

HASHTAGGING ISLAM: #JESUSHIJABI, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND RELIGIOUS/SECULAR IDENTITIES

IN THE LIVES OF MUSLIMS IN WINNIPEG AND ST. JOHN'S, CANADA

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© Cory Funk

Memorial University

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Dr. Jennifer Selby

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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 2015, after a Canadian federal election rife with negative rhetoric toward Muslims and a concurrent rise in anti-Muslim incidents that occurred alongside November terrorist attacks in Paris, the Canadian Ahmadiyya Muslim community launched a Twitter hashtag campaign called #JeSuisHijabi. With it, the organization stated that it aimed to challenge misconceptions of Islam and Islamic garb that led to anti-Muslim attacks across Canada. An offline campaign accompanied the hashtag; information booths sought to teach non-Muslims about Islam and the hijab, while encouraging them to try on the garment. With analysis of tweets generated with the hashtag #JeSuisHijabi and consideration of qualitative interviews conducted with Muslims in Winnipeg, MB and St. John's, NL on their use (or not) of hashtags and the Internet in general, I show that the way in which some Canadian Muslims use hashtags to communicate identity complicates the so-called separation between religious and secular spheres. This thesis argues that “religious” hashtags can complicate common notions of a religious/secular binary at work in contemporary Canada, and can serve as a means to understand everyday religiosity in the public sphere.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

On a cold, gray November morning in Winnipeg, Canada in 2016 I sat down for breakfast to interview “Dauood.”¹ Dauood is 36, born in Pakistan, and has been living in Canada since 2004. If there was one thing that I learned very quickly about Dauood, it was that he loves food. “I eat out a lot,” he told me. “So if you know good restaurants, you are my good friend. If you cook you are my really good friend. If you don’t ask me to do dishes you are my best friend.” We both laughed. “So, I don’t care what your religion is. As long as you’re not feeding me pork, I’ll be eating your food every day.”

Dauood is a self-identified Muslim and throughout our two hour-long interview we talked about more than just food. Like the focus of this thesis, we got together to discuss how, as a Muslim, he uses the Internet. Among other topics we talked about his favorite imams on YouTube, how the Internet is helping him decide who he wants to marry, and, as was on everyone’s mind at the time, what he thought about Donald Trump, elected as President of the United States only a few weeks earlier. In particular, I was curious about how he used hashtags, and whether he uses them expressly to challenge misconceptions about Islam. When I asked him, “Do you use hashtags? If so have you ever used them to challenge misconceptions about Islam?”

He responded, "Kind of. You know what baklava is?"

“Yeah.” I said, confused but intrigued. He responded:

¹ I would like to gratefully acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding this research. This thesis research falls under a larger SSHRC-funded project entitled *Canadian Muslims Online: New Muslim Public Spheres in the Digital Age*. As a research assistant for this project the interviews that I conducted are used as data for this thesis and for the larger project as a whole. For more information about the larger project, see <http://canadianmuslimsonline.uqam.ca/en>. All participants’ names have been anonymized.

It was my first picture on Instagram, I hashtagged it #MuslimFerreroRocher. So kind of in that aspect, you know, if you don't come to a *masjid* [mosque], you don't talk to us, you'd think all Muslims are some crazy maniac people. The word Islam, what's the first thing to come to your mind? Even to my mind, because in the media whenever somebody says Islam it's a black [and white] picture of someone with an AK-47. And even though I'm a Muslim, it comes to my mind, when beautiful things should come to my mind, but unfortunately that's what we see. So I do use hashtags to kind of show, hey, we follow a certain religion, but we also have a family, we also have birthdays, we also have weddings, we also have food fests, we also go and watch movies in cinemas, we have Muslim desserts that we call non-Muslim names, that you can kind of relate to. So I do use hashtags, but for engaging people. Like we had #WinnipegEid, the MIA [Manitoba Islamic Association] was using it, so I used that in a couple of pictures.

Like many Muslims, Dauood feels like his religion is portrayed poorly by the media and is fundamentally misunderstood in Canadian society as monolithic, violent, overly serious, dogmatic, and anti-Western. Even as a devout Muslim himself, he admits that it is starting to affect how he thinks about himself and his own religion. To him #MuslimFerreroRocher, is one way in which he, as an individual, can circumvent and subvert this narrative, and make his religious identity "more relatable," by humorously showing the world that he is just a regular person, who, alongside being Muslim, does many of the everyday things that non-Muslim Canadians do. In doing so, he aims to make a popular Pakistani dish more palatable for what he presumes is a non-Muslim audience.

I found Dauood's story about #MuslimFerreroRocher fascinating, because to him, a hashtag was something that he used to creatively communicate Muslim identity to a public audience in a way that highlights the so-called "secular" aspects of his religious identity. In part, this conversation led me to hypothesize that perhaps hashtags can shed light on the ways in which the religious and the secular, which are often perceived as being in a binary relationship, coalesce in the lives of Canadian Muslims. This thesis is a result of my exploration of this

hypothesis, and argues that the way in which some Canadian Muslims use hashtags to communicate identity and navigate public life, complicates notions of so-called religious and secular spheres that undergird hegemonic narratives about Islam, highlighting and nuancing the blurred, and as Robert Orsi (2005) calls, “braided” relationship between religiosity and secularity in the lives of Canadian Muslims.

Even if used in a menial or mundane fashion, the “#” (or hashtag symbol) is by no means an uncommon or insignificant contemporary symbol for Muslims and Canadian society (see CBC News 2015d), in general. Today, hashtags can be found on billboards, store fronts, product labels, pamphlets, and protest signs, and have even managed to seep their way into spoken vernacular. Whether online or offline, typed by religious or non-religious people, hashtags are being used daily to expeditiously communicate and organize ideas and identities in ways that did not exist before they were introduced by the social media platform Twitter in 2007.

In an age where online and offline, private and public, religious and secular are increasingly intertwined (as discussed by theorists including Aupers and Houtman 2010: 25; el-Nawawy and Khamis 2009: 59), hashtags and the way that they are used seem to be a visible and communicative manifestation of this reality. In 2015, 25% of Canadians claimed to be on Twitter (canadiansInternet.com 2015; see CBC News 2015e), a social media site where hashtags first appeared and are commonly used to communicate ideas, organize discussions, and express emotions. While no quantitative data exists on the subject, there is no reason to doubt that Muslim Canadians are also active on Twitter.

This thesis considers how Canadian Muslims use hashtags to articulate and complicate religious and secular identities and organize social critique through personal use of hashtags as

well as hashtag campaigns. To do so I combine two methodological approaches by (1) gathering qualitative data based on seventeen semi-directed interviews with self-identifying Canadian Muslims and (2) compiling and analyzing tweets under a hashtag started by Canadian Muslims called [#JeSuisHijabi](#).² #JeSuisHijabi, which translates from French as “I am hijabi,” is a campaign started by the Canadian Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at in 2015, and, based on statements made in their press release, sought to influence public opinion on hijabs and the Muslim women who wear them. The campaign launched on December 1, 2015 in the form of a press release, which throughout the campaign served as part of the campaign’s manifesto. The release stated that the campaign seeks to “highlight the Canadian values of multiculturalism, plurality and tolerance...and give Canadians an opportunity to hear from Muslim women firsthand and understand what their faith and identity means to them” (Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at 2015). The campaign started in response to a rise in anti-Muslim attacks and rhetoric after the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks.³ In fact, a Toronto police report stated that 22 anti-Muslim hate crimes were reported in November 2015, which was almost double compared to the year before (Simcoe 2016).⁴

² Throughout this thesis project, I have hyperlinked all of the hashtags that are mentioned by myself and participants. These links are intended to help readers to quickly access and better understand the hashtags that I discuss, and to flag hashtags which I believe may offer insight into people’s lived religious experiences, thus serving as a potential subject of study for future researchers.

³ Hashtags that directly respond to terror attacks appear often after such events. The most popular hashtag at the time of writing was [#JeSuisCharlie](#), a hashtag that appeared as a statement of solidarity with France and Charlie Hebdo after a deadly shooting at the offices of the satirical French magazine on January 7, 2015, leaving 12 people dead. Within twenty four hours of the attack, over five million tweets containing the hashtag were created (Ulanoff 2015). It is difficult to know definitively whether the #JeSuisHijabi campaign is influenced by the #JeSuisCharlie hashtag in anyway, despite their common resonance. Nowhere does the #JeSuisHijabi campaign claim to intentionally use the French wording of “Je Suis” to make a statement about or connect to the discourses surrounding #JeSuisCharlie. It may, at the very least, have adopted the “Je Suis ____” format by observing how effective it was as the #JeSuisCharlie hashtag and aiming to parallel its universalist aims.

⁴ A less official, but still important website managed by The National Council of Canadian Muslims tracks anti-Muslim incidents across Canada. In November of 2015, they tracked 16 anti-Muslim incidents, compared to 6 in November of the previous year (See National Council of Canadian Muslims 2017).

The campaign had a two-fold, online-offline approach that launched a hashtag while also setting up booths in public spaces across the country (see Fig. 1), garnering nation-wide media attention (see CBC News 2015a; 2015c; Javed 2015; Griwkowski 2015; Ngabo 2015; Crosier 2015; Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Canada 2015). The Ahmadiyya Muslim community is a particularly media savvy minority within Islam itself with messianic beliefs in their founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who founded the Ahmadiyya movement at the end of the 19th century (Gualtieri 2004: viii). In a 2013 *Vancouver Sun* article on the Ahmadiyya Community in Canada, one reporter claimed that although there are only 25,000 Ahmadi Muslims in Canada he, “receive more emails and news releases from the Ahmadiyya Muslims than from the rest of Canada’s roughly one million Muslims combined” (Todd 2013). To be clear, however, while this campaign was started by Ahmadis, there were a considerable amount of non-Ahmadi Muslims who participated in the campaign, because it spoke to something larger than specific Ahmadi beliefs and applied to Muslim, and particularly hijabi, identities in general.⁵

A *Toronto Star* interview with one of the #JeSuisHijabi campaign’s organizers, Farheen Khan, who in the past started a hashtag called [#MuslimsActually](#) and runs a blog that shares stories about everyday Muslims,⁶ also helps to shed light on the hashtag campaign’s main goals and somewhat echoes Dauood’s reasoning for using #MuslimFerreroRocher. She stated that, “The reason why this all came out is because there is a need for us to create positive stories and images of Muslims in the media...It gives people an opportunity to normalize and show that Muslims are just like everybody else” (Javed 2015). None of my participants told me that they themselves participated in the campaign, but nevertheless, examining the campaign alongside

⁵ Very few tweets were specific to Ahmadiyya Muslim identity, and was a hashtag designed to be used by Muslims who do not necessarily identify as Ahmadi. It is for this reason that I refer to Muslims more broadly throughout this thesis and not specifically to Ahmadis.

⁶ The blog began as an independent online publication, but has since been incorporated into the Muslim Media website *MuslimLink* (see MuslimLink 2017).

interviews with Muslims themselves offers a more holistic understanding of hashtags and how they are used to express religious identities. Like Dauood, the goal of #JeSuisHijabi is not just to communicate religious identity, but to subvert mainstream media narratives about Islam by communicating identity in general.



(Fig. 1) Two women (left) express in a tweet support for the campaign and how they feel about hijab. Five women (right), all in hijab or niqab, pose for a picture, including one police officer, and what may be non-Muslim women trying on the hijab.⁷

I have selected to examine and critique #JeSuisHijabi as a hashtag because the multitude of individual identities and ideas expressed through it reflects the subjective nature of Islam in Canada. In addition, #JeSuisHijabi is a hashtag that was developed by Canadian Muslims to simultaneously influence public opinion and provide a discursive space, online and offline, for Muslims and non-Muslims to express their understandings of Islam and Muslim identity in a way that challenges popular perceptions of a binary relationship between religiosity and secularity. To be clear, however, while this hashtag did generate hundreds of tweets and garner a significant amount of media attention in Canada, following the launch of the campaign in December 2015, it

⁷ All tweets under #JeSuisHijabi that I mention or show pictures of in this thesis come from a refined advanced search, the link to which can be found in my bibliography (see Twitter 2017b).

did not trend worldwide.⁸ Nevertheless, prior to its launch, the hashtag did not exist, meaning that it created space for people to discuss the role of Islam and the hijab in the public sphere in a way that would not have existed otherwise.⁹ By looking closer at #JeSuisHijabi and its language, rhetoric, reasoning, and tactics, this thesis demonstrates that in looking closer at how my participants use hashtags to show that “Muslims are just like everybody else,” scholars are able to obtain a deeper understanding of the everyday lived religious and secular identities of Canadian Muslims and how they seek to be understood in the Canadian public sphere.

It is important, however, to acknowledge that the study of hashtags and tweets has its limitations. The 140-character limit of tweets coupled with the performative and self-censoring nature of social media, can really only tell us how people *wish* to be perceived, which is still significant, but resembles only the tip of the identity iceberg. Therefore, by complementing my online analysis of tweets that use #JeSuisHijabi with in-depth interviews of Muslims about life in Canada, their online practices, and how they use hashtags, I offer a deeper understanding of the identities beneath the surface that inform and generate those tweets. In so doing, this thesis explores the stories of Muslim Canadians who use hashtags and the Internet in general, to navigate awkward workplace conversations, justify their decision about whether or not to wear hijab, navigate the perceived tension between gay and Muslim identities, and challenge hegemonic discourses about Islam and its place in Canadian society (see Chapter 4).

⁸ I will outline my methodology for gathering and analyzing tweets under #JeSuisHijabi in Chapter Three.

⁹ When a hashtag is “trending” it means that it is one of the most frequently used hashtags on Twitter during a certain period of time, and may even be featured on Twitter’s home page. For example, shortly after the March 2016 terror attacks in Brussels, the hashtag [#StopIslam](#) became one of the highest trending hashtags on Twitter just below [#Brussels](#) and [#PrayforBelgium](#). However, while on first impression one may think that #StopIslam was trending due to a high occurrence of Islamophobic tweets, it was actually trending because everyone who logged on to Twitter saw that it was trending and tweeted about their disappointment in how it was trending, which ultimately, and ironically, contributed to it being one of the highest trending tweets that day (see Dewey 2016).

In short, through conducting, coding, and analyzing interviews as well as tweets using #JeSuisHijabi, I argue that hashtags, and the way that some Muslims use them, help to bring representations of religious identities that were once only able to be kept private into the public sphere, enabling Muslims to better challenge “secular” norms that inform hegemonic discourses online and offline. In the process of articulating religious experiences and identities publically to a Muslim and non-Muslim Canadian audience, Muslims communicate the secular aspects of their identities alongside their religious identities, blurring an often perceived strict binary between so-called secular and religious spheres. Through making this argument, I seek not only to nuance the understanding of the relationship between Islam, online media, and religious/secular identities, but to also make a significant contribution to the emerging literature on hashtags, illuminating their role in communicating religious identities and the impact they may have in understanding religion’s place in the modern public sphere. On these two fronts, this investigation thus constitutes an advancement in the field of hashtags and religion.

Context

Canadian Muslims in Winnipeg and St. John’s

Muslims have a long history in Canada that goes back well before the Internet age. One of the first known arrivals of Muslims into Canada was a family from Scotland who arrived in 1850 (Environics 2016:1). In 1882, only fifteen years after Confederation, a group of Arab migrants from Ottoman Syria, some of whom were Muslim, came to Canada fleeing conscription into the Ottoman army (Zine 2012a: 4). After World War II, Canada lifted many of its exclusionary wartime policies aimed at keeping out non-European and non-white immigrants who were deemed as possible threats. This shift opened doors for more Muslims from around the world to enter Canada in greater numbers, mostly as skilled workers. By the 1950s, Canada’s Muslim

population was estimated to be about 3,000, and has grown steadily since then (Zine 2012a: 6). Today, there are over one million Muslims in Canada and, while remaining a very small percentage, approximately 3% of the entire population, Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the country (Environics 2016: 1).

Christianity is the religious tradition of most Canadians. In 2011 67% of Canadians identified as Christian, and the aforementioned 3% identified as Muslim (Statistics Canada 2011a). Winnipeg, where 12 of my participants live, is a medium sized prairie city known for its religious and cultural diversity (Hameed 2015: 16). In the 2011 National Household Survey, 64% of Winnipeggers identified as Christian and 1.5% as Muslim (Statistics Canada 2011c). On the other hand, St. John's, where 5 of my participants live, is one of the least religiously diverse capital cities in Canada, a result of its relative geographic isolation and small population. In 2011, 90% of citizens in St. John's identified as Christians; 0.5% of the city's population identified as Muslim. Despite this fraction, Muslims are the city's second largest religious group after Christianity (Statistics Canada 2011b). St. John's more ethno-religiously homogenous population thus differs from Winnipeg's population, which more closely parallels national averages for religious groups and visible minorities. In Winnipeg, many of the Muslims who I interviewed are professionals who, for the most part, call Winnipeg their permanent home, and all 5 of the Canadian-born participants in my study are from Winnipeg. In St. John's, 3 of the 5 participants that I interviewed are international students who have been living in St. John's for a while and plan to move elsewhere after their degrees. The other two consider St. John's their permanent home.

Certainly, the identities of my participants are impacted by the contexts of Winnipeg and St. John's, which I touch on throughout this thesis. However, since this thesis focuses primarily

on how Muslims in these two cities use the Internet and hashtags, I do not spend any significant amount of time comparing or analyzing the precise impacts that these cities have had on my participants, or what responses from participants say about them. Instead, I look closer at what their stories may say about Canadian Muslim identities, the impact the Internet has had on those identities, and how they are communicated online.

Even as a small minority within Canada, Canadian Muslims are themselves quite diverse. Ismailis, Ahmadis, Shi'a and Sunni Muslims have a variety of ethnic identities, political leanings, and personal aspirations. However, this diversity and subjectivity is often overlooked in media narratives of Islam. Geopolitical events like 9/11 combined with much of the wider Canadian population's understanding of religion and its role in modernity have meant that Muslims, as a religious and often racialized minority, are often perceived as practicing a religion that is monolithic, conservative, and anti-Western (Masquelier and Soares 2016: 26). This perception is one that many Muslims feel impelled to change, and some are taking to the Internet to do so.

The demographic make-up of my 17 participants and the ways in which they use the Internet reflects this diversity. Participants, born in Canada or not, came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds: Bangladeshi, Kurdish, Anglo-Saxon, Malay, Pakistani, Indian, British, and Somali; of my participants, 5 were born in Canada, one of which is a convert. While all of my participants identify to varying degrees as Sunni, which reflects the majority of Muslims, but not necessarily the denominational diversity of Islam in Canada, they certainly reflect its subjectivity. Interestingly, 12 participants, when asked, "What Muslim group or community do you affiliate with?" were reluctant to identify as anything else other than Muslim, and hesitantly identified with Sunnism, responding with answers like "I just say I'm Muslim. I would say

honestly, like, if someone pushes me to specify I'll just say I'm Sunni Muslim. But other than that, no." Another Canadian-born participant from Winnipeg said,

I've always referred to myself as Muslim, but I guess if you want to be more specific I guess you can say Sunni Muslim. But as far as things go, I don't want to say I'm transient, but I take from a few different things. You know, I've had my stint about learning about Sufism and I take element from in it my life and still use elements of that practice in my life, but I wouldn't identify as a member of that group necessarily, though I take elements from it.

This subjective, and somewhat ecumenical, sense of Muslim identity was common amongst participants in their discussions of the significant role that the Internet plays in shaping and exploring what it means to them to be Muslim, reflecting a keen observation made by Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman (2010) who note that religion in the modern digital age constitutes "a relocation of the sacred to the subjective world of the individual and to the world of technological objects; a sacralization of the self and the digital in other words" (25).¹⁰ This observation that the Internet is facilitating the twining of religiosity and individuality coincides with the fact that religious observance amongst Canadian Muslims, particularly Muslims between the ages of 18 and 34 is on the rise (Enviroics 2016: 5), an age demographic in which 15 of my participants fall under.¹¹ Interestingly, it also just so happens that the median age of my participants is 26, not far from the median age of Canada's Muslim population, 28 (Statistics Canada 2011a).

Both genders are also represented in my interviews. 9 participants that I interviewed were men and 8 were women. Of the women, 7 wore hijab and 1 did not. While this is a small sample, the proportion of hijab wearers in my study is significantly more than the 48% of Canadian

¹⁰ To be clear, the desire to be identified as "just Muslim" alongside a strong sense of subjectivity I do not find ironic or contradictory, but instead indicative of a turn towards a use of less traditional Muslim labels, which the ubiquitous term "just Muslim" allows for, as opposed to the historically and culturally saturated terms of "Sunni" or "Shi'a."

¹¹ The full age of my participants ranges from 19-40.

Muslim women who are said to wear hijab (Environics 2016:18). Each woman however, has her own unique stories and experiences pertaining to why they practice hijab, or don't. The Internet played a significant part in many of these stories and experiences, which I explore in more depth in Chapters Four and Five.

My participants, overall, are well educated. Every participant had at least some university education. In terms of the highest level of education achieved, six participants completed some or were currently pursuing an undergraduate education. Five participants held Bachelor's degrees as their highest degree obtained, two of which were pursuing an MA and Law degree respectively. The remaining six participants all had Masters degrees, two of which were pursuing their PhDs. With this in mind, Canadian Muslims do tend to be more educated than the Canadian public as a whole, nevertheless, they are disproportionately well educated compared to even the average Canadian Muslim population (see Kazemipur 2014).

This section has sought to demonstrate how my participants are situated within Canada's historical, geographical, and demographic context, briefly shedding light on how modernity and technology influence Muslim subjectivities in the Canadian public sphere. Now, before moving on to discuss their experiences in more detail and what they say about the interplay between religious and secular identities (see Chapters Four and Five), I would like to first look closer at the specific socio-political context of Canada at the time leading up to the launch of #JeSuisHijabi on December 1, 2015, a period that precludes my interviews as well. This was a time when Canadian Muslim identity was particularly prominent in Canadian political and media discourses, online and offline, and considering it in more depth will help to illuminate the hegemonic narratives that inform particular understandings of Islam and the perception of a rigid separation between the religious and the secular.

Internet, Securitization, and Muslim Identities in Canada

Internet usage amongst Canadians is amongst the highest in the world. In a study conducted by the Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA) (2014) of Internet usage worldwide, Canada ranked 16th overall in 2015 for Internet penetration, but was first in the world for the number of websites visited per month. Where the world average was 2,300 websites per month, Canadians averaged well over that, visiting 3,700, with the most common online activity being social media (CIRA 2014). According to a 2015 survey 59% of Canadians use Facebook and, as mentioned previously, 25% use Twitter (canadiansInternet.com 2015). There is no reason to believe that Canadian Muslims are any different, meaning that their religious practices, expressions, and articulations in the public sphere are also shifting with this new medium.

The post-9/11 era has also reshaped life for many Canadian Muslims, with heightened securitization and suspicion towards Muslims (see Harvey-Crowell 2015; Cesari 2013; Fox and Akbaba 2015). At the same time, the influences of modernity continue to place a heavy emphasis on individual freedoms and the self (Taylor 1991). I see these two contexts of post 9/11 suspicion and modern Western individualism as intertwined in how they affect and are evident in how Canadian Muslims use the Internet to construct and communicate their individual and collective identities, navigate and negotiate societal norms and institutions, and build communities. In other words, securitization affects the way Muslims express this “sacralization of the self and the digital” (Aupers and Hautman 2010: 25) and needs to be taken into account.

Fox and Akbaba (2015), define the securitization of Islam as a “process that includes discourses constructed around a perceived Islamist threat and the promotion of actions outside other normal bounds of political procedure that requires commitment of greater resources in

order to eliminate it” (177). While Muslims may be able to use Twitter, and social media in general, to challenge certain discourses, the discourse of securitization, as it pertains to Islam, is a powerful one that is present in both online and offline public spheres. Muslims live, and in turn tweet, post, and share within this discursive power dynamic.

Securitization pervades daily life for Muslim Canadians. An anecdote from Liam Harvey-Crowell’s (2015) thesis that drew from his own interviews for the *New Muslim Public Spheres in the Digital Age* project illustrates this point well, by shedding light on how securitization in Canada affected the recruitment and responses of his Muslim participants.¹² While recruiting participants for his thesis, Harvey-Crowell recalls being approached by five members of the Muslim Students Association (MSA) at Memorial University. He writes that

this group of five people informed me that they had heard of my project (and even read my pamphlet on the project) but were still suspicious of it, fearing that saying ‘the wrong thing’ or having something taken out of context would get them or the MSA in trouble (72).

This anecdote is telling. It shows that as much as Muslim Canadians may wish to and are constitutionally able to express themselves fully online or offline, there is a wider political context that may be holding them back from doing so or affecting their choice of words.

This was the context in 2015, when Islam was at the centre of Canadian identity politics, making Islam and Muslims a common issue in media and political discourses online and offline; discourses that would often reinforce securitization and stereotypes of Muslims. An anti-terrorism bill passed by the Conservative federal government in 2015, for example, called Bill C-51, raised numerous concerns amongst the Muslim community as well as legal scholars (see Elghawaby 2015; Forcese and Roach 2015) about expanding the powers of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). The bill

¹² Harvey-Crowell’s thesis was also associated with the *New Muslim Public Spheres in the Digital Age* project.

aimed to take more preventative action against suspected terrorism, monitor and censor the Internet, and prevent transportation in and out of the country by giving these organizations more power. This bill was widely criticized as legislation that would disproportionately and unjustly target, discriminate, and undermine the rights of Canada's Muslim population, a population that, in the post 9/11 context, was already under a heavy amount of suspicion and surveillance by law enforcement and the public eye in general.

The passing of this bill in the summer of 2015 and public discourse surrounding it was followed by a federal election that, especially on the part of the Canadian Conservative Party, appealed to this suspicion by making Islamic beliefs, practices, and identity an election issue. Prior to the election, a ban on wearing niqabs in citizenship ceremonies was proposed by Conservative Prime Minister, Steven Harper, arguing that the niqab was "rooted in a culture that is anti-women" (Chase 2015).¹³ Due to its questionable legality under Canadian law however, it was challenged by defendant Zunera Ishaq, a Muslim woman who was affected by the ban. Since it was an election year, her case was then prioritized by Canada's Federal Court of Appeal to determine whether she would be able to vote, cementing the niqab ban as an election issue. Before election day, the court ruled the ban as unlawful, and Ishaq participated in the citizenship ceremony and was subsequently allowed to vote (CBC News 2015f).

Likewise, Federal conservatives also vowed in the election to expand their commitment to the "Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act," which was given royal ascent that June; promising to allocate more funds to create an RCMP phone-in tip line for citizens to report neighbours if they suspect that they were engaged in practices like forced underage marriages or

¹³ In response to the ban, the hashtag [#PMDressCode](#) emerged criticizing Stephen Harper for telling women what they should wear. Canadians used it to criticize Harper in a number of ways. Many Muslim women tweeted it along with pictures of themselves wearing hijab or niqab, as a means of showing that Islamic dress is acceptable in Canadian society.

honor killings.¹⁴ Canada's Minister of Citizenship and Immigration at the time, Chris Alexander, even connected the niqab ban in citizenship ceremonies, and in turn Islam, to the Act and the tip line. When commenting on this election promise, he said, "We need to stand up for our values...We need to do that in citizenship ceremonies. We need to do that to protect women and girls from forced marriage and other barbaric practices" (Powers 2015). The Conservatives lost the election to Justin Trudeau's Liberal party, but the negative rhetoric surrounding Islam that was used by politicians during the election played a part in empowering people with once nascent Islamophobic worldviews to speak out and act on them. The November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris and the subsequent rise of violence and anti-Islamic rhetoric against Muslims in Canada followed soon after, which spurred the launch of #JeSuisHijabi.

With these factors in mind, my study will focus on the modern facet of social media that is the hashtag, and how it is being used by self-identified Muslim Canadians to work towards subverting hegemonic discourses of fear and misunderstanding that arise out of a climate of securitization and navigate the Canadian context by creating unique spaces for identity expression, construction, and discussion. Looking closer at hashtags offers a way forward in beginning to understand the complex ways in which Muslims are using new forms of media online to articulate religious identities within a socio-political context that often characterizes Islam as a threat to so-called 'secular' values, thus using hashtags to problematize, complicate, and nuance modern notions of a rigid separation between 'the religious' and 'the secular.' With this aim in mind, I turn to Kim Knott's (2013) eloquent observation that,

¹⁴ [#BarbaricCulturalPractices](#) became a trending hashtag on Twitter during the 2015 Canadian federal election, but in a way that criticized and lampooned the Conservative's proposal of a RCMP tip line, making jokes, for example, that people should report their neighbours for barbaric cultural practices if they see them commit a fashion faux pas like wear socks with sandals. Likewise, the hashtag would turn the term on its head by framing the party's reluctance to address the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and 'muzzling' of scientists as #BarbaricCulturalPractices (CBC News 2015b). Canadians are still using the hashtag at the time of writing, particularly to criticize Chris Alexander during his run for leader of the Conservative Party of Canada.

The tacit boundaries between ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’, and ‘religion’ and ‘politics’, continue today to be reproduced in various ways in public discourse, for example, in the making of laws, in policy and security debates, in political struggles for communal identity, and in media commentaries on the nature of contemporary plural societies. In the process, the concepts themselves are reworked, re-imagined and co-produced. Their relationship is far from settled. (151)

Hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi are a way that Muslims can weigh into public discourses about Islam, showing, in a very public manner, just how unsettled this relationship is, which upsets hegemonic discourses that separate the religious and the secular and associate Islam solely with the former, informing laws and policies like The Barbaric Cultural Practices Act and informing the types of opinions that lead the violence and hatred that Canadian Muslims experienced not only in 2015, but to this day.

This section has explored the hegemonic narratives and discourses of securitization that inform certain understandings of Islam in Canada, understandings that informed discriminatory policy and violence towards Muslims, which undergirds discussions with interviewees and spurred the launch of #JeSuisHijabi. I will now discuss, contextualize, and clarify, the concept of secularism in Canada itself, and how hashtags and social media may be shifting society’s understanding of it.

Contextualizing Hashtags, Religion, the Secular

As social media and mainstream media are becoming more intertwined by the day, the ways in which modern society communicates with itself are changing. Hashtags are a modern manifestation of this twining, further blurring and reshaping modern boundaries between medium and message, online and offline, public and private, self and cyber, thus allowing for anyone with access to the Internet to potentially insert their voices into and (re)shape public discourses that they would not be able to otherwise. Hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi, and the many

others that I will discuss in this thesis, illuminate the complex identities and subjectivities at work in the everyday lives of Canadian Muslims, and have the potential to further complicate modern understandings of the relationship between the religious and the secular.

Hashtags came into being in 2007, when Twitter sought, based on the suggestion of its users, to make it easier for people to categorize their tweets and find tweeters of similar topical interests (Bruns and Burgess 2015:26).¹⁵ Hashtags soon proved useful as a means of organizing and communicating during natural disasters like the San Diego bush fires in 2007 (ibid), and soon became used to proliferate and organize ideas, events, and movements; from [#BlackLivesMatter](#), a civil rights movement fighting for Black citizens to be treated equally in societal and governmental institutions, to [#elxn42](#) or [#cdnpoli](#), hashtags used as a means of organizing discussion and events surrounding the Canadian federal election and Canadian politics. It is also not uncommon for people to even express emotions through hashtags like [#happy](#), [#sad](#), [#blessed](#), or [#MuslimRage](#), a rather brash hashtag created in 2012 by Newsweek to discuss the Islamic world's 'angry' reaction to a controversial online video called 'The Innocence of Muslims'. This hashtag, however, as a means of subverting the vitriolic rhetoric embedded in the hashtag, was adopted by Muslims themselves to humorously and ironically communicate the mundane everyday frustrations that Muslims face, like not having halal options at restaurants or regularly being asked to explain terrorism (see Schwell 2015).¹⁶

Hashtags, in very complex, multifaceted, and dynamic ways are being used every day to communicate a wide variety of ideas, emotions, and meanings, including so-called religious

¹⁵ Twitter began in 2006 as a micro-blogging site, allowing users to upload posts that were, and still are, limited to 140 characters. Posts can then be liked, replied to, or "retweeted" by other users, which reposts the tweet on another user's page. Currently Twitter boasts 313 million active users on their site worldwide, and is a preferred method of public communication by many prominent figures including Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and most famously, or infamously, U.S. President Donald Trump (Twitter 2017a).

¹⁶ See Chapter Two for a deeper discussion of #MuslimRage.

ones. A particularly interesting and unique example of this is Ann Gleig's (2015) study of an American Buddhist media organization called *Buddhist Geeks*, where she noted how one of the founders, Vincent Horn, developed a technique called '#hashtag meditation' which he considers a form of vipassana meditation, a Buddhist meditation technique that focuses on self-reflection. On the *Buddhist Geeks* website, Horn writes a blogpost about his approach to '#hashtag meditation', saying that

when posting an update to social media, the #hashtag is usually used to denote context to the update. #hashtag's are used to add humor, to tag where one is located (and event of physical location), or to emphasize something. In the case of #hashtag meditation, what we're wanting to tag is what we're noticing in our experience as we're posting the update. What kind of thoughts, or emotions, are arising as we construct our Twitter, Facebook, or Google+ update? (Horn 2015)

In Gleig's discussion of this practice she notes that Horn, "draws a parallel between the social media use of the '#hashtag' as a way to notice and emphasize activity and the identification of thoughts, emotions, or sensations that occur in vipassana 'noting' practice" (193). There is not necessarily a specific Islamic spiritual practice associated with hashtagging that I am aware of, but there is no doubt Muslims are using hashtags for expressing, articulating, and even constructing their religious identities (see Wills and Fecteau 2016). Nevertheless, despite their presence in daily life, the connection between Islam and hashtags in Canada has yet to be studied in depth. For Muslims, hashtags like [#PBUH](#)¹⁷ [#alhamdulillah](#),¹⁸ [#MuslimProblems](#), [#MuslimsActually](#) or [#JeSuisHijabi](#) twin the modern religious self and the digital, and are being used to express and construct individual religious and national identities, and when studied closer, they can tell us much about modern Islam in the Canadian context, given the significance of the Internet in Canadian life. A significance that cannot be underestimated. To date, however,

¹⁷ PBUH stands for "peace be upon him," a phrase commonly said after invoking the name of the prophet Muhammad.

¹⁸ Alhamdulillah is a commonly invoked Arabic phrase that loosely translates as "praise be to God."

there is only one published study done by Peter Beyer and Rubina Ramji that looks at the way Muslim Canadians are using the Internet to construct identity.

Peter Beyer and Rubina Ramji (2013) interviewed 93 second-generation Canadian Muslims. Drawing on this data, a further study of Islam and the Internet by Ramji (2014), confirms Aupers and Houtman's observation of the connection between religion, technology and the self as it applies to the modern Canadian context. Beyer and Ramji studied how second generation Canadian Muslims create their identities, and noticed that of the 93 young Muslims that they interviewed, the vast majority believed that identity construction was a task to be undertaken by the individual, not by parents or one's religious community (Beyer 2013:56). In Ramji's paper on Canadian Muslim youths' use of the Internet, she found that individual identity construction manifested itself in how these Canadian Muslim youths use the Internet. She added that

accessing Islam online added to their sense of identity but did not affect their sense of 'citizenship.' While they are engaging in unique constructions of their faith, they do not distinguish between being Muslim and being Canadian, between Islam and the West, or between homeland and diaspora (Ramji 2014:115).

From my research, participants in St. John's and Winnipeg echo a similar sentiment, with many claiming that it is easier and more fulfilling to be a Muslim in "secular" Canada than it would be in a Muslim majority country (see Chapter Four). Religious, national, and individual identities seem to similarly be co-expressed through hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi and express an understanding of secularism that is much more complex than an understanding of it as the absence of religion, which is something that needs to be explored further before diving deeper into my analysis.

Since my thesis centres around how hashtags serve to complicate perceptions of secularism I want to make very clear what I mean when I use terms like "secular" and

“secularism.” Throughout my thesis I use the terms in two ways: how secularism is commonly perceived and how it is critically conceptualized. In referring to how it is commonly perceived I refer to it as so-called secularism, or “secularism.” Secularism or the secular is a concept that, for a number of historical and social political reasons, manages to be commonly perceived in the West as static, neutral, singular, and defined by what it is not: religion (Bakali 2015; Valenta 2009; Jansen 2009). Many scholars, myself included, see it quite differently and take issue with this perception and how the religious secular binary undergirds problematic perceptions of Islam verses the West.

Like religious identity itself, I critically conceptualize the secular and secularism as a dynamic, multifaceted, and by no means neutral, facilitator and manager of expression, be it religious, political or otherwise. A concept that ideally, but not necessarily in practice, seeks to ensure that all citizens of a diverse society, regardless of religious belief or background have equitable say in the public sphere. This definition of secularism that I present here, most closely resembles and is most heavily influenced by Elizabeth Hurd (2012), who in her study of secularism’s influence on international politics eloquently suggests that,

Rather than take secularism to be a neutral or natural space for politics that emerges once religion has been privatised, displaced, or diminished, it takes shape here as a contingent series of legal and political claims and projects that are deeply implicated in the definition and management of religion, religious freedom, toleration, diversity, and so on. Secularism is not the absence of religion, but enacts a particular kind of presence. It appropriates religion: defining, shaping and even transforming it. (995)

The use of hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi and #MuslimFerreroRocher, as I hope to demonstrate throughout this thesis, in mounting social critique and shedding light on Muslim identity, are a way in which Muslims are tacitly working to shift perceptions of secularism more towards this nuanced, problematized, and complicated understanding of secularism – showing the positive and negative ways in which secularism defines, shapes, and even transforms religion.

I, as well as other scholars, are particularly critical of perceptions that secularism is neutral, because it is a concept that is historically constructed with roots in the protestant liberal-West (see Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008, Asad 2003), and this lack of neutrality often becomes apparent when laws and policies are implemented or proposed in the name of secularism. As a result, its lack of neutrality is most apparent to those whom those laws, policies, and attitudes discriminate against. Recently in Canada, and Western countries in general, these policies, laws, and attitudes, while in the name of equality, show implicit favour towards more traditionally Christian worldviews, while Muslims are often the ones who are targeted. In France and Quebec for example, *laïcité*, a type of secularism that perhaps most strictly perceives a separation between religious and the secular is based on the assumption that society “can be held together only by a formal separation between religious belonging and political status, and by the allocation of religious belief to the private sphere” (Asad 2009). This position is evidenced by Quebec’s proposed 2013 Charter of Values, which sought to ban public servants from wearing conspicuous religious symbols like hijabs, turbans, or large crosses, but insisted on keeping the “cultural” symbol of the crucifix in the province’s National Assembly (Brean 2013).

The rest of Canada seems to practice a more “open” approach to secularism (see Taylor 2006), in which the public sphere is ideally seen as a place where all forms of religious expression are given equal voice in the public sphere so long as they fall within the rule of law, which on the surface may seem like a more nuanced approach, but is still fraught with problematic perceptions of a rigid separation between the religious and the secular and orientalist assumptions that some religions are more compatible with so-called secular-liberal ideals than others. The proposed niqab ban in citizenship ceremonies in 2015 and the negative public discourse towards Muslims surrounding the 2003-2005 “sharia debate” in Ontario after the

province allowed for Imams, Rabbis, Priests, to perform religious arbitration, for example, illustrate this well (see Selby 2013).

This variance in understandings and approaches to secularism within Canada itself is partly due to the fact that there is no constitutional separation in Canada between religion and the state. Nevertheless, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees freedom of religion and freedom of conscience (see Beaman 2008; Beyer 2008). Likewise, the Canadian government, through its Multiculturalism Act recognizes,

religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada (RSC 1985).

Note here how, within this landmark piece of Canadian legislation, religion, along with race, ethnicity, nationality, are all recognized as things that have an equal place within Canada's social, and even its political, fabric. This understanding points to a form of secularism at work in Canada, at least on the federal level, that instead of pushing religion and religious identity away from the public sphere, which is what it is commonly perceived to do, seeks to ideally blend it with other aspects of public life. This blending can manifest in a complex array of forms. To illustrate how this manifestation takes place for at least one Canadian Muslim, I turn to a participant who I have given the pseudonym of Mariam.

When reflecting on how her religious identity has changed over time since moving from Kurdish northern Iraq to Canada, Mariam told me about how she used to take her religious identity for granted when she lived in Iraq. Since almost everyone there self-identified as Muslim, she practiced Islam but did not think much about why. When she came to Canada as a teenager she was suddenly exposed to a number of diverse religious identities and practices,

including practices within Islam itself, which led her to question who she was as a Muslim woman, and for a while stopped wearing the hijab. From there it was not a slow progression towards a more private, implicit form of religiosity, or even a-religiosity. Instead, Mariam eventually decided to start wearing the hijab again, and told me that “now, when I practice Islam, I think it’s because I live in a country, in a secular plural country.” In Mariam’s eyes, she cannot simply separate the religious and the secular in her life. They are intertwined and are both a part of who she is. This, along with findings from my analysis of #JeSuisHijabi echoes an observation made by Moghissi, Rahnema, and Goodman (2009), who in their study of Canadian Muslim immigrant youths, of which many of my participants would be considered, note that in the face of certain barriers that liberal society places in front of many young Muslims,

Muslim youths (or a significant proportion thereof) refuse to abandon Islam or its public expression in order to overcome or circumvent those barriers [...] for youth socialized and raised in the West, religiosity can also mark out a sort of reflexive questioning of the secular values of the larger society, that in their view, has become stuck in its colonial mentality (11-12).

The problematic, powerful, ethno-centric, and even neo-colonial perception of secularism as neutral and preferable to religion affects Canadian Muslims, who are often depicted as unwilling (or unable) to separate the religious and secular aspects of their identities. With Moghissi, Rahnema, and Goodman’s observation and Mariam’s story in mind, which I explore in more depth in Chapters Four and Five, I do not believe that Canada is “secular” in the conventional sense that it is the absence or even opposite of religion, but am well aware that it is commonly perceived as such. This thesis demonstrates how hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi, #MuslimFerreroRocher, and the ways that Canadian Muslims use them, tacitly nuance this perception by deprivatizing identities and ideas that are simultaneously influenced by religious beliefs and the secular contexts in which they exist. Ideas and identities that Canadian Muslims

have understood for a long time, but the wider “secular” public, due to historically and politically constructed perceptions of a binary relationship between the religious and the secular, has not.

Thesis Overview

Now that I have outlined the context in which my thesis is situated, I will move on in the next chapter to review the relevant literature, beginning with a brief discussion of hashtags and the recent literature that explores and theorizes their role in the public sphere and their relation to Islam and secularism. Following this discussion, I will review and synthesize English-language research on the study of Islam and the Internet, Twitter as a public sphere, and online everyday activism to demonstrate how they work together to help begin to explain #JeSuisHijabi’s presence and function as a hashtag in the public sphere.

In Chapter Three I describe in more depth my two-pronged methodological approach that I used to gather and analyze the content of tweets under these hashtags as well as conduct seventeen qualitative interviews with Muslims in Winnipeg, Manitoba and St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador. In doing so I note the challenges and advantages of drawing on offline and online spaces for data.

Following this, in Chapters Four, I analyze themes and issues that arose out of the interviews and shed light on how Muslims are using the Internet and hashtags to construct, negotiate, and communicate religious and secular identities. In doing so, I look closer at how using the Internet within a secular context, like having to communicate to both a Muslim and non-Muslim audience simultaneously, illuminates that nature of religious and secular identity in the lives of Muslims in Winnipeg and St. John’s.

Chapter Five, builds on observations from the stories and identities discussed in Chapter Four and uses them to further analyze tweets that reference #JeSuisHijabi. By looking closer at the rhetoric and tactics used in tweets that contain the hashtag alongside participants' understandings of the relationship between the hijab, the Internet, and Muslim identity, I show how tweets with #JeSuisHijabi tacitly work to shift common understandings of a rigid separation between religious and secular that inform stereotypes and assumptions about Muslims, their practices, and their place in the public sphere.

I then conclude by overviewing some of the potential contributions of this research to the study of Islam and online religion as well as its limitations. In doing so, this thesis project aims to add to the on-going conversation about Islam and Internet studies, by bringing the voices and experiences of Canadian Muslims into a forum that generally pays a disproportionate amount of attention to extremist or radical versions of their traditions online.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the overarching question that this thesis seeks to address: What can hashtags and the way Muslims use the Internet tell us how the relationship between the religious and the secular are understood by and manifest in the lives of Canadian Muslims? I've contextualized this question by discussing the role of the Internet in Canadian life and how it relates to the modern context of individualism, secularism, Canadian identity and the securitization of Islam, introducing how hashtags manifest themselves in such a context.

With this context established, this study seeks to begin to fill a gap in the research of Islam online. Currently, there is yet to be comprehensive research published into how Canadian Muslims use social media to navigate public life. The examination of hashtags offers a way

forward in this endeavour. As a technological and communicative object, hashtags are being used by Muslims to address and cope with the many issues, whether mundane or severe, which come with being Muslim in the modern, “secular” Canadian context. By interviewing Muslims about their use of the Internet and hashtags, and analyzing tweets that use #JeSuisHijabi, I hope to not only nuance the ways in which hashtags are being used by Muslims to challenge discourses and express identities, but also demonstrate the efficacy in using hashtags to understand the complex connection between religion, secularism, social media, and their roles in the public sphere. To this end, I will now discuss and synthesize the relevant literature surrounding the study of hashtags, religion, Islam online, and how they connect to scholarly understandings of secularism, social media, everyday Islamic identity, and activism online.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

Scholarly research on online religion is necessarily, and understandably, behind developments on the Internet. This delay makes the study of religious phenomenon online just as exciting as it is challenging (see Helland 2005). It is for this reason that scholars must aim to capture the dynamic and diverse nature of online religion and build theories and methodologies that work with rapidly changing online religious worlds.¹⁹ With this evolving context in mind, this chapter examines theories and methods that are most useful in making sense of how religious ideas, practices or movements manifest in the form of a hashtag. Specifically, I consider how this literature can illuminate religion, hashtags, their connection, and their role in the public sphere.

To do so, this literature review, in three sections, analyzes three bodies of literature: (1) hashtag theory and online religion (2) Twitter as a proxy for the public sphere, and (3) Muslim hashtags as everyday activism. I aim to synthesize these bodies of literature throughout. When examined together, this literature sheds light on the roles that hashtags play in the everyday lives of some Muslims in Canada, specifically how they are used to express stories, identities, and emotions that emerge from those lives, thus setting the theoretical and discursive stage for my examination of in-person interviews and ethnographic analysis of tweets using #JeSuisHijabi as

¹⁹ My use of the term ‘online religion’ is intentional and follows Christopher Helland’s (2005) work on the difference between “religion online” and “online religion.” Helland argues that the former explains websites that simply list information about religion, whereas the latter takes into account the interaction that takes place by religious people online (Helland 2005: 1), which is key to understanding the connection between hashtags and religion.

means by which Muslims hashtags and the Internet complicate hegemonic narratives about secularism and Islam in Canada.

Hashtag Theory and Online Religion

Emerging in the mid 1990's, the study of online religion is a relatively new and developing area of academic inquiry. Despite this recent focus, a number of scholars describe a "third wave" beginning in the mid-2000s. In contrast to the first two waves of theory – described by Campbell (2013: 9) as (1) descriptive and (2) categorical – this third wave is marked by its more theoretical and interpretive focus on the web. I situate my research and this literature review within this theoretical and interpretive wave. At the same time, I aim to answer the call of Jose Casanova (1994), who in refuting traditional notions of secularization as a gradual phasing out of religion in the public sphere, claims that

What we need are better theories of the intermeshing of public and private spheres. In particular, we need to rethink the issue of the changing boundaries between differentiated spheres and the possible structural roles religion may have within those differentiated spheres as well as the role it may have in challenging the boundaries themselves (7).

Hashtags are technological manifestations of these changing boundaries that Casanova discusses, and by exploring how hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi or #MuslimFerreroRocher and others challenge transcend the boundaries between public and private, online and offline, religious and secular, I aim to make a primary, yet significant, contribution to the study of online religion and secular theory by widening and overlapping the theoretical domains of these two fields to include hashtags and their relation to modern religious expression in the public sphere. I must first, however, discuss hashtag theory itself before diving deeper into how it pertains to secularism and online religion.

To date, the most comprehensive social scientific-based theorization on hashtags and their potential roles in the public sphere is the edited volume, *Hashtag Publics* (2015a), upon which I draw heavily in this literature review. Other scholarly works from which I draw are focused on hashtags and their connections to social movements and hegemony (see Jackson and Foucault Welles 2015; Meulman and Boushel 2014; Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Schwell 2015; Graham and Smith 2016, Croeser and Highfield 2014), a function of hashtags that cannot be overlooked. Moreover, all of the above-mentioned sources explore the socio-political aspects of hashtags, but they do not all cover their relation to expressions of religion. There is only a very limited body of literature that treats social media, hashtags and religion in any significant way. Gleig's (2015) work on Buddhist "hashtag meditation" discussed briefly in Chapter One and van den Berg's (2014) broad overview of hashtags and their relation to Christian theology make useful contributions to the study of Buddhism and Christianity respectively, but do not significantly explore the nature or form of hashtags themselves. I am aware of only two scholarly treatments of Islam relating to these three themes to date (Schwell 2015; Wills and Fecteau 2016), that I analyze closely in this literature review alongside literature that more specifically speaks to these themes, in order to establish a theoretical connection between hashtags, social media, social movements, online religion, Islam and their role in the public sphere.

To begin, one must first understand what hashtags are, a significant component in the current study of hashtags. There are many ways in which scholars seek to define hashtags. For example, in their discussion of social media, social movements and the expression of everyday experiences, Bram Meulman and Corra Boushel (2014) propose a functionalist definition of hashtags, helpful for understanding their most basic purpose. For Meulman and Boushel, "hashtags function as markers that provide the reader with a digital context and a set of

preliminary instructions for how to read a tweet” (2014:57). Put differently, tweets with hashtags like [#BlackLivesMatter](#) or [#OccupyWallStreet](#) automatically situate the tweet into a broader topic or conversation. However, while this functionalist definition of hashtags is accurate, it only defines one aspect of hashtags.

In their study of [#Ferguson](#), Bonilla and Rosa (2015) propose a similar functionalist definition of the hashtag as an “indexing system” (5), but they also acknowledge how hashtags “function semiotically by marking the intended significance of an utterance. [...] Hashtags allow users to not simply ‘file’ their comments, but to performatively frame what these comments are ‘really about,’ thereby enabling users to indicate a meaning that might not be otherwise apparent” (5). This acknowledgment of the performative and semiotic aspects of hashtags is crucial to understanding how they are used and the meanings ascribed to them. Bonilla and Rosa go on to point out that this semiotic function gives hashtags an “interdiscursive capacity” (6) and situate the tweet in a more complex discourse or set of discourses. It is this ‘interdiscursive capacity’ combined with their accessibility on public domains like Twitter, that imbues hashtags with the potential to empower voices, like those of Muslim women, to challenge and insert themselves in discourses that they would otherwise be excluded from.

Hashtag Publics acknowledges this discursive capacity and takes it a step further by using the discourses created by hashtags to further theorize their form and function, which is a much needed academic endeavour at this point in time. In its introduction, cultural and communications theorist, Nathan Rambukkana (2015b:2), describes hashtags as “technosocial events”, in how hashtags connect technology and discourse. To my mind, Rambukkana offers the most compelling and comprehensive definition of hashtags to date:

As actants and actors in the networks they perpend to, we can see them as pathways to an open and non-predefined set of communicative encounters and architectures, a crossroads between form and matter, medium and message entangled [...] They are a technic (which is to say, both a technique and a technology) of the social, and in their performativity are events that map together and encompass not just the tag itself but the network of human and nonhuman actors that come together in such configurations: tags, technologies, taggers, conversations, press coverage in other media (Rambukkana 2015b: 4).

Rambukkana's definition underscores hashtags as "pathways" where the "medium and message [are] entangled," in so doing exposing their deeper function beyond Meulman and Boushel's (2014) definition of providing a "digital context" (57). Unlike others, Rambukkana's definition illuminates the social and performative aspects of hashtags as "technique and technology" that serve to "map together" networks that would not exist otherwise, thus creating new discourses of power and meaning.

More cautiously however, Rambukkana (2015b) does not tout hashtags as new revolutionary forms of communication that necessarily empower users and engage audiences. Throughout his theorizing of hashtags, Rambukkana is intentional about using the word "sometimes" after discussing the functions that hashtags serve for social communication and political change (2). Indeed, many hashtags are used more trivially and, depending on their context and who is using them, they are not necessarily imbued with any social significance or political power. My own approach to this question will thus follow Rambukkana and others (see Bruns and Burgess 2015; Rambukkana 2015a, 2015b: 30; Rocheleau and Millette 2015; Veenstra et al. 2015: 95; Bonilla and Rosa 2015:6) who recognize hashtags' potential to create powerful and influential networks and discourses by spurring, organizing, and disseminating information quickly and effectively, while being careful not to frame them as necessarily inserting underrepresented voices into mainstream media discourses.

Bruns and Burgess's chapter in *Hashtag Publics* theorizes the networks created by contrasting what they call *ad hoc* and *calculated* publics that arise from hashtags. They argue that ad hoc publics are formed quickly around developing events or news stories (Bruns and Burgess 2015: 15) like [#OttawaShooting](#) or [#Elbowgate](#). Calculated publics are created by hashtag users with a premeditated agenda and are designed specifically to benefit specific stakeholders (Bruns and Burgess 2015: 15). The hashtags themselves can also be created and promoted by certain organizations or institutions to serve agendas, like [#JeSuisHijabi](#), launched in a press release by the Canadian Ahmadiyya Muslim community. However, due to the bottom-up nature of Twitter and the ability for anyone to post using any hashtag, multiple discourses arise that do not all necessarily serve the originally intended purpose of the hashtag. In this case, it was not only Ahmadiyya Muslim women who were using the hashtag, but Muslim and non-Muslim men and women outside of the specific community (see Chapter 5). In fact, the dominant discourses surrounding such hashtags can in some circumstances serve the opposite purpose intended by its creators, which is known as "hijacking" (Antonakis-Nashif 2015: 106).²⁰ Consistent throughout the theories presented in *Hashtag Publics* (2015) is that hashtags – depending on who uses them and the contexts in which they are created – create multiple discourses. These discourses, created by many different publics, become useful entryways to appreciating contemporary issues (see Rambukkana 2015a, 2015b; Bruns and Burgess 2015; Antonakis-Nashif 2015; Rocheleau and Milette 2015). [#JeSuisHijabi](#), is no exception to this, and is used by multiple users to create multiple discourses about Islam, hijab, and Canadian identity (see Chapter Five).

²⁰ [#myNYPD](#) is a good example of 'hijacking'. Created as a response to numerous cases of police brutality, the New York Police Department created the hashtag to allow citizens to showcase police officers doing good in their communities. Instead the majority of tweets that used the hashtags included images of police misconduct, thus undermining the intended purpose of the hashtag and creating an ad hoc public out of a calculated one (see Jackson and Foucault Welles 2015).

Emily Regan Wills and André Fecteau's (2016) work on [#muslimcandyheartrejects](#) draws on the work of Bruns and Burgess (2015) and is one of the first studies to sort out and analyze the discourses created by a hashtag related to a Muslim religious identity in the Western context. I draw on their methodological approach in greater detail in Chapter Three. Their study explores the discourses surrounding tweets with the hashtag #muslimcandyheartrejects, which imitated and put a humorous, tongue-in-cheek "Muslim twist" on the cheesy candy hearts that emerge around Valentine's Day. Since Valentine's Day has become a Western "secular" holiday, which can make Muslims who do not date before marriage feel uncomfortable, an ad hoc public emerged in 2012 around the hashtag #muslimcandyheartrejects, and as argued by Wills and Fecteau, it served to reinforce and further construct a Muslim diaspora identity and provides an outlet to express their identities and discomfort through language and humor (33). Examples of tweets under this hashtag include "Be Mine (Or you won't be able to make Haj cuz you won't have a mahram) [a male guardian] #muslimcandyheartrejects," (42) and "Let's go back to my place and yell at FOX News #muslimcandyheartrejects" (43).

What is perhaps most insightful about Wills and Fecteau's exploration of #muslimcandyheartrejects is how they distinguish it from hashtags that represent people or events like #obama or #BlueJays. While not as humor focused, #JeSuisHijabi, similar to #muslimcandyheartrejects, deliberately creates a space for Muslims and advocates to share ideas and experiences as a means of fostering solidarity, constructing identity, and, as I will consider in Chapters Four and Five, negotiating "secular" norms. Wills and Fecteau's study usefully shows how hashtags are spaces created by Muslims for the purpose of constructing and expressing individual and collective identities (2016: 35). Overlooked in their analysis however, is how the hashtag can also be analyzed through the lens of "secular" norms related to

Valentine's Day, and how "secular language" is used in the tweets to express a religious identity. My analysis of #JeSuisHijabi draws on Wills and Fecteau's observations to understand how such hashtags communicate an amalgamation of religious and secular identities. In doing so, I hope to show how identifying and analyzing hashtags like #muslimcandyheartrejects and #JeSuisHijabi is an important task for anyone who seeks to understand not only online religion, but how religious identity is expressed within a so-called secular context.

Internet culture *is* culture, and conceptualizing hashtags as dynamic and discursive cultural texts can help scholars to theorize their function and establish a methodology for their study. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) move this dual process forward by coining the idea of 'hashtag ethnography', a methodological approach that I discuss further in Chapter 3. Their study (2015: 5) considers [#Ferguson](#), an ad hoc hashtag (Bruns and Burgess 2015) that quickly became a tool for organizing protests and challenging racialized media portrayals of Michael Brown, an unarmed black man from Ferguson, Missouri who was shot by a white police officer. In their study, Bonilla and Rosa carefully conceptualize hashtags as a space for anthropological inquiry by asking, "can a hashtag become a field site?" (5). They aim to distinguish between "the town of Ferguson, Missouri" and "hashtag Ferguson" to determine "how each of these contributed to the formation of the larger 'event' of Ferguson" (5). This observation is insightful for my analysis of #JeSuisHijabi. While this hashtag is used by Muslims, and more specifically hijabis, as a tool to negotiate and challenge "secular" norms online and offline, when analyzing them I avoid drawing general conclusions from these hashtags about life for Muslim hijabis. For that I draw on qualitative interview data.

Instead, I focus on how hashtags contribute to and challenge wider discourses on Islam, secularism, and their place in the public sphere; hegemonic discourses that, prior to the rise of

social media, were more difficult for Canadian Muslims to access. While exploring the potential that the Internet has for the study of religion, Christopher Helland (2008) notes that “No religious group can be censored or suppressed by another religious [or secular] group on the World Wide Web, and because of this, the online environment has become a unique map of Canada’s religious mosaic, constantly being updated and transformed” (128). Studying hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi more closely and more often is a way in which we can begin to track and understand such transformations.

Through exploring theoretical and methodological discussions of the hashtag and merging them with the very recent and small body of literature on Islam and hashtags, this literature review and subsequent analysis of the qualitative data that I have collected on Muslims and their use of hashtags aims to demonstrate that Muslims use hashtags not only to change, create, and insert themselves into dominant discourses about religion and identity in the public sphere, but use hashtags to create a space for the construction of their own individual and collective identities. Therefore, critiquing the study of online religion’s under emphasis on aspects of social media like hashtags, and building theories that help to understand the connection between social media and Islam is a necessary task, as more and more online activity moves from websites and chatrooms to Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, where hashtags are used regularly.

Facebook launched in 2004 and Twitter in 2006, with hashtags emerging in 2007 (Bruns and Burgess 2015: 26). Scholarship has yet to look closely at how religious people use social media, particularly hashtags. I suggest that hashtags could be one way in which scholars can begin to make sense of the complex ways in which religious people express themselves online.

To demonstrate this, I will now move on to apply the influential work of scholars of Islam and online religion (Bunt; 2009; Seib 2007; Dawson 2005) to understanding hashtags.

Much of the authoritative bodies of work on Islam, religion and the Internet (namely by Bunt 2009; Campbell 2013; Dawson 2005; Eickelman and Anderson 2003; el-Nawawy and Khamis 2009; Knut 2013; Helland 2005; Højsgaard and Warburg 2005; Ramji 2014) focus on websites, blogs and chatrooms, and mention social media in passing or not at all. While websites remain important in the construction and expression of religious identity and practice of Muslims in Canada, they have become increasingly mediated or have even been replaced by social media.²¹ It was not uncommon, when asking participants about the websites that have had the most influence on them, to get responses like, “I don’t know any websites, more Instagram and Facebook or Snapchat.”

In his study of Islamic cyberspace Gary Bunt (2009) introduced the concept of “Cyber Islamic Environments” (CIEs), a concept taken up by a number of other scholars of Islam online (see el-Nawawy and Khamis 2009; Grieve 2013). The concept is designed to explore “Islamic” spaces online (Bunt 2007: 1). In his exploration of CIEs, like many other scholars (Cameron 2013; Hoffman and Larsson 2013; Echchaïbi 2013a), Bunt primarily analyzes blogs and websites. Nevertheless, his observations remain useful for understanding hashtags and social media. Bunt suggests that, “what makes a site Islamic is perhaps in the eye of the individual surfer, especially when content is open to criticism or reflects views that some Muslims might describe as profane, heretical, schismatic, or otherwise against their interpretation and concept of beliefs” (Bunt 2009: 44). When extended to hashtags, Bunt’s point captures hashtags’ complex

²¹ While a significant number of young people use social media, it is not used exclusively by young people. Many older people use it too, which seems to include the use of hashtags. The faces of the #JeSuisHijabi campaign, for example, were two middle aged women who even went on CBC to discuss the campaign and hijab (see Rabwah Times 2016).

intersubjective and polysemic nature and the types of discourses that they can potentially mobilize in the Muslim community.

Based on word choices and theological allusions, some hashtags might read as “Islamic” or instil a CIE. Recall Wills and Fecteau (2016)’s analysis of #muslimcandyheartrejects, where they observe that hashtags can create CIEs or what they call “Muslim-marking”:

the Muslim-marking of the tweets in the hashtag is accomplished through the explicit use of words, phrases, concepts, and experiences that connect tweeters to other Muslims. By marking the space in this way, the participants claim it as Muslim and to express a unique experience of social life (41).

Islamic hashtags create CIEs by generating and encouraging certain key words that foster a sense of solidarity and common identity, while creating a space for Muslims to express their own individual identities and ideas. Identifying these key words, who is using them, and how they are used in tweets that use hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi, are key to develop a methodology for understanding how individual and collective Islamic identity is expressed and constructed in a secular context. For example, the top three words used in tweets that used #JeSuisHijabi (see fig. 4) were *hijab*, *Muslim*, and *women*, terms that shed light on the main topics of discussion. However, these words were often paired words like *choice*, *Canada*, and *proud*, (see Chapter 5 for further discussion). Religious objects like the hijab, and religious identities, like Muslim, were often accompanied by “secular-liberal” nouns and adjectives when they used #JeSuisHijabi. This pairing captures how, as a CIE, #JeSuisHijabi facilitates the expression of Islamic identity, within a Canadian context.

Phillip M. Seib’s work (2007) argues that the Internet has solidified a diverse multinational online *ummah* (Islamic community). Seib eloquently explains how the network is established because the Internet does not “require uniformity. Members of dispersed groups can tie

themselves tightly or loosely, as they choose, to a central cultural identity” (13). The same can be said for hashtags. When attempting to make sense of Islam-related hashtags, one must look for where common cultural, religious, and national identities connect, intersect and clash in the messages that are communicated through such interactions. The collective identities and discourses that hashtags foster, in the case of hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi or #MuslimFerreroRocher, are a sum of unique individual ideas and identity statements presented using that hashtag, and may offer a way forward in addressing an issue that has plagued the study of online religion for a long time. Although written over ten years ago, Lorne Dawson (2005) sheds light on this issue, that remains today, stating that,

the interactive religious potential of cyberspace remains largely a dormant and untapped capacity. It is difficult to say why this is the case (if indeed I am right), but I believe that part of the answer lies in gaining a better grasp of the nature, limitations, and reality of ‘interactivity’ on the Internet (16).

Theorizing and analyzing hashtags’ place in the public sphere and how religious people use them can, help us to understand the complex nature of interactivity online. As text and “markers” that generates space and discourse, gaining a deeper understanding of how hashtags function for religious people in the public sphere can begin to unravel the complex connection between religion, society, identity, and social media.

Now that I have briefly explored and synthesized the literature on hashtags and how they are used as online religion, I now turn to Twitter. As a proxy for the public sphere, I suggest that Twitter can be conceptualised and understood as a space in which these multiple and intersecting discourses and identities created by hashtags arise.

Twitter as a Proxy for the Public Sphere

Twitter is often colloquially referred to as the ‘Twittersphere’ (Rocheleau and Milette 2015), perhaps because tweets seem to exist in their own online world, with their own unique slang, idioms, debates and personalities, which often manifest themselves as hashtags. This particularity however, does not mean that Twitter is completely detached from the offline public sphere. In fact, in many ways it functions as an extension or proxy of the public sphere. This section explores how Twitter functions as this, and what implications that has for our understanding of hashtags in the public sphere.

Jürgen Habermas (2008) defines the public sphere as “a space of reasoned communicative exchanges” (12). Something similar is commonly cited by those who conceptualise the Internet as a public sphere (as with Bergie and Hodson 2015; Rambukkana 2015a; el-Nawawy and Khamis 2009; Graham and Smith 2016; Hoffman and Larsson 2013). These scholars, however, often provide an addendum to Habermas’ conceptualization, by stating that the Internet is hyper-discursive, allowing people to communicate in seemingly boundless ways that would not be possible in face-to-face interaction (Rambukkana 2015a: 29; el-Nawawy and Khamis 2009: 56; Graham and Smith 2016; Hoffman and Larsson 2013: 4). In other words, the ‘real world’ public does not have the equivalent of a hashtag. While someone like Dauood can, in a conversation, take a piece of baklava and say out loud “hashtag Muslim Ferrero Rocher,” it does not have the same communicative or discursive effect as inserting it into a tweet, or in Dauood’s case, an Instagram post that is shared.

When someone inserts a hashtag into a tweet and publishes it they create and/or become part of a public thread. Whereas in an offline public sphere, unless one has the resources and influence to declare their views in front of a large crowd or an op-ed in a major publication, it is

difficult for a word or sentence uttered in public to attach you to a certain public or insert your voice into a certain discourse. By exploring works that conceptualize Twitter as a public sphere (Richelot and Milette 2015; Burgess, Galloway and Sauter 2015; Anotnakis-Nashif 2015; Vivienne and Burgess 2012; Bergie and Hodson 2015; Bonilla and Rosa 2015), and merging them with scholarly works on the role of Islam, religion, secularism and their role in the public sphere (Tweed 2006; Selby 2013; Asad 2003; Massad 2015; Mahmood 2005; 2016; Jeldtoft 2013, Knott 2013; Cesari 2013) one can begin to understand the similarities and differences between online and offline public spheres and what this means for the expression of Islam within them.

Jean Burgess, Anne Galloway, and Theresa Sauter (2015) also seek to theorize hashtags and the publics that they create. Their analysis of hashtags is based on the assumption that “publics are multiple and emergent— that is, they are constituted through their material involvement with issues and events rather than pre-existing as a ‘public sphere’” (62). The public sphere, as it exists on Twitter, is itself a broad overarching concept that is comprised of a series of publics that, much like the identities expressed within them, are constantly in flux; materializing and dissipating, converging and separating. This understanding of the public sphere calls to mind Thomas Tweed’s (2006) definition of religion as, “confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering” (54). In Tweed’s definition, as in Burgess, Galloway, and Sauter’s understanding of the public sphere, religion is a broader term that is comprised of complex events and relationships taking place within it. Perhaps religion, if one accepts Tweed’s definition, and the online public sphere itself, share this multiplicity. In any case, Burgess, Galloway, and Sauter’s observation is invaluable when it comes to understanding Twitter as a public sphere and the place of hashtags within it, because it encapsulates its dynamic

nature. Hashtags are the way by which members of this public sphere map, navigate, and create space within it.

This is not to say that Twitter, as an online public sphere, and the offline public sphere are two distinct entities. In fact, both affect the other. What is unique about Twitter as a social media site is that, while it has an algorithm like Facebook and Instagram that places Tweets at the top of a user's timeline based on a user's likes and who they follow, the company allows users to opt out of using that algorithm, showing users tweets in the order that they are tweeted. Anna Antonakis-Nashif (2015) explains that "the structurally open form of hashtags (on Twitter) allows interested people to follow them by content, not necessarily by only the people they may know" (103). This makes Twitter, as a public sphere, much wider and user mediated than other social networking sites. On Twitter, people are more likely to see content from people that they do not know personally. This is because the best or most newsworthy content, assuming their followers have opted out of the algorithm, is judged by the users themselves through likes, retweets, and replies.

This user based mediation, however, does not mean that content on Twitter is entirely egalitarian. Although content popularity is largely determined by users, those with more access to knowledge, resources, and influence, like media companies and corporations, are more able to influence discourses and further their own private interests on Twitter by creating sponsored content or by simply having a large number of followers (Bergie and Hodson 2015: 256). Nevertheless platforms like Twitter, through hashtags, allow individuals with ideas and identities they would like to share to be read and disseminated to a massive audience. Religious practitioners are engaging with these platforms, inserting their voices in discussions from which they might otherwise be excluded.

In her study of the religious arbitration debate in Ontario, Jennifer Selby (2013) suggests that “ideally...multi-voiced media-savvy engagement could reshape the so-called secular sphere to carve out space so that more religiously-motivated concerns could have a place in public debate, better reflecting a post-secular and de-privatized public sphere” (424). In modern secular articulations of the public sphere, religion is widely perceived as something that is best kept in the so-called private realm, thus undermining the voices of religious people in the public sphere (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2016: 9). As a source of media, Twitter turns the offline public sphere on its head however, blurring the boundaries between private and public, resembling what Jose Casanova calls “deprivatization” (5). For Muslims, this means that instead of being the hypervisible, passive observers of discourses about Islam in the public sphere (see Jeldtoft 2013), Twitter gives them a vehicle for greater authorship and visibility (see Antonakis-Nashif 2015; 104), which resembles Jürgen Habermas’ (2008) concept of the post-secular public sphere.²² Hashtags create a space in the ‘Twittersphere’ for religious voices to plug into debates and communities where they feel like their voices need to be heard, facilitating a more open style of secularism that does not relegate religious views to the private sphere.

With this context in mind, it is important to acknowledge that while I see Twitter as a proxy for the public sphere, it remains most powerful in shaping and reshaping discourses within the public sphere, which may or may not inform public opinion. The hashtag of #MuslimRage is particularly illustrative of this point. In 2012, *Newsweek* magazine printed an issue with a controversial front cover. It showed a picture of two angry Muslim men with long beards and bore the title “Muslim Rage”. The image was meant to portray the Muslim world’s response to an antagonistic American-made online video called ‘The Innocence of Muslims,’ which depicted

²² I discuss Casanova and the concept of deprivatization alongside Habermas’ notion of the post-secular as it pertains Canadian Muslims experiences with the Internet in more depth in Chapter Four.

and generalized Islam as archaic, intolerant, and misogynistic. *Newsweek*'s use of the term 'Muslim Rage' to cover the issue, as Schwell (2015) notes, is itself problematic, and served only to perpetuate Western notions of Islam as 'other,' since the term 'rage' runs in direct opposition of the West's perception of itself as calm, rational, and tolerant (88).

Newsweek came under a large amount scrutiny for their front cover, and responded in kind by launching #MuslimRage to facilitate discussion. Much to *Newsweek*'s surprise however, Muslims around the world adopted the hashtag, and through humor and irony, altered the controversial and vitriolic discourse surrounding the hashtag. Instead of contributing to a discourse that assumes Islam and rage go hand in hand, users tagged menial, everyday inconveniences (see Schwell 2015: 85). Schwell cites many examples of tweets that completely changed the intended meaning of the hashtag in a way that humorously, cleverly, and powerfully, undermined the stereotypes of Islam that #MuslimRage initially perpetuated. For example, Schwell cites a tweet that says "A puppy licked me. NOW I HAVE TO MAKE WUDU AGAIN AND BURN MY CLOTHES. #muslimrage" (93). Tweets like these allow Muslims to interrupt and insert their voices into discourses about themselves, that before were controlled by traditional forms of media (i.e. newspapers, magazines, TV news networks etc.). Traditional forms of news media are beginning to adopt and merge with social media, like Twitter, to avoid becoming irrelevant, which is ultimately changing the way media content is created and communicated.

Nevertheless, while this merger does give more venues for Muslim voices, it by no means alters hegemonic and unequal power unbalances in these discourses. Schwell notices that there is a polysemic aspect to the humor and irony found in #MuslimRage, which as affective as it is in critiquing hegemonic discourses, there is still the possibility that they can be interpreted in a way

that reinforces them, rendering them an effective, yet imperfect rhetorical tool (Schwell 2015:97). For example, the above mentioned tweet about having to burn their clothes after being licked by a puppy, could very well be interpreted in a literal sense by a misinformed or biased observer, thus counteracting the tweet's intended result and perpetuating the stereotype of Muslims as angry, irrational and overly dogmatic. The issue of polysemy and its relation to hegemonic discourses is not new, and, while in the case of #MuslimRage, served at least in part, as a means of challenging a problematic discourse, the opposite can take place as well. This polysemy in more traditional forms of media is partially responsible for the many stereotypes that exist in their portrayals of Islam.

In their study of the way the media in Britain portrays religion, Knott, Poole and Taira (2013) offer a convincing explanation of how polysemy, if used carelessly, can create stereotypes and misunderstandings in mainstream media discourses. They eloquently explain how 'Islam' and 'Islamism' became one in the same in post 9/11 media discourses about Islam. They explain that

It is important to note here the culturally embedded use of language and its implications for interpretation. Which categories routinely established, replicated and exchanged in media discourse, one term is easily replaceable with another- 'extremist' with 'militant' or 'radical', for example. The meaning of one may thus be readily transferred to another. Whether 'extremist' or 'militant' is used, both may now carry the implication of terrorism. Islam is conflated with Islamism, the former as well as the latter becoming associated with irrational radical violence. 'Islamism', originally established in order to disassociate Islam from fundamentalism, is now used to describe myriad political groups and activities without reference to their 'actual practices' and 'discursive strands' and how these are articulated in particular contexts. Added to this, the link to terrorism then criminalizes innocent groups and individuals (83).

Twitter, as media and a proxy for the public sphere, is subject to many of the same issues that existed in more traditional forms of media before its inception. The multiple meanings that can be derived from a tweet or hashtag can be extremely effective in challenging hegemonic

discourses. However, it can also be interpreted in a way that contradicts the original intended meaning of s/he who first published the tweet, thus unintentionally contributing to that the problematic discourse that they may have sought to subvert.²³ Schwell's (2015) conclusion about the nature of #MuslimRage sums this point up nicely, by saying that,

Potential polysemy is an inherent feature of #MuslimRage that cannot be resolved. Who laughs with who about who and why? The twitter-ego does not have to coincide with an actual person; #MuslimRage is about performance and parody, not about representation [...] it is nearly impossible to determine whether a tweet is successful: whether over-identification is rooted in identification, whether it is a position of ironic distancing that leads to retweeting the joke for the joke's sake, or whether the cliché is reproduced and reified (97).

It is for this reason that when analyzing the nature of a hashtag and its role in the public sphere, it is important to focus on its intended effect and the rhetorical devices employed to achieve that effect and what it might say about the people who reference it, rather than trying to determine its actual outcome, which is almost impossible to measure. In other words, hashtags tell us more about how people wish to be perceived, which is telling and significant, but does not provide the whole picture.

With this in mind, Habermas' definition of the public sphere can be readily critiqued as unrepresentative of the realities of the offline public sphere, namely wherein not everyone has access to "reasoned communicative exchanges." This heteronormative public sphere grants unequal access to women, people of colour, the working class or minority religions (Vivienne and Burgess 2012: 366). Twitter, however, more closely seems to resemble Habermas' definition

²³ A study by LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam, (2009) titled *The Irony of Satire*, looked at conservative and liberal perceptions to the American satirical show *The Colbert Report*, in which the host, Stephen Colbert, took on the persona of a conservative talk show pundit and commented on American politics. Interestingly the study found that "there was no significant difference between the groups in thinking Colbert was funny, but conservatives were more likely to report that Colbert only pretends to be joking and genuinely meant what he said while liberals were more likely to report that Colbert used satire and was not serious when offering political statements" (212). In short, people watched the show through the lens of their own political beliefs and interpreted it in a way that fit their own personal agendas. A similar phenomenon can very well take place when people read tweets with any sort of semiotic, tongue-in-cheek humor, therefore reversing its intended affect.

because disembodied voices, through hashtags, arguably have more equal access to its platform and its debates regardless of race, gender or religion, allowing them, in a disembodied way, to carve out discursive space for themselves while influencing and challenging existing hegemonic discourses that have traditionally excluded them from the public sphere.

Hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi, #MuslimRage, and #MuslimCandyHeartRejects empower the publics that they form to traverse the once oppressively rigid and now questionably existent lines between religious and secular, online and offline, sacred and self, public and private, individual and collective, medium and message, citizen and other that keep people divided and unequal in the public sphere. While this thesis touches on some of these perceived binaries, it is mainly concerned with how #JeSuisHijabi nuances the relationship between religious and secular.

To build on my discussion secularism on the Canadian context in Chapter One, I will now dive deeper in to the narratives that fuel certain problematic understandings of Islam and secularism in the public sphere and how they brought Canadian Muslims to the point where they see the #JeSuisHijabi campaign and other hashtags as a necessary means to counter these narratives. To briefly recap my understanding of the term “secular,” following Elizabeth Hurd (2012), am skeptical of its perceived status as neutral and passive, and see it as an active manager of religious expression with distinctly Western, and tacitly Christian, roots and goals. Furthermore, like Asad (2003), “I take the secular to be a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life” (25), not excluding religious, and more specifically Islamic behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities. Joseph Massad (2015), in his book *Islam in Liberalism* would concur with this understanding of secularism, noting how the secular has historically framed Islam, as well as other ‘oriental’ religions, as “external other” (1).

Massad adds that its discursive force comes in having become an “internal constituent of liberalism” (1), by which he means that, as throughout history, as liberalism’s ideals were being developed, Islam has been portrayed within the liberal narrative as an antagonist to the liberal protagonist, being characterized as the thing that liberalism is not. Narratives like this are rehashed and reified in modern times when Canada’s Prime Minister says that “Niqab is rooted in a culture that is anti-women” (Chase 2015), or when a Presidential candidate for the United States can win an election after proposing a ban on Muslims and saying “I think Islam hates us” (Schleifer 2015).

Likewise, this narrative also informs the assumption that hijab is a symbol of women’s oppression, and is, in a way, a product of liberalism’s use of othering as a means of justifying a very narrow view of women’s rights, and blinds people to seeing the hijab (and even the niqab for that matter) as an expression of a woman’s right to choose what they wear and even a means of expression their femininity and fighting patriarchy. Tweets under #JeSuisHijabi attempt to communicate this point (see Chapter Five) by demonstrating that a religious object like the hijab has “secular” benefits (i.e. pride, confidence, freedom, no bad hair days). Therefore, blurring the line between religious and secular and beginning to move their portrayal of Muslims within the liberal narrative from antagonist to protagonist.

Kim Knott and Nadil Echchaibi point to how the separation of religious and secular has been a long time problematic pillar of the Western liberal imagination. In *The Secular Sacred* (2013) Knott points out that while the relationship between religious and secular is often assumed to be fixed and rigid in the making of law and policy, “their relationship is far from settled” (151). She notes that,

The 'religious' and the 'secular' are frequently presented in opposition to one another, for example, as two counter spheres of interest with separate centres and peripheries, and distinctive powers, ideologies and hierarchies, as well as in the encounter between religion and secularism and their various 'culture wars' (149).

The perceived binary relationship between religious and secular identity is enshrined in the overarching narrative of Islam vs. the West, and by blurring the line between religion and secularism through modern communicative media tools like hashtags, Muslims can directly undermine the hegemonic narrative that has historically posited Islam as antithetical to western-liberal identity.

Nabil Echchaibi's (2013a) study of a website called *Alt-Muslim* picks up on this observation, in so far as he argues that "it is important to study these emerging Muslim media cultures as significant loci for the construction of contemporary Muslim subjectivities beyond the deterministic binaries of traditional religious and modern secular identities" (193). With this point in mind, #JeSuisHijabi, through its simultaneous communication of religious and secular identity, demonstrates that hashtags, and religiously influenced hashtags in particular, can open up new avenues of inquiry and serve for future researchers as an *aufheben*, in the Derridian sense, by aiding "in lifting up the binary oppositions of classical idealism, of resolving their contradiction" (Derrida 1972: 36). At the same time, I do not mean to imply that Twitter is an online utopia of discursive equality. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) are correct in warning scholars that "we must avoid the common slippage made by journalists and others who tend to represent Twitter as an unproblematized 'public sphere' without taking into account the complexity of who is on Twitter, as well as how people are on Twitter in different ways" (6).

When individuals participate in debates or discussions online, they do so while still being situated in an offline context (i.e. in their kitchen, their workplace, etc.), where they are still subject to the complex norms, customs, and values of that context (see Croeser and Highfield

2014: 3; Lövheim 2004). Likewise, problems like Islamophobia, securitization, racism, sexism are still issues that Muslims are subject to on Twitter and other aspects of social media (see Awan 2014; Nadeau and Helly 2016), and therefore affects what they say and do on that forum. Many of the participants in this study, for example, claimed that these issues contributed to their avoidance in discussing religion or using religious language online (See chapter 4). As one seeks to conceptualize Twitter as media and as a public sphere, a process that is ongoing and still requires much more research, one must at the very least acknowledge that when religion is expressed in the online public sphere it is intertwined with the secular offline public sphere.

The literature in this section of my literature review has discussed the nature of Twitter as a public sphere and as a source of media in which Muslims use hashtags to carve out space and blur the lines between religious and secular identity. However, while I briefly discussed the ad hoc Muslim response to #MuslimRage and #MuslimCandyHeartRejects, I have yet to discuss in depth *calculated* activist Muslim publics like #JeSuisHijabi, and how they use such a space to communicate their identities and (re)shape discourses. This investigation requires a deeper discussion of everyday activism, social movements, and their relation to hashtags and Islam in the public sphere.

Muslim Hashtags as Everyday Activism

Noureddine Miladi (2016) studied the role of social media in the Tunisian revolution and how it has changed the political and religious identities of the country and its citizens. In his study he noticed that “the online self is presented in a way aligned with the offline self, i.e. a representation of the real self in the everyday environment” (37). In other words, what people do online, while certainly still performative and self-censored, is often seen as an extension of their offline social lives, activities, and even emotions. This is an important insight to consider as one

thinks about the way in which people express themselves online. As much as the online environment is full of sensationalistic and flashy rhetoric aimed at gaining people's attention, it is important to acknowledge that there is equal value in the mundane expressions of everyday life and identity, which has its own activist agenda, and was a theme that came up constantly in the way many participants discussed their use of hashtags, which I discuss further in Chapter Four.

Within the academic study of religion, there is a growing trend toward examining the individual everyday lived aspects of religious life, which seeks to move away from a focus on religious organizations and institutions (see McGuire 2008:4; Fadil and Fernando 2015: 60; Dessing et al. 2013a; Goffman 1959; Schielke and Debevec 2012). While the normative assumptions of focusing on the everyday as a technique of anthropological inquiry is up for debate (see Fadil and Fernando 2015; Deeb 2015), scholars of new media are beginning to notice how marginalized, often seemingly voiceless communities are taking to online spaces and using hashtags to express their individual everyday experiences to counteract stereotypes about themselves and their communities (Vivienne and Burgess 2012; Antonakis-Nashif 2015; Graham and Smith 2016). When one looks at tweets under the hashtags #JeSuisHijabi, a focus on everyday lived religion is what one sees, which makes these hashtags not only a source to study lived religious expression and how it is being used to shape public opinion about Muslim Canadians and religion's role in society, but of how Muslim identities manifest themselves in a modern secular online sphere. This last section of my literature review seeks to explore the congruencies in the scholarly literature on everyday religion and everyday activism, as a means of nuancing #JeSuisHijabi function in the Twittersphere.

Manuel Castells (2015), a theorist of online social movements, eloquently helps to explain how online social media helps to amplify the voices of socially marginalized populations.

Castells suggests that

By engaging in the production of mass media messages, and by developing autonomous networks of horizontal communication, citizens of the Information Age become able to invent new programs for their lives with the materials of their suffering, fears, dreams and hopes. They build their projects by sharing their experiences. They subvert the practice of communication as usual by occupying the medium and creating the message. They overcome the powerlessness of the solitary despair by networking their desire. They fight the powers that be by identifying the networks that are (9).

Castell's description of how communities reclaim their voices online by "occupying the medium and creating the message," when viewed alongside Rambukkana's description of hashtags as "medium and message entangled," illuminates hashtags' form and function as they pertain to the empowerment of certain voices in the online public sphere.

Aforementioned, while they are often hypervisible in the media and the public sphere (see Jeldtoft 2013), Muslim Canadian voices remain largely invisible, causing stereotypes and assumptions to arise, which may further suppress their voices. Adopting new media technologies like #JeSuisHijabi are one way in which Muslims can gain greater visibility in public discourses. By occupying, and in turn, (re)shaping discourses about themselves, they redefine what "Islam" and "Muslim" means in the public sphere and in more traditional forms of media. In other words a hashtag, if used well, can capture others' sensibilities, generate empathy, and equip subaltern communities with the means to influence what is said and thought about them. In the case of #JeSuisHijabi, it is often the inseparability of religious and secular identities in the everyday lives of Canadian Muslim women that lays at the rhetorical core of its tweets and the pejorative characterizations and many of the responses are gendered.

Anna Antonakis-Nashif (2015) in her discussion of how hashtags help bring private experience into public debate argues that, "the specific communicative dispositions of hashtags have opened up new possibilities for political participation and contestation, especially to those who feel underrepresented in a traditional media public" (102). A common goal for hashtag campaigns is to be interesting or popular enough for their stories or commentary to be picked up by traditional media outlets, which is the case for #JeSuisHijabi (see CBC News 2015a, 2015c; Javed 2015; Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at 2015). In some cases the goal of certain hashtags is to subvert the messages being sent by traditional media outlets, therefore, when their message is featured in the media itself, it is considered an achievement because their hashtag has taken up discursive space in traditional media as well as online media (see Figs. 1 & 5). In the case of #JeSuisHijabi, for example, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at, the organization that launched the hashtag, issued a press release outlining why the hashtag was launched, serving somewhat as the campaign's "manifesto."²⁴ The press release leads with "In light of the recent terror attack in Paris, France and the subsequent hate attacks on Muslim women around the world, Canadian Muslim women have launched a national awareness campaign to help Canadians better understand Muslim women's identity" (Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at 2015). The opening sentence of this press release clearly demonstrates that while the nation Ahmadiyya organization was looking for media exposure, they were simultaneously looking to challenge the problematic understandings of Islamic identity that were influencing these attacks.

²⁴ Throughout the #JeSuisHijabi campaign, organizers, through the twitter page @JeSuisHijabi, were clearly monitoring and attempting to curate how #JeSuisHijabi was being used. Throughout the campaign it was constantly replying, thanking, and giving shout outs to those who used the hashtag. They were also diligent about addressing criticisms of the campaign. In one instance, when a user tweeted a criticism of #JeSuisHijabi for its similar form to #JeSuisCharlie, tweeting, "I am Charlie Hebdo #JeSuisHijabi," @JeSuisHijabi replied to their tweet with a link to their press release, pointing to the fact that they see their press release as the document which most clearly outlines #JeSuisHijabi's goals and values.

Prior to the rise of social media, networks of Muslims who wanted to have their voices heard existed, but they did not have the means to connect and amplify those voices. Hashtags, through social media, connect people with shared everyday experiences, thus empowering them to collectively speak out, share, and amplify a collective message comprised of individual identities and experiences. #JeSuisHijabi, with an “I” (or “Je”) statement embedded within it counters a similar narrative, but seeks to combine the voices and experiences of hijab wearing women to change common assumptions of the hijab and the women who wear them from religious objects of oppression and patriarchy to religious objects of liberation and identity expression .

It is evident through looking at #JeSuisHijabi that Muslims (and non-Muslims) are strategically using hashtags to communicate the small, menial, sad, and humorous day-to-day joys, challenges, and benefits of being a Muslim in a Canadian and global context. It seems as though expressing everyday identities and experiences appears to serve the intertwined purposes of countering stereotypes, expressing/constructing identity, fostering solidarity and generating empathy. In their discussion of ‘digital storytelling’ as a means of giving voice to marginalized communities, Vivienne and Burgess (2012) help to explain why the expression of everyday experience online serves these purposes, and has become a common communication strategy for marginalized communities to have their voices heard:

Digital identity construction offers potential to speak across difference. Unlike face-to-face performances of identity, digital stories offer the opportunity for a refined, reflective articulation of self. Through the construction of verbal narratives and the curation of material or digital artifacts, storytellers are able to make meaning out of an apparently random assemblage of life events and, while this capacity to summarize generally elides complexity, it also draws attention to nuanced human similarities that evoke empathy and speak across difference (374).

Identity construction and activism go hand in hand in hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi, and for people like Dauood when he uses #MuslimFerreroRocher. As they construct their own narrative and challenge existing narratives they, in turn, establish what it means to them to be Muslim in an individual and collective sense. The process of identity construction is dynamic and ongoing. Many stereotypes emerge from assuming that Islamic identity is static and resistant to change. By using secular language to demonstrate the everyday emotions, challenges and complexities of being Muslim through hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi, Muslims are generating empathy, and showing that their identities are just as complex as anyone else's.

Nabil Echchaibi (2013b), while he does not discuss hashtags directly, offers valuable insight into the nature of Islamic activism online and its relation to identity construction in hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi. In his study of *Muslimah Media Watch (MMW)*, a blog that critiques media portrayals of Muslim women, he notices that the site serves two overlapping purposes. According to him it “offers not only a critique of the established narrative of Muslim women’s experience, but also new images, subjectivities and a new way of imagining the Muslim subject no longer at the margin, but at the center of modern society” (861). A similar two-fold process takes place when people use the hashtag #JeSuisHijabi.

Furthermore, Echchaibi offers another helpful insight for scholars to consider when studying Islamic activism online. Echchaibi notices that it is easy for scholars to overlook blogs like *MMW*, as well as hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi, which both create performative spaces for Muslim women to make their voices heard. This is because they are often viewed as an ambitious group of subaltern voices shouting amongst an array of others in a complex and largely misunderstood medium; leading many to underestimate their impact and value. However, it is important to analyze such blogs as part of a larger collective project of identity construction,

which even if they do not intentionally work together, as a whole they help to subvert dominant hegemonic voices (Echchaibi, 2013b: 858). It is for this reason that Echchaibi suggests that scholars must move their analysis of such online spaces away from evaluating how well they work and more towards understanding why they exist and the deeper, more cultural purpose that they serve (855).

In my own analysis of #JeSuisHijabi I take Echchaibi's suggestion seriously and purposefully avoid trying to measure its impact, and instead employ the qualitative data from interviews with Muslim Canadians to understand the cultural forces that brought it into being and the discursive tactics that they employ to change those forces, all the while highlighting how Canadian Islamic identity plays into such tactics.

Using hashtags that help express the everyday is a powerful strategy for online Muslim activism because in an organized fashion it appeals to the wider public on a human level, shaping discourses while simultaneously creating a place to more freely express and construct identity. It is for this reason, as I hope to have demonstrated in my discussion and synthesis of the above literature, that studying hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi as expressions of everyday activist religiosity in the public sphere, is a helpful way to understand modern Muslims in the so-called secular Canadian context.

Conclusion

In noting a lack of attention paid to social media and hashtags in the scholarly study on online religion, this literature review has sought to examine what I see as 3 major gaps in the field by (1) furthering the field's theoretical understanding of hashtags and what they can tell us about religious identity online and offline; (2) demonstrating how social media, through the use

of hashtags, complicates the problematic binary between the so-called religious and secular spheres; and (3) shedding light on how everyday Islamic identity, expressed through hashtags can be an activist pursuit that challenges hegemonic narratives of Islam in the Canadian context. In doing so, I have laid the foundation for my coming discussion of how my interviews with participants analyzed alongside tweets under the hashtag #JeSuisHijabi, point to congruencies between religious and secular identities in the modern Canadian public sphere.

As I hope to have shown in this preliminary discussion of the relevant literature on hashtags, online religion, Islam and everyday activism, and hashtags reflect a twining of the self and the digital, the private and the public, online and offline, and are changing the way Muslims express themselves online. This thesis seeks to gain a nuanced understanding of how Canadian Muslims in St. John's and Winnipeg express their identities and shape discourses about themselves online. In addition, by analyzing hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi and how Muslims are using them, this research will help to move the study of Islam and online religion forward by looking at how Muslims and religious people in general are using hashtags to make their voices heard. Before moving on to that discussion, I will briefly outline my methodological approach.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodological Approaches

Introduction

In seeking to recognize a twining and blurring of the religious and secular, the self and the digital, and online and offline life (see Hine 2000; Walker 2010; Campbell 2012; Croeser and Highfield 2014; Aupers and Houtman 2010), I employ a mixed-method approach to understanding hashtags used by some Canadian Muslims. Scholars have recently argued that online spaces like Twitter are not completely separate from offline spaces (Croeser and Highfield 2014; Walker 2010). Both realms influence the other. A mixed-method approach, thus, best addresses online/offline to consider the content of tweets that use #JeSuisHijabi, but also how and why Muslims use hashtags through interviews with self-identified Muslims. This work therefore draws upon seventeen one-on-one semi-directed interviews with Muslims over 18 years of age in St. John's, NL and Winnipeg, MB and analyzes those alongside tweets containing #JeSuisHijabi. This approach effectively allows me to examine how Muslims use hashtags to express and construct identity in multiple publics: online/offline and religious/secular.

This chapter first discusses my method for recruiting and conducting interviews with participants in St. John's and Winnipeg, how this data is related to a larger cross-Canada collaborative project called *New Muslim Public Spheres in the Digital Age*, and the theoretical position I take in incorporating offline perspectives when examining online content. I will then discuss my online ethnographic method for gathering and analyzing tweets under the hashtag #JeSuisHijabi, demonstrating throughout how I see these two methods complementing each other and mitigate their respective limitations.

Gathering, Analyzing, and Recruiting for Interviews

To initially recruit participants for my interviews, I created an electronic announcement (see Appendix 2) that I sent to relevant academic and Islamic institutions in Winnipeg and St. John's (i.e. Muslim Student Associations, Islamic Associations, mosques, and Religious Studies Departments) asking if they would be willing to share it on their respective social media sites and list-serves. I then relied on a snowball method, whereby participants tell their friends and colleagues about the project, encouraging them to participate. The electronic announcement worked well in that the organizations that I contacted were very willing to help advertise the project. Through this recruitment I was able to recruit seven participants. The remaining ten were recruited through a snowball approach: they were told about the project by colleagues or by friends of friends who thought that they would be interested in partaking in the project.

All of the interviews took place in public places like cafes or university cafeterias, where I would conduct and record a semi-directed interview. The interview consisted of one hundred questions (see Appendix 3) and took anywhere from forty-five minutes to two and a half hours, depending on how much participants had to say or how much time they had. Before starting the interview, participants signed a consent form (see Appendix 1) granting their consent to record and publish their views while informing and assuring participants that all measures necessary would be taken to ensure that their identities would not be revealed, and that they could, without having to state a reason, withdraw from the study any time before April 17, 2017.

The interviews that I conducted are in coordination with a larger SSHRC-financed project titled, "New Muslim Public Spheres in the Digital Age: Identity, Community, Diversity and Authority in Canada." In the summer of 2015, I began working as a research assistant for this project, and it is the title under which I conducted these interviews. The principal investigator on

this project is Dr. Roxanne Marcotte (Université de Québec à Montréal). My supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Selby (Memorial University) is one of the four co-investigators for the project. One of the goals of this five-year project is to collect approximately 250 interviews, of which my interviews for this thesis are a part.²⁵

While I will draw on the entirety of the interviews in my analysis to contextualize participants' views of hashtags, my research focuses on question number 64 a: "Do you use Hashtags? If yes, which hashtags do you use and how?" I would often ask whether they have used hashtags to challenge misconceptions about Islam as a follow up questions. It is this question that was helpful in shedding light on what Muslims think about hashtags and how they are using them. This initial direction seemed to encourage participants to think about hashtags in relation to their faith more contextually.

In their study of [#oo](#), a hashtag used to organize the "Occupy Oakland" movement, Croeser and Highfield (2014), use a similar method to accompany their analysis of tweets under the hashtag #oo, which was used by the Oakland, CA chapter of the Occupy Movement. Croeser and Highfield interviewed activists who were using the hashtag to understand how they were using it to communicate, organize, and subvert unfavorable media portrayals of the movement. This mixed-method approach (interviews and analyzing their tweets) was based on their observation that "some of the same factors which constrain activists within the place of Occupy Oakland (such as the repressive role of the state, as demonstrated by the crackdown on Occupy sites discussed below) also affect the space of #oo" (2). The same can be said for #JeSuisHijabi.

²⁵ The project is a cooperative effort between four universities across Canada: Memorial University, Université de Québec à Montréal, the University of Regina and Cape Breton University. Each university will analyze qualitative data from the interviews by focusing on a specific theme (identity, community, diversity and authority). Dr. Selby and I are both interested in the question of authority. In the case of this thesis, authority pertains to the ability of Muslims to participate in public discourses about themselves and the world around them, and how they are expressing their beliefs, opinions and identities through hashtags to establish such authority.

While #JeSuisHijabi takes a very different approach to activism, and I did not interview any users of #JeSuisHijabi, issues like securitization, Islamophobia, racism, sexism, as I mentioned in both chapters 1 and 2, transcend online and offline spheres, and were expressed by participants as discrimination that affected the way they interacted online (see Chapter Four). Therefore, looking closely at a hashtag, while asking how Muslims are using hashtags, provides a more well-rounded account of how offline forces affect online behavior, and vice versa.

Christopher Helland (2005) has also explored the methodological challenges of looking at religious expression online specifically as *lived* religion and offers insight into exploring what hashtags can elucidate. Helland observes that religious experience by its very nature is subjective, which makes it difficult to determine what is genuinely religious activity online, and whether offline methodologies are even applicable (5). While this observation was certainly true when he published this article in 2005, the advent of social media, as exemplified by the hashtag-mediated #JeSuisHijabi campaign, has, I would argue, further intertwined online and offline worlds. This then makes online expression, while still highly self-censored, much more authentic and reflective of offline religious experience than it was when Helland made this observation. Therefore, the question is no longer whether offline methods are applicable to understanding lived religion online. Instead, the questions that social scientists ought to be asking when observing not only religious experience, but modern public life in general is: how can traditional offline methods be merged with methods that observe online behavior?

For many, social interaction and expression online, has become intertwined with everyday offline social interactions, especially on social media sites like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, where hashtags appear most often (Meuleman and Boushel 2014: 51). As a result, anonymity, which often leads researchers to question a text's authenticity has become taboo to a

certain degree, and is often associated with the type of people who seek to make malicious or hateful comments on online social media content, tellingly known as trolls. Therefore, interview-based methodologies like those utilized by social scientists who study what is often called ‘lived religion,’ are useful for researchers in examining religious-related hashtags (Helland 2005; McGuire 2008; Orsi 2003).

Consider Dauood’s explanation for why he hashtagged a picture of baklava with the hashtag #MuslimFerreroRocher as an example of how interviews help to illuminate the relationship between hashtags and lived religious identity expression in the public sphere. If one were to simply come across his picture on Instagram, they could make note of how Dauood uses the hashtag to merge Muslim and seemingly mundane objects and ideas. However, in our interview Dauood confirms that behind the hashtag was the motivation to challenge mainstream media narratives of Islam and, in his words, “show, hey, we follow a certain religion, but we also have a family, we also have birthdays, we also have weddings, we also have food fests, we also go and watch movies in cinemas, we have Muslim desserts that we call non-Muslim names that you can kind of relate to.” Put differently, Dauood uses hashtags to show that religion is an important part of his life, but there are secular parts of himself and his community that are commonly overlooked in the mainstream media that he wants people to know about too; demonstrating all the while that these two parts of himself are not mutually exclusive.

To this end, the semi-directed interviews that I conducted help to illuminate the religious and secular forms, functions and motivations behind the use of hashtags in the public sphere. By complementing this interview-based approach with an analysis of a “Muslim” hashtag created by Canadians, like #JeSuisHijabi, a mixed-method approach allows for a more in-depth understanding not only of the content generated by hashtags, but the context that drives their

creation. With this in mind, I will now discuss my method for gathering and analyzing tweets under #JeSuisHijabi.

Gathering and Analyzing Tweets: The Emerging Method of 'Hashtag Ethnography'

Using NVivo research software²⁶, I analyzed 893 original tweets containing #JeSuisHijabi, generated by 333 individual Twitter users, which I retrieved from Twitter by using its advanced search function.²⁷ I compiled the content of the tweets first into an excel spreadsheet, which was then transferred into the NVivo software for analysis. The tweets that I compiled were generated from December 1-5, 2015 (see Chapter 1 for context) and were found using Twitter's advanced search option, which allows users to search specific hashtags and the dates that they were generated. These dates were chosen because the hashtag and campaign was launched on December 2, 2015 (Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at 2015), which allowed me to see how the hashtag was used before it was publicized, as well as how it was used for the first four days of the campaign. Originally I had planned to compare them to tweets using the hashtag for a five day period 1 month later, allowing me to analyse how discourses within #JeSuisHijabi changed over time; not just from day to day while the hashtag had momentum, but once media coverage and hype had settled. During the five day period of January 1-5, 2016, however, only four tweets were generated under the hashtag. While this is not enough data to make a proper comparison, it is worth noting that although #JeSuisHijabi tweets still sparsely emerge on Twitter to this day, its function as a calculated public created as a campaign, was temporary and heavily tied to the

²⁶ I specifically used NVivo version 11 to organize and analyze tweets gathered under #JeSuisHijabi.

²⁷ In conducting the advanced Twitter search, I was taken to the following link where I transferred each tweet and its relevant information into an excel document for coding into NVivo: <https://twitter.com/search?l=&q=%23JeSuisHijabi%20since%3A2015-12-01%20until%3A2015-12-06&src=typd&lang=en>

media exposure that it garnered (see Chapter Four). Therefore, my focus will be solely on Tweets generated with the #JeSuisHijabi hashtag from December 1-5, 2015.²⁸

At first glance, the above mentioned method of analyzing tweets under #JeSuisHijabi may resemble the method of participant “webservation” (see Varisco 2002), which can be seen as an Internet based form of content analysis, which serves to analyze the text found in tweets, and is useful for organizing and drawing out themes from individual tweets. In its most basic form, content analysis is based on the idea that by organizing words and phrases, one can begin to critically examine the categories that are created and extract various meanings and interpretations (for more, see Weber 1990), which I have done with #JeSuisHijabi tweets.

However, developed prior to the explosion of social media, the method of webservation has mainly been developed around the examination of a website or blog focusing on a certain issue or group, and does not take into account the uniquely interactive, discursive, and polysemic nature of social media. Since this thesis project is concerned mainly with hashtags on Twitter – a site that facilitates the creation of discursive cultural space as well as texts – a more robust Twitter-specific method that goes beyond content analysis and into the realm of anthropology is necessary. It is for this reason that I employ the methodology of “hashtag ethnography,” which was first coined by Bonilla and Rosa (2015) in their study of #Ferguson. This methodology conceptualizes sites like Twitter as an actual place where cultural interactions occur, viewing it as a space in which one can undertake ethnographic field work.

While hashtag ethnography is a “new” methodology, it stems out of the broader method of virtual ethnography, which was first described in 2000 as a response to the increasing need for

²⁸ One month later, January 1-5, 2016, only seven tweets were generated using #JeSuisHijabi during that time, which demonstrates the temporary nature and appeal of the campaign.

methodologies to adapt to the increasing merger of online and offline public spheres and how the Internet is being integrated into people's everyday lives. To address this, Christine Hine (2000) introduced the notion of "Virtual Ethnography" in her book by the same title. To account for this merger, she conceptualizes the Internet "as culture and cultural artefact" (14).

Building on Hine's observations on the concreteness of the Internet, Dana Walker (2010) sought to further this approach with the caveat that

one of the primary and ongoing challenges facing Internet-based ethnographic research is the question of how to construct the location of a project when the sites, technologically mediated practices, and people we study exist and flow through a wider information ecology that is neither fixed nor can easily be located as 'online' or 'offline' (23).

This permeability issue still exists today, yet, in spite of this fact, scholarly works on the Internet and social media (Schwell 2015; Wills and Fecteau 2016; Bonilla and Rosa 2015), while often making incredibly helpful insight about the nature of social media, hashtags and their role in the public sphere, often fail to adjust their methodologies to account for this. This observation is echoed by Croeser and Highfield (2014), who, have noticed that "quantitative studies of social media are often quite broad and hashtag-oriented in their analysis" (2). It is for this reason that a mixed-method approach that accounts for offline perspectives of Internet use alongside an analysis of the content and interactions that take in networked cultural spaces, like Twitter, is increasingly becoming the most intellectually responsible means of studying the Internet, and must be developed further.

One major sign of online ethnography's newness is that academic works that employ the methodology often dedicate a great deal of discussion to attempting to make their own contribution the furthering and theorizing of the methodology itself. Schwell's (2015) discussion of #MuslimRage, is one of these such articles. Schwell's analysis is particularly useful to the

development of my own methodological understanding of online ethnography because her work is concerned with a Muslim specific hashtag. In her work, she refers to how her

‘netnographic’ approach encounters various methodological and analytical challenges such as the complexity of the field, the multitude of relationships and networks, the unclear context and the many ways of content being disseminated. [...] the question remains: what is the social context of the tweets and the blogs if the field consists of a multitude of actors, motives, intentions and geographical places (97).

This is a question regarding multiplicity is one that that I too grappled with while compiling and analyzing #JeSuisHijabi tweets. I found that, even if none of them were tweets of #JeSuisHijabi, drawing on interviews with Canadian Muslims helped to mitigate the methodological problems posed by Schwell, which, as mentioned above, helped point to the possible motives and intentions behind using hashtags to counter misconceptions of Islam. Likewise, knowing that this hashtag emerged specifically out of the Canadian context allowed me to ground and focus my analysis within it.

As discussed in the literature in Chapter Two, in their study of #Ferguson, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) take their approach to online ethnography a step further than Schwell with the methodological concept of ‘hashtag ethnography.’ In doing so, they pose the very important methodological question: “Can a hashtag become a field site?” (5). As they explore this question further, they find that attempting to answer this question opens up an entirely new set of questions. They ask:

What kind of field site does a platform like Twitter represent? Is Twitter the ultimate ‘non-place’ [...] of super modernity, a transient site of fleeting engagement, or is it an instance of a virtual world’ [...], with its own set of socialities and form of engagement? And is the study of an event through social media a return to a previous era of ‘armchair anthropology’? Or is hashtag ethnography the next logical step in an anthropology of the 21st century, one that has become increasingly concerned with the ontological implication of digital practices? (5).

While these broad, over-arching methodological questions are important to consider and have significant implications for the study of human culture online, they are not the central research questions that this thesis seeks to address. Nevertheless, they are questions that I too grappled with and could not avoid as I thought about a how to compile and analyze tweets in a way that incorporates and acknowledges the complex social interactions and power dynamics that exist not only on Twitter itself, but between researcher and subject. For this reason, hashtag ethnography, to date, is the most apt methodological approach for analyzing #JeSuisHijabi, especially when paired with the narratives of my participants. While I have indirectly explored and addressed some of these questions posed by Bonilla and Rosa in my literature review, they also have methodological implications, which I turn to now.

In conceptualizing #JeSuisHijabi as a field site, addressing its interactivity within it is an important way forward in addressing the problems posed by Bonilla and Rosa. This interaction spurred by #JeSuisHijabi is why, as I coded the tweets in NVivo, I not only coded the content of the Tweets, but the retweets, likes and replies. Gathering these responses allowed me to quantify, to a certain degree, the reception, engagement and interactivity of #JeSuisHijabi. This approach is tied to how I conceptualized Twitter as a discursive public space, as I discussed in Chapter Two, where a series of discussions are constantly taking place and new publics are constantly forming and dissipating. Therefore, one cannot simply look at the content, but must also look at how others engaged with that content, just as one would if they were observing a discussion in an offline field site.

This approach was influenced by Wills and Fecteau (2016: 33), who in also acknowledging the discursive nature of Twitter, have developed and employed a helpful methodology for coding

tweets and including retweets, likes, and replies. Their work, while not being influenced by Bonilla and Rosa's hashtag ethnography, reflects many of its insights. They are instead influenced by an astute observation by Bruns and Burgess (2015), who are in many ways the first to begin to take hashtags seriously as an object of social scientific inquiry. They were perhaps the first to point out that

it is possible, in particular, to measure the extent to which contributors to any given hashtag are actively responding to one another— by sending one another publicly visible @replies, or retweeting each other's messages[...] A high volume of such response messages would indicate that users are not merely tweeting into the hashtag stream but also following what others are posting; the more such messages are contained in the hashtag stream— and the greater the total number of participants who engage in this way— the more the hashtag community can be said to act as a community (5-6).

Wills and Fecteau (2016) employ this method in their study of #muslimcandyheartrejects. They gather and organize the tweets under the hashtag and keep track of the retweets, likes and replies. Once sorted, they were able to analyze how these tweets helped reinforce and express Muslim diaspora identity amongst those who used it, which led to their insightful findings about the discourses that can emerge from a singular hashtag (Wills and Fecteau 2016: 34). It is this method that I employ in my own thesis project to analyze #JeSuisHijabi because, as mentioned in Chapter 2, these types of hashtags are similar, and this coding method will be an effective means of collecting and sorting data without undermining the interactive nature of tweets.

I recognize, however, that there are limitations to such an approach. A number of scholars have shown how the categorization and coding process of content analysis is particularly susceptible to bias and ambiguity (Weber 1990: 18). Nevertheless, tweets have a 140 character limit, which means that the texts that I am analyzing are relatively succinct and have a limited number of words per tweet, arguably making the identification and categorization of

words, themes, and accompanying hashtags much more straightforward than longer texts. Likewise, just analyzing tweets does not illuminate the entire picture, which is why scholars who have taken interest in social media hashtags are beginning to look beyond the forums in which online content is created and interview users themselves (see Croeser and Highfield 2014; Illman and Sjö 2015; Glieg 2015; Echchaïbi 2013). My methodology takes a similar approach in hopes of gaining a more well-rounded perspective not only on the use of #JeSuisHijabi, but of the way Muslims in general are using hashtags. To be clear, none of my participants themselves tweeted #JeSuisHijabi. Nevertheless, their insights into how they use social media and hashtags illuminates, contextualizes, and situates #JeSuisHijabi as an event within the larger modern event that is hashtagging.

Conclusion

As I have established throughout this thesis, online and offline public spheres are not completely separate, and my methodological approach to understanding Muslim hashtags seeks to account for this reality. By conceptualizing #JeSuisHijabi as a field site and analyzing tweets within it alongside in-person interviews, I not only look closer at how online and offline spheres are intertwined, but what that means for Canadian Islamic identity and how it is expressed in the secular public sphere. With this in mind I will now discuss my findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

How Islam and Hashtags Shape Participants' Navigation of Canadian Secular Society

Introduction

This chapter examines my participants' use of hashtags and considers what it might say about their more general engagement with religiosity in a so-called secular Canada. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Habermas (2008) defines the liberal public sphere as "a space of reasoned communicative exchanges" (12). With this definition in mind we see that Habermas is concerned with the contours of the public sphere and the modes of communication that take place within it. Habermas aims to discern what rules of reasonable public discourse create the most equal playing field for citizens in pluralistic liberal societies. In a post 9/11 context, and while recognizing the deep historical debt that modern secular reason and liberalism owe to Christianity, Habermas, in formulating his concept of the post-secular public sphere has taken a particular interest in the rules of communication between religious and secular reason, and has built on his theory of communicative action to account for this.

In doing so, Habermas describes a communicative process of collaborative translation between religious and secular reason, which, in his opinion, incorporates the nuances that exist in the interactions between religious and secular reason. At the same time, he seeks to a perceived polarity between citizens who operate under these two types of reason, that is religious and secular.²⁹

²⁹ To explain his reason for this translation process further, Habermas (2008) states that "citizens of a democratic polity owe one another good reasons for their political positions. Even if the religious contributions are not subjected to self-censorship, they depend on cooperative acts of translation. For without a successful translation the substantive content of religious voices has no prospect of being taken up into the agendas and negotiations within political bodies and of gaining a hearing in the broader political process" (132).

This perceived polarity appears in Canada today, which I argue affects the everyday lives of Muslim Canadians. To address this issue, Habermas (2008) calls for a nuanced public understanding of religion's role in secular liberal societies, which lies at the centre of his concept of the post-secular public sphere. In doing so he posits that:

Even today, religious traditions perform the function of articulating an awareness of what is lacking or absent. They keep alive a sensitivity to failure and suffering. They rescue from oblivion the dimensions of our social and personal relations in which advances in cultural and social rationalization have caused utter devastation. Who is to say that they do not contain encoded semantic potentialities that could provide inspiration if only their message were translated into rational discourse and their profane truth contents were set free? (6)

The following two discussion chapters are an attempt to decode and illuminate the “encoded semantic potentialities” embedded in hashtags used by Muslim Canadians as well as discussions among Canadian Muslims themselves, which are often overlooked when society divides religious and secular identity and shows favour towards the latter. In doing so, I demonstrate that the way in which some Canadian Muslims are using hashtags and the Internet to respond to public life complicates the so-called religious and secular spheres. In considering a blurring between these two spheres, this thesis demonstrates, through analyzing responses from interview participants alongside tweets that use the hashtag #JeSuisHijabi, that the identities expressed through “Muslim” hashtags and social media show how the religious and the secular are braided together in the lives Muslims in contemporary Canada.

This chapter explores participants' understanding of hashtags and social media, how they are used, the affect that they have on participants' understanding of the relationship between Islamic and Canadian identities in the public sphere, and what that tells us about how the religious and secular play out in everyday lives. I do so by first looking at participants'

perceptions of Islam, Canadian identities, and secularism. I then move on to discuss how participants co-express religious and secular identities online. From there, I discuss more specifically how participants use hashtags to communicate religious and secular identity and navigate the public sphere.

Following this more descriptive foray, Chapter Five analyzes tweets under #JeSuisHijabi, looking at how language in those tweets is used to communicate a blurring of the perceived divide between the religious and the secular in the lives of Canadian Muslims. Throughout both of these chapters, my findings point to the fact that the religious and the secular, as they are communicated through hashtags in the public sphere, coalesce around Canadian Muslim identity.

Participants' Perceptions of Islam, Canadian Identities, and Secularism

As I discussed briefly in Chapter One, perhaps the most glaring finding from my qualitative research in St. John's and Winnipeg is that all participants expressed a positive view of Canadian society and, to varying degrees, saw Canadian and Muslim identities as intertwined. This opinion echoes findings from the only other study of Canadian Muslims' use of the Internet by Ruby Ramji (2014). In her study, Ramji found that the Muslim Canadians who she interviewed did not distinguish between being Muslim and being Canadian (115). My results echo this finding. In fact, the participants that I interviewed who grew up in a Muslim majority country prior to immigration would often express directly or anecdotally how Canadian secularism and pluralism has made them better Muslims. Likewise, as we saw in Mariam's story in Chapter One, many participants who were born outside of Canada told me that before they moved to Canada they took their faith and identity as a Muslim for granted, praying, fasting, or wearing hijab because it was just what everyone else in their community did. However, upon moving to Canada, they were not only suddenly exposed to a number of different religions, but a

number of different ways of practicing Islam as well. This religious diversity caused them to question and engage more closely and critically who they were as Muslims, which many said strengthened their identity as Muslims instead of weakening it (see Moghissi, Rahnema, and Goodman 2009).

To explain this growing movement further, I return to Mariam's story from Chapter One. Mariam is a 27 year-old law student who came to Canada as a refugee from Kurdish Northern Iraq with her family when she was 12. She considers herself a devout Muslim and wears hijab. I asked her what she thinks about living in a religiously plural society with secular values like Canada. She said,

It's awesome. It's very awesome actually, because when you live in a place where most people look different from you, you kind of question like, 'why do I look different?' So when I first came to Canada as a child, like everyone was wearing the headscarf so I wore it too. Nobody told me. I just wore it. When we came here and I was in high school I was like, 'oh no one else is wearing it. Well there's a couple of girls. Most people are not wearing it so why do I wear it?' So you start to question your own identity and later I took it off. Obviously because I didn't know why I was wearing it. Later when I was much older then I started to question 'wait, why am I Muslim? Why am I not something else?' Then I started learning about the religion, and actually I feel like a convert myself, because I didn't really know much about Islam even though I was born in a Muslim country and lived there for all my childhood. Then I learned about Islam and wanted to practice it. And now when I practice Islam I think it's because I live in a country, in a secular plural country.

On the surface, as many scholars assumed throughout the Enlightenment period and even today, that living in a country with secular values eventually leads to a decrease in religious sentiment amongst the wider population, and that secularism, often understood as a separation of religion and state, is a process that encourages relegating religion strictly to the so-called private sphere

and to private practice (see Berger 1967, 1999; Durkheim 1912).³⁰ In Mariam's experience, however, secularism can bring people to engage with what they believe in a way that strengthens their identity as a religious person, and even encourage them to express it publically.

For Mariam, the initial shock of living as a religious minority caused her to question why she believed what she believed, leading her to temporarily end the practice of wearing hijab. Nevertheless, as she grew older, this same secular environment encouraged her re-engagement with her faith in a way that ultimately strengthened it to the point where she felt like a 'convert.' I will return to Mariam's story, and why she decided to wear the hijab again more in Chapter Five, when I further explore Canadian Muslim women's understanding of the hijab as it relates to #JeSuisHijabi. For now, however, I turn to the experiences of other participants to consider what their stories say about the nature of religious identity in a secular context.

This insight into how religious identity is challenged and even strengthened by a secular context, as seen in Mariam's story, is not new and is beginning to receive more attention from scholars of religion (see Cameron 2013, 2014; Knott 2013; Echchaïbi 2013). Likewise, traditional theories of secularization as a process that disintegrates the role of religious identity in the public sphere have been successfully challenged by scholars like Jose Casanova (1994), who recognizes the validity of secularization theory's core observation that religious institutions have been, and continue to be separate from the secular political sphere, while taking note of the resilience and push back by religious communities against the "privatization and marginalization" (6) of religious beliefs and practices that comes with it. Casanova (1994) calls this pushback against the relegation of religion to the private sphere as the "deprivatization" of

³⁰ In sociologist Peter Berger's (1967) earlier work, *The Sacred Canopy*, he theorized that Western society was on course to become a-religious. However, later in his career, in the book *The Desecularization of the World* (1999), Berger, in noting a resurgence of religious sentiment and identity in the West, retracted his earlier theory.

religion, which he defines as “as dual, interrelated process of repoliticization of the private religious and moral spheres and renormativization of the public economic and political spheres” (5-6). In other words, deprivatization is a process by which religious concerns and identities are increasingly expressed and recognized within the secular public sphere, pushing back a form of secularism that, due to secularism’s historical roots in the Christian West favours more Protestant forms of religion, thus assuming that religious expression is something that we can keep, and is best kept private (see Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008; Asad 2003).

The Internet, however, as a medium that blurs the line between private and public through social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, has most certainly played a part in fostering this process of deprivatization by allowing for religious everyday concerns and identities that were once private, like Dauood’s description of baklava as #MuslimFerreroRocher, to be shared in a public manner. Nevertheless, there are still offline constraints that affect how and what kind of information is shared when one discusses their religious identity online. Aisha’s story sheds light on this context. Aisha, is a 33 year old UK-born Muslim woman of Pakistani heritage, who, like Mariam, feels at home in Canada and sees its secular values as an asset that aids in her religious expression. However, as a visible Muslim woman in the “secular” public sphere, she still feels required to constantly discuss who she is as a Muslim and to represent Islam in a positive light. In response to the question, “What does it mean to you to be a Muslim living in Canada?” She said,

It means that I have a lot of freedoms, a lot of choice in how I want to practice my faith verses living in a so-called ‘Muslim’ country. It means I have a lot more responsibility I guess, because being a visible Muslim woman, I’m a walking, talking advocate for Islam and Muslims everywhere, because that’s what happened after 9/11. But for the most part I value all of the freedoms that I have. I’ve never really faced any Islamophobia that I can tell. If anything 9/11 gave me a platform, not as though I sought it at all. Like, I don’t see myself as an activist, I see myself

as very reluctant. Someone who has been pushed into that space because people wanted to hear from Muslims.

While Aisha explicitly does not identify as an activist, she still feels a certain burden of representation (see Morley and Chen 1996: 9). As a Muslim woman, she feels constantly obligated to discuss and portray her religion in a positive light. This pressure speaks to a current tension present for Muslims in the modern secular public sphere: that their ‘Muslimness’ is often racialized and essentialized as their sole operative identity instead of being seen as a central facet of a complex and dynamic confluence of identities. This context constantly puts Muslims in a position where they feel obligated to discuss the Muslim part of their identity much more often than anything else.

This myopathy is partially due to the media and academia’s focus on the most practicing and conservative members of Muslim communities (see Selby 2016: 72-73; Wong 2011), and is compounded by post-9/11 misconceptions of Islam as staunchly conservative, repressive, monolithic, and overly dogmatic. Therefore, even within a secular context, Muslims like Aisha are often pushed into a space where before they can discuss their identities as employees, students, parents, citizens, sports enthusiasts or trombonists, they must not only counter misconceptions of Islam itself, but reluctantly address the nature of their own ‘Muslimness.’ As Hoffman and Larsson (2013) point out, it is easy to become “blinded by the categorical powers of the terms ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islam’” (10). As scholars and citizens, Hoffman and Larsson remind us that “Muslims are not and do not act as Muslims all the time” (10). Not unlike how men who practice nursing are often referred to as a “male-nurse,” many Muslims often have to deal with the “Muslim-” before they move on to other aspects of their identity, because to be a Muslim and

something else is seen, within the “secular” liberal imagination, as salient, homogenous, atypical, and highly visible.

Muslims are subject to this perception on the Internet as well (see Törnberg and Törnberg 2016). At the same time, the world wide web has also become a place where Muslims can connect, express, and explore their identities in a way that, at the very least, lightens the burden of representation by giving them a unique platform to navigate and articulate the secular aspects of their religious identity in ways that they would not otherwise be able to, showing others that while Islam is a central part of their identity, it is not necessarily their sole operative one. In this next section, I will discuss how one participant in my project navigates this reality.

Use of the Internet to Navigate the Public Sphere

As a self-identified gay Muslim man, Alan often finds himself negotiating between two worlds that some perceive to be incompatible: the gay community and the Muslim community.³¹ And just like it is easy to assume that living in a secular society leads to a decline in religiosity, it is just as easy to perceive the diverse and complex gay and Muslim communities as not only at odds, but as monolithic representatives of different sides of a religious/secular divide. However, recent scholarship has begun to shed light on the problematic aspects of this assumption. Queer theorist Jasbir Puar (2007) provides an authoritative critique of the perceived tension between queer secular identity and Muslim religiosity. She defines the common Western imagination’s understanding of the relationship between Islamic and queer identity as “resolutely secular, unforgiving in its understanding of (irrational, illogical, senseless) religion, faith, or spirituality as the downfall of any rational politics” (13). She goes on to observe that within this imagination,

³¹ Winnipeg and St. John’s can both be very small places, especially when one is a member of both the gay and Muslim communities. So to ensure that Alan’s identity remains confidential, I have intentionally avoided disclosing any other aspects of Alan’s identity beyond that fact that he is a gay Muslim man.

“Queer secularity demands a particular transgression of norms, religious norms that are understood to otherwise bind that subject to an especially egregious interdictory religious frame. The queer agential subject can only ever be fathomed *outside* the norming constrictions of religion, conflating agency and resistance”³² (13). Put differently, in the commonly drawn Western imagination, to be gay is to be secular and liberated, while to be religious, especially Muslim, is to be restricted, repressed, and constrained, making it impossible to be both homosexual and Muslim at once without giving up some form of agency.

In contrast, Puar observes that focusing on the “also,” as in “I am *also* a homosexual,” instead of the “or,” is a key to challenging the perceived adversarial binary between queer and Muslim identities (Puar 2007: 15). Alan’s story affirms this observation made by Puar. The Internet helps him to articulate and explore his identity as a gay man who is *also* Muslim, positing these parts of himself as different, but ultimately intertwined, complementary, and integral to who he is as a person.

When I asked him about how the Muslim community uses the Internet, he said that,

They [the local Muslim community] have a mailing list as well, which is regularly active and so they send out notices for if someone passes away and they call for a *jinazza* or burial, there’s a notice so we can go together and join somebody’s family. That’s really one of the most important things that I appreciate about being part of the Muslim community, because I like the communitarian nature of being part of the community. With my gay friends everybody is very individualistic and everybody just thinks of their own friends.

Alan is out in his Muslim community and prays at his mosque regularly. While he says that his religious community’s attitude toward homosexuality is tepid at best, it remains important to him.³³ He says that his Muslim community provides things for him that his gay friends do not,

³² My emphasis added.

³³ A 2016 Environics survey of 600 self-identified Canadian Muslims asked the question “Do you think it should be possible to be both an observant Muslim and to live openly in a lesbian or gay same-sex relationship?” 26% of

and vice versa. More specifically, he admires the more altruistic and communitarian aspects of his religious community, while his gay friends, albeit somewhat individualistic, offer him camaraderie and acceptance as a gay man without judgment.³⁴

Alan is thoughtful, well educated, and takes great care to back up his understanding of who he is with rational arguments. He discusses how the Internet has helped him to explore what it means to be gay and Muslim in a way that he could not in a face-to-face conversation:

Just the opportunity to indulge in an aspect of my identity without judgment or taking this rational distance from it, where you might not be able to have that distance if you're talking to somebody in person. Being able to distance yourself from the arguments and from the emotional reaction that you might give by reviewing arguments and comments and statements that are made against you as an individual, which I still find quite problematic as a Muslim because we're not supposed to be making any judgements against one another and we tend to be, as Muslims, making them all the time. It's been very helpful in terms of just normalizing the idea that my family have been trying to engrain, that I am who I am for a reason and I should not be trying to change myself because somebody out there is trying to change me, and that has happened through these Youtube videos and online *khutbas* [sermons] that I've read and through reinterpretations of what was said 300 years ago by people who have alternative views on Islam and I think they're just as valid as anyone else's.

In this passage, Alan shows how the Internet helps him to navigate around pressures against gayness that make seeking information about his identity difficult. In this case, he turned to the Internet to help normalize his identity as a gay Muslim outside of the supportive circle of family and friends, and cement his understanding of who he is as a gay Muslim in the wider offline

respondents answered "yes" and 18% of respondents answered "depends, don't know, or not applicable." The rest answered "no." Interestingly, the majority of the respondents who answered "yes," 36% were in the 60 and over age demographic, and was the age demographic to answer "yes" the most. The next highest age demographic was 18 to 34, at 32%.

³⁴ In hindsight, I wish that I had asked Alan about what his gay friends think about his identity as a Muslim and his relationship with the Muslim community. Perhaps this question could have shed some light on what the gay community itself thinks about Islam and sexuality, and how having a gay-Muslim friend affects their understanding of the religious/secular divide. Unfortunately, it did not occur to me to ask such a question at the time. So to avoid speculation about how Alan's gay community may perceive Islam, I instead focus on Alan himself, his identity as a gay Muslim man, and the role that the Internet has played in helping him to explore and articulate his identity as such, and what they might tell us about the intersections between the religious and the secular. For a deeper discussion of queer secular understandings of Islam and religion see Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), where she further explores the concept of 'queer secularity'.

societal context, as well as within the Muslim community itself, a task that would be extremely difficult to pursue without access to the Internet. He went on to say that

I find YouTube channels sometimes pretty helpful. Being a gay Muslim, I find one of the things that's really helpful for me is looking up information on Islam and homosexuality in a non-judgmental way because I know that at my mosque I will be judged for it. Even though I'm out in my community I don't know if my Muslim community even acknowledged it as such or as existing, because for some Muslims you cannot be homosexual, you can act, you can perform a homosexual act, but you cannot be a homosexual man. So I find looking up information online to be very helpful in the sense that there are particular Imams, there are particular searches, there are particular sources in terms of websites, and communities and networks that will provide additional information or will provide light into how people are resolving internal dilemmas about their religion and Islam their sexual orientation or gender identity.

As a secular forum, the Internet allows for "alternative views on Islam." And as long as they are well intended and based in fact and reason, they are, in Alan's eyes, "just as valid as anyone else's," allowing for a wide degree of views on religion and homosexuality, thus helping Alan to understand who he is as a gay Muslim man. Therefore, instead of moving him away from his religious identity, the Internet has helped him to more deeply explore the connection between these two central aspects of himself. As a homosexual man, an identity that is arguably more readily accepted in secular circles and non-Abrahamic religions, he seeks to demonstrate how this central part of himself is compatible with his religious identity as a Muslim without having to give up either, something that both his religious community, and perhaps even his gay friends, find difficult to grasp.

More theoretically, I see Alan's use of the web as an example of how the online sphere complicates the religious/secular divide. The rational arguments for homosexuality as a morally acceptable aspect of one's identity, have for the past decade or so become accepted in mainstream Canadian political discourse, and in fact are becoming increasingly difficult to

rationally argue against.³⁵ The Internet gives Alan the opportunity to explore what for him are rational Islamic arguments for homosexuality that can be overlooked, ignored, or frowned upon by both the Islamic and gay community, but exist online, thus allowing him to rationally negotiate, and in turn complicate, identities and concepts that are often perceived as binaries in Canadian society: Islam and homosexuality, religiosity and secularity, faith and reason.

Hashtags can be shortened communicative manifestations of these “communities and networks” that reflect how some Muslims navigate and complicate these sorts of divides, and behind every hashtag that performs this function, there are countless stories like Alan’s. For Alan, the religious and secular aspects of his identity are, in the words of Kim Knott (2013), “two sides of a coin, the coin itself being of peculiarly modern mint” (149). This metaphor seems to be echoed not only in the way Alan and others use the Internet to negotiate two crucial parts of their identities, but how the Canadian Muslims that I interviewed view their own place in Canadian society.

Now that I have discussed in depth, through Alan’s story, how the religious and secular coalesce, I will now move on to discuss how other participants express this coalescence online.

The Co-Expression of Religious and Secular Identities Online

To varying degrees, many of the participants that I interviewed expressed scepticism about whether an informed debate about religion can take place online. One participant for example said “I’m not that much fun online, trust me, because like, I don’t know. First of all I

³⁵ In 2005, in spite of pressure from numerous religious organizations the Catholic Church, the government of Canada officially recognized same sex marriage under Canadian law. This was after numerous Canadian provinces had already passed decisions in 2003 and 2004 to legalize same-sex marriage and began performing ceremonies themselves.

don't believe you can have an informed debate online. It doesn't make any sense to me you know." While some expressed outright scepticism, others didn't necessarily avoid discussing religion online, but were strategic about their use of religious language when discussing or posting publically online, preferring language that they believed would appeal to a more "secular" audience. It is this strategic use of language which highlights how the religious and the secular coalesce in the lives of participants, shedding light not only on the secular context in which they post online, but how they express themselves within that context.

Tariq, for example, is a Canadian-Born Muslim of Pakistani origin. When I asked him whether there are any topics that he avoids online he said

To be honest I don't share as much religious content online for a couple of reasons. First of all, most of my Facebook isn't Muslim and there's certain things that people, you know, may not get. And I don't share things for necessarily everyone on my list either, but for the most part I'm not super active in posting things anyway. And I find that when I do post things that are faith-based, they're generally things that are accessible to the general population. I wouldn't post a specific lecture series that pinpoints a specific incident in the life of the prophet Muhammad – peace be upon him – unless I think it's relevant to current events, or it's a good, sort of, thing that dispels myths that people may have about Islam and Muslims. But for the most part I tend to probably hold back a little bit, in terms of if I see something interesting, I'll share that in my group chat with some of my Muslim friends, but otherwise my Facebook is a mix of film, trivia, photographs that I've taken, weird news things, maybe some cat memes here or there.

Tariq, along with many other participants that I interviewed, intentionally avoids sharing content online that is completely religious in nature, not because he is ashamed of his religious identity, but because he is aware of his audience, which in the primarily Canadian online context, is religiously diverse, making cat memes much more relatable than a quote from the Qur'an. Nevertheless, Tariq will use the Facebook interface to engage religious material with friends, but in private manner. If the public content that he shares does have some sort of religious element to it, he makes sure that it appeals to wide range of people or speaks to an issue that everyone,

Muslim or not, can relate to. It is in these instances where Muslims like Tariq express how the religious and secular are intertwined and virtually indistinguishable in their everyday lives. It's important to make clear, however, that Tariq's strategic use of religious and secular language, while it serves to blur the religious secular divide, is not necessarily intended to do so. As mentioned in Chapter Two, my Muslim participants use a mixture of religious and secular language online for a number of inter-related reasons. Sometimes it's to avoid harassment, other times it is to reach a wider audience. It may also simply be because the religious and the secular, for them, naturally coalesce around certain issues and ideas.

Fawzia, for example, is a 20 year-old Canadian born university student of Somali heritage. Sometimes, if there is a tragedy, she told me that she'll post prayers on Facebook. I asked her "As you type [the prayers] out, how does that work?" She said,

I don't put anything really Islamic, that 100% is Muslim. I would just kind of be 'may Allah ease the families pain and bring them some joy' or 'may God help people find justice in moving far from this place.' Things like that where everyone can be like, 'we want that for them.' So in general I don't put in prayers anything specific where people would be like 'I don't really agree with that.'

In this case, even when posting religious content, like a prayer, Fawzia takes her mixed-belief audience into account. While Fawzia is expressing her grief and well wishes in an Islamic manner, she is well aware that since her Facebook friends are diverse, what she shares will be read by more than just Muslims, and what she does say may affect what they think about Islam and her identity as a Muslim. Her insight regarding audience is noteworthy. Muslims are not always posting about Islam or in an Islamic manner, but Fawzia, for one, thinks carefully about how her posts may be interpreted by a wider audience. Looking closer at the way my participants post online highlights – to borrow Robert Orsi's (2005) illustrative term – the *braided* relationship between religious and secular in the lives of Canadian Muslims, showing how

Canadian Islamic identity contains within it a tremendous array of “improbable intersections, incommensurable ways of living, discrepant imaginings, unexpected movements of influence, and inspiration existing side by side” (9).

Whether it is Mariam’s personal journey with wearing the hijab; Aisha’s reluctant role as a “walking talking advocate for Islam;” Alan’s use of the Internet to explore his identity as a gay Muslim man; Fawzia’s Facebook prayers that are purposefully not 100% Islamic; Tariq’s vigilance in assuring that that the faith-based content that he shares is pertinent to more than just Muslims; or Dauood, whom I mentioned in Chapter 1, and his hashtagging of Baklava as #MuslimFerreroRocher; in the lives of these Canadian Muslims, the religious and the secular function in a braided manner, and it is demonstrated in the way that they interact online.

Likewise, as I have explored briefly in Dauood’s story throughout this thesis thus far, it is clear that this braided relationship between religious and secular carries over and is embedded in the way Muslims use hashtags, and is what I will now explore further.

The Use of Hashtags by Participants to Communicate Religious/Secular Identities

Of the seventeen participants that I interviewed, 13 said they used hashtags, but to varying degrees. Participants said that they used them for a multitude of reasons like sharing information at events, to show solidarity with a movement, to share news, to label a picture or tweet, or to simply get a laugh. These were by far the most prominent uses of hashtags for participants, and using them for religious expression or to challenge misconceptions about Islam was something that they did only every once in a while, if at all.

Recall Dauood, who we met at the beginning of Chapter 1. After he told me about hashtagging baklava as #MuslimFerreroRocher, I went on to ask him why he uses hashtags. He

then told me a story also referencing food.

[They] mak[e] it easier for everybody to interact. That's why I would use hashtags. Like I posted another one on Ramadan. My nephew, the only time the Muslim kids get candies without a fear of somebody taking it from them is Ramadan. So I'm sitting and my nephew is having a Kit Kat right in front of me, and it's 2pm and I'm fasting, and I cannot have his Kit Kat, as much as I wanted to. He probably didn't understand that I was fasting or whatever, but I was just looking at him, and any other time I would just go and take a bite of it or a piece of it. So in that I used two hashtags just to show who we are.

CF: Which hashtags?

I can't remember, like #Ramadan #fasting. I used #KitKat for that picture because that would bring somewhat of a crowd, and then people will see and they will laugh and they will understand and they will become curious, because I think that there are a lot of misconceptions. I think the purpose of a hashtag is to set a trend, and to set a trend is to raise awareness about certain things. I think a lot of people fear Islam or are scared of Islam because they don't know it. And usually you're scared of something that you're not aware of. You'll be scared of going to a new place because you don't know that place, but you'll feel very comfortable coming back to Winnipeg because you know this place. Like I'll be very happy to go back to Toronto because I lived there. So, the fear of not knowing is there, and that kind of sets that perception in your mind. So that's why I think that as a Muslim I think that it's my job and my responsibility to find different ways, let that be hashtags or Islam Awareness Week where we set up a table in UC, to raise awareness in whatever way I can.

To Dauood, hashtags facilitate interaction, and are used to “set a trend” and “raise awareness about certain things.” They are one tool amongst many that he uses to “bring somewhat of a crowd” to look closer at Islamic identity, understand it from his perspective, and make it more familiar. By attaching a secular hashtag like #KitKat to a story about Ramadan, he intentionally sheds light on the very humorous and human aspects of fasting during Ramadan and the dedication that it takes to take part in it. He hopes that if someone were to see his picture on their Instagram feed or search #Kitkat or #Ramadan, they would see, for that one moment, a glimpse

into “the ‘invisible’ and the noninstitutional” (Dessing et al. 2013b: 2) aspects of lived Islamic experience, thus challenging common societal imaginations of Islam as, in Dauood’s words, “a black [and white] picture of someone with an AK-47.”

In Dauood’s case, the way in which he uses certain hashtags illuminates how he communicates his Muslim identity in the areligious context of Instagram. During Ramadan, Dauood, who loves food, gets hungry. To cope with the discomfort of his hunger, like many do when they’re uncomfortable, he uses humour. Moreover, he sees humour as an opportunity to communicate to a wider audience his small, but significant lived experience during the month of Ramadan, thus ideally generating empathy and humanizing Islam in the eyes of the wider public. This seemingly mundane statement of intertwined religious and secular identity channelled through Dauood’s use of #MuslimFerreroRocher, #Ramadan, and #KitKat, I argue, can and should be seen as an act of everyday activism that directly challenges a hegemonic narrative. In the social media age, we must not view small acts of dissent like these as insignificant in challenging hegemonic discourses on Islam, but as Nabil Echchaibi (2013), in his study of online activism, points out, “rather as ports of small but consistent disruptive flows of dissent, which are significant, precisely because of the nature of the intervention and the tactics of their resistance” (853). The hegemonic discourse in this case is the perception of mutually exclusive relationship between the religious and the secular, which in the context of the post 9/11, positions Muslims as antithetical to Western-liberal values.

A similar embrace of the mundane is used by Saleem when he uses hashtags. Saleem is a 23 year old web developer from Winnipeg who was born in Pakistan. “Have you ever used hashtags to challenge misconceptions about Islam?” I asked.

“Yeah.” He responded. “Sometimes, I would get a good picture of the sky and if it’s really beautiful, I would just say something like ‘Beautiful sky #sky #beautiful #nature.’”

Interestingly, Saleem didn’t see it as necessary to follow up with how these hashtags help challenge misconceptions of Islam, nor did I think to follow up with a question asking him as to why. This is because, in that moment, we both saw his response as self-evident. We both recognized that in using hashtags that have nothing to do with Islam and expressing a certain appreciation for nature, he in turn challenges the problematic misconception that a narrow-minded and all-encompassing understanding of Islamic identity. As a practicing Muslim youth, Saleem’s actions are often already politicized. In this way, the perceptions of his use of Instagram or other social media unescapably placed within the religious/secular binary. Therefore, by being a Muslim who posts about mundane things, they are making an implicit, yet powerful statement that can complicate notions of what it means to be Muslim *and* secular.

In this current historical moment, as a platform for the public expression of private identity, the Internet has made the everyday mundane expression of identity a powerful tactic for Muslims. Saleem and Dauood’s stories, and the stories expressed through #JeSuisHijabi, which I explore further in Chapter Five, highlight the important role that the mundane expression of intertwined religiosity and secularity plays in challenging hegemonic discourses, and requires further attention from scholars who seek to understand religious expression in the modern public sphere.

Participants, although they expressed an awareness of powerful hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter, viewed hashtags as, for the most part, mundane, trivial, or strictly practical tools of online communication. Dauood’s rather in-depth and insightful answer and Saleem’s lack of an in-depth answer, however, suggests that perhaps, on a subconscious level, in using

hashtags in a mundane or clever fashion that highlights the “secular” aspects of their identity, they do hope to challenge misconceptions about their religion. Nevertheless, more research that digs deeper in to exactly why Muslims use hashtags, would need to be done on this question to confirm this observation.

When I asked participants how they use hashtags, they would often discuss how helpful hashtags were at events. For example, when I asked Tariq, the Canadian-born Muslim of Pakistani heritage whom I mentioned previously, about whether he uses hashtags, he said

If I do it's because I'm attending some kind of event. Like if we're attending a conference I might post about a conference and hashtag the name of the conference or the name of the event. Or even if it's not something religious specifically. I went to the TEDx Manitoba and they were encouraging us to post about it and use the hashtag and some other groups have done that. I attended a conference in Toronto called 'Reviving the Islamic Spirit' where a lot of people like Suhaib Webb, Tariq Ramadan, a lot of these people are there and I've shared, posted about that using the hashtag #RIS, which is the acronym. So there's some events that have been done locally. The Islamic Social Services Association released a handbook a few years ago talking about combatting extremism, so when I wasn't able to attend the launch of the handbook I was posting stuff. I don't know if it was live streamed. It might have been broadcast on some live streaming thing, so I was commenting on it and sharing news about it. So yeah that's a really nice part I guess. I use it for Instagram, if I post a picture I'll hashtag whatever it is.

Tariq uses hashtags to contribute to wider conversations on a certain event. Sometimes those events are Islamic in nature, sometimes they are not. He does not view hashtags as an amazing emancipatory tool by any means. He sees it as convenient way to communicate, stay connected, and share what he is up to with the public. Likewise, Zainab is a 40 year old Canadian born Muslim woman of Bengali heritage who owns her own business, and when I asked her about how she uses hashtags she said

I don't use them a lot because I'm not on Twitter. We have a Twitter thing for our company. My sister manages it and she doesn't use it a whole lot. When I use a hashtag it's usually something humorous or to highlight what the content of this

photo is, or whatever. I just posted a picture of a cloud yesterday and said ‘Winnipeg skies #Winnipeg,’ like it’s wasn’t anything exciting or anything, but it was just like, this is what it’s about. Or sometimes it will be something funny like, for example, my friends have done stuff like this, like, they’re having hijab issues and they’ll be like #MuslimProblems, you know what I mean? I haven’t used that particular one, but I would use something similar.

For Zainab, hashtags help to facilitate expression, and share that expression with a wider audience and place what she posts online in a certain context. Likewise, through hashtags like [#MuslimProblems](#), a relatively popular hashtag often used by Muslims to humorously air grievances about life as a modern Muslim, Zainab expresses what it means to her to be practicing.³⁶ As I will discuss further in Chapter 5, Zainab, like Mariam, has gone through her own story about “hijab issues,” and I will explore her story alongside my discussion of [#JeSuisHijabi](#).

Many participants gave answers like Tariq and Zainab’s, and suggest, as one can expect, that Muslims use hashtags for much more than religious expression. Nevertheless, as we have seen in Dauood and Saleem’s stories, and to a small degree in Zainab’s, the content of those hashtags and the context in which some Muslims use those hashtags can help to shed light on everyday Muslim identities in a Canadian context. It can also shed light on identity expression within the Muslim community itself.

Jamilah, for example, is a 19 year-old Somali-born university student who has used a hashtag called [#BlackOutEid](#) around the Islamic event of Eid. When I asked her how she uses hashtags, she said

When Eid came around we had #BlackOutEid, because usually when Eid comes around, like the Arab people think that they’re more superior than coloured Muslims,

³⁶ Like most popular hashtags, [#MuslimProblems](#), as one can imagine, is also host to a number of other complex and overlapping discourses about Islam, which in itself could be its own study.

so I use it to show my appreciation of the Black Muslims. So we use hashtags like that. And we were trending too, worldwide.

Jamilah accompanies #BlackOutEid with Instagram photos that she takes during Eid to shed light on issues of racism within her own Muslim community and show solidarity with her fellow black Muslims.³⁷ Jamilah's use of #BlackOutEid situates her in a discursive intersection of two online spaces that are known to many as '[Black Twitter](#)' and '[Muslim Twitter](#).' Both of these spaces are what Ganaele Langlois (2011) would call "technocultural assemblage[s]" (3), whereby groups with a shared ethno-cultural identity create and gather in an online space to discuss, explore, and construct identities, while subverting hegemonic discourses and powers that may oppress or suppress them. Sanjay Sharma (2013), building on Langlois, calls Black Twitter a "digital-race assemblage" (48). Black Twitter is perhaps one of the most well-known of modern online spaces, garnering a significant amount of online discourse and media attention. While at its very essence, Black Twitter is comprised of all of the Tweets crafted by Black people, there is no doubt that it is hashtags are the foundation on which Black Twitter is built. For example, if one were to look at the Wikipedia page for 'Black Twitter,' its table of contents is comprised almost completely of hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter, [#ICantBreathe](#), and [#HandsUpDontShoot](#), which it considers to be its 'influences' (Wikipedia 2017). While 'Muslim Twitter' has not garnered enough recognition outside Muslim circles to warrant its own Wikipedia page, it is still certainly conceptualized amongst Muslims as a digital space with its own Muslim-specific hashtags and inside jokes (see Dahir 2017). While Jamilah, or any participant for that matter, did not mention whether she was aware of the existence of Muslim Twitter, hashtags like #BlackOutEid, #MuslimProblems, and #JeSuisHijabi, would most

³⁷ Eid, also known as Eid al-Fitr, translates from Arabic as "feast of breaking the fast," and is a holiday, feast, and celebration that marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan, where Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. Often, Eid celebrations take place in at mosques or public venues and is a time of gathering.

certainly be considered to be a part of it by certain Muslims who are engaged in the Twittersphere.

Hashtags have also made their way into the “offline public sphere,” and Aisha, the UK-born Muslim who I mentioned earlier in this chapter, told me a story about how she verbally used a hashtag #ModestMuslimWoman to navigate a workplace scenario that, as a self-identifying modest Muslim woman, made her uncomfortable. Aisha is personable, witty, articulate, and, she says, is known by her friends and colleagues for her trademark sarcastic British humor, which she told me can get her into trouble sometimes. Aisha works in the non-profit sector, which she characterizes as fairly progressive, and for the most part she would consider herself as such. Nevertheless, she would often find herself as the only Muslim in her workplace, and, unlike many other workplaces, her colleagues enjoyed talking about religion and politics, which as someone with a keen interest in both those topics, is something she appreciated and was happy to partake in. Often the conversation would turn towards Islam, and as Muslim who, in the post 9/11 era has been reluctantly pushed into being “a walking talking advocate for Islam and Muslims everywhere,” she felt she had a certain power and responsibility to represent Islam in those conversations. While she felt fortunate that her colleagues took an interest in understanding Islam and genuinely enjoyed their company, there were certain secular norms in her work place, however, that she still needed to navigate, such as discussions about sex.

Aisha explained how she says “hashtag modest Muslim woman” in a playful tone to humorously defuse workplace conversations whenever they would go somewhere that made her uncomfortable. She said that Muslim modesty is an ongoing joke between her and her non-Muslim friends, which she leverages in the form of a hashtag to communicate to her colleagues that, because of her faith, what they are talking about makes her uncomfortable. Aisha’s story

suggests that hashtags have jumped from online spaces like Twitter and Instagram into the modern vernacular, and are even becoming akin to rhetorical devices. What is particularly interesting about #ModestMuslimWoman is that, at the time of writing, it has only been used on Twitter twice and Instagram once, which suggests that its use originated in the offline sphere. The phrase “Modest Muslim Woman,” as it stands would be an awkward thing for Aisha to say in the work place on its own. However, by attaching a “hashtag” to it, the phrase is suddenly imbued with a certain humorous tongue-in-cheek quality, that would otherwise be difficult to portray without sounding uptight.

By using a hashtag to humorously and publically express her discomfort, Aisha made her faith palatable to the “secular ear,” thus challenging a secular norm that tolerates inappropriate sexual discussion in the workplace. This in a way is an extension of the burden of representation that I discussed earlier. Describing her discomfort on the merits of faith alone is not enough to defuse a conversation about sex without potentially being perceived as uptight or dogmatic. Instead, Aisha must package her faith in the form of humour to make it something that people would actually listen to, without diminishing their view of Islam. While on the surface it may appear that Aisha is diluting or trivializing her faith to navigate an awkward workplace scenario, it is also important to keep in mind that she is cleverly using humour, through a hashtag, to insert her faith-based perspective in into a dominant secular discourse that normally does not take Islamic notions of modesty into account. In a way, Aisha's use of #ModestMuslimWoman is not dissimilar to the way that hashtags are used in an online context. Using what Holmes (2000) calls "contestive humour" to challenge institutional and implicit power structures within her workplace parallels the way in which women use #JeSuisHijabi to insert themselves into secular narratives about hijabs and Muslim women. When someone, for example, tweets "Perks of being

a #JeSuisHijabi No one knows how greasy ur [sic] hair is" they use humour to contest the assumption that hijabs are worn strictly for religious observance. Thus, when Aisha used #ModestMuslimWoman every time her co-workers take conversations to places that make her uncomfortable, she is taking part in the "small but consistent disruptive flows of dissent" (Echchaïbi 2013:853), that work to insert Islamic perspectives into dominant secular discourses, whether that be about Muslim women and what they wear, or what conversations are appropriate in the workplace.

Conclusion

Based on my interviews with participants about their views on Canadian society, and how they use hashtags to navigate and challenge its secular norms, I have found that hashtags are useful tools for performing such tasks, not necessarily because of their salience or potential to go viral, but because they allow for the communication of mundane everyday aspects of Canadian-Muslim identities. Prior to the rise of social media, one's humorous experiences during Ramadan, or a Muslim woman's feelings about hijab means to them were only accessible to people with whom they made direct contact, or in a speech or newspaper editorial. Now, hashtags allow Muslims to make what was once largely private, public and connect with others. In an age where perceptions and discourses of Islam as monolithic, dogmatic, and antithetical to liberal values inform media narratives and the decisions of policy makers, these everyday stories and identities serve as small but significant disruptors of such notions by offering a glimpse into the very human, and even secular or mundane aspects of religious life, demonstrating that just as Islamic and Canadian identity are tightly woven together in the fabric of modern Muslim-Canadian life, so is the religious and the secular. This nuanced notion of religious/secular identities is similarly

reflected in the way that Canadian Muslims use the hashtag #JeSuisHijabi, and is what I will now discuss.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Religious and the Secular in #JeSuisHijabi

Introduction

In examining the language and tactics of tweets that use #JeSuisHijabi, this chapter considers how this hashtag is used by some Muslims to attempt to challenge discrimination and Islamophobia that not only leads to problematic associations between Islam and terrorism, but limits Muslims' free speech in the public sphere. Throughout, I also examine what this usage can say about Canadian Muslim identity. I understand Twitter as an extension of the public sphere, and by using a hashtag to articulate a form of public reason that is compatible with secular liberalism, #JeSuisHijabi seeks to remind readers that religious practices can not only be translated in this accessible public sphere, but be consistent with so-called liberal secular values.

In his discussion on the nature of secularism, Craig Calhoun (2011) examines the irony of contemporary formulations of the secular by noting that "secularists propose a limit on religion in the public sphere, which they take to be the basis for equal inclusion, but at the same time insulate themselves from understanding religious discourse, practicing an ironic exclusion" (76). In other words while often purporting neutrality, the secular typically has clear politics. In the Canadian context, Abdolmohammad Kazemipur (2014) offers the most succinct explanation for this irony, which lies at the centre of his book, *The Muslim Question in Canada*, where he depicts it as an issue of "Muslim exceptionalism in the context of Canadian exceptionalism" (9). At the end of his quantitative-based study, Kazemipur concludes that one way to resolve this seeming tension is through a "shift of attention from the theological to the social [which] implies that the solutions to various issues surrounding Muslims are more likely to be found in the realm of relationships, behaviors, and attitudes than in religious scripts" (180). In other words, we must pay more attention to what Muslims *do* rather than the texts from which they turn in their

religious beliefs. I take this suggestion into account, when examining #JeSuisHijabi, which offers a glimpse into this realm.

This chapter proceeds by first offering an overview of the hashtag to then discuss how religious and secular identities are reflected and communicated in #JeSuisHijabi through associating the hijab with liberal and secular values, emotions and characteristics. I then look at how female participants' engagement and lived experiences with the hijab echo and nuance such associations. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the tactics and strategies used to change media narratives and challenge stereotypes about Islam and the hijab, and the insights that these tactics offer into the interplay between religious and secular identity in the lives of Canadian Muslims.

“Religious” and “Secular” Language in #JeSuisHijabi

Of the characteristics most commonly associated with the hijab in tweets that use #JeSuisHijabi, modesty came up often.³⁸ Tweets about modesty would often look something like, “#JeSuisHijabi Covering up our body modestly is part of religious freedom that we enjoy as being a proud Canadian Muslim women!” or “Hijab is not just about modesty. It's about being a helper and giver. If you're in a jam I'll be there. #JeSuisHijabi.”

Modesty can commonly be seen as a value that is closely, if not entirely, tied to religious beliefs and practiced because of religious convictions.³⁹ However, based off many of the #JeSuisHijabi tweets that mention modesty, if one were to try and define the above tweeters'

³⁸ In coding for “modesty” I also included uses of the word *purdah*, a Persian term used by some Muslims which translates loosely as “veiling.” It is also commonly used in #JeSuisHijabi to mean modesty. Under the umbrella of “modesty” I also coded for discussion that explicitly discussed covering as a value associated with hijab.

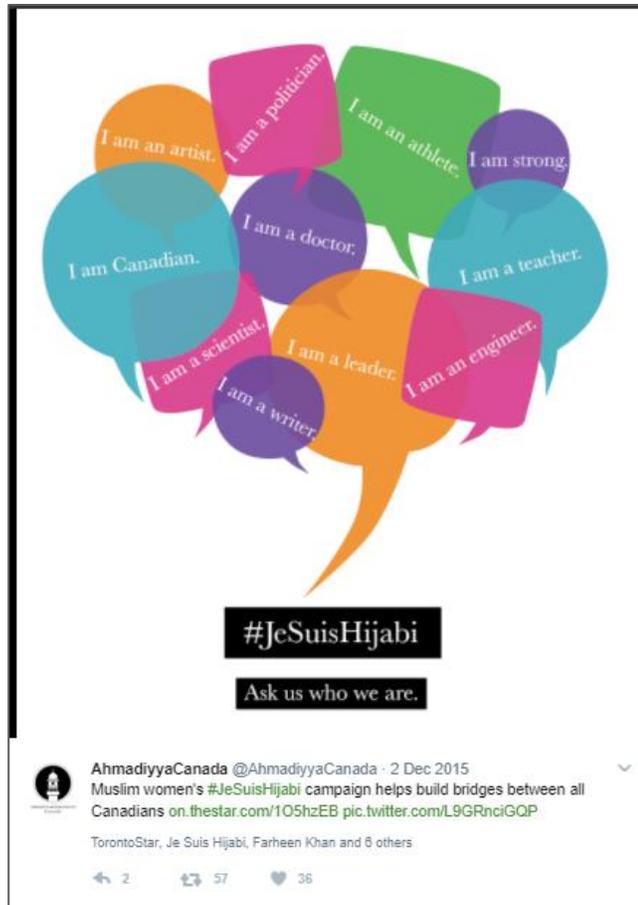
³⁹ Perhaps the most commonly referenced Qur’anic passage on modesty is found in Sura An-nur 24:30, which tells Muslims, men and women, to “lower their eyes and guard their private parts” (The Qur’an 24:30). It also calls for women to cover their necklines and “not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal” (The Qur’an 2010: 222), with the exception of other women, husbands, and close male relatives. This passage is widely seen as the Qur’anic basis for hijab.

definition of modesty in relation to hijab it would by no means be a static, singular, or entirely religious definition. 47 of the 893 tweets that I examined referred to modesty in some way. Of those 47, only 8 associated modesty with the hijab without mentioning another virtue or characteristic, or elaborating more about how it represents something more. This dynamic, complex, and individualized understanding of modesty was common in #JeSuisHijabi tweets, and echoes an insight made by Jane Cameron in her (2014) ethnographic analysis of religious, mostly Christian, and non-religious blogs that discuss modesty. Cameron observes that,

Women's motivation is far more complex than would be allowed by narrow definitions of what modesty is. It is also clear that women's motivation for modest self-presentation cannot be contained within a binarised secular-religious dichotomy. To frame the discussion in this way would do an injustice to the complexity of women's decisions and understandings of their place in the world. (154)

Perceptions of modesty as a strictly religious value and practice is directly tied to problematic perceptions of a separation between the religious and the secular, and lead people to assume that women who practice modesty do not have agency. #JeSuisHijabi tweets that mention modesty directly challenge such perceptions, and aim to depict modesty as a complex and individualized practice that is inspired by religion, but not necessarily determined by it.

This complexity is reflected in a photo that was used in tweets throughout the #JeSuisHijabi campaign, which illustrates how Muslim women seek to communicate to multiple audiences that the hijab represents not only their religious identities but their individual secular identities simultaneously (see fig. 1). It also quite nicely illustrates the discursive nature of #JeSuisHijabi, and its goals of not only starting conversations, but inserting itself into existing ones.



(Fig. 2) A tweet created by Ahmadiyya Canada’s official Twitter advertising the campaign and sharing a [Toronto Star](#) article about it.

As figure 2 demonstrates, #JeSuisHijabi, as tweeted by the campaign’s official Twitter account, @JeSuisHijabi, has the clear goal of communicating that the identity of hijabi is compatible with and complementary to other secular identities.

Of the 893 tweets that I gathered, I identified only 29 tweets (or 3.2%) that used purely religious language and reasoning to discuss hijabi identity. These tweets would look like “#JeSuisHijabi, you are hijabi cause God has asked u to do so, so keep up pleasing God and ignore what ppl say about #JeSuisHijabi,” or “Why do I wear Hijab? Simply because my creator, my God asked me to do so. I love my Allah, I love my Hijab. #JeSuisHijabi.” Such purely

“religious” tweets would often include references to Allah as the only reason why they wear hijab or use Qur’anic references to explain why wearing hijab is important. To be clear, while tweets like these appear in a significantly reduced number compared to tweets the combined religious and areligious language and reasoning, they are still significant in their own way, because they are religious sentiments that would not be heard otherwise, and hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi offer a means to express such sentiment in a public manner. Like anthropologist, Charles Hirschkind’s (2001) ethnographic study of Islamic cassette tapes in Egypt, this use of new media “does not map onto the constitutionally demarcated separation of public and private but, rather, traverses this distinction in a way that is often uncomfortable to those with secular-liberal sensibilities” (11). #JeSuisHijabi provides a way to publically express religious reasoning and emotion in a in a way that serves to upset and complicate traditionally “secular” notions that religious expression does not have a place in the public sphere, even though, according to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), it arguably does.



(Fig. 3) This was the first Tweet generated by the @JeSuisHijabi Twitter account on December 1, 2015, outlining the desired format in which its organizers wanted people to use the hashtag.

Otherwise, besides tweets that use purely religious language, the remaining tweets combine religious and secular language and reasoning to discuss hijab and hijabi identity, portraying the hijabs as a religious objects that functions simultaneously a “liberal object.” This category collapse may be partially due to the fact that the #JeSuisHijabi campaign, in the attempt to form a calculated public, outlined a suggested format for using the hashtag, which involved sharing three aspects about oneself and posting a picture in one’s own handwriting (see Fig. 3). While many tweets did follow this format, many tweets did not, and users would use the hashtag in their own unique way. For example, tweets would look like:

#JeSuisHijabi My Hijab. My story. My choice. @JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:12, L:14)

*Staying up studying Latin and then sleeping in because I don't have to fix my hair
#JeSuisHijabi It's also why I need #coffee (R:0, RT:3, L:1)*

*How can hijab be oppressive when in most countries it requires greater courage to
wear it than to remove it. #JeSuisHijabi (R:2, RT:45, L:67)*

*Confident. Compassionate. Canadian. #JeSuisHijabi @JeSuisHijabi (R:2, RT:16,
L:13)*

*#JeSuisHijabi @JeSuisHijabi I HIJAB, DO YOU? My makeup-> Smile, My
Jewellery-> Hijab, My Clothing-> Confidence (R:0, RT:12, L:10)*

The hijab liberates me, ignorance suffocates me. #JeSuisHijabi (R:1, RT:14, L:13)

*My identity My choice. But i am still reliable, educated, hardworking, lovin and
respecting NOT SCARY, please do not pre-judge #jesuishijabi (R:0, RT:9, L:10)*

*#Hijab counters those men judging women for their outward appearances. That's
the kind of freedom Islam gives to women! #JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:16, L:10)*

These tweets show that to those who are tweeting, the hijab is more than just a religious object. Nevertheless, to be clear, for the non-Muslims who are observing the #JeSuisHijabi campaign

online, through media coverage, or at booths set up in public spaces, I argue that the emotions, identities, and experiences that the campaign associates with the hijab does not trivialize it or even secularize it, but instead, in Habermasian terms, #JeSuisHijabi aims to place this religious object and the reasons for wearing it firmly “within the horizon of their shared lifeworld,” (Habermas 2008: 30) as opposed to the transcendental realm of religious reason in which hijabs are often perceived to exist. In other words, through offering up secular reasons for wearing the hijab and encouraging non-Muslims to try it on, #JeSuisHijabi does not necessarily strip the hijab of its religious meaning and transform into a secular object, but instead *detranscendentalizes* it, demonstrating that while hijab is, at its core, a religiously inspired practice with roots in a religious text, it simultaneously instills a sense of freedom, confidence, empowerment, and pride, that counters oppression and addresses the male gaze, therefore showing that it is “a practice that copes with reality” (Habermas 2008: 32). In turn, it is hoped that those who interact with the #JeSuisHijabi campaign, whether online or offline, see the everyday reasons and emotions that are associated with wearing hijab, offering insight into the complex interplay between the religious and the secular, an insight to which modern secular liberal citizens are not often exposed (see Jeldtoft 2013).

Of the 893 tweets that I coded, the 20 most commonly used words that appeared in those tweets offer a glimpse into the type of “secular-liberal” language that was communicated alongside the individual religious statement of #JeSuisHijabi (see Fig. 3).

Word	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)
Hijab	293	4.36
Muslim	138	2.06
Women	130	1.94
Campaign	105	1.56
@jesuishijabi	90	1.34
Woman	62	0.92

Wear	48	0.72
Hijabi	47	0.70
Islam	44	0.66
Choice	40	0.60
#hijab	39	0.58
Canada	36	0.54
Proud	35	0.52
Wearing	34	0.51
Love	32	0.48
Respect	32	0.48
Canadian	29	0.43
Modesty	28	0.42
Like	27	0.40
News	26	0.39

(Fig. 4) The top 20 words used in #JeSuisHijabi Tweets December 1-5, 2015. Note that only 6 of the words are overtly “religious”: Hijab, Muslim, Hijabi, Islam, #Hijab, modesty.

While the common occurrence of words like “choice,” “proud,” “Canada,” and “news,” point to the main themes within #JeSuisHijabi, these words alone, of course, do not tell the whole story. Nevertheless, as I will go on to demonstrate, a closer examination of the way they were used reveals that while the hashtag itself revolves around a religious garment, the hijab, the language used to describe, define, and tell stories about it is mainly “secular” in nature, commonly depicting the hijab as a symbol and means of choice, individuality, and freedom. This clear language choice thus imbues it this religious object with secular meaning, and positions it as compatible with Canadian liberal values.

As mentioned throughout this thesis thus far, for many Muslim Canadians, it is not uncommon for a strong sense of Western individualism to be embedded in Muslim identity (see Ramji 2013). The “Je Suis” in #JeSuisHijabi, along with the tweets that I have mentioned thus far, demonstrate this reality. However, this is often overlooked as a result of an orientalist dogma, which assumes that followers of Islam are more susceptible to passively accepting religious dogma (see Said 1979: 300-301); an assumption that has historical roots in the West viewing itself, and its own religions, as rational and superior, while viewing other cultures and

religions as the irrational monolithic “other.” Undermining this assumption is a key theme in the #JeSuisHijabi campaign, which highlights women’s *individualized* reasons for wearing the hijab based on each woman’s lived reality, which not only puts an emphasis on individualism, but also agency, therefore affirming the authenticity of the way in which women who wear the hijab understand themselves, their religious identity, and their place in the world. It also demonstrates that the hijab itself can be an expression of individualism and is therefore indicative of Western Islam’s acceptance of a fundamental principle of western liberal society. As a technological object and technosocial act (see Rambukkana 2015b), the #JeSuisHijabi hashtag taps into the deep connection between the sacred, the self, and the digital in modern Western society (Aupers and Hautman 2010), and in doing so, demonstrates how Muslim identity and meaning are constructed and maintained alongside the construction and maintenance of secular liberal values. As a result, by expressing lived religious identity, #JeSuisHijabi demonstrates to those who interact with the campaign that the hijab, as an Islamic object worn by Canadians, is a symbol of choice and freedom, and is comprised of both religious and secular meaning, which perhaps is the key point of the #JeSuisHijabi campaign.

Feminist scholars of the Internet, like Michelle White (2015), notice how through things like the new domesticity movement, “mommy blogging,” and online “craftivism” are evidence of a post-feminist deprivatization and reclamation of traditionally “gendered” female roles, practices, and activities; premised on notions of individuality, political agency, empowerment, and the equitable involvement of men and women in said movements (see White 2015: 18-19). A similar reclamation, particularly in countries like Canada, has taken place with practices surrounding the wearing of hijab. Alla Myzelev (2009) similarly argues, practicing knitting can help to redefine gendered roles in society when multiple subjects, men, women, or otherwise, publically involve

themselves in a practice that is traditionally understood as feminine (148), #JeSuisHijabi seeks to demonstrate that hijab can help to redefine religion's role in society when multiple subjects, Muslim or non-Muslim, man or woman (see Figs. 1 & 5), publically involve themselves in the practice. This post-feminist, agential understanding of hijab is also apparent in my participants' understanding, and many female participants shared that the Internet played a large role in affirming and developing that understanding. Therefore, to better contextualize the content of #JeSuisHijabi, I will now discuss my participants' stories about hijab and the role the Internet has played in their understanding of it before I move on to discuss the content of #JeSuisHijabi in more depth.

Contextualizing #JeSuisHijabi through Participants' Experiences with the Internet and the Hijab

Before looking closer at more content produced with #JeSuisHijabi, it is important to understand how the Internet itself has effected how Muslims use, relate to, and engage with the hijab in Canadian society. In recent years Islamic dress has been a source of discrimination in Canada, from the proposed ban on religious symbols, including Islamic head coverings for public servants in Quebec's proposed Charter of Values (Montpetit 2016; Nadeau and Helly 2016), to the proposed Conservative niqab ban in Canadian citizenship ceremonies (Chase 2015). Often, as Canada-based political scientist Katherine Bullock (2011) points out, the political discourse surrounding such issues, excludes the voices of Canadian Muslim women, because "The image of the 'veiled woman' in the West functions to erase the identities of real Muslim women. For the hijabis, the symbol of 'the veil' erases them as subjects, because they become reduced to the 'passive victims of oppression'" (162). One of the most prominent themes in tweets that used #JeSuisHijabi, was the direct and indirect challenging of the assumption that Muslim women are oppressed. To do so, tweeters would not only say that they are not oppressed,

but would often posit the hijab as a symbol of choice, freedom, and liberal values. Discussions with my interview participants echo this understanding of the hijab, and help to nuance how the choice, freedom, individuality and liberal values that are often mentioned in #JeSuisHijabi function in the everyday lives of Canadian Muslims.

Recall Zainab, who described how her friends use the hashtag #MuslimProblems. Zainab is 40 and wore hijab for 23 years of her life, but in recent years has chosen not to wear it. Of the eight women I interviewed, Zainab was the only woman who did not wear a hijab, which is a practice that is also subject to its own stereotypes and assumptions under the Western gaze (see Fadil 2009). Katherine Bullock (2011) also observes that Western discourses on Islam exclude non-hijabis, because, from their perspective, “they are not the ‘veiled victim’ but they are not really Muslims either” (162). In other words, to wear hijab is to be perceived as a religious Muslim and to not wear hijab is to be perceived as a secular Muslim. It is clear, however, that in spite of the fact that Zainab did not wear hijab, she had thought about it a great deal, and her decision to stop wearing hijab did not come from any sort of disillusion with Islam, but from a deeper personal engagement with it. For her, the Internet played a big part in helping her to explore other people’s thoughts, identities, and stories surrounding the hijab, and assisted in cementing and justifying her decision to no longer wear it.⁴⁰ Here she describes how her understanding of modesty shifted:

So I used to wear a hijab for a long time, for like 23 years (LG), and before I became engaged with the Internet I had already been thinking about not wearing it anymore, and it was sort of my own personal journey. And based on experiences that I had and things that I had read, I was just thinking along those lines for a few years, but when you’re thinking along those lines it’s kind of lonely if you don’t

⁴⁰ Male participants did not discuss their experiences with modesty or hijab nearly as much as women, if at all. Nevertheless, there were male Muslim tweeters who tweeted #JeSuisHijabi. For the most part, male tweeters took on the role of ally, showing support for their wives and daughters and reiterating their choice to wear hijab and showing admiration for the piety that it represents.

sort of reach out and understand what other people have to say on the issue, or can you relate to someone else going through a similar experience. So I actually turned to the Internet for that and I found a lot of women online. I didn't talk to them directly, but I read about their experiences. So there was several women. There was this one really good piece that was in the U.S., NPR, National Public Radio and they did this whole piece on several women who had taken their hijab off and they talk about why they did it. And I went through each one diligently and I just listened to them and, what they were saying, all of them, all of their reasons were so different. There was so much diversity. Each one of them resonated with me because that decision is so multi-faceted. You could do something in your life for certain reasons and that can change every year right? So everything that they said resonated with me. And I had read quite a few other articles by women, and so I think that Internet really had an impact on my final decision. Because I kind of knew that I was going to do it, so it wasn't a matter of if, it was a matter of when, and I needed to sort of build up some courage. Because I've always been involved in my local community here and I didn't want my act to be perceived negatively. This is where the faith/practice thing comes in. Like I didn't want people to think that I was moving away from my faith, because that wasn't the case. I was moving away from that practice, but it doesn't mean that modesty is not important to me or that I don't support my friends or other women that do wear hijab, because I understand the significance and I think that it's important for women to do what they need to do at any point in their lives. So the Internet definitely had an impact on that specific practice that I did.

For Zainab, her decision to no longer wear the hijab was a complex and individual decision that took place over a long period of time. In the process of making and justifying her decision, the stories that she was exposed to on the Internet fostered a sense of solidarity with women who have gone through their own unique experiences, which gave her the courage to stop wearing hijab, while maintaining a deep respect for the hijab itself and the personal identities of Muslim women who still wear it. For her "it wasn't a matter of if, it was a matter of when," she would stop wearing hijab, and the Internet helped her to take that leap and find the balance between faith and practice that was difficult to strike due to a fear of how she'd be perceived by her surrounding Muslim community. For Zainab, not wearing the hijab is still a very public religious practice, and the Internet helped to facilitate the deprivatization of her belief that she can still be a devout Muslim without wearing hijab.

Zainab also acknowledges that this “deprivatization” goes the other way, and she appreciates how the Internet has helped to encourage Muslim women to wear the hijab proudly and express themselves through it in different ways. She went on to tell me that,

Now in the past couple decades even, I’ve seen a lot of change in what is acceptable in the mainstream community. So for example when you go to the mosque, for example, you see a lot of women wearing pants with tops, or skinny jeans with their hijabs, and make up or whatever that’s just more acceptable. If I were to have done that when I was a teenager, I think people would think that that’s not really great. So a lot of that type of practice becomes a lot more acceptable because of the Internet, because people are seeing each other. People are watching other Muslim women doing Youtube tutorials, they’re wearing hijab, but they’re doing Youtube tutorials on make-up or something like that. And when other people see other people doing that across the ocean they say, ‘Oh, people seem to be cool with it, there’s lots of positive comments.’ There’s some negative comments too, but it becomes a lot more acceptable when everyone realizes, ‘Oh, I’m not alone in this. Other people are doing it too, so it’s probably okay.’ So I think in that sense my practice has been shaped a little differently based on the Internet.

Zainab points out that the Internet has brought about a new means of exposure to different embodied ways of wearing and identifying with the hijab, which has fostered a unique sense of individuality, solidarity, and collective identity expression, thus helping Muslim women to cement and explore their identities as hijabis or non-hijabis. This, as discussed in Chapter Four, can be seen as a way in which the Internet is helping to foster what Casanova (1994) calls a “deprivatization” of religious identity – particularly that of hijabi identity – in the public sphere. Put differently, the Internet encourages women to engage more closely with and reclaim a public religious practice that before may have felt taboo and even unsafe in mainstream Canadian society. These norms were perpetuated by popular political discourses condemning Islamic dress and comportment as symbols of female oppression.

Zainab's observation of this deprivatization of hijabi identity is echoed in Sonia's story, a 22-year-old Pakistan-born health sciences student whose faith, including her wearing of the hijab, is also heavily influenced by her use of the Internet.

I feel like it's really shaped the way people practice their religion. I feel that if it wasn't for the Internet people wouldn't be as practicing. Depending on who you follow, wherever you go you see all of these reminders: quotes of a hadith or Qur'an quotes. So I feel like it really influences your faith, and if it wasn't for the Internet I don't think that a lot of people would be practicing their religion. And even the hijab right? It was very difficult a few years ago to wear it, but now you go on Instagram. Recently there was this Youtube makeup artist called Nura Laila, who was recently chosen to be the ambassador of this really good famous makeup company. And even L'Oréal, recently it had Amina Kin, who's a Youtuber, it featured her as well. And I feel like seeing all of these hijabs and all of these hijabi people in the community it kind of influences you, you know. Like, if they're wearing the hijab and they're so successful and they can be doctors, engineers, lawyers, they can have PhDs, they can be so educated, then so can I. And it feels like it's helped me feel like Islam is not so restrictive, and helped me think that Islam is not restricting me from doing anything that I want. Anything that somebody who is not Muslim can do, I can do as well. So it's really helped me in that way.

Sonia uses the Internet to draw encouragement from other hijabis and looks up to empowered women who wear hijab, particularly those sponsored by mainstream companies, like L'Oreal, in "secular" forums like Youtube or Instagram. This is partially due to a recent merging of Islamic practices with Western consumerist practices, where Muslim women prefer to purchase modest clothing through mainstream retailers like Zara, H&M, and the Gap, to which they also have access online, as opposed to Muslim-specific stores or websites (Moors 2014). In Sonia's case, she chooses to view make-up tutorials from a hijabi Youtube star who partners with L'Oreal. Sonia's story is an example of how the corporatization of social media is making Muslim women more visible in a mainstream, faith-positive way, changing the way that Muslim women who wear hijab think about the practice and its place in Western society. To Sonia, this increased

exposure sends her the message that those who wear hijab can also be educated, independent, have successful careers and wear mainstream-valued and commoditized clothing and cosmetics.

However, this is not to say that the commercialization of social media is only serving the women and the Muslim community in a positive way. Demeaning images and hetero-normative portrayals of women and women's bodies are still commonly reified in online advertising (see White 2015), and there are still numerous examples of stereotypes of the hijab and Islam that are being perpetuated by corporations on social media, like in Chapter Three's example of Newsweek's use of #MuslimRage (see Schwell 2015). These stereotypes loom over such faith-positive understandings of the hijab online, and, as Sonia admits, even she has been influenced by them. This reinforces the observation that I made in Chapter Four, that when hijabis express themselves and how they feel about their hijabs online, they are addressing two audiences simultaneously. By associating the hijab with identities and emotions like pride, independence, freedom, and empowerment, alongside Muslim identity, they are not only trying to educate a non-Muslim audience, who may view the hijab pejoratively, but also to fellow hijabis, who when they see tweets like Figure 2, will think to themselves, "Like, if they're wearing the hijab and they're so successful and they can be doctors, engineers, lawyers, they can have PhDs, they can be so educated, then so can I."

In addressing these two audiences, #JeSuisHijabi reflects many of the same goals, emotions, values and identities that Sonia and Zainab mentioned when they talked about what the hijab, or lack thereof, means to them in their everyday lives. As a facilitator of lived religious expression that seeks to communicate to a Muslim and non-Muslim audience simultaneously, #JeSuisHijabi communicates the religious and secular aspects of everyday life, and is what I will now move on to discuss.

#JeSuisHijabi as Lived Religion in the Canadian Context

“Je Suis Hijabi,” when turned into a hashtag communicates to its audience, through sharing and organizing personal experiences, thoughts, and identities, a collective limited script of individual lived religious expressions and meanings, which articulates, nuances and combines three core values of secular liberal society: individualism, freedom of religion, and freedom of expression. The study of lived or everyday religion, as a means of understanding religion beyond its traditional institutions and texts, is becoming a more common approach to religious studies (see Orsi 2006; McGuire 2008; Dessing et al. 2013b; Fadil and Fernando 2015; Fadil 2017). Of the tweets that I gathered under #JeSuisHijabi, I identified 55 unique tweets that made a particular reference to Canadian identity. Likewise, as mentioned previously I observed 142 unique tweets that associated the hijab with secular values like choice, identity and freedom. Tweets like these can be seen as expressions of lived religion in the public sphere, and can help scholars, as well as the public, to gain a more nuanced understanding of Muslim Canadian identities. For example:

#JeSuisHijabi I am a hijabi and a proud Canadian a teacher and community helper and a mother and wife. (R:0, RT:13, L:5)

#JeSuisHijabi Covering up our body modestly is part of religious freedom that we enjoy as being a proud Canadian Muslim women!(R:0, RT:0, L:1)

Being Canadian means being respectful and inclusive of other cultures. Xenophobia has no place here. Je suis Canadian. #JeSuisHijabi (R:1, RT:11, L:11)

I am a Canadian , who is Blessed , optimistic , & Powerful #JeSuisHijabi @JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:12, L:21)

Toronto Muslim show who they are, not just what they're wearing with #JeSuisHijabi campaign (R:0, RT:51, L:35)

Confident . Athletic . Creative . Canadian #JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:12, L:12)

Many of the above tweets seek to communicate a fusion between hijabi identities and individualism, while demonstrating that their hijab does not limit them having other identities as well. The tweets that critique Canadian society do not critique Canada itself, but critique normative understandings of what it means to be Canadian, and negative portrayals of Islam that come out of such understandings. Nevertheless, while these tweets are significant markers of cultural expression and meaningful identity statements, they are still limited to 140 characters and represent the tip of the iceberg that is Muslim Canadian identity, which is why it is important to supplement them with more in-depth qualitative interviews to help explain the stories and context behind these limited, yet powerful cultural texts.

Now that I have explored the content and common presenting of #JeSuisHijabi tweets and what they reflect about Canadian Muslim identity, I would like to consider one last participant's response to help contextualize how Canadian, Islamic, and hijabi identity coalesce in the Canadian public sphere to better understand the identities that are informing tweets that use #JeSuisHijabi. To do so, I would like to go back to Mariam's story, the 27 year old law student who came to Canada as a refugee from Kurdish Northern Iraq with her family when she was 12. In Chapter Four, she told described how when she came to Canada and noticed the diversity of perspectives that were possible, she found herself thinking differently about her faith and hijab, and began to engage with what it meant to freely believe what you want and choose what you wear leading her to tell me that "now when I practice Islam I think it's because I live in a country, in a secular plural country." When I asked her "What does it mean to you to be a Muslim living in Canada?" her response elaborated on why a secular plural country certainly still has its issues, but it can help facilitate a stronger sense of Islamic identity. She told me,

It can be good, it can also be very frustrating and scary at times. I think it's really good for me, because in Canadian society we have freedom, and we have space to be who you are how you want to practice your faith. I think that's really important because I grew up, I spent my childhood in Iraq, like a Muslim society. I wore the scarf, sometimes I prayed, I fasted, but I never really understood why we were doing it. I never even questioned it, because it was just what we did, it was like, our life, just our lifestyle. It was like eating, you don't question, 'why do we eat?' You know? So when we came to Canada, it was like 'oh we look so different, how come no one else is wearing a headscarf? Other people are not Muslim, so you start to, like, question, you know, 'why am I wearing my headscarf?' So when I was in high school I took off my headscarf because I was like 'what's the point of wearing it? How come others are not wearing it?' So I wanted to, like, question it and really understand it and then put it back on, which is what I did some years later. So that's the really good part, because you should question things before you do it, because if you really understand it and people ask you, you know why you're wearing it. And also it's not easy to be a Muslim these days, because you are bombarded with stuff about Islam and Muslims, when you are practicing your faith, and for a Muslim woman sometimes it means wearing a headscarf and for me I'm wearing one. So people expect that you have answers for things that happen in the world. So when there is a bombing somewhere that's done by a Muslim, people expect you as a person of that faith to answer, 'why did it happen?' And you're like 'I don't know. I don't know those people. I never lived in that country. I don't know who they are.' But people still expect that you have those answers because in the media Muslims are all put into one box and it's as if we all get together in one corner of the world and we all talk to each other and we all know each other, but there is so much diversity [...] You know I'm constantly questioning and brainstorming, so it's not like I'm blindly following things and doing things because a scripture told me to do it. So it's a struggle to be visibly Muslim, but it's also good because I have the freedom to go through that struggle and be who I am and dress how I want.

To Mariam, the freedom that she exercises in wearing the hijab is not seen as a means to blindly follow religious dogma, although it is commonly perceived as such. Instead, to her it is a freedom that leads her to engage thoughtfully and critically with her identity as a Muslim Canadian woman. It is a similar understanding of freedom, struggle, and Canadian identity that is being articulated through #JeSuisHijabi. For Mariam, alongside expressing her Islamic identity, the hijab is about freedom and resilience in a time when religion, particularly Islam, is misunderstood. By communicating that the hijab, as a religious practice, is also a symbol of

choice, freedom, individuality, and subjectivity, Muslim women can turn the burden of representation that often comes with being a visibly Muslim woman on its head, using their visibility to directly address the assumption that they are victims of oppressive patriarchy and follow religion blindly. This critical individuality embedded in Mariam's religious identity echoes a study conducted by Ruby Ramji and Peter Beyer (2013) who examined 1.5 and 2nd generation Canadian Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists between the ages of 18-27. They found that while almost all of their participants recognized that they inherited their religious traditions from their parents, they firmly believed that the construction of religious identity was up to the individual (Beyer 2013: 56). Drawing from the same data, Ramji (2013), in her own study of online Muslim practices amongst 1.5 and 2nd generation Canadians found that:

Although a few of the highly [religious] Muslim participants were critical of various aspects of Canadian society, they also showed a greater tendency to mesh their Islam with dominant Canadian values and orientations. For them, to be Muslim was to be modern, kind, and peaceful: it was their role to make the world a better place. (115)

Nevertheless, in spite of such scholarly findings and efforts by the Muslim community to communicate their intertwined Muslim and Canadian identities, assumptions and stereotypes about Muslims persist, creating more obstacles for the integration of Muslim women and Muslims in general into liberal society and its various discourses. As Sherene Razack (2004) points out, it is often assumed that behind every hijab is a patriarchal man stripping women of any agency when it comes to matters of public life (130). These salient assumptions are leveraged by those in power, as we saw with former Prime Minister Harper in the 2015 federal election campaign, to fuel discourses that legitimize their own political agendas that overtly or tacitly favor Western Christian ideals. #JeSuisHijabi, however, is a means for Muslim women to demonstrate that their hijab represents more than just religious devotion, and that their identity is theirs and theirs alone, using various tactics within the discursive space created by #JeSuisHijabi

to insert themselves into and (re)shape liberal discourses about themselves. It is these tactics which I will now consider in more depth.

Changing Media Narratives and Addressing Stereotypes

It is clear that in laying out its goals and choosing to launch in the form of a press release (See Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at 2015), #JeSuisHijabi had the clear intention of building a presence not just on social media, but in the mainstream media as well, which are becoming increasingly intertwined. 123 tweets with #JeSuisHijabi shared or mentioned some type of article or video from a mainstream media source about the campaign or were generated by mainstream media sources themselves (see fig. 3).



(Fig. 5) A tweet from CBC journalist, Devin Heroux's Twitter account covering the #JeSuisHijabi campaign in Saskatoon. A representative from the campaign appeared on CBC Saskatoon's evening news that night. In the photos, non-Muslims, including a man, try on the hijab at a #JeSuisHijabi booth.

106 tweets were just of the hashtag, but were often accompanied by a picture. Some were selfies of women wearing hijab, some were pictures of non-Muslims trying on hijab at #JeSuisHijabi booths on campuses and other public places, and others were pictures that contained identity statements or quotes (see figs. 1, 5 & 6). Meanwhile, the opportunity for non-Muslim women – and men – to try on a hijab, reflect on it, and hear from Muslim women about its emotional, individual, and societal significance in the offline public sphere, projects onto the hijab other meanings and personal significance, and when collapsed into an image and shared, disseminates these experiences to a wider audience.



(Fig. 6) A Twitter user's contribution to the online #JeSuisHijabi campaign.

Likewise tweets would often directly address certain stereotypes, employing a variety of approaches to do so. Interestingly, many of these tweets read as though they were speaking

directly to those who stereotype Islam and the hijab with tweets like, “Judge me by my mind. Not the colour of my scarf. Find out who I really am. #JeSuisHijabi.”

While coding tweets, I identified ten different tactics for how those who used #JeSuisHijabi challenged those stereotypes and assumptions that are informed by a perceived divide between the religious and the secular. Some tweets used more than one of these tactics at the same time, and looking closer at the content and tactics of these tweets highlights the ways in which users of #JeSuisHijabi understand the liberal-secular context in which they live, and the way they wish to be understood within it. I identified these tactics as:

- (1) I’m not oppressed
- (2) Pointing out double standards
- (3) My identity is more than hijab
- (4) Hijab is not just a Muslim thing
- (5) Characterizing Islam as peaceful
- (6) Critiquing society
- (7) Addressing the male gaze
- (8) Richard Dawkins is wrong
- (9) Shifting perspectives
- (10) Stop assuming and just ask me

(1) By far the most common tactic, as I mentioned briefly, was directly addressing the stereotype of oppression associated with hijab, which was present in 76 tweets. Examples include:

*Not oppressed, but free and proud. #JeSuisHijabi (R:2, RT:2, L:2)*⁴¹

⁴¹ Unless a tweet is created by a celebrity, it is not uncommon to see very few replies to a tweet. Often, retweets and likes are the most common interactions. Hashtags make it more likely that tweets are seen and interacted with because they are put on the hashtag’s thread on top of the user’s thread. Therefore using a popular hashtag increases the chances of interaction. It is difficult to say what the average retweets are per tweet and what that says about the

#JeSuisHijabi and if my husband doesn't like it, too bad for him. (R:0, RT:17, L:21)

*Do I wear Hijab by force? No, this is purely my own choice. I love my Hijab.
#JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:9, L:9)*

Many of these tweets were clearly directed to a non-Muslim audience, an audience which they may not have been able to reach otherwise, in hopes of personally sharing with them how hijab is a choice and is tied to their personal identity. Likewise, (2) 13 tweets pointed out double standards that existed for women who wear hijab:

#KhalifaOfIslam rightly put it, if Hijab is bad for the society, are all women's dress in the west in mid winter bad as well? #JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:7, L:6)

#JeSuisHijabi if j lo shows her butt because she is free our muslim sisters r free to wear hijab end of talk (R:0, RT:0, L:1)

I keep quiet seeing your tattoo, your nudity, your way of life clubbing and drinking. It's YOUR choice. Just as it's MY choice #JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:5, L:2)

These double standards that these tweets point out exist, in part, because of Islam's commonly perceived place in the Western-liberal narrative. Wherein, as I discussed in Chapter Two, regardless of whether Islamic practices are acceptable from a legal, ethical, or even traditionally liberal "live and let live" perspective, due to the historical and cultural forces that developed liberalism, Islamic beliefs and practices are still commonly upheld and caricatured as an example of what Western liberal identity is not (see Massad 2015). In pointing out these double standards, through publically sharing opinions that are often kept private, these tweets aim to directly challenge this narrative. The user who tweeted about expecting others to respect her choice to wear hijab because she tolerates others' tattoos, nudity, and drinking, appears to suggest that these critiques would be difficult to share in an offline setting. #JeSuisHijabi, for

tweet's popularity or viewership, but generally, for the average Twitter user, a tweet with more than four or five retweets means it has garnered a notable amount of attention. People tend to like tweets more than retweet them. This may be because likes serve the function of acknowledging someone's tweet, but retweets demonstrate that you wish to associate with that tweet.

this person, creates a discursive space to share this feeling in a safe, public manner; demonstrating a very liberal understanding of mutual respect and tolerance. Users of #JeSuisHijabi also used this discursive space to address the assumption that hijabi is a sole operate identity by sharing with the public that while their hijabs are important to them, (3) their identities consist of more than just their hijab:

The #Hijab is not the only thing that defines me. There's more to me than meets the eye. #Student #Woman #Canadian #JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:7, L:5)

My identity My choice. But i am still reliable, educated, hardworking, lovin and respecting NOT SCARY, please do not pre-judge #jesuishijabi (R:0, RT:9, L:10)

I cover my head.. Not my brain.. #JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:23, L:17)

I identified 40 tweets using this strategy. As discussed in Chapter Four, in spite of Muslims' complex, multi-faceted identities that transcend the putative religious/secular binary, their 'Muslimness' is often essentialized in the Canadian public eye (Selby 2016). Often, as seen in the tweets above, they would claim that their hijab was not their operative identity, then follow the suggested format by the makers of the campaign (see Fig. 3) and list aspects of who they are, like teacher, Canadian, hardworker etc. Like Dauood's hashtagging of baklava as #MuslimFerreroRocher to show that "we have Muslim desserts that we call non-Muslim names," #JeSuisHijabi shows that the hijab is a Muslim practice that complements identities that are shared by many other Canadians, whether Muslim or non-Muslim. In a similar vein, 26 tweets framed hijab as a universal practice by claiming that (4) the Hijab is not just a Muslim thing. For example:

Muslim women cover themselves just like Mary, mother of Jesus; a role model for all, chose Hijab for herself! #JeSuisHijabi (R:1, RT:6, L:6)

Hijabi is not a monopoly of Islam alone! #JeSuisHijabi (accompanied by a picture displaying women from different religious traditions around the world and their various head coverings) (R:0, RT:86, L:46)

In using this tactic, the image or mention of Mary, Jesus's mother, with her head covered was often invoked, assuming, interestingly, that the audience is Christian. This demonstrates that hijab, as an Islamic practice, can also be a secular practice, in the sense that modesty, a core reason for wearing the hijab, can be a universal value that transcends the traditions of Islam (see Moors 2014). Peace was another universal value that was often used, which is a common tactic in general that Muslims use to challenging stereotypes. In (5) characterizing Islam and themselves as peaceful, some users of #JeSuisHijabi sought to challenge the commonly upheld figure of the "militant and violent Muslim":

I am not afraid of commitment to my faith; a faith of peace and love #JeSuisHijabi @JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:6, L:11)

I am a proud Hijabi , I do not believe in Jihad with sword instead I believe in Jihad with pen #JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:7, L:9)

Humbled. Confident. Peace loving #JeSuisHijabi @JeSuisHijabi [accompanied by a picture with a of a Tim Hortons cup beside a piece of paper with "Je Suis Hijabi" written on it] (R:0, RT:14, L:17)

The image of "the peace loving Muslim," is an image that Muslims often find themselves having to portray. However, as Selby, Barras, and Beaman (forthcoming) point out, in having to constantly portray Islam as peaceful, these hashtags are inadvertently (re)producing the reductionist and binary figures of the militant and peaceful Muslim. Nevertheless, the hashtag still provides the opportunity to nuance overgeneralized or misunderstood Islamic terms like *jihad*, which are often interpreted as militant and violent, and reframe it in a more peaceful light.

On a broader level, users of #JeSuisHijabi would take to (6) critiquing society itself:

Being Canadian means being respectful and inclusive of other cultures. Xenophobia has no place here. Je suis Canadian. #JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:11, L:11)

As a Muslim, I respect all people, from all religious backgrounds. Why can't I be

respected for wearing a Hijab? #JeSuisHijabi @JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:36, L:34)

*Hijab sets us free from the standards of beauty forced by materialistic world...
#JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:14, L:9)*

This tactic, while closely tied to addressing double standards, takes on broader problematic concepts such as xenophobia and materialism, questioning and challenging their legitimacy and relationship to Islam. In critiquing society, many users took particular issue with, and sought to address specifically, (7) the male gaze and posited the hijab as a means of protecting against it:

*Hijab is NOT about OPPRESSION but FREEDOM from Evil Eyes!! #JeSuisHijabi
@LajnaEdmonton @amsayeg #LoveForAllHatredForNone #Islam #Hijab (R:0,
RT:0, L:1)*

*because women should be seen as a human being, not as sex objects #JeSuisHijabi
(R:0, RT:3, L:3)*

*Compelling men to realize that women are not here to please their eyes but to
contend with their minds. Checkmate, your move.#JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:0, L:1)*

In positing the hijab as a protector from the male gaze, users of #JeSuisHijabi problematize perceptions of hijab as a religious practice enforced by males, thus turning it on its head by demonstrating that to them, hijab is not a product of patriarchy, but protection from it. In portraying hijab as a feminist religious practice, the hijab is once again shown as an object that embodies both religious and secular qualities, offering freedom *from* the male gaze, while representing freedom *to* express oneself religiously. Nevertheless, this freedom that the hijab represents to many Muslim women is still overlooked by reductionist understandings of hijab that are informed by a perception of religious and secular identity as rigidly separate as well as other Islamophobic and neocolonialist tendencies.

Renowned British biologist and outspoken advocate for atheism (8) Richard Dawkins can be viewed as a prominent figure who holds fast to such an understanding, and in many ways represents and embodies many of the problematic notions of secularism that I have critiqued

throughout this thesis. #JeSuisHijabi was used as a means for Muslims to directly address Dawkins and his views online, which prior to the rise of social media, would be much more difficult, if not impossible. Interestingly, it just so happened that on the same day that #JeSuisHijabi launched, he shared an op-ed in *The Guardian* on Twitter entitled, “As a Muslim Woman in Britain I was never fearful in Britain. But today I’m afraid” (see Rahim 2015). In his tweet Dawkins commented on the article saying, “Moving heartcry by Muslim woman fearful of hateful abuse in UK...Why not remove hijab in Islamic defiance of ISIS?” Here Dawkins references the series of attacks in November 2015 in Paris. The tweet received 99 replies, 121 retweets, and 215 likes. That day he also tweeted that, “Veil not compulsory in Islam. Defiant gesture of Islamic solidarity. How about removing it now as a gesture of Islamic solidarity with Paris?” This tweet received 323 replies, 305 likes, and 643 retweets. As one can imagine, many readers took issue with his controversial statements and saw it as an uninformed understanding of the relationship between hijab and Muslim women’s identities. In response, nine people used #JeSuisHijabi to critique his comments on Twitter with tweets like:

@RichardDawkins Let #JeSuisHijabi fill your information gaps bc you r completely unaware. To be a true rationalist, you must open ur mind (R:0, RT:1, L:1)

@RichardDawkins throws out reason for zillionth time & employs a false analogy to justify his bigotry #JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:2, L:2)

Gotta be a special type of ignorant to come up with ideas like this lol #JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:15, L:12)

By tweeting about what Richard Dawkins said including the @mention of his Twitter handle, these users of #JeSuisHijabi are not only able to share their opinions publically, but put their opinions and ideas directly into Richard Dawkin’s notification inbox on Twitter. What’s particularly noteworthy about people’s use of #JeSuisHijabi to critique Richard Dawkins – who is well known for framing religion and reason as mutually exclusive (see Dawkins 2006) – is

that, in defending the hijab through #JeSuisHijabi, they attack his use of reason. By accusing him of using a “false analogy,” having “knowledge gaps,” and implying that he is not a “true rationalist,” these hashtags use Twitter and #JeSuisHijabi to publically demonstrate that there are “secular reasons” for a religious practice. Users of #JeSuisHijabi would also do so by (9) shifting perspectives, which was often done in the form of a question, challenging readers’ notions of freedom, modesty and individuality with tweets like,

#JeSuisHijabi Covering myhair provides me protection&respect,self-confidence& independence.Whatdoes your uncovering your hairprovide toyou? (R:1, RT:7, L:1)

HIJAB-> You Only See What I Choose You To See. Is That Not Freedom? #JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:9, L:7)

#JeSuisHijabi Why is my Hijaab your problem? (R:0, RT:23, L:17)

These tweets seem to directly address those who stereotype Islam, suggesting that those who use the hashtag see it as a chance to speak to a wider audience. There is also an air of frustration in these tweets with the inability of others to see a perspective that seems so obvious to them: that hijab is a choice that is closely tied to a practicing Muslim woman’s identity.

This frustration is also apparent in the final tactic that I would like to discuss, the tactic of (10) “stop assuming and just ask me.” Tweets with this tactic would look like:

If you ever want to know the truth about anything, please please please ask an insider before making assumptions #JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:1, L:1)

Get to know us. And discover the truth about Islam. #JeSuisHijabi (R:0, RT:9, L:7)

This tactic is also apparent in Figure 2. In saying “ask us who we are,” the picture in Figure 2 speaks to a belief that underlies and informs the entire #JeSuisHijabi campaign and the tactics in which people use #JeSuisHijabi to challenge stereotypes. This belief is that the truth about Muslims and their place in Western liberal societies can be better understood if there were a greater direct dialogue and empathy between Muslims and non-Muslim citizens. Creating a hashtag is a way in which this dialogue can be facilitated by helping to insert Muslim voices into mainstream discourses and starting conversations that are imagined as transformative. This clearly discursive goal at the centre of #JeSuisHijabi is reflective of the (discursive) nature of hashtags themselves, as discussed in Chapter 2. It is further amplified by the performative nature of #JeSuisHijabi (see Figs. 1, 2, and 3) through pictures and hashtags themselves.

Indeed, as described by Rambukkana (2015) in his definition of hashtags, hashtags have a performative element to them. #JeSuisHijabi is by no exception, and in fact, may be more performative than most. In their study comparing calculated and ad hoc hashtag movements, in which #JeSuisHijabi would qualify in the former, Axel Bruns and Jean Burgess (2015) explain the performative nature of hashtagging a tweet, explaining that “to include a hashtag in one’s tweet is a performative statement: it brings the hashtag into being at the very moment that it is first articulated, and— as the tweet is instantly disseminated to all of the sender’s followers...announces its existence” (23). People who use #JeSuisHijabi often, but not always, take it a step further by accompanying their tweet with a picture, which was encouraged by the campaign itself, giving it an extra-performative quality. Of the tweets that I gathered, 283 shared pictures, which varied from hand drawn pictures of #JeSuisHijabi (see Fig.1), to lists of identities and characteristics, to selfies, to inspirational quotes (see Fig. 6). There were also, of course, derogatory pictures of women in full burqa, used to criticize Islamic head coverings as well.

A growing argument within the Canadian public discourse on the hijab, particularly in Quebec, is that it should not be permitted in the public sphere (see Montpetit 2016). If we understand Twitter as a proxy of the public sphere, using it to publicly express, through images, one's pride, agency, and citizenship as either a wearer and/or supporter of the hijab, directly challenges this argument, which can often be premised on assumptions of oppression and pseudo-citizenship that further perceptions of otherness. Likewise, establishing a presence in public spaces and posting pictures of people positively interacting with the hijab (see Fig. 5) in those spaces make up many of these photos, and is another strong extra-performative aspect of the #JeSuisHijabi campaign that directly challenges these perceptions.

Each of these tactics that I have explored in this section is amplified by their performativity and contribute to #JeSuisHijabi's role as a "counter public," a term used by Charles Hirschkind (2001) to explain the public that formed with the introductions of Islamic cassette sermons in late twentieth and early twenty-first century Egypt. He explains that the circulation of these tapes reflected the twinning of mass media with a religious response to the secular liberal nationalism that became highly present in mainstream Egyptian media and was perceived as a mechanism of Western cultural imperialism (Hirschkind 2006: 33). When read with #JeSuisHijabi in mind, Hirschkind's insights underscore the political and communicative forces that make it what it is. He defines a counter public as people who have "cultivated sentiments, loyalties, and styles of public conduct that stood in tension with the moral and political exigencies and modes of self-identification of national citizenship" (Hirschkind 2001: 13). To be clear, not all Canadians would view hijabis as falling under this definition, nor would all hijabis see themselves as being perceived in this light, and I do not want to further collapse hijabi identities by collapsing them all into one category of "counter public." Nevertheless, the

concept of a counter public helps to make sense of many hijabis' responses to online and media discourses surrounding conspicuous religious symbols in Quebec, the proposed ban on the niqab in citizenship ceremonies, or even in public discourse after the 13 November Paris attacks, where it is not uncommon to see hijab and niqab framed as a style of public conduct that runs counter to what it means to be Canadian (Bakali 2015: 416-17; Chase 2015; Khan 2015; Reitz 2015). Thus affecting how Muslims and non-Muslims see hijab and Islam itself in the Canadian context and the policies that affects them directly. With that said, #JeSuisHijabi, as a response to this perception, forms a counter public comprised of the people who fall within this frame alongside people who want to help them. To change their situation, like in Hirschkind's study of cassette tapes, hashtag users harness the medium as a communicative tool to mobilize a counter-narrative in hopes of changing their perception in society.

Conclusion

In sum, I have demonstrated in this chapter that #JeSuisHijabi, is a hashtag designed to create discursive space for Muslims to communicate identities, challenge hegemonic narratives about Islam, and facilitate the generation of cultural texts. Together these notions may point to how Muslims, particularly hijabis, wish to be perceived in the Canadian online public sphere. In doing so, my analysis of the language, reasoning, and tactics used to communicate hijabi identity shows that many of those who use #JeSuisHijabi transcend private and public, religious and secular binaries, as a means of portraying the hijab as a religious practice that symbolizes freedom, choice, and agency; values that mesh with so-called secular liberal values. These values are also reflected in my participants' engagement with the hijab, and suggests that not only do Canadian Muslims wish to be perceived as integrating liberal values into their identities, but truly do see Islam and hijab as intertwined and compatible concepts in Canada that manifest

differently from person to person, thus demonstrating that one cannot simply separate how the religious and secular function in the everyday lives of Canadian Muslims.

CHAPTER SIX

General Conclusions

In a broad sense, this thesis is a contribution to the ongoing modern scholarly project of blurring binaries and collapsing categories, a project that for reasons that I have discussed throughout this thesis often overlooks the religious/secular binary. By examining the #JeSuisHijabi campaign alongside the use of hashtags by Muslims in Winnipeg and St. John's, this thesis shows that through hashtags social media is changing the way that Muslims express themselves in the public sphere, which, in turn, sheds light on the complicated and intertwined relationship between the religious and secular spheres in the lives of Muslim Canadians. This new means of expression and communication behoves scholars and citizens alike to rethink what it means to be religious in the Canadian context, a context in which many do not, and perhaps should not, separate the religious and secular parts of themselves.

As I write this conclusion in June of 2017, Statistics Canada has reported that hate crimes against Muslims rose 60% from 2014 to 2015, which some Muslim groups attribute to the negative political rhetoric about Muslims that took place during political events like debates surrounding the 2013-proposed Charter of Values in Quebec and the 2015 Canadian federal election (see Harris 2017). More recently a resurgence of such problematic rhetoric took place in online and offline conversations about Islamophobia after the non-binding parliamentary motion, M-103, was proposed. M-103 condemned hate speech, particularly Islamophobia, and called for a study into Islamophobia in Canada. In public debates around the motion, hashtags like [#M103](#) were used by opposing citizens and politicians to stoke fears of creeping sharia law, framing the term "Islamophobia" as a means of silencing critics of Islam and undermining free speech (see

Funk 2017). Undergirding such rhetoric, as I have argued throughout this thesis, is a problematic Western-liberal-influenced assumption that religious, particularly Muslim, and so-called secular identities, are best kept separate and relegated to their respective private and public spheres. Islamophobic and neo-colonial beliefs that Muslim and Canadian identities run counter to each other are also deeply rooted in Western liberal history and culture, and are, in part, responsible for such a disturbing rise in hate crimes and hate speech towards Muslims. Nevertheless, while social media, particularly hashtags, serve to amplify and empower such problematic narratives and assumptions about Islam, it also offers a way for Muslims to directly challenge them.

One does not need to look far to see the ways in which hashtags are being used to, for better or worse, shape narratives about important social issues. Whether one seeks to show that #BlackLivesMatter in American institutions and society, demonstrate their [#pride](#) as a person who identifies as LGBTQ, or tell the world that they want to [#MakeAmericaGreatAgain](#). This thesis has shown that when Muslims use hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi, #MuslimFerreroRocher, and even #KitKat, they communicate everyday religious and secular identities as a means of shaping and influencing hegemonic narratives about Islam's place in Canadian society.

Particularly since the introduction of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 and the Multiculturalism Act in 1988, Canada has often fancied itself on the world stage as a multicultural and religiously diverse nation. But multiculturalism and religious diversity, much like identity itself, are ongoing, complex, and dynamic processes, and as the rise in anti-Muslim and religiously motivated hate-crimes suggests (see Harris 2017), they are projects that are by no means perfect or complete. Natasha Bakht (2012), in her analysis of public discourses surrounding the niqab, eloquently describes the dynamic nature of Canadian multiculturalism as,

A normative project [...] wherein people from many different walks of life with diverse and deep commitments try to live peacefully together will always entail

negotiation and renegotiation. But this dialogical discourse [...] can occur only where we leave open the possibility that our political and social certainties might be transformed in the process of getting to know the Other. (71)

Currently, in much of the Western world, there is growing discussion and recognition that social media mainstream media, with their respective personalized algorithms and tight ideological groupings, have helped people to create social, political, and discursive “bubbles” around themselves (see Shafer and Doherty 2017). In these bubbles people are more likely to read about and discuss issues that bolster their opinions instead of constructively challenge them, further bolstering social divisions along religious, ideological, and cultural lines. In other words, the way we use social media is hindering “the process of getting to know the Other” (Bakht 2012: 71) that is so crucial to the well-being of multicultural society like Canada. Nevertheless, while the problem lies within social media and the way we use it, so does the solution.

This thesis has shown how the use of hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi, #MuslimFerreroRocher, #MuslimProblems, #ModestMuslimWoman, and others may shed light on and help facilitate the complex inter *and* intrapersonal negotiations that are taking place for Canadian Muslims in the multicultural and so-called secular context that is Canada. Hashtags offer up a new modern means of deprivatizing, in the Casanovian sense, religious identity in the public sphere, challenging notions of secularism that relegate religious expression to the realm of the private. This deprivatization takes place when Muslims publically communicate identity online to a diverse Muslim and non-Muslim audience, aggregating disparate publics that in turn disrupt traditional notions of the role of religious and secular identities in public life. Whether it be through a formal campaign like #JeSuisHijabi, telling a story about Ramadan with #KitKat, mundanely hashtagging the sky as #beautiful, or telling co-workers that they are a #ModestMuslimWoman, Muslims, through hashtags, tacitly demonstrate the coalescence of

religious and secular identities in their lives, thus serving to challenge, blur, and complicate widely held perceptions of a binary relationship between religiosity and secularity and disseminating those identities to a wider public. Furthermore, for my participants, religious/secular identities are not only articulated and constructed through hashtags, but in the way that they use the Internet in general to make decisions about how and whether to wear the hijab, balance gay and Muslim identities, or understand what it means to be both Muslim and Canadian.

Scope and Limitations

While this thesis has begun to make clear how hashtags help speak to the everyday “negotiations and renegotiations” (Bakht 2012: 71) that are taking place in the lives of Muslim Canadians and what that says about their identity, it is beyond the scope of this thesis, and extremely difficult, to determine or measure whether such hashtags are helping Canadians to get to know the Other, or are in any meaningful way transforming the public’s problematic “political and social certainties” (Bakht 2012: 71) about Islam. Nevertheless, I would like to use this one sentence to make the modest suggestion that if more people would pay attention and be open to how Muslims use hashtags, or even spend more time with Muslims in-person, that such a transformation can perhaps take place.

Of course, tweets and hashtags alone cannot tell us everything about Canadian Muslim identity, which is why I supplemented my analysis with offline interviews. These interviews, however, have their own limitations. Although the participants that I interviewed come from diverse cultural backgrounds and each have unique stories to tell about their religious identities, they are more educated than the average population. While many are no longer students, many have advanced graduate degrees; Canadian Muslims with less education may have given much

different responses. Nevertheless, it is important to note that on average, Muslims in Canada are more highly educated than non-Muslims (see Kazemipur 2014).

Likewise, all of my participants, while diverse in many ways, all identified to some degree as practicing Sunni Muslims, and I did not interview anyone who identified as Shi'a, Ahmadi, Ismaili, or any other minority within Islam. I also did not interview any non-practicing or atheist Muslims, who may also have given much different responses, particularly in discussions surrounding secularism and the role of Islam in Canadian society. Therefore, the scope of this thesis is limited to understanding how practicing Sunni Muslims, are communicating identity through hashtags to tacitly complicate the religious/secular divide.

Suggestions for Future Research

As “medium and message entangled,” (Rambukkana 2015: 4) hashtags like #JeSuisHijabi and others mentioned in this thesis offer up new ways of publically transmitting, translating, expressing, and inspiring religious identities and ideas. They breathe new life into networks and generate discourses of meaning. They connect and amplify the voices of those outside of positions of authority and work to dismantle the structures that keep those voices apart. With this in mind, while I have focused heavily on the more functional and discursive aspects of hashtags throughout this thesis, hashtags are not simply discursive tools to communicate and construct identity, but must also be analyzed within the aesthetic and affective space that is Twitter. Doing so would open up entirely new avenues of inquiry that illuminate the ever-growing technocultural and technosocial aspects of religion. For these reasons, the potential contributions that hashtags have to offer the study of religion are immense and require attention from scholars who wish to understand religion, the Internet, and the publics they create when they intersect.

Within the scope of this study in particular, hashtags offer up exciting and challenging new ways to understand not only lived Islam in the modern context, but lived religion in general. As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this thesis, in particular through my discussion of methodology, the space and concept of “Muslim Twitter” contains within it numerous possibilities for understanding modern Canadian Muslim identities, that remain relatively unexplored. To do so, scholars must theorize and explore the hashtags that comprise it. As this exploration takes place, the methodological approach of hashtag ethnography, which conceptualizes hashtags as field sites, must still be developed further, and be supplemented by sociological methods that involve offline personal interviews with subjects about how they interact online and think about their religious identities.

Likewise, since this thesis employs such a two-fold method that examines hashtags themselves alongside interviews to understand hashtags and their relation to religious identity, it is my hope that more scholars will apply this approach to other hashtags and religious traditions and refine it, using it to confirm or challenge my findings about religious identity in the secular context. Doing so, I believe, will move forward scholarly discourses that are in much need of theories and methods that help to make sense of the complex interactivity that takes place on social media and explain religious identities, experiences, and ideas online.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Title: Hashtags and Everyday Life for Muslims in Winnipeg and St. John's

Researcher: Cory Funk
Department of Religious Studies
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, NL A1C 5S7
Email: cfunk@mun.ca
(204) 330-1688

Supervisor: Dr. Jennifer Selby
Department of Religious Studies
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, NL A1C 5S7
Email: jselby@mun.ca
(709) 864-8059

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled "Hashtags and Everyday Life for Muslims in Winnipeg and St. John's."

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, Cory Funk, if you have any questions about the study or for more information not included here before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future. **If you have any ethical questions**

about this project please feel free to contact ICEHR if they have issues with the researcher, research or if you feel that you have been treated unfairly.

Contact: ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Introduction

My name is Cory Funk, I am a research assistant at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am originally from Winnipeg, Manitoba and completed my undergraduate studies at the University of Winnipeg. As part of my Master's thesis, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Selby. Dr. Selby is an Associate Professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Her research focuses on contemporary Islam and secularism in France and in Canada. This research project is funded primarily by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Insight Grant, as part of a nationwide study titled "New Muslim Public Spheres in the Digital Age: Identity, Community, Diversity and Authority in Canada."

This research aims to help foster a more complete understanding of Canadian Muslims' religious experiences that moves beyond fear and Islamophobia. In short, this project seeks to understand the modern Muslim experience in Canada during the digital age.

Purpose of study:

The purpose of this study is to collect information on how digital technology and the Internet might shape Islam, how local Muslims are using the Internet, and what they are accessing online. The project will address this question through four related research areas: (1) sense of identity; (2) sense of community; (3) sense of diversity; and (4) religious authority. Each of these four areas of research will pay particular attention to the impact of digital technology on women, youth, and religious leaders.

What you will do in this study:

Your participation consists of taking an individual semi-directed interview during which time you will be asked questions about your experience with digital technology and the Internet as a Canadian Muslim (or former Muslim). The interviews will be in English.

Length of time:

With your permission, the interview will be digitally recorded to ensure we do not misinterpret your statements. The interview should take between one to, no longer than, three hours of your time. The place and time of the interview are to be agreed upon by interviewer and interviewee.

Withdrawal from the study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary; this means that you are accepting to participate in this project without any obligation or external pressures. Moreover, you are under no obligation to answer any question. **The deadline for withdrawal from this project is April 30, 2017. Before this date, you have the right to withdraw your participation, for any**

reason, without having to provide any justification for doing so. Upon your withdrawal all the information pertaining to you, which has been securely stored in locked filing cabinets of the university offices in the Religious Studies Department, will be immediately destroyed (unless you say otherwise).

Your consent to participate in this project also means that you consent that the research team uses the collected data (see above, Anonymity and Confidentiality) for the purpose of this research and the dissemination of research results (articles, theses, dissertations, conferences, scientific communications, books, etc.). **The deadline for withdrawal from this project is April 30, 2017.**

Possible benefits and risks:

Your participation will contribute to the advancement of our knowledge of the place digital technology and the Internet play in the lives of Canadian Muslims. We hope to gain a better understanding of the importance, the roles and the functions that digital technology and the Internet play in shaping Canadian Muslims' experiences and understanding of ethno-religious identities, communities, diversity and religious authority. Your contribution will help researchers and the general public to better understand Canadian Muslims' points of view.

Possible risks:

Your participation to this interview should not lead to any significant discomfort or harm. However, issues might revive unpleasant emotions associated with past experiences you may have had, in which cases, you remain free to refuse to answer any question that you may find uncomfortable, and this, without having to justify your refusal to answer. You should also know that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers to the questions we ask. **The Chairperson of Memorials ethics committee can be reached if you wish to discuss your situation (icehr@mun.ca or 709-864-2861).**

It is the responsibility of the interviewer to interrupt or terminate the interview, if the interviewer feels that your well-being is at stake. If this were the case, the interviewer would help you in finding useful resources to assist you. **Should you require assistance with your emotional state after participating in or during this research, you will be directed to the appropriate resources.**

The following services are available in Winnipeg.

- **24-hour mental health crisis line: (204)-786-8686 (province-wide).**
- **Mobile Crisis Response Team: (204)-940-1781 Winnipeg Region.**
- **Community Mental Health Services Intake Line: (204)-788-8330.**
- **Health Sciences Emergency Department Winnipeg: (204) -787-3661.**

The following services are available in St. John's:

- **24-hour mental health crisis line: 737-4668 (local) or 1-888-737-4668 (province-wide).**
- **Mobile Crisis Response Team: 1-888-737-4668 St. John's Region.**
- **Psychiatric Assessment Unit: 777-3021 or 777-3022 24 hour Walk-in Crisis Service at the Waterford Hospital Site on Waterford Bridge Rd.**
- **Health Sciences Emergency Department in St. John's 777-6335.**

Confidentiality

Information collected during the interview is confidential. Only members of the research team will have access to this data, i.e., (the recording and transcripts of your interview). Data that identifies participants will be preserved by research team co-applicants in a secured place separate from that of the files of digital audio recordings and transcripts of interviews and online questionnaires.

Anonymity:

Whatever you say will remain confidential. Nowhere will we identify you by name or by any other means that may point to your identity (ie. workplace, associates, positions held etc.). Only participants who have clearly stipulated in writing (in this consent form) that their name be mentioned could be identified (or left anonymous) in research outputs or research publications.

Recording and Storage of Data:

All collected data – i.e., files of digital audio recordings of interview, together with the files of transcripts and online questionnaires – will be put on external hard drives **and securely stored in locked filing cabinets of the university offices in the Religious Studies Department.** Data will be kept for a minimum of five years, as required by Memorial University policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research.”

Reporting of Results:

The data collected will be used in a Master's thesis and will use direct quotations but will not provide personally identifying information. **As mentioned above, this research project is funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Insight Grant, as part of a nationwide study titled “New Muslim Public Spheres in the Digital Age: Identity, Community, Diversity and Authority in Canada” and the data collected will be published in their report.**

Sharing of Results with Participants:

All theses at Memorial University are available to the public once completed. Upon completion, my MA thesis, which the data from this interview may contribute towards, will be available through Memorial University's Queen Elizabeth II Library, which can be accessed online at this address: <http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/search/collection/theses>.

Questions:

You are welcome to ask questions at any time during your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact:

Cory Funk

Email: c.funk@mun.ca or contact me by cellphone (204) 330-1688

Or my supervisor Dr. Jennifer Selby

Email: jselby@mun.ca or phone (709) 864-8059

ICEHR Approval Statement

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Consent:

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- **You have the right to withdraw your participation, for any reason, without having to provide any justification for doing so.**
- **The deadline for withdrawal from this project is April 30, 2017.**
- **You understand that any data collected from you up to the point of your withdrawal will securely stored in locked filing cabinets of the university offices in the Religious Studies Department.**
- **Following the point of withdrawal from the project, your information from you will be immediately destroyed (unless you say otherwise).**

If you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

Your signature:

- I have read what this study is about and understood the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.
- I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation.

I agree to be audio-recorded during **the interview**

Yes No

I agree to the use of quotations.

Yes No

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

Signature of participant

Date

Appendix 2. Online Recruitment Poster



Participants Needed for a Study of Canadian Muslims and the Internet

We are looking for Canadian Muslim participants (over 18 years of age) to take part in a study on the role of the Internet and digital technologies in the lives of Canadian Muslims.

Participants in this study will be interviewed about their use of the Internet and its impact on the related issues of identity, community, (intra-/inter-religious) diversity, and religious authority. The interview may take one to two hours.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and involves a semi-directed interview.

Contact:
Cory Funk– MA Candidate
(204)–330–1688
Email: cfunk@mun.ca
Dr. Jennifer Selby– Supervisor
Associate Professor of Religious Studies
(709)–864–4046
Email: jselby@mun.ca

Project website:
<http://canadianmuslimsonline.uqam.ca/en>

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709–864–2861.

Appendix 3. Interview Schedule

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

(2014.09.27 VERSION)

INFO	QUESTION-TYPE
<p><u>DEMOGRA</u> <u>PHICS</u></p> <p>- Age</p> <p>- Family</p> <p>- Ethnicity</p> <p>- Religion</p>	<p>1. How old are you ?</p> <p>2. Where were you born ?</p> <p>3. Where did you grow up ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>4. Where were your parents born (or lived before, if they immigrated) ?</p> <p>5. When did your parents [<i>for immigrant parent</i>], or you come to Canada ?</p> <p>6. Why was Canada chosen ?</p> <p>7. Do you have any brothers and sisters ?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">a. [<u>If yes</u>] Where are they born ?</p> <p>8. What is the occupation of your parents ?</p> <p>9. What is you marital status ?</p> <p style="padding-left: 80px;"><i>[e.g. single, civil union, married, separated, divorced, any children]</i></p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>10. How would you describe your "ethnic" background ?</p> <p style="padding-left: 80px;"><i>[e.g. Moroccan Berber, Pakistani, Indonesian, Egyptian, Iranian Kurd, etc.]</i></p> <p>11. How would you describe your "religious" background / identity ?</p> <p style="padding-left: 80px;"><i>[e.g. very religious, atheist, liberal, traditional, Salafi, etc.]</i></p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>12. Are you a <u>long term</u> or <u>short term</u> resident of Canada ? <u>Can you specify</u> ?</p> <p style="padding-left: 80px;"><i>[e.g., Canadian citizen, permanent resident, international student, etc.]</i></p>

- Nationality	<p>13. How long have you lived in Canada ? <i>[DO NOT SKIP this question for Canadian born participants, some of them may have lived outside Canada for few years]</i></p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>14. What is your highest education degree ? <i>[e.g. PhD, MA, BA, College degree, High School leaving certificate, other...]</i></p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p>
- Education	<p>15. What kind of elementary and secondary school did you attend ? <i>[e.g. public school (or private non-Islamic school), home schooling, Islamic school]</i></p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p>
- Employment	<p>16. Are you employed ?</p> <p>a. <u>[If yes]</u> What is your current occupation or profession ?</p> <p>b. <u>[If no]</u> Are you unemployed, unable to work, or a student ?</p> <p>i. <u>[If student]</u> In which field of study ?</p>

<u>INTERNET</u>	<p>17. Has your Internet usage <u>increased</u>, or <u>decreased</u>, in the last 5 years ?</p> <p>18. On average, how many hours – per day, per week, per month – do you use the Internet ? <i>[e.g., including cell phone, checking emails, for work or study, etc.]</i></p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p>
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	<p>19. So, on the topic of what you do online, do you use the Internet for “religious” or “spiritual life”?</p> <p>a. [<u>If yes</u>] How is the Internet impacting, or affecting your “religious” or “spiritual” practices, beliefs, values, or attitudes ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>20. Do your faith – beliefs and practices – affect how you use the Internet and what you do <u>online</u> ?</p> <p>21. Do you have any faith-based limitations ?</p> <p>a. [<u>If yes</u>] In what ways ?</p> <p>i. Can you give some examples ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>22. Do you think the Internet –</p> <p>(i) enhances your faith,</p> <p>(ii) operates more as a distraction or</p> <p>(iii) changes your faith in any way ?</p> <p>23. For better or worse ?</p> <p>a. Can you explain or give examples ?</p>
<p><u>IDENTITY</u></p>	<p>24. What does it mean to you to be a Muslim living in Canada ?</p> <p>25. How do you identify yourself, religiously and nationally ?</p> <p>Do you see yourself as a Canadian Muslim, a Muslim Canadian, or other ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>26. Do you tend to have friends of the same “ethnic” or “religious” background as you, or not ?</p> <p>a. Any reasons why this might be so ?</p> <p>b. Has the circle of <u>your offline</u> friends changed as you grew older ?</p> <p>i. [<u>If yes</u>] In what ways ?</p> <p>c. Has the circle of <u>online</u> friends changed also ?</p> <p>i. [<u>If yes</u>] In what ways ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p>

IDENTITY

27. Do you change your way of behaving depending on the “ethnic”, or “cultural” background of the group of friends you are with ?
- a. What about when you are with Muslim *versus* non-Muslim friends ?
 - b. How so ?
 - c. What about online ?

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-
28. Do you feel a generational, or cultural, or linguistic, or a religious gap with your parents ? How so ?

[young participants – e.g., act differently at home as compared to outside the home]

[adults not living with parents – e.g., act differently in the presence of their parents or of elders of the family]

29. Would you discuss with them all your online interests and activities?

- a. [If yes] Can you give examples of things you discuss or share with them ?
- b. [If no] Why not ?

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-
30. Does gender play a role in how you socialize or do not socialize or interact with some people ?

31. Who do you socialize with ?

- a. Mainly with the same gender ?
- b. Any ethnic, religious, or intellectual preferences ?

32. Where do you socialize ?

[ex. parks, coffee shops, community centers, bars, mosques, etc.]

33. If you wish to remain gender segregated, how is this maintained online ?

34. Do you find that online communities offer opportunities to find friends, companions, or a life partner / spouse ?

- a. Have you used online communities this way ?
-

-
35. How has the Internet affected the way you feel connected to your Muslim and non-Muslim friends in Canada, or in other places ?

a. [If yes] Which online communities or groups ?

[*e.g., local, national or international – country or countries*]

-
36. Does (i) information you find online and the (ii) communities or people you relate to online affect your religious practices and beliefs **offline**

[*e.g., since childhood, in the past 5 years*] ?

a. Can you explain or give examples ?

-
37. Do you use online media in the practice your faith ? For example, for...

a. buying religious goods [*e.g., for prayer rug, hijabs, etc.*]

b. accessing religious literature [*e.g., for Qur'an recitation, religious sermons, scholars opinions concerning debatable issues, etc.*]

c. using applications (Apps) regularly [*e.g. for the direction of prayer, the time to start fasting for Ramadan, etc.*]

<p><u>AUTHORITY</u></p> <p>Usage</p> <p>“Brand Names”</p>	<p>38. Does your usage of the Internet include visiting</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> sites to read the Qur’ân ? sites that deal with Islamic jurisprudence (<i>fiqh</i>) ? hadith (prophetic sayings) search engines ? Islamic Blogs ? Arabic language instruction websites aiming to read the Qur’ân ? <p>[<i>for non Arabic speakers</i>]</p> <hr/> <p>-</p> <p>39. How do you decide whether an “Islamic” site is authentic or appropriate, and that you can trust it ?</p> <p>40. What signs do you look for to ensure it is authentic, or appropriate ?</p> <p>[<i>e.g., use of language, cited sources, logos, references to known scholars, known Qur’ânic verses (suras) or hadiths, website interface, links, etc.</i>]</p> <p>41. What are the “Islamic” websites that have had the most influence on you, or that affected your beliefs and practices?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Can you give examples ? <hr/> <p>-</p> <p>42. When you visit websites, are particular schools of jurisprudence (<i>madhhab</i>) important in your determination of their appropriateness ?</p> <p>[Sunnis: <i>Hanafi</i> <i>Hanbali</i> <i>Shafi’i</i> <i>Maliki</i> Shi’as: <i>Ja’fari</i> <i>Ismaili</i> <i>Zaidi</i>]</p> <p>[<i>IMPORTANT to mention doctrines OTHER than the one of participant,</i></p>

because Sunnis might state they are open to other interpretations -- i.e. other Sunni interpretations – but not to Shia, Ahmadi, or Sufi interpretations]

43. If you attend a mosque – that is affiliated with a particular school of jurisprudence (*madhhab*,) – does it have an impact on your selection of Islamic websites ?

a. [*If no*] Do you accept, or are you open to, all interpretations and doctrines?

44. What kind of information do you find most helpful in an online context ?

[e.g., in comparison with an offline engagements with your religious beliefs and practices]

45. Are there certain situations or moments where online spaces offer better support, or Islamic information than offline spaces ?

[e.g., for more private matters, such as questions related to sex, alternative lifestyles, etc.]

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46. What are your feelings encountering online interpretations that differ from, or conflict with your own beliefs or practices ?

[e.g., Shia, Sunni, secular interpretations, etc.]

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-

47. What would you consider a radical or very conservative websites ?

a. Have you encountered such radical or very conservative websites ?

b. Do you think they are easily identifiable? How ?

c. How would you describe them ?

<p><u>AUTHORITY</u></p>	
<p>Fiqh for Minorities</p>	<p>48. If you seek out Islamic jurisprudence (<i>fiqh</i>) <u>online</u>, do you believe that it should be interpreted for a Muslim minority context?</p> <p>49. Or, do you see interpretation of religious texts, such as the Quran, hadith, and legal fatwas, as unchanging, irrespective of place, time, or context ?</p> <p>50. Have your opinions to this end changed in the last 5 years?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">a. [<u>If yes</u>] Has your usage of the Internet anything to do with that change ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>51. Which scholars or thinkers do you feel are most important as sources of religious authority ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>52. If you visit a Muslim website hosted in Canada – of a Scholar or an organization that is from Canada, have you <u>noted any differences</u> between so-called “local”, or “national”, and “non-Canadian”, or “foreign” perspectives ?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">a. [<u>If yes</u>] can you describe how they differ in their presentation ?</p>
<p><u>COMMUNITY</u></p>	<p>53. What Muslim group or community do you affiliate yourself with ?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">[e.g. some would say they are affiliated with the “Maliki-Sunni”, or with a “Sufi-humanist” community, etc.]</p> <p>54. Is that because of family, friends, or personal choice?</p>

<p>General</p>	<p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>55. Do you belong to a religious group, or mosque – not necessarily through a formal membership, but where you regularly attend ?</p> <p>56. How regularly do you attend? <i>[e.g., attend all activities, prayers, online community outings, etc.]</i></p> <p>57. What kinds of activities, if any, do you participate in <u>outside of</u> worship ?</p> <p>58. How important is that community to you ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>59. If you attend a mosque, does it use the Internet and how ? <i>[e.g., websites, chat rooms, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, etc.]</i></p> <p>a. [<u>If yes</u>] Is it for internal communication with members, promoting your local mosque or group, or for correcting misinformation about Islam ?</p> <p> i. How might the usage of the Internet be improved ?</p> <p> ii. Anything the mosque can do better to improve their usage ?</p> <p>b. [<u>If no</u>] Why might that be so ?</p> <p> i. How might their usage be improved ?</p> <p>-----</p>
	<p><u>COMMUNITY</u></p>

	<p>61. Do you use the Internet to you access information about Muslim events or gatherings ? <i>[e.g., Muslim Fest, Islamic Spirit, Canadian Muslim Day,⁴² international speaking tours of Muslim preachers or scholars]</i></p>
<p>Online interactivity</p>	<p>62. Are the online groups to which your <u>offline</u> friends belong different from yours ? <i>[e.g. online forums, Facebook, chat rooms, etc.]</i></p> <p>a. Why is this so? b. Can you give examples?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>63. Can you describe the type of activities in which you engage online with members of your group or faith community ? <i>[e.g. mosque, Muslim association, Muslim Student Associations (MSA), transnational group, etc.]</i></p> <p>64. How much do you contribute and interact with others online ? <i>[e.g., commenting, posting, sharing articles, etc.]</i></p> <p>a. Do you use hashtags? <i>[e.g. #Islam, #Canada, #Religion, #PBUH, #Muslim, #Cdnpoli, #Ramadan, #HumanRights, #Allah, #IslamisPeace, #deen, etc.]</i></p> <p>i. [If yes] Which hashtags do you use and how?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>65. Have you joined Islam related self-improvement activities ? <i>[e.g., weekend seminar, leadership seminars, etc.]</i></p>

⁴² Muslim Fest (www.muslimfest.com), Islamic Spirit (<http://www.revivingtheislamicspirit.com>), Canadian Muslim Day (<http://www.muslimday.info>),

<p><u>COMMUNITY</u></p>	<p>66. Have you taken any <u>online</u> ?</p> <p>a. [<u>If yes</u>] What did they consist of ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>67. Have you ever changed some of your views before, or after joining a group, whether <u>offline</u> or <u>online</u> ?</p> <p>a. [<u>If yes</u>] Can you give examples ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>68. How do you evaluate the quality of your time spent online ?</p> <p>[e.g., <i>with individuals or with groups</i>]</p> <p>69. It is worth the time spent, or do you believe you are wasting too much time ?</p>
<p><u>Online community</u></p>	<p>70. Has an <u>online</u> community or a religious group ever</p> <p>a. helped deepen your understanding of an issue, or</p> <p>b. given you some solidarity when you may have disagreed with the teachings of your faith community or family ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>71. Have you found that the Internet has provided you with a faith community or a religious group that you otherwise might not have accessed ?</p> <p>a. Do you feel you share more or less with people <u>online</u>?</p> <p>b. Does anonymity help or hinder ?</p> <p>c. Have you ever moved on to meet others of an <u>online</u> group face-to-face ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>72. Have you ever left an online community or a religious group ?</p> <p>a. [<u>If yes</u>] Why ?</p> <p>b. Were there any conflicts ?</p>
	<p>73. Do you have Muslim friends who are from groups or communities other</p>

<p><u>DIVERSITY</u></p> <p>Intra-religious dimensions</p>	<p>than the one to which you belong ? <i>[e.g. <u>non-Sunnis</u> IF you are a Sunni, etc.; how many, some / all]</i></p> <p>74. What about <u>online</u> ?</p> <p>75. What kinds of issues are discussed with them <u>online</u> ? <i>[e.g., do you discuss beliefs, dogma, creationism, etc.]</i></p> <p>76. Are these similar or different from those discussed <u>offline</u> ? <i>[e.g. diversity within Islam, differences between Islamic doctrines, etc.]</i></p> <p>77. Do you avoid – either online or offline – any topics or websites ? a. <i>[If <u>yes</u>]</i> Why? ----- -</p>
<p><u>DIVERSITY</u></p> <p>Intra-religious dimensions</p>	<p>78. What do you think about the different interpretations, different beliefs and practices within Islam and the Muslim communities ? <i>[e.g., Sunnis, Shi'as, Sufis, Ahmadis, Ismailis, Alevis, Alawiyya, Salafis, etc.]</i></p> <p>----- -</p> <p>79. What sources do you rely upon to inform you about diversity within Islam and the Muslim community ? <i>[e.g., mosque, family, friends, religious leaders, readings, the Qur'ân, the hadiths, etc.]</i></p> <p>80. And, what about the Internet ? <i>[e.g., websites of other Muslim groups, of religious scholars, social media, blogs, etc.]</i></p> <p>81. How often do you access information on other Muslim groups or doctrines on the Internet ? -----</p>

	<p>-</p> <p>82. Have your beliefs or practices about differences that exist within Islam and the Muslim community changed in the last 5 years ?</p> <p>83. And, why do you think that is ?</p> <p>84. Has your Internet usage anything to do with this change ?</p>
<p>Inter-religious dimensions</p>	<p>85. Do you have friends who are <u>non</u> Muslim ? [<i>how many, some / all</i>]</p> <p>86. What about <u>online</u> ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>87. What do you think about living in a religiously plural society, and a society with secular values such as the Canadian society ?</p> <p>88. What kinds of topics are discussed with your non-Muslim friends <u>online</u> about inter-religious diversity ?</p> <p>89. Are these topics similar or different from those discussed with them <u>offline</u> ?</p> <p>90. When you are with <u>non</u>-Muslims – either off or online – do you avoid any topics or websites ?</p> <p> a. [<u>If yes</u>] Why ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>91. Have you been (i) involved in, or (ii) do you participate in any formal inter-faith groups or events – either inter-religious or intra-religious <u>offline</u> ?</p> <p> a. [<u>If yes</u>] can you explain and give examples ?</p> <p>92. Have you (iii) accessed <u>online</u> interfaith groups or blogs?</p> <p> [<i>e.g., interfaith Facebook, blogs, online forums, etc.</i>] [<u>If yes</u>]</p> <p> a. How much of an influence do they have on your personal faith ?</p>

<p><u>DIVERSITY</u></p> <p>Inter-religious dimensions</p>	<p>b. What about on your public practice ?</p> <p>c. Do you feel they deepen your faith, or that they trouble it ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>93. What sources do you depend upon to inform you about people of other religions ?</p> <p><i>[e.g., mosque, family, friends, religious leaders, readings, Qur'ân, hadiths]</i></p> <p>94. And what about the Internet ?</p> <p><i>[ex. websites of non-Muslim religious groups, of non-Muslim religious scholars, social media, blogs, etc.]</i></p> <p>95. How often do you access information on groups of other faiths on the Internet ?</p> <p><i>[e.g., always, often, rarely, never]</i></p> <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>96. Have your beliefs or practices about differences between Muslims and <u>non</u>-Muslims changed in the last few years ?</p> <p>97. <u>If</u> your beliefs or practices about those differences <u>have changed</u>, ...</p> <p>a. Why do you think that is ?</p> <p>b. Has your usage of the Internet anything to do with it ?</p>
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<p><u>Recap Questions</u></p>	<p>98. Is the influence of the Internet MORE or LESS importance than the influence of ... [rank according to importance]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. religious leaders ii. religious text(s) iii. your parents/caregivers iv. your siblings v. your other relatives vi. your friends vii. printed media [e.g. magazines, books, etc.] viii. electronic media [e.g., online TV, videos, audio] ix. Other ? Please specify... <p>-----</p> <p>-</p> <p>99. How important are the Internet and digital technologies for you as a Muslim living in Canada ?</p> <p>100. Can you explain further and give some examples ?</p>
<p><u>Additional Information</u></p>	<p>101. Is there anything else you would like to add – regarding your experience with the Internet and digital technologies as a Muslim living in Canada ?</p>

Appendix 4. Letter from ICEHR with Ethics Approval

 <p>Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR)</p> <p>St. John's, NL, Canada A1C 5S7 Tel: 709 864-2561 icehr@mun.ca www.mun.ca/research/ethics/human/icehr</p>	ICEHR Number:	20170706-AR
	Approval Period:	September 2, 2016 – September 30, 2017
	Funding Source:	SSHRC Insight (RGCS #: 20140843)
	Responsible Faculty:	Dr. Jennifer Selby Department of Religious Studies
	Title of Project:	<i>Hashtags and Everyday Life for Muslims in Winnipeg and St. John's</i>
Title of Parent Project:	<i>New Muslim Public Spheres in the Digital Age: Identity, Community, Diversity and Authority in Canada</i>	
ICEHR Number:	20140938-EX	

September 2, 2016

Mr. Cory Funk
Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Dear Mr. Funk:

Thank you for your submission to the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) seeking ethical clearance for the above-named research project. The Committee has reviewed the proposal and agrees that the proposed project is consistent with the guidelines of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2)*. Full ethics clearance is granted for one year from the date of this letter.

If you need to make changes during the course of the project, which may raise ethical concerns, please submit an amendment request, with a description of these changes, via your Researcher Portal account for the Committee's consideration.

Additionally, the *TCPS2* requires that you submit an annual update to the ICEHR before September 30, 2017 to request renewal of your clearance, if you plan to continue the project, or closure when the project no longer requires contact with human participants, is completed and/or terminated.

Annual updates and amendment requests can be submitted from your Researcher Portal account by clicking the *Applications (Submitted – Post Review)* quick link on your Portal homepage.

We wish you success with your research.

Yours sincerely,



Russell J. Adams, Ph.D.
Chair, Interdisciplinary Committee on
Ethics in Human Research
Professor of Psychology and Pediatrics
Faculties of Science and Medicine

RA/lw
cc: Supervisor – Dr. Jennifer Selby, Department of Religious Studies
Director, Research Grant and Contract Services

Appendix 5. Pamphlet

TO CONTACT US

If you're available for an interview, please contact us!

Or, if you have any other questions or concerns:

709-864-4046 (Jennifer's office);

204-330-1688 (Cory's cell phone)

or by email:

iselby@mun.ca

cfunk@mun.ca

BROADER SIGNIFICANCE

This project contributes to the broader understanding the Internet and role it plays in the lives of Canadian Muslims. Your contribution will help us detail the potential benefits and challenges that the new digital landscape introduces in the lives of Canadian Muslims. This research aims to help foster a more comprehensive understanding of Canadian Muslims' religious experiences in a comparative context across Canada.

QUESTIONS / CONCERNS

This research project has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy (as well as the Committee for Research Ethics (CIÉR) of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)).

If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at (709-864-2861).

NEW MUSLIM PUBLIC SPHERES IN THE DIGITAL AGE: IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, DIVERSITY AND AUTHORITY IN CANADA

INVESTIGATORS:
DR. JENNIFER SELBY &
CORY FUNK (RESEARCH ASSISTANT)

UQÀM

University of Québec at Montréal



Newfoundland & Labrador, Canada

**CAPE BRETON
UNIVERSITY**



**UNIVERSITY OF
REGINA**

ABOUT THE PROJECT

“New Muslim Public Spheres in the Digital Age: Identity, Community, Diversity and Authority in Canada” aims to examine how Canadian Muslims use the Internet and the role the Internet and digital technologies play in their lives.

We are interested in hearing from Canadian Muslims (over 18 years of age) who would agree to discuss their usage of the Internet and digital technologies and the role their online activities may or may not have in shaping their experiences and understanding of (1) identity, (2) community, (3) (intra- and inter-religious) diversity, and (4) religious authority.

We will ask about how often you use the Internet and how your usage interacts with offline religious beliefs and practices. For example, how often do you use the Internet – per day, per week, per month? Do your beliefs and practices affect how you use the Internet and what you do online? Do you think the Internet

enhances your faith life, operates more as a distraction, or changes it in any way? Do you feel that the Internet has a positive or negative impact on your life?

In sum, participants in this project will have the opportunity to discuss their technological and religious experiences in St. John’s.

YOUR ROLE

You can contribute to this study by giving 1-2 hours of your time to answer some questions about your religious life, your own or your family’s everyday life experiences in St. John’s or Winnipeg, how and whether you practice Islam, and your thoughts on the integration of Muslims in the city.

The interview we will conduct will be open-ended with a few common questions. The time and location of this conversation can be scheduled for your convenience.

CONFIDENTIALITY

This project will observe strict rules of confidentiality. Records of observations and conversations

will be kept private and used for research purposes only.

Should you feel any discomfort in answering questions, you may refuse to answer any particular question or withdraw from the study altogether. Participants will not be paid to participate in the study.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Dr. Jennifer A. Selby is an Assistant Professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Her research focuses on contemporary Islam and secularism in France and in Canada. In 2008 she completed postdoctoral studies on Islam and public policy in Ontario at Harvard University. She joined the Department of Religious Studies in 2007 and lives in St. John’s with her husband and daughter.

Cory Funk is a research assistant at Memorial University of Newfoundland, currently working on an M.A. thesis in Religious Studies. He is from Winnipeg and completed undergraduate studies at the University of Winnipeg, majoring in History and Religion.