000 words. The number of posters per thread ranges from 12 to 153. Most posters explicitly present themselves as female which reflects the topic of wearing a headscarf and is in line with Leurs' (2012) estimate that the majority of the users of Marokko.nl are female. All threads start with a post asking for opinions or advice; two are started by posters asking why some women do not wear the headscarf (titled 'For the girls who do not wear *hijab*' and 'Why no headscarf ...?'), one by a poster soliciting posts by women who choose to not wear the headscarf (titled 'Consciously not wearing/wanting to wear *hijab*') and one asking for advice on how to start wearing the headscarf (titled 'Love for the *hijab*. I am too weak').

### **Approach**

In line with our aim to examine the ways in which women construct the category of 'true' Muslim, the analysis was informed by principles of MCA (Lepper 2000; Sacks 1992; Stokoe 2012). The focus was on how the category-bound activity of wearing the headscarf was used, oriented to and reworked in negotiating membership of the category 'true' Muslim woman.

The data were read carefully and instances of the use of relevant membership categories and category-bound attributes were marked. In a second step, we focused on the ways in which the women link the headscarf to a 'true' Muslim female identity and use this link to account for their own identity claim, and to judge others as (not) belonging to this category. Third, we examined the ways in which the link between being a 'true' Muslim and wearing the headscarf is contested and reworked by women who do not wear the

headscarf but claim to be a real Muslim. We used the qualitative software program Atlas.ti to code the material as belonging to different argumentative positions, as well as to code membership categories, category-bound attributes and other relevant phrases and themes.

Our analysis starts with showing that all women participating in the online discussions claim a Muslim identity. Next, we consider how not wearing a headscarf is set up as an accountable position by defining a 'true' Muslim as being submissive to the will of God, regardless of 'worldly' arguments for the headscarf such as it offering protection from men. Subsequently, we consider how the link between being a Muslim and wearing a headscarf is problematized and reworked by, first, stressing the importance of personal intention and inner conviction, and, second, by drawing on a range of category-bound attributes. The notion of *ijtihad* is used to develop a different understanding of Islam which rejects the headscarf as a patriarchal interpretation of the Qur'an and does not consider it as an intrinsic part of 'true' Muslim identity. In the analysis, we present a number of extracts that have been translated from Dutch but otherwise remain unchanged (the Dutch versions are available on request). For reasons of space, only a limited number of extracts (without identifying information such as usernames) are included but many others make similar points.

## Findings

### *Claiming Muslim identity*

Independent of wearing a headscarf or not, in all four threads, all women define themselves as Muslim believers. They claim membership of this category through the choice of usernames which indicate Muslim identity (e.g. 'moslima17', 'islamia', 'da3wa' [da'wah, proselytizing]) and explicit references in the text of their posts (e.g. 'as a Muslim', 'we Muslims'). Furthermore, the participants construe the category 'Muslim' as a religious category, part of the membership categorization device 'religion', making the members of this category 'Muslim believers' (Sacks 1992). This is evident from the pervasive use of religious language including religious phrases, e.g. *insha'Allah*, *bismillahir rahmanir rahim* (in the name of God, the Most Gracious, Most Merciful) and 'may Allah strengthen my iman' (faith). Furthermore, the posters address each other as fellow Muslims by using identity-relevant salutation (e.g. *as-Salamu allaykum*) and inclusive language ('we', 'our', 'sister'). The interpretation of 'Muslim' as a religious category is not contested. The women attend to this interpretation in their messages, and although the target group of Marokko.nl is ethnic rather than religious, there are no examples of attempts to construct alternative ethnic, cultural or political interpretations of being a Muslim.

### *Submission: the headscarf as obedience to God*

The women do not only claim membership of the religious category 'Muslim' but also discuss related category-bound features and activities. In this discussion, wearing a headscarf is construed by the majority of the participating women as a Qur'anic injunction that implies unconditional submission to God. The 'submissive' position was dominant which reflects the 'mainstream' interpretation of (Sunni) Islamic doctrine. This position was defended quite vociferously, with its proponents 'taking the lead' in most discussions and putting other posters on the defensive. The first extract is an example.

#### *Extract 1*

You should wear the hijab because the lord of the worlds has ordered this to us . . . and He subhanahu wa ta'ala [May He be Glorified and Exalted] doesn't need to explain to us why we

have to wear it. Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala is all-knowing and He knows what's best for us. We will never understand the hikma [wisdom] of Allah ta'ala [the Exalted] with our human brains. You have to wear it not just because it protects you from men etc. but also because He wants it and there is great wisdom behind it. If you take Islam you have to take it as a whole, and not parts of it etc. We have to do that which our lord commands us without questioning because this is not a characteristic of the believer. We hear and obey insha'Allah.

This extract introduces the category of (female Muslim) believer that is characterized by a set of category-bound attributes: she should 'wear the *hijab*', accept 'the whole' of Islam, and be submissive by following God's commands 'without questioning'. The relationship between God and His followers is unilateral and hierarchical: God lays down the rules (which include wearing a headscarf) and the role of a true believer is to 'hear and obey'. Being a Muslim means being a believer, and believers should submit themselves to God and demonstrate this by wearing the headscarf, which is a religious command and thereby an intrinsic aspect of Muslim identity. After all, the word 'Islam' means submission or surrender. A further example is presented in the next extract.

*Extract 2*

If we would truly realize the realities of death, the grave, Judgement Day and Hell, no-one would doubt the *hijab*. Not only women should lower their gaze and cover themselves. The man must also lower his gaze, wear a beard and shorten his trousers. You aren't doing it for a man, you are doing it to obey your Creator. The one to which you owe every breath you take. Someone who claims to be a Muslim must put his own wishes after the Will of Allah (swt). He who doesn't do this has made his own wishes Ilah (God). 'And it is not appropriate for a believing man and a believing woman, when Allah and his Messenger have decided a matter, to make a different decision regarding their matter'. (Sura al-Ahzab: 36)

Extract 2 introduces the categories of 'Muslim' and 'believing man and believing woman', and belonging to these categories is made dependent upon putting one's 'own wishes after the Will of Allah'. Those who do not do so are placed in the contrasting category of 'idolaters'. Not wearing the headscarf would be disobedient, making one liable to punishment in the afterlife. Thus, both Extracts 1 and 2 argue that Muslims should be submissive to God and not follow their individual wishes and choices.

In this way, not wearing a headscarf is set up as a strongly accountable practice. This is further achieved by explicitly claiming the right to judge those who do not meet the requirements of being a 'true' Muslim. This is referred to as *nasiha* or the obligation to give advice about the correct interpretation and application of Islamic teachings (Meijer 2009). By presenting one's criticism as resulting from the religious duty to 'show the right path' rather than from personal interpretations and preferences, the normative claim of the *hijab* being a category-bound – and thereby accountable – attribute is strengthened.

While guarding Muslim women's modesty against the inappropriate male gaze is often referred to as the 'rationale behind' covering, both Extracts 1 and 2 refuse to connect the headscarf to arguments about gender relations, or they regard this, at best, as a subsidiary argument. They consider the influence of the headscarf on men's conduct or women's virtue to be irrelevant because the purpose of wearing a headscarf is submission to Allah. Linking the headscarf to gender relations would detract from this true purpose. This argument is also brought forward in the following extract:

*Extract 3*

Where do you get the idea that you should wear a *hijab* for the sake of the man???? Islam has imposed rules on the woman with respect to covering her body ... This is simply a rule, that is fixed and which every Muslim woman should follow, if she doesn't do this she's disobeying her Lord. This has nothing to do with men or anyone.



Moreover, in Extract 2, it is also argued that not only women should be submissive and therefore wear a headscarf but also that men have the same religious obligation and should have a beard and shorten their trousers. Or as another poster says, ‘just as a women has the obligation to wear a *hijab*, a man has also his “hijab”: to have a beard’, and a third one argues, ‘don’t forget that the man is obliged to have a beard, this is his *hijab*. And both men and women have to lower their gaze’. Men and women would have the same responsibility resulting in different, gender-specific practices. These posters argue for gender complementarity (Karam 1998), whereby women and men follow different rules but are equally responsible for avoiding sin.

In setting up not wearing the headscarf as an accountable position, a further distinction is made between women who reject the headscarf and those who do not (yet) wear it but agree that it is required. The participant in the following extract reacts to other posters who question whether or not the headscarf is obligatory. In explaining her previous statements in which she argued that prayers are invalid if one denies parts of the Qur’an, she makes a distinction between two groups of women. Although both groups fail to do what she considers obligatory, those who deny the obligation are ‘not-true-Muslims’ and also belong to the contrasting category of ‘disbelievers’, which is a much stronger moral condemnation (Meijer 2009).

*Extract 4*

It’s not about the girls who don’t wear the *Hijab* and recognize the obligation but about the girls who don’t wear the *Hijab* and deny the obligation, together with all the statements of the best of creatures, peace be upon him. The latter category are Kuffar [disbelievers] and not just their prayers are futile, all their actions are too.

***Not being ready***

All participants claim a Muslim identity, an identity which the ‘submissive’ posters made contingent on wearing a headscarf. That means that those who do not wear a headscarf have to give an acceptable explanation for their identity claim. This is done in two ways: first, and in contrast to the submissive argument, a large number of women argue for the importance of personal intention and religious conviction as necessary conditions for wearing the headscarf and therefore as an additional category-bound feature of being a ‘true’ Muslim. Second, a few women argue that the headscarf is not obligatory according to Islam and thereby challenge the claim that wearing a headscarf is a category-bound attribute. We now discuss the former strategy before exploring the latter.

The women who do not deny the religious obligation of the headscarf but do not wear it tend to argue that they are ‘not (yet) ready’ for it. By claiming that they are ‘not ready’, these women acknowledge the discrepancy between their actual and expected behaviour. They do not contest but rather affirm the religious nature of the headscarf and it being bound to the category of ‘true’ Muslim. However, arguing that one is not ready changes the debate from objective religious rules to which one has to submit to that of subjective personal feelings that by definition are inaccessible to others and therefore difficult to challenge. Although these women express the desire to conform to Islamic rules, they argue that they are unable to do so because they have not yet developed sufficient inner religious commitment.

Inner feelings and beliefs do not only provide an explanation for not wearing a headscarf but can also be presented as a category-bound attribute of a ‘true believer’. This reworks and undermines the intrinsic link between *hijab* and Muslim construed by those arguing for submission. The following extracts show parts of a discussion between a

‘submissive’ poster and someone who considers herself ‘not ready’ to wear the headscarf. It is taken from a longer sequence which started with the author of Extract 5b asking for advice on how to start wearing the headscarf:

*Extract 5a*

I don't help you when I say; yes sister, I understand you; the doubts. Doubts come from Shaytan [the devil]. You are a Muslim and should be steadfast enough to not give in to temptations. The *hijab* helps you with that! You are a Muslim but you don't want to cover yourself? We should help each other to do what is good, and not to give in to Shaytan.

*Extract 5b*

Yes, but you don't help me by approaching me in this manner (...) We are sisters, so we should encourage each other. I need support, while people are only saying that I'm on the wrong path, because I don't wear *hijab*. That is really not helping me. You are helping me by encouraging me in this. And you're right we need to cover ourselves, but do I not need to deepen my knowledge of Islam? Does Allah not also look at our hearts and the intention of the person and the way in which you act?

The author of Extract 5a has replied in an earlier post that wearing the headscarf ‘is commanded, so just do it’. Muslims are not supposed to have doubts but are expected to do what is required and not give in to temptation. The second poster agrees that ‘we need to cover ourselves’ but she rejects wearing the headscarf out of religious submission and instead stresses the importance of good intentions and proper behaviour. Whereas Extract 5a portrays wearing the headscarf as a simple choice between being a ‘steadfast Muslim’ and giving in to Satan’s temptations, the woman in Extract 5b broadens the scope of the argument by providing additional considerations. She rejects being portrayed as a ‘bad’ category member because she does not wear the headscarf and instead claims that they are ‘sisters’ who should ‘encourage each other’. Furthermore, she argues that religious knowledge and intentions are just as important for being a ‘true’ Muslim. The next extract is another example.

*Extract 6*

I don't wear a headscarf myself because I'm not ready. I know it's a weak excuse, but I cannot. As soon as I wear a headscarf I want to wear it right. And I have to adjust my entire life to it and that's not something you change overnight. I believe with my heart in Islam. I have to say I do admire girls a lot who wear a headscarf for themselves and are not forced by one of their parents. But well you don't do that overnight.

Here, again, it is claimed that one is ‘not ready’ to wear the headscarf. Although the poster anticipates others will consider this a ‘weak excuse’, she claims being unable (‘I cannot’) to put on the headscarf before she is able to wear it ‘right’ and adjust her ‘entire life’ to it. Thus, simply wearing the headscarf is insufficient because there is a ‘right’ (and, by implication, a ‘wrong’) way. Wearing the headscarf out of submission or because of social pressure is rejected. By emphasizing her inner religious conviction (I believe with my heart in Islam) and desire to wear the headscarf in the right way as defining attributes of being a Muslim, she builds up an account of why she does not wear the headscarf but still is a true believer. The following extract elaborates on right and wrong ways of wearing the headscarf:

*Extract 7*

What I mean is that a lot of girls wear *hijab* but without the right intention (= have to because of the parents, wrong haircut, have to because you have to) And I don't want to make the same mistake. I only want to wear the *hijab* if my intention is pure, when I know what I do it for and why. For example, there are girls who don't wear a headscarf, but pray regularly. Now it's not up to us to judge but what is more important? Prayer and no *hijab* or *hijab* and no prayer?

This woman identifies a category of ‘girls who wear the headscarf for the wrong reasons’. The right way of wearing the headscarf is with ‘pure’ intentions based on personal conviction. She considers it better to pray regularly (thereby demonstrating inner religious conviction) but not wear a headscarf, than to wear the headscarf so as to be seen as submissive but without having a corresponding ‘inner’ religiosity.

To summarize, these accounts acknowledge that the *hijab* is a religious obligation, but complicate the link between being a ‘true’ Muslim and wearing the headscarf by evoking additional category-bound features. The wearing of the headscarf is not only a religious duty but also made conditional on good intentions and inner conviction. These are attributes of a ‘true’ believer which make wearing the *hijab* authentic and valuable in the eyes of God.

### *Denying the obligatory character of the headscarf*

Whereas the former account complicates the link between being a ‘true’ Muslim and wearing the headscarf, a few women deny this link altogether by emphasizing other features and activities as intrinsically tied to being a ‘true’ Muslim:

#### *Extract 8*

I’m not a fanatical *hijab* wearer myself. That doesn’t mean that I don’t respect other Muslim sisters who do wear a *hijab*. It’s your own life, you make choices based on how you personally view Islam. I personally have a broad view of Islam, it is a tolerant and peaceful religion. In which it’s not about the headscarf but about the whole person and his acts. I try to refrain from bad deeds such as gossiping, arrogance, lying etc. etc . . . The Qur’an says that you have to hide your adornment as a woman, nowhere it literally says you have to hide your hair. That is one. Secondly I think the headscarf is a side issue and not what really matters. Namely your actions, feelings, and reasoning. To me, that is Islam, the main issue. When I look at a person I don’t think: that’s someone without a headscarf, she’s not a good Muslim, or that’s someone with a headscarf, she must be a good Muslim. No, . . . the one without the headscarf can be a better Muslim than the one with the headscarf.

This woman argues for the possibility of viewing Islam in different ways, which might or might not include the headscarf. The headscarf is construed as only one and not a very important practice that can be linked to being a Muslim. There would be many other and more important activities and predicates that are bound to being a good Muslim, such as ‘refraining from bad deeds’. Moreover, it is the overall picture which counts, the ‘whole person and his acts’, ‘your actions, feelings, and reasoning’. Furthermore, she disputes that the Qur’an explicitly refers to wearing the headscarf, thereby reproducing a common argument among feminist Islamic scholars (Bullock 2002; Mernissi 1987). There is no necessary relationship between being a good Muslim and wearing the headscarf, and someone without a headscarf can even be a better Muslim. Thus, she provides an account for not wearing the headscarf by downplaying its importance as a category-bound activity, and making relevant and prioritizing other activities and features of a true believer, stressing individual choice rather than thoughtless submission.

Another example is the next two extracts which were posted in reaction to a previous post stating that God does not answer prayers while not wearing a headscarf and that you should be submissive:

#### *Extract 9a*

(. . .) How can we claim to believe in the Greatness of Allah if we think He only hears our prayers if we wear a headscarf while praying? Is He not the One who can look straight through everything into our Soul and for whom we don’t have to give evidence from outside our heart? I’m sure that He doesn’t need a headscarf to see our love for Him proven (. . .).

*Extract 9b*

Are you serious? So a real Muslim should put his reasoning/logic/insight aside while the first word that was sent down is 'IQRA' [read/recite, the first word of the Qur'an that was revealed to Mohammed]? That's why all Muslims are disadvantaged, they think like you!!!!

According to the first person (Extract 9a), God looks at the soul of believers and their love for him (see also Extract 5b) and does not require external signs of devotion (evidence from outside our heart), such as the headscarf. The submissive argument that one should not question God's greatness by doubting his commands (see Extract 1) is reworked: in fact, the submissive position does not acknowledge God's greatness by presuming that God can only recognize good Muslims because they wear a headscarf. In Extract 9b, the claim that Muslims should be submissive and follow religious rules without speculating on their necessity is construed as being contrary to religious teachings which proclaim that the first duty of a Muslim is to read the Qur'an with the purpose of informing oneself and becoming knowledgeable. Thus, instead of blindly following God's commands, 'true' Muslims would have the religious duty to learn and think critically. *Ijtihad* or the independent reinterpretation of religious sources is a core analytical tool in Islamic reform movements, including those seeking more gender-just interpretations of religious texts (Badran 2009; Wadud 1999). Similar to the arguments of Muslim or Islamic feminists (Ahmed 1992; Karam 1998; Mernissi 1987), some posters argue that the headscarf is not a true Islamic injunction but stems from a patriarchal interpretation of the Qur'an. This is clearly expressed in the next extract.

*Extract 10*

It simply is not fair towards women. Men always defend it [the *hijab*] because they don't want to lose the dominant position they have now within Islam. But I truly believe that many things are just made up by men. And those scholars are no use, not at all. They also are always looking at the power they have.

Having to wear a headscarf for the sake of men is presented as an example of gender inequality. The authoritative interpretations of (male) scholars are deemed illegitimate because they stem from a desire to control women. To be a 'real Muslim' (see Extract 9b), women should read the Qur'an using their own reasoning and insight (see also Ahmed 2012; Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006). In the next extract, it is argued that the *hijab* is not necessary and that it is demeaning for women to consider only them responsible for the prevention of *zina* (unlawful sexual relations). Contrary to the submissive position of gender complementarity which argues that both men and women have to guard their modesty, albeit in different ways (see Extract 2), this poster thinks the burden of preventing *zina* is unfairly placed on the woman.

*Extract 11*

I myself am still not convinced of the necessity of the *hijab*. Especially the fact that you should wear it for the sake of the man, so that he isn't tempted to commit *zina*, I find a little demeaning to women. I mean, both men and women are tempted to commit *zina* but why is the woman the one to accommodate to the man? I wonder why??

**Discussion**

This article has looked at how Muslim women who do and do not (yet) wear a headscarf claim to be a 'true' Muslim in unfolding debates. Because the Internet is becoming an increasingly important place for discussing religious matters (Echchaibi 2008), we focused on online forum discussions among Moroccan-Dutch Muslim women. We used MCA (Sacks 1992) to examine how participants construed the relation between (not) wearing a headscarf and being a 'true' Muslim. We used the notion of 'doing gendered

religion' to show that the construction and performance of religious gendered selves is something which is accomplished in social interactions and that implies accountability not only to 'outsiders' but also to religious group members (Avishai 2008; West and Zimmerman 1987). We found that the different connections that were made between the headscarf and 'true' Muslim identity were related to different positions on gender relations within Islam and the admissibility of reinterpreting religious texts.

All participating women in the forum discussions claimed a Muslim identity which was interpreted in a religious way. Many of these women presented wearing the headscarf as a category-bound activity, i.e. an activity that is intrinsically related to and constitutive of being a 'true' Muslim. They argued for this link by emphasizing the need for true Muslims to submit themselves unconditionally to God. Gendered arguments for wearing the headscarf were either dismissed as irrelevant or put in a frame of 'gender complementarity' (Karam 1998). This view of the true believer as a submissive rule follower defines Muslim women not wearing a headscarf as deficient and deviant category members (Jayyusi 1991), who thereby become subject to criticism from fellow believers (often delivered in the form of *nasiha* or advice about religious teachings). Their claim on being a 'true' Muslim depends on producing acceptable accounts for not wearing a headscarf and two main strategies were identified.

First, some women did not deny the central importance of the headscarf but rather reworked the nature of the link between being a 'true' believer and the *hijab*. Real Muslims should not just wear the headscarf because it is a religious injunction but should wear it out of personal conviction. Instead of submissively following religious rules, they advocated subjective intentions and motivations as defining attributes of a true believer. This provides an account for not wearing the headscarf, or rather for not being ready to wear it yet. 'Not being ready' is a useful discursive interaction strategy because it acknowledges the need to wear a headscarf for belonging to the group of believers while simultaneously moving the discussion towards appropriate inner psychological states instead of simply having to be submissive. Therefore, even though they did not wear the headscarf yet, they can claim to 'put in more effort' in developing a more mature and genuine Islamic belief than the submissive group (see also Bartels 2005; Furseth 2011).

Second, a few women downgraded the status of the headscarf as a category-bound attribute or rejected it all together by arguing that it is not prescribed in the Qur'an (Read and Bartkowski 2000) or implies gender inequality. They emphasized other behaviours and predicates as defining a 'true' Muslim. What counts for being a 'true' Muslim is the whole of one's actions, feelings and thoughts, not a single behaviour like wearing a headscarf. Moreover, being a good Muslim and following God's will would not mean being submissive but rather becoming knowledgeable of Islam. This includes reexamination of religious texts about the headscarf to expose patriarchal interpretations (Badran 2009).

This study is one of the first that has tried to identify some of the discursive ways in which Muslim women construe and challenge the wearing of a headscarf as a category-bound attribute of being a 'true' Muslim. The study is also one of the first that examined online interactions about religious identity and the *hijab* among Muslim women living in a Western country. This type of research is timely and important because of the increasing importance of computer-mediated communication and the need to examine how accountability to category membership functions in actual interactions. It is in ongoing discussions and debates that Muslim women have to construe an acceptable religious identity. Identity descriptions and accounts are key aspects of everyday social life making it critical to examine their constructed and variable nature (Benwell and Stokoe 2006).

To provide suggestions for future studies, we will discuss some limitations of our research. First, it is possible that online communication produces different types of accounts, for example, because online interactions allow for more self-selection making them narrower in scope than offline interactions. However, there are reasons to expect that there are few differences in accounts offered in online and offline places. Similar types of arguments with regard to the headscarf have been found in interviews with Muslim women in the USA (Furseth 2011; Mishra and Shirazi 2010; Read and Bartkowski 2000) and in the Netherlands (Bartels 2005). Furthermore, research has shown that there typically are a limited number of arguments for challenging and justifying identity claims (Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Billig 1987). The discursive space for these claims is restricted by what is considered common sense and normatively acceptable. Thus, although there are obvious differences between online and offline places, it is likely that the type of arguments and accounts used is quite similar. Yet, it is possible that particular circumstances or environments can increase or decrease the acceptability of specific arguments.

A second and related point is that future studies could examine ‘doing gendered religion’ of Muslim women in interactions with Muslim men and with non-Muslims, including host society majority members. Muslim women have been found to use different arguments to defend their choice to (not) wear a headscarf towards co-believers and outsiders (Roald 2001). Furthermore, the headscarf is often interpreted differently by Muslim and non-Muslim (Western) audiences as well as by different Muslim denominations (e.g. Sunni, Shi’a). Future research should examine more systematically whether and how arguments about religious membership and category-bound attributes differ between groups and group settings and what the discursive and social consequences of these differences are (Klein, Spears, and Reicher 2007).

To conclude, the headscarf (*hijab*) and its relation to Muslim identity is a major topic of contention for Muslim women living in Western Europe. We have argued for the importance of examining in online discussions how the relationships between the category of ‘true’ Muslim and (not) wearing the headscarf emerge as interactive achievements. This category is not static or fixed and by arguing about the category-bound attributes of a ‘true’ Muslim these women negotiate the normative religious context on which categorization practices with fellow believers are based. Following MCA, we have shown how in ongoing interactions the discursive connection between the headscarf and the female Muslim category is made as well as challenged and reworked.

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## ABSTRACT TRANSLATIONS

### **Ser una verdadera musulmana: discusiones online sobre los pañuelos cubriendo las cabezas entre mujeres marroquíes-neerlandesas**

El pañuelo cubriendo la cabeza (*hijab*) y su relación con la identidad musulmana y las relaciones de género dentro del Islam es un tema importante de controversia para las mujeres musulmanas que viven en Europa occidental. Un aspecto de esta es que ellas tienen que presentar una identidad religiosa aceptable en relación a otras musulmanxs. El presente estudio utiliza el Análisis de Categorización de Membresía para examinar las categorías de pertenencia y los atributos determinantes de categorías utilizados en los foros de discusiones de Internet sobre el pañuelo cubriendo la cabeza entre las mujeres marroquíes neerlandesas. El análisis muestra cómo la categoría de la "verdadera"



musulmana está ligada con el vestir la cabeza cubierta por sumisión religiosa. Las mujeres que no visten el pañuelo en la cabeza producen relatos que enfatizan la convicción personal y la participación religiosa como atributos definitorios adicionales de una “verdadera” musulmana, o enfatizan otras actividades o son predicados como críticas para una identidad femenina musulmana. Con estos relatos, estas mujeres negocian el contexto religioso normativo en el cual se basan las prácticas de categorización con sus compañerxs en la fe.

**Palabras claves:** pañuelo en la cabeza; identidad musulmana; relatos; membresía; género

### 成为真正的穆斯林：摩洛哥裔荷兰女性在互联网上有关头巾的讨论

头巾 (*hijab*) 及其与穆斯林身份认同和伊斯兰中的性别关系之关联性，是生活在西欧的穆斯林女性主要争议的主题。其中一方面便是她们在面对其他穆斯林时，必须呈现出可被接受的宗教身份认同。本研究运用成员身份范畴分析，检视摩洛哥裔的荷兰女性在互联网论坛上讨论头巾时，所使用的成员资格范畴和该范畴所界定的特徵。本分析显示“真实的”穆斯林范畴，如何连结至出自于宗教服从的穿戴头巾行为。不穿戴头巾的女性，生产了强调个人信念与宗教参与作为定义“真正的”穆斯林的辅助性特徵之解释，抑或强调其他的活动或谓词，作为批判性的穆斯林女性身份认同。这些女性运用上述理由，协商教友的范畴化实践所根据的规范性宗教脉络。

**关键词：**头巾；穆斯林身份认同；解释（理由）；成员身份；性别